

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Debbie Gates

Interviewed by Kaia Landon in Brigham City, March 24, 2012

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Kaia Landon: I'm Kaia Landon, and I'm going to talk with Debbie Gates. Today is March 24, 2012. What years did you attend Intermountain School?

Debbie Gates: I attended Intermountain from 1988 to 89.

KL: How old were you?

DG: If I remember right maybe 16.

KL: Did you know any students here?

DG: Yoli, Yolanda Enos. I never knew she came to this school. Back home I used to go to public school and boarding school. I noticed that in public school everyone would get in trouble. For me that wasn't good because my mother wanted me to take my education seriously. I knew that every time I got into trouble, she would be here to bail me out. I thought about it, and then I told my mom, "I want to go to boarding school."

She asked me why, and I told her that every time I got in trouble, somebody was there to fix it for me. I wanted to learn to do that for myself. I also wanted to go there where I could breathe fresh air, and she agreed. She knew I was a strong person, and that I'd be able to handle being away from home. I talked to this one gentleman who was into education, and he was our teacher. This man also made a big impact on my life. He told me about Intermountain School. I knew about other boarding schools, but that was the one I wanted to go to. I'm very thankful because this school made a huge impact on me.

KL: What do you remember about your first day?

DG: When I first arrived here, it was seeing the mountains and seeing the "T", and I thought it was so beautiful! I loved the buildings because they were so old. I was looking at them, and they were so pretty. I loved everything about it, and I looked around and thought, *Oh my goodness, there are so many students here!*

I was nervous and sort of stuck to myself. Then finally I saw Yolanda.

KL: Tell me how you knew her.

DG: We were friends since grade school.

KL: It's nice how that worked out for you.

DG: I know!

KL: Tell me about your teachers there.

DG: They were very cordial. When I got to know them, they were so warm, so kind. A lot of them, I can't remember their names. I remember the faces. The only one that stands out is Mrs. Pohmajevich. At the end of my junior when I was going into my senior year, everyone was asking who I got for my English teacher. I told them Mrs. Pohmajevich, and they all said, "Oh no! She's mean!" And they were scaring me. I ask them, "Is she really mean?"

I talked to some students about her, and they said, "Oh yes, she's really mean!" Everybody said, "Yes, she's really mean."

Senior year started, and I remember walking up the classroom. I was scared, so sat way in the back. A lot of other kids would try to fight. I sat next to this one guy that I knew. His name was Nathan Holtz. Mrs. Pohmajevich, when you walked into her class, along the windows she had all of her plants. They were so pretty I was always looking at them. She would come in and she would ask me the first thing, "Do you like the plants?"

We talked about it a little bit. Everybody was coming in. The first thing she said was, "I don't like it when people chew gum in my class, so if you have it, now's the time to spit it out and dump it in the trash." Everybody dumped their gum in there.

As I got to know her, I thought, *She's not a bad person*. So every time it was time to go to her class, I always looked forward to it. I was there quick. I was always there first. Then she let me water her plants. I'd do it all the time. We talked and talked. In one conversation she told me what she expects from her students. She told me that she knew she was a hard teacher. She said, "Everybody out there thinks I'm mean."

I said, "I don't think you're mean." And she smiled. I can still see her smile, and it makes me cry. I really loved this lady. She was so beautiful. She was a beautiful lady. She told me I had a lot of potential. She said, "Every student of mine I love." A few times there I was a partyer, and she really made me realize that I needed to buckle down and do what I needed to do. After that, I told my mom – because I used to call her once a week, and I said, "Mom, I want to get on the honor roll."

With her you could always get an A+, but you had to do extra work. So I did. I buckled down, worked hard in all my classes and got on the honor roll. Mrs. Pohmajevich, besides my mom, was so proud of me! She was the one that made me realize, "Hey I really can do it!" Before that I thought, *I can do what I want. The heck with school! I'm just here*.

But she was the one that really changed my life. She really was. I remember when it came down to graduation, I went to see her after we graduated. She was in her room. I walked in there, and she smiled at me.

I told her, "Thank you." And she knew exactly what I meant. She said to me, "You're welcome." She told me to keep in touch and everything. Then said, "Well, I guess I'll have to pass you since you were up there, and they already gave you your diploma." I was up there laughing at her, but she was just the best teacher I ever had in my whole entire life. She was my favorite. I was just thankful that the Lord brought her into my life.

KL: How were the meals and the school rooms?

DG: The meals were good. The classrooms – some of them were crowded, but nobody really minded. Nobody made any negative comments or anything like that. Everybody got along. We were family, and you'd see somebody you knew on every corner. Everybody got along together. The classrooms were good. Everybody talked to each other. Everybody was really happy. Nobody got up in the morning and said, "I don't want to go to school." We were all happy to be with each other.

When you'd come out of the classroom, one of your close friends would be there waiting for you. We'd walk into the next classroom or go to the library after school. A lot of people went into the library after school just to do their work. In the cafeteria, the staff was excellent. They got to know you. Every dorm had the opportunity to have their students go in and work for them, and I signed up to do that. I don't remember their names, but I remember their faces. There were two taller white men, and they were so sweet. They just cracked jokes all the time. I'd sit there and laugh at them, and we'd clean out the part where you do the dishes. We washed dishes and everything. We had fun working in there, but in order to do that, you'd have to get up really early. You'd have to be there at 5 o'clock. So we did it, and, you know, it was your choice when you'd sign up. So we'd go in there early, and we'd have breakfast. Then we'd be ready when the students started coming in, and we were all in line serving them. That was really good! I loved it! When I'd go in the back, the hostess would give me the little orange drinks. I used to take that back to my dorm.

KL: What did you like best in the activities?

DG: The inter murals. I loved that, but it was everything about the school. It was the learning, cafeteria, school, church. It had everything for you. They had boxing, which I took up, a skating rink, a bowling alley, the swimming pool. We had his and hers gyms, a theater. Everything. It was a good school. It kept you busy, kept you out of trouble. It always had something going on for you.

After school, in the evenings, me and my one friend Sabrina from Arizona -- this girl was a good basketball player, very good at her three-pointers. Every evening the two of us would head up to the gym, and everybody was there. Everybody played basketball. I mean, everybody just kept busy.

KL: And you did boxing?

DG: There were me and two other girls from where I was from. There was one guy, and I can't remember his name. He was kind of a short guy, as short as my, 5'3". That boy was an excellent boxer. He would box all the time. He would compete, and we used to go watch him all the time. The only girls in there were me, Sandy Garcia and this other girl named Belinda Jackson. We all came from the same place, and we all got into boxing, just the three of us. We loved it, and every once in a while they would let us box against the boys. But back then there was no such thing as girl boxers, and so we just did it for fun. They never let us enter any tournaments, but we were good at it. We did it because it was something we really liked it. I used to sneak off with my friends and do it, because I liked it. Even back home when I run into them, we talk about it now. It was fun.

KL: I never would have guessed that you were a boxer. Was there anything that was hard for you?

DG: I can't really say any bad words about it because that was my home away from home, When I was home, at my real home, it felt awkward because I missed everyone. I loved being home, but when it was time to come back here, I was like *Yes!*

Once I put my foot off that bus and took my first step, it felt good. Everybody was looking for everybody, and it was just like being back home. It was just home. I can't say anything bad about it.

KL: Did you speak your native language with other students?

DG: No. Very rarely, because people would ask me, "How do you say this?" "How do you say that?" There were a lot of different tribes there that would teach me theirs. That's one thing I liked about boarding school – getting to meet people from the tribes within the United States and really getting to know their beliefs. We all loved each other. We were just one big family.

KL: Was there ever fighting between different tribes?

DG: I know there were some things, but I can't remember what tribes were fighting. But they were fighting, and it was a big issue. You could just feel that tension. I guess there were others that really did not have that. I was not a part of it, but it was just a lot of tension. It really was, and all the faculty was at full attention because they all knew what was going to happen. They were trying to keep peace, and for a while everybody had to be in those dorms.

When I was home before I even came here, I just sat there. Like I said, I was always in boarding school. I didn't have to do dishes. My mom took care of us. Some girls weren't really nice, but I hung out with my cousins and a lot of friends. I hung out with some Hispanic. That's all we knew, We hung out with them. It was kind of wild. We had a lot of parties and came home late, but when I came home, my mom was always waiting up for me. I didn't like that because my poor mom was worried. Every time I'd come home, she'd call me by my middle name.

KL: Did that mean you were in trouble?

DG: No, I wasn't in trouble. She just stayed up to make sure I was home safe. Me and my other two younger sisters would go out together. Then we'd tell our cousins, "When you get home, call us so we'll know you got home safe."

They'd say, "Okay." We didn't do anything like some of my other classmates who would have to babysit their little brothers and sisters and things like that. I guess I was very young, and fortunate, and my mother took care of us. When I came back to boarding school in Brigham City, I grew up very quickly because they taught you how to do a lot and take responsibility – financial, everything. I didn't mind. I'd get up early, and I still get up early, even on weekends. I enjoyed the morning, the peace and quiet, seeing the stars, hearing the birds, drinking my coffee. I'm really thankful because it taught me structure, and it was always positive.

KL: Where schools had you gone to before?

DG: I was a Kino Kolt. You know where that's at?

KL: I do. [Editor's note: Kino Junior High in Mesa, Arizona.]

DG: I went to junior high school there. I played basketball there. My principal was Mr. (?) Lum(?). He made a big impact on my life. Another teacher was Mrs. Shaver. She was my P.E. Teacher and always kept me on the up-and-up. She was another huge impact on my life. After that I went to Westwood [High School, also in Mesa]. That's where I started getting in all the trouble. It was a bad school. You'd try to do right, but people were always there to try to knock you down. Me – I will only take so much from anybody.

KL: At Intermountain were there a lot of other kids like you who were happy to be getting a fresh start?

DG: Exactly. It's a good school that really gets you going. I think the thing was, or that part for me, that it had everything to keep you busy, and you wanted to do it. You didn't have to. You wanted to. It was your choice

KL: What class was your favorite? Was there something you learned that you wanted for a career?

DG: Mine was cosmetology. I loved it! People from the office used to come over, get their hair cut and have whatever they wanted. There was a police academy also here on campus, and the men used to come in, and I would cut their hair. That's what I did in cosmetology. I thought about making it a career. Later on, as time went by, I decided, *No, I don't want to do this*. So I didn't. I just left it alone. I still cut hair for my family, but other than that, I didn't do it.

After I graduated, I went to a law school, and I liked it there, but that school was so different from Intermountain. Over there people still wanted to fight. I liked the teachers. There was Mr. Halpin. He was pretty cool. There was this girl that kept wanting to fight me. We knew it, but we

just stayed away from her. It finally came down that we ended up fighting. I beat her up. After while, my roommate called security and told them what happened. They got her to go to jail, and the next day they shipped her back home. Because of that, they kicked her out of school.

The next day Mr. Halpin asked me about it when I went into class. He said, "Don't worry. She's gone. I had her taken out of here."

I knew in my heart that school was not right for me. I told my mom, and she said, "Okay. That's fine. Come home." And I did. I stayed home and took a class at school, and I loved the people as they were coming in. Some of them had been through divorces and everything, and I heard stories of things they were going through. I was the cashier, and it was a lot of work. People think it isn't, but it is. I really liked that job.

I got tired of working there, and decided I wanted to do something else, so I went to a medical school. I got my M. A. there. I worked at the clinic every Saturday. I worked there and worked in the lab. Then I went into the dental clinic, and I was their secretary because they needed help badly. There were three of us in the lab. I said, "Well, I'll go." So I did. Dental work was something I'd never done, and I learned a lot from there. I kind of got bored with it, and I told them I wanted to do something else. Personnel told me there was an opening in the lab facility that we had there, but it was for a senior secretary. They let me go, and they let me switch with them. I loved it, and that's where I work now. They wanted me to be at the detox facility for the Natives that came in. We get all kinds there, and it's sad. They're people from my community, the Natives, that come there. I never realized how much our people on the reservation need that. They're dealing with meth, alcohol, everything, and it really hurts to see it. Sometimes you sit and cry with them because you see them going through it.

I think the longest individual – he was 22 years old – was in that facility like more than a dozen times. We get a lot of them that come in and out, in and out. Finally this individual came in and said he needed help. At times he would be so angry, and he was in the 12-hour detox facility for like 50 days. Once he got there, we moved him over to Sobriety Maintenance. He was still angry. I came in one time, and said, "Good Morning!"

He always said, "Good Morning, Debbie!"

I always preached the word of the Lord to them. I always said, "He's here with you."

I told him, "Good morning!" He said, "What's so good about it?" He was angry again.

I looked him and said, "Well, you're alive to see another day."

He just kept quiet.

I like it there because I really like helping the people. I feel like this is where I belong. I would never say anything bad about it. I just feel really bad about the people I work with there, but that's where I'm at right now.

KL: Do you feel like you were prepared at Intermountain for the things you would do as an adult?

DG: Yes, responsibility, everything was there. When you are there, you have bills to pay. You take care of your finances. You learn how to budget your money. My mom would send me money every month. I would go to the Western Union bus terminal and get it. I would go to the store and buy all the stuff I would need for that month. We had a bank on campus, and so my money was there. I could spend it when I needed it.

It taught me how, if you got sick and your mom wasn't there to take care of you, you did it yourself. You'd be home, stay home, and use your time wisely. You took care of your room. You didn't leave it messy; you kept it clean. Your laundry – they didn't do it for you. You did it yourself. It taught you responsibility. It taught you everything about life.

KL: Did you have a job?

DG: No. I did have a job. Yoli worked at the store, and she got me a job there, and I really liked it. We'd talk and everything. It was fun.

KL: Were the people in the community nice to you?

DG: Back then it seemed like they didn't want us here. It felt like they thought we were all troublemakers, but back then they didn't understand disco out here in town, and that's where we wanted to go. A lot of people accepted us, but I guess in every bunch, you have the good and the bad, and there were a few bad people there who would say rude things to us. We'd say stuff back to them, but all-in-all it was okay. It seemed like a lot of people didn't want us here, but we were here. There was nothing we could do or they could do about it. But it was okay.

KL: Is there anything that stands out to you?

DG: That stand out to me? Besides the teacher, I would have to say the "I". I loved that "I" because that represented all of us. We used to go climb up there all the time and just loved it. We'd just sit up there and take it in – the whole view and how beautiful it all was, how this town meant so much to us and how it brought all of us together as a family, our house parents and all the staff. I remember Beverly Sou. I don't know where she is. I wish she was here. She was a good house parent. We were lucky. All our house parents (Mrs. Begay and I can't think of the other one's name) were good because every time we came back from someplace, they would have cookies, coffee, and chocolate (cocoa) there for us. So when the girls went out, while they were getting ready to go out, they'd go down and get their coffee or whatever, go back to their rooms and get ready. We were lucky because we were in Building 10. I thank the Lord that it's still there, but it became apartments. They were so good to us. We called them "mom", and they never minded that.

I liked it, too, because back then they always had a really good movie that touched everybody.

All the females in the dorm would say, “We want to watch that. It comes on at 8 o'clock.” Everybody had plans, and the dorm attendants knew it, so when we came back, they always had stuff for us – popcorn, juice, everything. Some of our guy friends would come over and just sit with us in the living room, and we'd all enjoy the movie. It was so neat. The house parents treated us good. When it was over, the guys would go home, and everybody would go to bed. Everything about the school I loved. This is the best boarding school I've ever been to, and it really hurt me when I heard it had shut down. I'd think, *Why don't they shut the other schools down! Not ours!*

There were a lot of other schools out there that I thought should have been shut down because they were so close to the city at Sherman. They weren't in Riverside where they had so much access to other stuff. That's where my sister went and she graduated. To me, I just wish they hadn't shut Intermountain School down because everything was just so perfect. It was always about the students. Not about the staff, but about the students. In the wintertime, they always had a bus going out so you could go tubing or to the movies. It was always about the students, and that's what I liked. The dorms, the teachers – everything -- was about the students.

I say, “God, if you could only turn time back, that's where I'd be!”

KL: Well, I want to thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

DG: I loved it. I'm just happy I made it here. I said while I'm here, I want to take a picture of that Taco Time sign, because when it was lunchtime, we all made a beeline over there and had lunch there. It was good. On Wednesdays we always went over to the Mormon Seminary building, and it was good. Those two places I always think about.

KL: Before we end, I wanted to ask you about the stories of ghosts on campus, and we'll make that the last part of the interview.

DG: Okay. Back in the day, there were quite a few that had master keys to all the dorms. I'm not going to say names, but these two guys that were my friends had those keys. They would go in there in the dorms, and there would be things in there, like somebody talking. One time they thought spirits were following them through the dorms. They took off out of there, but it was just crazy because they thought it was ghosts following them, and they were scared. Once when I was home, a group was talking about some people who came to investigate the story that there were ghosts at the school. It is true. There were ghosts in there. With us, I guess we knew what it was before, a military hospital, so I believed if they're there, they're there. Even in Building 10, we could hear them. Sometimes you'd be standing there, you'd hear somebody going through a door or slamming it. I didn't let it bother me. You'd go into a room, and there were men there. Some people were really scared, but it didn't bother me.

KL: Thank you again.