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An Interview with Mrs. Vanessa Vega

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Transcript of Oral Interview with Mrs. Vanessa Vega

October 20, 2017

1. April Clements: Thank you, Mrs. Vega for agreeing to participate in my project for History of
2. American Education. As I've mentioned, this recording that we are making today will be
3. placed in the UD Commons as a part of history and can be accessed by anyone at any time to
4. hear what we have talked about today, so, thank you and we'll proceed right into the questions.

5. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey in the educational world.

6. Vanessa Vega: I've always known that I was going to be a teacher. Both of my parents were in
7. education, so some of my earliest memories are of colored pens, legal pads, and sitting at my
8. father's desk in his office at Rice University. I learned to alphabetize in fact, by putting my
9. father's graduate essays into alphabetical order for grading. Every night, weekend, and
10. vacation day was spent going over what I and eventually my younger brothers had learned
11. and identifying what we needed to learn more about or work on. Although we had a TV in our
12. home, it was rarely on. Reading was the priority.

13. AC: So you mention reading. Could you share a couple of your favorite books, maybe from
14. that time or even today?

15. VV: Oh goodness yes. I mean, I grew up on the *Little House on the Prairie* series. If I could
16. go back in time, I think I was a pioneer woman in another life and I was so just captivated by
17. her experiences on the frontier and her passion for learning and she very much represented the
18. kind of teacher that I hoped to be one day, even at such an early age.

19. AC: Thank you.

20.AC: Alright, what were some of the influences that guided you to become a teacher?

21.VV: Well, there are actually two things: first, because of my parents' influence, every day of

22.my life has been a learning experience. My parents instilled in me this passion for learning

23.something new every day. So as a result, I have always been a voracious reader, someone

24.who seeks out educational programming, I frequently visit museums, aquariums, attend

25.theatrical and orchestral performances. I worked really hard to bring as many different types

26.of educational resources and experiences into my classroom as I possibly could so that I could

27.pass along these passions. And, additionally, I was fortunate enough to have two incredibly

28.influential teachers at an early age: Mrs. Duncan in third grade, and Mr. Knight in seventh

29.grade. Much of what I do as a teacher today is directly tied to their influence.

30.AC: Excellent. Have you ever gone back and let them know about the influence that they

31.have had on you?

32.VV: Yes, absolutely. Mr. Knight and I remained pen pals until he passed away just a few

33.years ago. He was at my wedding, even though we lived in different states by that time. He

34.attended my graduations; my father wasn't in the picture for a good part of my teen years, and

35.so he basically was that mentor for me and so yes, he knew very much when he passed away

36.what a thumbprint he had left on my life.

37.AC: Wow. Thank you.

38.AC: Number three. Could you describe the two biggest changes you've witnessed or been a

39.part of in education, and let me go on and tag on to that, and were those results positive or

40.negative?

41.VV: Well I think the biggest challenge and the obstacle has been that we are losing so many
42.qualified educators because of burnout and low morale. I cannot tell you how many
43.extraordinary educators this nation has lost because they have been used up by their
44.administration and then shown little appreciation for their efforts. The second thing is there
45.has been a complete shift in the student population that we serve. When I started in Irving in
46.1999, Irving was upper middle-class, it was a bedroom community. Teachers wore make-up
47.and heels every day. Students came to school prepared, they were eager to learn, and they
48.were full of aspirations in everything from the sciences, to medicine to engineering. As a
49.teacher, I wrote letters of recommendation for let... for NASA space camp programs,
50.leadership conferences, international travel exchanges. I don't even think that our families
51.today know that these programs exist and education isn't made such a priority that even if
52.they were aware, that their children could participate in them. Overall, absolutely, you know
53.you asked me if these were positive or negative, I think these are profoundly negative changes
54.in our system. I don't know how our country can continue to grow if we don't have highly
55.qualified educators working with children every day. Parents owe it to their children, I think,
56.to push them to achieve great things, and I feel like so many of our families today have kinda
57.adopted this "good enough" mentality, when in reality, nothing short of excellence is going to
58.breed long-term success.

59.AC: Thank you.

60.AC: What frightens or distresses you about education today?

61.VV: Because there are so many teachers engaging in inappropriate relationships, our society
62.now looks at all education, or all educators with an air of suspicion. Few people seek out
63.education as a respected field, it's not reflected well in the media, they don't choose it as a
64.career path when they are in college. Our profession is growing weaker because of the people

65. we've lost, the people we will never get, and the students we serve that come ill-prepared,
66. apathetic, and totally overwhelmed by a society that values athletic ability over mental
prowess.

67.AC: Which educational trend or practice would you like to see disappear?

68.VV: I think it is absolutely scandalous that an educator can be so awful, that the district will
69. just pass them on, instead of going through the exhaustive process of firing them. It's called
70. "passing the trash." Districts don't want to risk a long, costly lawsuit, so if a teacher does
71. something inappropriate, the district will offer them a chance to resign, which will then allow
72. them to reapply for a future job in education. This should never happen. If a teacher is that
73. bad, he/she is negatively impacting children in some way, whether its academically or
74. emotionally. This person should be blacklisted, and forced out of the profession.

75.AC: What causes you to be hopeful about our educational system?

76.VV: So, for all the negative things, believe it or not, I am still incredibly optimistic about the
77. future of education in our country. I'd like to think that our society will realize the importance
78. of what a free education offers the world. I think it is in our best interest to educate as many
79. people as possible, whether they choose to stay in our country or not. Education makes the
80. world a better place. And I think we see nightly what happens when people who don't have
81. an education to fall back on, what they have to do to survive. Many of our society aid funds
82. are nearly exhausted, our country can no longer afford to support those with limited skills.
83. The job market is rapidly closing against people without a strong and varied skill set, and I
84. think that the reality of these changes will, I hope, inspire people to take full advantage of the
85. educational opportunities afforded them. If not, I'm afraid the disparity between the haves and

86.the have-nots, will only widen, and this will result in a lower quality of life for many of our citizens.

87.AC: In your opinion, what are the three most important things teachers can do in the classroom to impact student achievement?

89.VV: I think one of the most important things is developing themselves, professionally. The more you know, not just about your content area, but a broad scope of knowledge, the more of a resource you are for your students. I think they should also seek out opportunities to learn more about where their students come from; see where they live, learn about their culture, their family life; because the more sensitivity that teachers have to their students and where they come from, the more of a relatable connection teachers will have. This will help with engagement and relatability of content. And then finally, I think that every day in the classroom, this is an opportunity to turn on a lightbulb. Any lightbulb! Teachers don't realize how one comment, one picture, one anecdote might be just the thing that literally changes the course of a student's life forever. You can't just talk about content. You have to literally bring the world into your classroom and inspire them through exposure.

100.AC: Could you give a couple of examples of what that might look like?

101.VV: Yes. Absolutely. So, one of my students that I will always remember was just very resistant almost to everything I was teaching, and as bell ringers often I would try to include all sorts of different, whether it was images from you know, New York Times, Smithsonian, I might have a quote, I would do lots of different things for my bell ringer. And I remember very vividly one of my pictures, I wanted to use it as kinda like a think aloud and something students could free write about and it was a snake that had been literally electrified in a

107.fence. A farmer had set up a peripheral fence because his sheep kept disappearing, and so
108.this snake had literally bitten this fence and died. And so it was this incredible image of this
109.snake and these fangs hooked on this electric fence. That kid, all he could talk about was the
110.snake. He was so excited; he went to talk to his science teacher about this snake. That child,
111.once I figured out that was an interest for him; we got him into the kinda junior zoo keeper
112.program at the Dallas Zoo and he is a herpetologist today.

113.AC: Oh wow.

114.VV: And it started with an image that I put up in my room as a bell ringer, and that led him
115.on his path of discovery and helped him (AC: Wow) to discover his true passion.

116.AC: That's awesome!

117.VV: It is amazing! (AC laughing in background) It's just one of those things, you can't plan.
118.I mean it literally... that's why teachers can't limit themselves. You have to throw up a lot
119.of different things because you never know what's going to inspire each child. It's different
120.for everyone.

121.AC: Absolutely. Wow. Thank you for that.

122.AC: In many countries around the world, teachers are revered and respected, and education
123.is highly valued. How might we encourage that same mindset in the United States?

124.VV: I think that respect starts with people in the field. It's hard for others to respect us, when
125.many teachers in our profession, don't respect the field that they've chosen. If we want
126.respect, teachers have to conduct themselves in a way that is transparent and appropriate at
127.all times. I think that the media needs to do a better job of balancing their horror stories with
128.stories of teachers that give their students kidneys. So much of public opinion of education is

129.tied to the spin put upon it by the media. Teachers need to become involved in the retelling
130.of our own stories and tirelessly work to promote all of the good things that teachers across
131.this country do every single day.

132.AC: What do you consider your greatest accomplishment in education?

133.VV: Students that go into education are, by far, my greatest success. I have students who've
134.become professional athletes, directors in Hollywood, experts in many different fields. But
135.for those students that have made a conscience choice to go into the classroom and pour
136.themselves into future generations, I think that says a lot about who they are. And it means
137.so much when a former student and current educator tells me they became a teacher because
138.of me... one conversation, one lesson, one activity I crafted that they remember, literally
139.changed their life course. It's really powerful and humbling when I think that I have inspired
140.others just like Ms. Duncan and Mr. Knight inspired me.

141.AC: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

142.VV: I believe that out of all the jobs in the world, a teacher's job is the most difficult and the
143.most important. In an eight- hour day, teachers can literally hit on every job and soft skill
144.that exists. Their... those that are able to do it seamlessly, are the most successful. I don't
145.believe a good teacher is someone that you can teach; I think it's innate; I think it comes
146.from within you. It comes from a desire to help others and it's all consuming. It is truly a
147.life's work... it's a calling. And I'm so proud that I work in a profession that I love and that
148.I feel constantly inspired by and that allows me to grow as both a person and a professional.
149.It's truly been the greatest thing in my life. And so even though my experience has been
150.different than perhaps Laura Ingalls Wilder's experience, I feel like I have a lot of the

151.satisfaction that I think that she probably felt, all those many years ago; so thank you. Of all

152.the people you could've asked for your interview, I feel very honored that you asked me.

153.Thank you for including me.

154.AC: And thank you for being so gracious and answering my questions so thoroughly. I

really, really appreciate it.

155.VV: It's my pleasure.