Interviewer: Tom Girard (TG)

Interviewee: Paul Gagne (PG)

Date: Wednesday, October 13, 2021

Place: Gagne residence, Biddeford Maine

Transcriber: Nicole Morin-Scribner

TG: Today is Wednesday, October 13th. My name is Tom Girard. I am the interviewer. Present with me today is Nicole Morin-Scribner, who has conducted many of the Voices of Biddeford interviews. Today I have the privilege of interviewing Paul Gagne at his home in Biddeford. Thank you, Paul, for agreeing to the interview.

PG: You are welcomed.

TG: We like to start the interviews usually by asking where and when you were born.

PG: August 8, 1941. Biddeford, Maine

TG: Can you talk a little bit about your family history? Were your mother and father born in Biddeford? Did they come from somewhere else?

PG: No. My mother and father were both born in Biddeford. My father was born in 1914. My mother was born in 1918 in Biddeford.

TG: Do you know where their parents, were they also Biddeford natives?

PG: My father's parents were born in Biddeford. My mother's mother was born in Canada. Her husband was born in Biddeford.

TG: OK. So, you have a long family history in Biddeford.

PG: Oh. Way back.

TG: Can you share with us a little bit about how your parents met?

PG: Off the top of my head, I can't really answer that. I'm not sure. I know they met in Biddeford. They got married in 1938.

TG: Did they both work in Biddeford?

PG: Shoe shops. My father used to work at the old Saco Lowell building which is being renovated to apartment houses right on lower Main Street…lower Elm Street, I'm sorry. He worked there for many years.

My mother worked in shoe shops. She started working way back in the Pepperell mills back in the 1950s. She then ended up at Kesslen Shoe, Herman Shoe and that's where they both ended up working together for many, many years. They retired from Herman Shoe.

TG: Did they stay in Biddeford when they retired?

PG: Oh yes. Year round, just like us.

TG: Can you talk a little bit about your bringing up and childhood, memories of growing up in Biddeford?

PG: I started my life back in 1941 and ended up going to the old St. Joseph's School on Birch Street, which is now high-rise apartment houses. Then I went to the Birch Street School from the 6th grade. Then I ended at the old St. Louis High

School before it closed in 1970. During that time, I ended up taking piano lessons for a few years.

Then I started working at Baillargeon's Market when I was a sophomore in high school. I used to work at Baillargeon's Market until around 2 o'clock in the afternoon then I'd get in the car with my mother and my aunt to go to work at Scarborough Downs. I used to wash dishes at Scarborough Downs. This was back in the middle 1950's.

TG: What did your mother and aunt do at Scarborough Downs?

PG: They were working in the kitchen. My aunt worked in the kitchen and her husband was in charge of security at Scarborough Downs.

I worked there for a couple of years. I played basketball, in between, in high school and everything else.

TG: Were your grandparents living in Biddeford at that time?

PG: Yes, they were.

TG: Do you have memories of doing things with them?

PG: I used to play battle, ("bataille" in French) a card game, with my grandmother. I would go to her house. They had a friend that lived across, I think her name was Rachel. She used to play the piano. There was a roof in between the two apartments. I used to sneak out, well not sneak out, but go through the window to go see Rachel. I would go play the piano and come climbing back in through the window and go play games with my grandmother.

TG: Do you still play the piano?

PG: No. Unfortunately, when I was ready to go to my first job I ended up in the hospital with appendicitis. One thing led to another, getting out of high school, I never continued.

We'll get to that later, but I played in the St. Louis High School Alumni Band for 10-12 years. I played in the St. Louis High School Band also. The St. Louis Alumni Association started a band back in 1993 or somewhere around then. I

ended up joining that. I played a little keyboard and xylophone. I got back into music somewhat.

TG: Is that band still going?

PG: Yes, it is. I dropped out about 8-9 years ago. I just keep up with everything that was going on. It was an enjoyable 10-11 years.

TG: Growing up, was your primary language English or French?

PG: Both. Back then there was more French being taught in high school. There was English but the curriculum was very heavy in French.

My mother always spoke French. She ended up in a nursing home many years ago. The funny part about it is the nurses would talk to her in English. She would start talking in English and she'd revert to French like most of the elderly people did. And she'd say to the nurse, "Why don't you people learn how to speak French?" (laughter)

TG: Can you share with us some of your experiences growing up in Biddeford and what you did as a child, for fun, and things of that nature?

PG: Growing up, I played Little League baseball. I got into hockey. The funny part about it is our son was born in 1968. Back in 1973-74, the ice arena was built in Biddeford. Our son said, "I want to play hockey." I said, "Well, ok." We outfitted him for hockey. We went over to the rink. I went in there and there was a whole bunch of little kids forming teams. We put him in the locker room and told him, "You are going to play for this team." I don't know if you remember Robert Provencher who sold Italian sandwiches on lower Main Street?

TG: Ralph's?

PG: Ralph's. Yeah. He was one of the coaches. He said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "My son wants to play hockey." "Oh. We are a team. Broadway Motors. OK. You are the coach." I said, "Huh? I don't have any hockey skates." Back then we used racer skates all of the time. Now I had to buy a pair of hockey skates. I went to the store and got a pair of hockey skates. I got on the ice. The blade is much shorter than the racers. I kept falling forward. (laughter). I ended up coaching that for 8-9 years. At the same time, I was helping out at the Arena

that had just opened up. I was coaching hockey and helping to make ice. I ran the Zamboni and worked there for many years. That was enjoyable. He then stopped playing and I kept putting around the arena. I ended up working there part time for a few years. By then I was working at the Pepperell and City Hall.

Other than that, it was fun growing up with the boys in high school. Of course, the boys and the girls were separate. Back in high school, the girls were on one side and the boys were on the other side. The boys would go to recess, but the girls couldn't go to recess at the same time. The nuns and the brothers didn't want us to mingle. But we managed to get together somehow (laughter).

TG: I want to go back a little bit to your childhood. You said you played Little League baseball? That was on the Waterhouse Field back then?

PG: No. We played on May Street. Back then, you had two separate Little Leagues: East Little League and West Little League. There was a fine line in the city. If you lived over there, you couldn't play with the East Biddeford. You had to play with West Biddeford. Finally, they ended up merging. There was a conflict for a while. "Well, if you live on that side of the street, you can't play for us. You have to play with East as opposed to West Biddeford."

TG: What other things did you do pre high school for activities with friends?

PG: Mostly, like I said earlier, play the piano and work. My father was laid off for about a year and a half. Times were tough back then and money wasn't that available, so I started working at Baillargeon's Market in my younger days. I'd give my mother some money and she'd give me a little allowance. We would go play football in the street, on Center Street, with the Baillargeon's sons, Guy and Charlie. We used to play football in the street. There weren't many cars back then, so it was easy to play. You didn't have to step aside every 30 seconds for a car coming by. It was fun.

I ended up working for Baillargeon. The old Pepperell Trust Bank was on Main Street. He would give me an envelope of money and say "OK. Go to the bank and make a deposit." 13-14 years old walking down the street with a bundle of money. Back then you didn't have the problems we have now with everything going on in town and the world.

It was enjoyable. I had a lot of good friends in high school. One of my classmates just passed away not too long ago. He was the first one who bought a car in high school. A bunch of us used to get together on a Saturday night. We'd chip in 25 cents to fill the gas tank to go perusing down the beach (laughter). Looking at the girls (laughter).

TG: You had mentioned earlier, skating. Did you skate at Westbrook Skating Rink?

PG: Oh yes. Many, many years. Probably met the wife there. We also used to go to the dances at St. Joseph's Parish Hall in high school. Then we'd go skating at Westbrook Skating Rink Friday night, Saturday. That was a fun time. There were no problems going in town whatsoever.

TG: You met your wife in high school?

PG: Yes. In high school. Of course, they were on that side of the building and we were on this side of the building and you couldn't be caught going together in the school yard. That was taboo. We used to go down to Archie's. Remember Archie's? (Note: local corner store). We used to go down there to get some candy and come back during recess. It was an enjoyable time.

TG: What was your experience going through St. Joseph's and St. Louis?

PG: Great. We had some good friends. It wasn't like it is today per se, where you are dealing with drugs and this and that. Back then, it was clean fun. We had no problems with the kids in school.

TG: Can you speak a little bit about being taught by the nuns in grammar school?

PG: (chuckle) The nuns were strict. I think the brothers were even worse. What is the word I'm looking for? Attendance and so forth, you had to follow the rules. I remember one time in high school, one of the brothers (I think he is deceased now) was mild, mellow and the kids used to make fun of him a little bit. One day, one of the students got a little edgy, having fun. The brother comes by, picks him up out of the chair, opened the door and threw him out of the classroom. "Don't come back to my classroom." You could have heard pin drop in that class. He's stronger than we thought he was.

The other one, a little French brother, Brother Clement, I don't know if you know him. If you had trouble with your grades, all you had to do was give a donation to the brothers and you got an A. A lot of people got an A when they should have had a C or a D (laughter).

That was Brother Clement. We had fun in his classroom. We used to have an alarm clock that we would put in a desk that was empty. All of a sudden, the alarm clock would go off and he'd get all upset. We'd also all shake our legs (while sitting). The windows back then were so old that they would rattle. He would get all upset with that too (laughter). It was clean fun. It was an enjoyable four years.

TG: What activities were you involved with at St. Louis?

PG: Basketball, volleyball, the band. That kept me going. Volleyball used to be a battle. We didn't have leagues like they do now. It was lunchtime. Everybody would run down and get a quick box lunch. It was a race to see who would get on the volleyball court first so we could play for 15-20 minutes and go back in again. That was an ongoing struggle. Sometimes we skipped lunch just to go out and play volleyball outside.

We played soccer in the schoolyard with the brothers. They good at kicking you in the shins. (laughter)

TG: You mentioned the Saturday night dances. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

PG: St. Joseph's Parish Hall. You also had a lot of clubs. There was the Lightning Club for the boys. Flamingo's, which was the girls. They had their own little spot for dancing. The Lightning Club used to dance over Doran's Pharmacy. The old St. Jean the Baptist, I belonged to that organization too. They used to have dances up there too. We didn't go to that one. We stayed at the Parish Hall. I would dance with my future wife. Three or four of us had our own little corner in the Parish Hall. Back then you had chaperones. They would come by and say "Keep the Holy Ghost in between you. Don't get so close." Her father used to be one of the chaperones. (laughter) I had to be nice. (laughter)

TG: Can you talk a little bit about your decision when leaving high school to go into the Air Force vs doing post education?

PG: I wasn't strong on post education. I wasn't the smartest man in the world. I figured I'd get a little better education going into the Air Force. I started off going to basic training at Lackland Air Force base. I fell off the bunk and broke my wrist. I had to stay an extra two weeks for training. I came home. I then got stationed up in Bangor for two years. After that, they shipped me off to Guam. In two years in Bangor, I started working a little bit on computers. It was relatively new back in 1960-1961. Then I got shipped off to Guam for 18 months. When I landed in Guam, the guy that met me there, I'd had him in basic training. It's ironic that in the whole Air Force, you meet somebody you had basic training with. He said, "I'll take you around the island." I thought great. We got in the car and drove around. Half an hour later, we were back where we started. "Where do we go now?" He said, "That's the whole island." "Really? That's it?" He said, "Yeah." A week later, a typhoon came in and wiped out the whole island. Over there, they have barracks without windows. They had shutters. They don't have glass windows. One guy was in his bed and had just gotten up. A two by four came through and got right in the middle of his bed. I thought, "This is going to be a long 18 months." No water, no electricity, no food.

TG: Was it a long 18 months?

PG: It ended up being 14 (laughter). I got out after 14 months. No water, no electricity, no food for 3-4 days. At first, there was no communication. I finally was able to get messages to the house from short wave radio that went to Westbrook. They were able to relay the message to my parents that everything was alright. It wiped out the whole island. When I left 14 months later, they were still rebuilding. That was a learning experience.

TG: Were you part of the rebuilding when you were in Guam?

PG: Yes, because I was getting more into computers. Everything got wiped out, so we had to wait for airplanes to come in and bring all new computer equipment. We had to refurbish everything and rebuild all the computer system and everything else. Back then, computers were hard wired. You had to wire the computers to make them work. Now it's all electronic. There is a big, big difference.

TG: What was it like being away from your family and your future wife for that long a period?

PG: A little challenge, at the beginning. It was something new. I graduated in early June. In late June, I was gone. I didn't wait around. At first, you are away from home, its different. You are still young, 18 years old. You've always been around your friends, your family and all of a sudden, whoops! You get down there and it's a whole new ball game. You get off the bus and there's a TI [NOTE: Training Instructor] waiting for you at Lackland Air Force base. His first words were "I am not your mother." I'm thinking, "It's going to be a long freaking 11 weeks." (laughing). They learn how to swear very well too. You tow the mark. You adjust, just like anything else. My brother went in the Air Force. My other brother went in the Air Force. We kept it in the family.

TG: Overall, a positive experience though?

PG: Yes. Personally, I think every young man or woman should serve at least two years in the service. You get re-educated to what life is all about. Right now, it's too easy for most of them. They sit back and expect everything to be given to them. You get out there and after 11 weeks, it's a whole new life. You've grown up real quick, which is good. There is nothing wrong with that.

TG: So, you came home.

PG: I came home in 1964. I got married in 1964. I came home in March and got married Labor Day 1964.

TG: Where were you married?

PG: St. Joseph's Church. Right where I grew up and was an altar server. Now I'm back into the church and do readings every Wednesday night. We go to church every Wednesday night. With the new schedule and COVID, there are a lot of people who are still skeptical of gatherings. The attendance has gone up quite a bit for the masses that they have now. We are comfortable with Wednesday night. I go in every Wednesday night. I do the readings at the church. I also serve on several committees in the church. We'll get to that later on.

TG: Where did you and your wife live when first married?

PG: 32 Western Avenue. It was a little apartment on the second floor. We stayed there for several years. We then moved down the street. One of our classmate's

mothers owned the block so we moved down there. We were there for 17 years. We've now been here for 37 years.

TG: When did you start your family?

PG: 1968. Our son Timmy was born. 1972, our daughter was born. They are both doing very well. One is a firefighter/EMT in Biddeford. Our daughter is a Certified Anesthesiologist Technician at Mercy Hospital.

TG: Does she live in Biddeford also?

PG: She lives in Saco. Our son lives on Hill Street in Biddeford.

TG: Can you talk about your experiences bringing up a family in Biddeford?

PG: It's a challenge. One funny thing is when our son was in high school, drugs weren't that heavy in the 1980's. Some guy came over to see him and said, "Hey, got a Christmas tree here." In his innocent way, he said, "That's ok. We have one on the front porch." It was a drug. They called it a Christmas tree. He said, "Oh no. We've got one on the front porch. (laughter)" I said, "Oh gee." But he's a firefighter/EMT now, so he knows all about that stuff. It was enjoyable. Like I said, he played hockey. I coached hockey. My daughter went into dancing school, so we were following concerts, dance recitals and practices. It was all part of the growing up. We went to trips to Santa's Village. The usual stuff you do with your children. Every year, we used to rent a camp down to Hill's Beach with her folks. We'd go down there and rent a camp for a week. We'd play there. We grew up very, very well. Very well rounded.

TG: Did your children go to public or Catholic school?

PG: Public. There was no Catholic school back then. St. Louis closed in 1970.

TG: Grammar school also, they went to public school?

PG: Yeah. My wife has been teaching for 45 years. My daughter ended up going to school with her. Before she started school, the nuns would give her some lollypops or paperwork. They would sit her in a little corner where she'd do her thing while the wife was teaching school.

TG: Where did your wife teach?

PG: She started at St. Joseph's School. She then moved to Emery School. She then went to primary school and now she is at Kennedy School as an Ed Tech/Substitute Teacher. She is starting her 45th year. She enjoys her little kids. We could tell you a lot of stories, but it's on tape.

TG: When you came back from the service, what did you start doing for work?

PG: Back in 1964, there wasn't many computers, availability of businesses in running computers. My father-in-law, through connections, I got a job at West Point Pepperell in the maintenance department. I was fixing floors and stuff like that. Then I ended up getting into the Shipping Department. One day, I got a phone call that said, "We have two job offerings for you, if you are interested. One of them is in the Dye House and the other one was in the Computer Room." I said to myself, "This is a no brainer. How far can you go in the Dye House?" I said, "I'll take the second shift at the Pepperell." I then started working on computers at Pepperell. I've been in computers ever since.

TG: Were you mostly self-taught Paul or did you take some classes?

PG: Like in the service, OJT, on the job training. This was the same thing. I worked at the Pepperell from 1964 to 1973.

TG: That's when you took the job with the City of Biddeford?

PG: Yeah. I helped install the first computer system in the City of Biddeford. Dennis Plante, who worked with me at the Pepperell, went to the City of Biddeford. Back then they had a HUD Program where they gave you money, so he started setting up a computer system at the City Hall. I helped him off and on with little things. Then he decided to go to Lewiston to do the same thing. I decided to apply for the job. I'm familiar with the system. I helped put it in there. I got the job at City Hall, and I worked there for 30 years. I retired in 2002.

TG: You saw a lot of changes in IT.

PG: Oh yeah

TG: Can you talk a little about that? The challenges?

PG: Challenges ain't the word for it. I'm glad I got out when I did. Back then, it was relatively new. You had these big, big spindles like those long-playing records. That's what stored all of the information on there. One thing I remember at West Point Pepperell, they had these big tape drives, 2400-foot tape drives. They had four of them. At the end of the year, we did all of the payroll, the W2s [NOTE: Internal Revenue Service required annual wage and tax statement] and that stuff. One day we were getting ready to run the W2s and the other operator ended up grabbing the wrong tape and we lost all of the information for the W2s for about 3,000 people. I said, "Oh, this is not going to be fun." They ended up having a few people key in all of the information. Back then, they were on IBM cards. We had little punch holes. They had to re-punch all of the information. We started running the W2s. One guy said, "Hey. I made $900,000." They had keyed the wrong numbers in. They had to go back and correct those. The machine broke down. Those were IBM. I used to be the operator. One night the machine broke. We called the repair company, the IBM maintenance guy. He said, "What is wrong?" I said, "This is not doing this…" He said, "OK. Go over here, take a paper clip, put the paper clip there and you'll be good until tomorrow morning." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah." The darned thing worked. (laughter) Another time he said, "Put a rubber band." That worked. I said, "OK. Genius. That's how you fix these computers now? (laughter)" Those were learning experiences.

Back to City Hall the challenge was trying to modernize the individual departments. The first thing we ever did was modernize the voter registration list. Do you know how many people were on there who had passed away and were still on there for voting? The list went from 15,000 down to 7,000 (laughter). We cleaned that right up. That was the first project that I was able to accomplish. We grew from there: payroll; accounts payable; accounts receivable; real estate taxes; personal property taxes and on and on. The one time that I won't say made enemies, but some people weren't happy with me, was when we instituted the sewer billing. That raised a lot of eyebrows. I made some "friends" there. Not the kind of friends I really want. But it eased off like anything else. With time, it goes away.

TG: You must have worked under a number of different mayors.

PG: Six or seven of them.

TG: What was that like, having to adjust to new administrations?

PG: I just stayed out of it. The one who hired me was Gilbert Boucher. He told me, "Whatever you do, stay out of politics." I said, "You're on." I stayed out of politics. I stayed in my own little corner. They can do their own thing. If they had a question, I'd be glad to answer it. Boucher, Marty Reilly, Jim Grattelo, Donna Dionne, Bonnie Belanger, Roger Normand, Farley and Casavant. I've seen quite a few of them. They all had their own little ideas and way of doing things.

TG: It sounds like staying out of politics served you well.

PG: For 30 years, it did. One thing I remember, Ray Gagne was the former Fire Chief. We've known each other for years and years. We both retired at the same time. Donna Dionne was the mayor at the time. They gave us a little celebration at the Rochambeau Club, a retirement party. A couple of the mayors were there. The other mayor I forgot was Babe Dutremble. Going back to the reception, Ray and I got up to say a few words. "Thank you. It's been a pleasure etc. etc." Jim Grattelo was there. I said, "Hey Jim." "What, what?" "Do you remember I used to go down there, and I had papers in my hand like I was going to do something?" He said, "Yeah, yeah." "I really wasn't doing anything. I was just walking around." He started laughing. "I knew it. I knew you weren't doing anything (laughing)." That was fun. Thirty years. Unique experience. I've seen a lot of changes.

TG: One of the things we haven't talked about is downtown Biddeford and your memories of growing up and going downtown Biddeford and it evolving over all of those years, even to when you were in city government. Can you talk about the changes you've seen? What downtown Biddeford was like when you were growing up?

PG: Great. It was easy to go downtown. Friday night, all of the stores were open. The gangs would hang out. On Friday nights you had football games, St. Louis and Biddeford. St. Louis would play football and the guys would gather at the Puritan. Biddeford would go to, what is the place? It's a restaurant now. It'll come to me. They would meet over there. We would go to the Puritan to get a drink or something. We didn't have much money back then, so we'd go to the Puritan and say, "We'll have Lumberjack Special." That's a glass of water and 2 toothpicks. That was a Lumberjack Special. We couldn't afford to buy anything (laughter). We'd be hanging around on the sidewalk and Officer Guillemette

would walk by and say, "Would you guys please get on the sidewalk?" It would overflow into the street. The cars were there. "Would you guys please get on the sidewalk?" OK. We'd get back. Of course, after a while, we'd go back into the street because everyone would gather there.

Mayflower. That is where Biddeford High School used to meet. That was right up the street.

You could walk down the street on Friday nights with no problem at all. The stores were open. There was always Woolworth with their little sundae place there. Fishman's was across the street. A & P, I used to go there on occasion for Baillargeon's Market. If we ran out of something like meat, I would sometimes go down there to pick it up and bring it back. Edwards Market and Murphy's Music store to name two. McKenney and Heard. We used to go there a lot to buy sports equipment. Bob Bois, he lives in Old Orchard now. He's still around. Bob Bois used to be there.

TG: When did you see downtown Biddeford start to lose stores and shops.

PG: I think probably when some of the mills started shutting down. Clientele started going down. The workers were not around as much anymore. I don't know why. It just suddenly stopped. I think people just stopped going downtown. People were spreading out. Malls, Five Point Shopping Center which has been around a while. We had Kings back then. That was taking stuff away from downtown. Big stores had everything. You don't have to go to 2-3 different stores to get something. It was all there. I think the sprawl started going away from downtown. People couldn't afford it and not go downtown anymore. The dynamic just changed once it started sprawling outside the city limits.

TG: I know you were gone from Biddeford between 1960 and 1964, so you may not have memories of some of the major fires in Biddeford like the Hooper Street fire, the Grafton Lumber fire.

PG: I'm familiar with it but I was in Guam. I think I had some clippings of that which my future wife saved for me. But I wasn't around for those fires. My father-in-law was. My father-in-law was a call man for the Biddeford Fire Department for 20-25 years. He got burnt a little bit in one of those fires.

TG: Do you remember where you were when President Kennedy was assassinated?

PG: I was in Guam. We went on high alert with the guns and everything else. We went to a lockdown. 1963. I was in Guam at the end of 1962.

TG: What was your reaction and that of your colleagues to that? Do you remember?

PG: Are we going into a coup here? Are we going to go to war? It was an assassination but for what reason? Luckily it was just one person but there is more to it than that. There's more to that assassination than people will ever know. There's more behind that than just a guy deciding to shoot. They figure then Ruby shot him. You take care that…and we'll make sure we take care of you etc. etc. We'll never know the whole story. Never.

TG: You've also given a lot of time to your community. Can you talk about the organizations you volunteered for and what those experiences have been like for you?

PG: The first one I had was Chairman of the St. Joseph's Parish Council. I chaired for a year then I was on the Council for several years. I got out of that.

Then we started going into La Kermesse. I've been in Kermesse 28 years. That was back in 1993, I started Kermesse.

I was also involved with starting the St. Joseph's School PFTA which now they call PTO, Parent Teachers' Organization. When we started the PFTA, it was a nun who wanted to abolish the PFTA for some reason. At that time, Father Paul Paré, was in charge of the parish, the pastor. She had written a letter or made a tape. He said, "Give it to me. I'll take of that." He squashed that right off the bat. So, the PFTA kept on going. I was president of that for a year or two. Then, I got out of that.

Then I was on the Parish Council.

In 1993 I joined the Kermesse and became the Financial Manager for a couple of years. I had several other positions. I did support services which had to do with buttons and gates and so forth. Then, nobody wanted Treasurer. You know the old saying in the service. A volunteer, everyone takes a step back and you are the only

one standing there. Guess what? I was the only one standing there (laughter). I ended up being Treasurer for several years. I stepped down and Donna Dionne was Treasurer for a couple of years. Then Police Chief Roger Beaupre was Treasurer for a couple of years. Then I got back into being Treasurer as nobody else wanted it.

Then still got involved with the Parish because of Bob Provencher, who just passed away. Then the wife and I co-chaired the Parish Fair for 12 years. That was enjoyable. It was a lot, a lot of fun. Back then people would come out. It was huge. This is fund raising for the parish. We did that then both dropped out. You get burned out after a while. Repetitious. We got out of that. We still stayed involved with the parish. When the Monsignor Mathieu called me up and wanted to know if I was interested in serving on the Parish Council, I said, "Sure. Why not." (laughter) I like to help out. I was on the Parish Council for 6 years. You can serve two 3-year terms. You had to get off for a year. I'm done with that. Then I got a call again, "Would you want to serve on the Parish Finance Committee?" "Sure. Why not." Finances. I've dealt with money for 30 some odd years. Now I'm Vice Chair of the Parish Finance Committee. Like I said earlier, I serve at church every Wednesday night and do the readings. I'm also an altar server, a Eucharistic Minister at the same time. I do funerals with one of my classmates, who also does funerals. It's like a vicious circle. Everybody comes back around.

In 2017, they started talking about the Biddeford Cultural and Heritage Center. They were meeting at the Kermesse office. I'm going there to let them in the office and listen. Low and behold, they were talking about setting up officers, president (Diane Cyr) and so forth. They needed a Treasurer. Dana Peck said, "I know who." I said, "Don't you dare." Dana said, "Yeah. Paul can do that. He's Treasurer for the Kermesse. He's familiar with the situation." So, here I am, Treasurer.

TG: You forgot to step back again (laughter)

PG: Yeah. I know (laughter). I was sitting down, but they all pulled their chairs. OK. Alright guys. So, we started off with nothing, really. No computer, everything was handwritten. We went to the City. Luckily, we got $10,000 the first year, which helped us get started. Finally, I was able to buy a computer. I was able to control the finances on a computer. Kermesse had its own computer and I have my computer. Any given day I'm grabbing one of these computers depending

on what I'm going to be doing. I enjoy it. Someday it will stop. You get tired. Nobody wants the job. At elections time, no hands go up. Oh, OK. I guess I'll have to stay. That's the only trouble with finances. Some of the positions you can change, and it doesn't upset the apple cart too much. As far as finances, you don't just say, "Here. You do the finances." Some people just aren't adept at doing it. Some people just don't want to do it. It's a responsibility. Knock on wood, I've been lucky. Nothing has happened along the way. I'm still not in jail. I'm still doing well. If I keep avoiding the police, I'm good (laughter).

TG: La Kermesse has been part of this community for many years.

PG: 1983

TG: What do you think it's meant to the community to have that?

PG: I think its enjoyable to see all of the people gather. Back then, we had two major tents going. It was huge. There was nothing wrong with having 7,000 to 9,000 people. The big thing back then was the block party which was down at the City Square. We had two. We had the City Square and the Water Street. The City Square would close and the parade with the St. Louis Alumni Band would march down to the waterfront for the fireworks. It was several thousand people there. I think its camaraderie. I remember many people saying, "We'll meet over here next year at the same time, in front of this food stand." The families get together, and they celebrate. That was the key, the celebration. We used to honor different families.

We used to have 35 members. Now we are down to 18. It's cut in half. We've already started planning for next year, 2022. We are starting to line up the ducks, slowly but surely. Hopefully, we'll be able to pull it off. Fryeburg Fair went, I don't see why we can't unless some major medical stuff happens between now and June. We can't wait until May to plan this. You have to line up bands, vendors and crafters. They are all looking for places to come. You have to negotiate something for the rides. That's always hard to get. Entertainment, the big thing is trying to get French entertainment. They can't come across the border anymore. When they could, if they went to the border with their instruments, they had to pay a fee because they were coming down here to make money. So, they had to pay to cross the lines to come here and make money. That's always been a struggle to get entertainment out of Canada. That's another story. We just manage the best we can with what we can find.

TG: You've been part of the Biddeford Cultural and Heritage Center since its inception.

PG: 2017

TG: What's your vision? How would you like to see it evolve?

PG: Getting the community together, ethnic groups, which I think is the philosophy behind the cultural. They were part of the Riverjam with all of the ethnic food vendors. They were able to get together the Italian, Moroccan little samples of food, which I think is the key of bringing all of these ethnic groups together. They are all doing the same thing. Let's get them all together and try to get away from "We don't want to deal with them. They're different, we don't want to deal with them." Getting all the people together. It's a culture thing.

TG: One of the things I didn't touch upon is the closing of St. Louis High School. How did you feel about that?

PG: It was all political. There was nothing wrong with it. I think from bishop on down, I think there was something going on in there that he just didn't want to continue putting money into the school. The tuition was really low back then anyways. I think my mother kept telling me it was, "It cost us $25 a year for tuition." Now if you look at St. James School, you are looking at $6,000 tuition for non-resident. The other ones are little lower. But, that's a lot of money if you have two kids in there. That's $12,000 bucks. Honestly, I don't know how long it can continue doing that. The parish itself, we've put in a $250,000 out of the parish budget to supply the school above and beyond the tuition. I don't know how long they can maintain it. Every year they're going up. They have 150-160 kids. I don't know. That's the big stigma. Some people are still very bitter about that closing. Luckily, the St. Louis Alumni Association has been able to continue. Now they are meeting at the Kermesse office. They sold their building and moved into the Community Center. They have an office downstairs in the building. I don't think that will ever go away. It will eventually when the elderly people who knew about it have been laid to rest. The younger generation could care less. Well, they don't even know what happened anyways.

TG: They didn't have those experiences.

PG: That's right. You are talking 1970. That's a long time ago.

TG: So, Paul, what has being from Biddeford meant to you in your life?

PG: Good question. I think it's just the idea of being small community, per se, compared to others. You know people. You are familiar with people. The upbringing was easier, back then. I wouldn't want to start a family all over again now. Everything has changed so much. I think just the idea of being around people you grew up with. It's hard to put into words exactly, what it means. I wouldn't change anything. I wouldn't go anyplace else. It's perfect upbringing. Everything was fine, quiet. I wouldn't change.

TG: What has the recent 18 months to 2 years, living through COVID. What has that experience been like for you?

PG: (Groan) Very challenging. For want to better words. It changes all of your lifestyle. You have to adapt to a different way of living. The mask scenario. You can't go here. You don't dare go there. I think it disrupts the whole family life. For example, we had to change how we did Christmas last year. We usually have Christmas here. The whole family comes here. We do the gifts and everything else. My daughter, working in a hospital, was very leery of gathering. She said, "Well, we aren't going Christmas year. We're just going to bring the gifts over." The wife said, "We can't do that. That's tradition." As my grandson would say, "This is tradition. Making memories." I said, "I'm going to fix that." We will use the Kermesse office. We went there. It's a big room. (You've been in there. We are just starting to remodel it.) So, the tables were all spread out. We had our Christmas party. No food, just the gifts. We asked, "What do you want for lunch?" One of them said, "We like the stuffed shells." So, we made 75 stuffed shells. We brought them over there. We kept them in the car. When you leave, here's your lunch. Take it home with you. We gave out all of the gifts. They opened all of their gifts. Everybody was happy. Everybody went their own way. Everybody stayed safe. That was a fun party.

TG: Is there anything you want people to be able to take away from hearing your story?

PG: That's a tough question. For people to get along together. To stop being bitter about little things. Life is too short. Enjoy what you have now. Move on.

Stay friendly. Try not to carry grudges. Again, life is too short to be carrying grudges.

TG: Is there anything you'd like to share that we didn't talk about today?

PG: No, not really. Just the idea that I appreciate you coming over and having me put some words to what has happened in the past in my life and the wife's life. Every family has ups and downs. We've lived through it. I think we managed to control ourselves. Our kids have grown up. They are doing very well. The grandchildren are doing well. Our granddaughter is graduating from York County Community College with an associates degree in architectural design. Now she is going to get an associates degree in culinary arts. If you want a nice birthday cake, go to Reilly's. Just pick the one with a lot of roses on it. Those are her favorite ones. The boys are doing well. They both have a good job. Knock on wood. It's been a good life. We are going on the 58th year of our marriage. We have survived the ups and downs as any married couple will do. We are doing well.

TG: I want to thank you for sharing your story with us. You have a lot to be proud of and we appreciate your time today, Paul.
PG: I appreciate you people doing this. Thank you very much.

TG: You're welcome.