THE YEARBOOK EDITOR:

Jody Owens

I liked Mike Petty's concept of unsung, everyday heroes, and decided I would like to pay a visit to his cousin Jody in Battle Creek, Michigan. I got lost while trying to find her house, and stopped to ask directions of a couple conversing in their driveway.

The man had never heard of the street where Jody lived, but his wife thought a moment and told me how to get there. When I arrived at Jody's house, I glanced to my right and realized that I was no more than thirty yards from the home of the couple I had asked for directions. This man had never heard *of Jody's street, and yet a strong gust of wind could have blown him onto her front porch. A misthrown Frisbee could have landed on her roof.*

When I told Jody what had happened, she explained that the man lived in a different subdivision and faced in the opposite direction, and I shouldn't get upset about it.

I set up my tape recorder while she went to get water and cookies. When she returned, I asked her to tell me some basic information about her family and her high school.

When I was born, my mother was a telephone operator and my father was an installer for the telephone company. I have two younger sisters, plus Michael, who's thirteen days younger. He calls me "the elderly sister." I was born right here in Battle Creek, and I went to Lakeview High School, which is a couple miles over that way.

Lakeview High School had a fully equipped fallout shelter for

twelve hundred people. There was water, food, cots, blankets, everything, for twelve hundred people. There were certain rules in case of a nuclear explosion. Anyone who came to school could come in, but once the doors were closed, no one could go out. Even if your parents came for you, if the door was closed, you couldn't leave. As early as the first grade, we learned a little song about a turtle, and how to get under your desk and put your hands over your head. When you grow up and your whole life is getting ready for a nuclear war, well, I have to say I'm surprised that we made it this far. I never expected to go this long without there being a nuclear war.

When I was in high school, my mother used to tell me that I was born middle-aged. I took high school very seriously, and it was very important that I got good grades. It was really my senior year before anything significant happened to me socially. I was elected editor of the yearbook, which was a real, real thrill to me. But it did lead to my sad story. Since I was the yearbook editor, I was the chairman of the homecoming dance in my senior year. So I decorated all day—and then came back home. No one had invited me. I knew that night that my heart would break and I'd never live until morning. But, you do. I did have a boyfriend who was a year behind me, but you had to have a tux and flowers and dinner out, and he couldn't afford it.

I remember being really frightened at graduation. I'd already been accepted at college and had a scholarship, but the only thing you've really known for thirteen years is coming to an end. I knew the rules, I knew the ropes, I knew how to get from one class to another, and it was really frightening to think of starting all over.

I wanted to go to college somewhere small, where I felt like I wouldn't be lost in the shuffle. A friend of our family had gone to Hope College, in Holland, Michigan. I applied, was accepted, and decided that's where I was going before I ever visited there. I look back at some of the rules and realize how restrictive they would seem today. We could never wear pants to class. We had to attend chapel twice a week and that was grounds for expulsion. If we were going to be out of the dorm after 7:30 P.M., we had to sign out. As freshmen, we had to be in by ten o'clock on weeknights. Upperclassmen had to be in by ten-thirty. On weekends it was twelve and twelve-thirty. Of course, the rules were not at all restrictive to me. I didn't have anything to do after seven-thirty anyway.

I first became aware of the Vietnam War when Mark Lander died. He was in my high-school class. He'd come up through honors English

with me and gone off to the University of Michigan. He felt compelled to quit school and join the marines—and he was killed when we were nineteen. I mean, people in my class were never going to die. War was in the history books. Then another boy I graduated with died in Vietnam. And my boyfriend's brother stepped on a land mine and was killed. And another boy from my class came home from Vietnam, but had a lot of problems mentally, and ended up setting himself on fire in his backyard and killing himself.

In Holland they had a "tradition" that as soon as a family was notified that their boy was dead in Vietnam, all the flags in Holland flew at half mast until the day of his funeral. Then, the day after the funeral, the flags would go back up. You are so isolated when you're in college, so involved with your own little world. But, when I was a junior, every day as I'd walk to class . . . it must have been about two months that the flag was never up, there were so many boys dying.

I had a cousin who was an active draft resister, and I took part in the end-the-war candlelight marches. It was more "Give peace a chance" than demonstrating against the soldiers who were in Vietnam. But it was Michael who really influenced my attitudes. The first time he went over as an engineer, he came home and was saying we were right to be there, and we were doing the right thing, and we were stopping the spread of Communism. He was sent back as a Green Beret paratrooper when I was a junior in college. I had his car while he was over there. That time when he came home, I remember how nervous he was. He couldn't sleep. He'd be up all night long, pacing the floor. If he did go to sleep, no matter how quiet you were, he'd wake up. He didn't talk about it as much anymore. Then he went back the third time as a Cobra pilot, and his attitude had swung around 180 degrees: There was no point in being there.

My goal in going to Hope was to graduate with highest honors. So for four years I was just tied to my books. I didn't see a newspaper. I could go a week at a time and not see television. I didn't make it, by the way; I only graduated with high honors. When I was a senior, I was nominated for a Woodrow Wilson. There were 24,000 nominated and then there were 1000 designates and 1000 honorable mentions. I was an honorable mention. I got an offer of a fellowship with pretty fair money to a school I'd never heard of in West Virginia. I decided I would go to Michigan State and work on my masters in English. All of a sudden I said, "That's not what I want to do." It was very flattering to be nominated. My poor adviser, I felt so badly telling him that I didn't

want to go to graduate school. But he was very nice about it and got me into a student-teaching program that summer in Kalamazoo.

It was seventh- and eighth-graders who had failed English. It lasted for eight weeks and there were five student teachers in the room. So I had taught only eight mornings when I got my first job and they turned me loose with 120 seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds. The only school that called me for an interview was Athens High School, twenty miles south of Battle Creek. It was in a conservative farming community. Growing up in Battle Creek, I'd never heard of it. They offered me a contract and I accepted. There were twenty teachers on the staff and ten of us were new.

I taught English and I was yearbook adviser. My first day of teaching, Michael sent me a dozen roses, so that was really special and the kids thought that was neat. I was teaching twelfth grade, so I was only four years older than the kids. But it didn't make any difference because as soon as you cross the line from student to teacher, they never think of you as having any family or earlier life. I think they think you get rolled into your closet every night.

But I really didn't know what I was doing. I was just flying blind. The first year, all I knew to do was all the things that I had done coming up through advanced-placement English. So these kids read *Oedipus,* they read *Hamlet,* they read *The Grapes of Wrath,* and they read all the things that I read in advanced-placement English. They were very polite about it!

By this time, I had broken up with my boyfriend, Bob, after five years. He had gone to Michigan State while I was at Hope, and one of his friends told me that he was seeing another girl at Michigan State. So I called him and broke up, assuming he would know I'd found out. The same night I broke up with him, I agreed to go on a blind date. Why not? I'm a free agent. Within a month I was engaged to Bill. Bob never knew why I broke up. It turned out he hadn't been going out with anyone. His friend had lied to me. So a month later Bob saw my engagement in the paper and assumed I had broken up with him because I had been going out with this other fellow. Eventually we ran into each other and we began talking, and realized what had happened. But by then, we were both engaged. One of the world's sad love stories.

I was engaged through my first year of teaching. Bill was a super person, but it was just a rebound. We got engaged before I had a job. But then I taught for a year and I really liked it. All of a sudden I was

on my own. I had an apartment, I had a car, and I had some money. He wouldn't stop pushing to get married, so I broke off the engagement. My aunts had had a shower for me, and then I didn't end up getting married, and felt terrible about that.

I met my husband, Gary, the end of my second year of teaching, and we were married in August of '72. He's a commercial truck driver. Class of '68. He didn't come on really strong and he wasn't real macho. Because he was shy, I felt I could be myself with him, because I'm really a shy person—when I'm not teaching. I taught for over seven years before I said anything at a teachers' meeting. I tell my kids that and they find it hard to believe, because, to them, I never shut up.

After I'd been teaching about two years, I was asked to interview for a teaching position at Lakeview, where I had gone to high school. I would have gotten more money. It's nice to have money, but that's not the most important thing. I liked it where I was at Athens. The school was $163,000 in debt and everybody was bailing out. I didn't want to be a quitter. I've been teaching at Athens ever since. I do teach adult education now one night a week at Lakeview.

In 1972 I wrote away to a place in California for a POW bracelet. Engraved on the bracelet was the name of Staff Sergeant David Demmon and the date 6/9/65, which was the day he disappeared. As it happened, it was also the date that I graduated from high school. I had planned to send him the bracelet when he returned, along with a letter I wrote him. But he never came back, and I still wear the bracelet every day. Just last night I had dinner with a former student who said, "I remember when the Iranian hostages were being held. You made a speech at an assembly and you talked about your prisoner of war, and how he never came home, and how you hoped that wouldn't happen with the Iranian hostages. You started to cry, and you couldn't go on." She said, "I felt sorry that it made you so sad, but I didn't understand what the big deal was about it."

I don't think the kids today are very political, but neither was I in high school. I feel there are a lot more ways that they're the same as we were than ways we're different. One difference I've seen is a dwindling respect for teachers. Not necessarily for me personally, but when I decided to be a teacher, I wasn't sure I could do it, because teachers were these beings that were set apart, and were so bright. Now the attitude is—what's the saying—those that can't, teach. I guess, when you come to look at it, why should they respect me just because I'm a teacher? I should earn their respect. But my teachers didn't have to earn my re-

spect. Then it was, you get in trouble in school and you're in twice as much trouble when you get home. Now the parents often take the kid's side automatically before they even know what the problem is. And if a kid can't spell or can't read, it's my fault because I'm the English teacher.

There's also a growing lack of respect for property. There are no acts of violence at my high school, but there is a lot of senseless vandalism. They drive on the lawn; they shoot out the windows. The school's been broken into twice this year and the kitchen and the locker-room area were vandalized.

It was in the early '70s that the kids really scared me with drugs, and taking a lot of different kinds of pills. Now it's mostly just marijuana, and it's sort of swinging back to alcohol. Kids are so influenced by what's "in" and what's "out" in clothing and ideas and ways of defying the system. I don't think they ever think about their safety in terms of drinking and driving or mixing alcohol and pills, because it's never going to be them.

There have been some good changes, too. When it comes to dating, the girls are a little more bold about calling fellows and initiating the action. We had to be sneakier about it. You'd have to have your girlfriend tell his boyfriend and all that, instead of just picking up the phone and saying, "I'm not doing anything Saturday. Would you like to take me out?"

When I was in high school, there were no girls' sports teams. My girls can participate in basketball, in volleyball, in track. At the bigger schools, they can swim and become involved in softball and cross-country. I love it. I have a daughter, Alyson, who was born in 1975. My daughter the jock. She's a gymnast and she's going away to gymnastics camp this summer, by herself. She also plays floor hockey, which is like hockey in a gym. And this year she was the mascot for my varsity cheerleaders over at Athens.

Right now I teach "Practical English," where they learn survival skills: how to fill out a job application, how to write complaint letters or request letters. We have a listening unit where I try to talk about euphemisms and misleading statements in advertising and politics. We also read *Animal Farm,* because it's a fable with political implications, and they read *Johnny Got His Gun,* because I'm an old diehard antiwar demonstrator.

In my honors English class they still have to read Shakespeare, as well as *The Grapes of Wrath, To Kill a Mockingbird, Lord of the Flies,*

Death of a Salesman, Catcher in the Rye. When I first started teaching *Catcher in the Rye,* I used to have to send permission slips home for the parents to sign. I don't have to do that anymore. I also teach two ten-week classes each semester, what we call "quarter classes." That's a holdover from the '70s. In the '70s you could take virtually anything as an English class. You could take "The Bible as Literature." You could take "African Folktales," "Sports Literature," "Acting." Now it's the back-to-the-basics movement.

We've lost a lot of things from our curriculum. World history used to be a requirement, and it's not anymore. A lot of the quarter classes have been dropped, like Michigan history and Russian history. A lot of advanced classes like chemistry and physics are now taught every other year instead of every year. But at least now the school district is able to keep its head above water financially.

There is one incident that happened a few years ago that affected me deeply. I had stopped going to church when I was in college. I thought, If you're God, why do you let all these terrible things happen? Why are my classmates dying in Vietnam? I wanted nothing to do with church. Then, in 1980, two of my students died, two of my girls. It was an auto accident just before the start of their senior year. They weren't drinking; they weren't on drugs; they weren't driving too fast. They just lost control on a gravel road. I really couldn't come to terms with that. One was supposed to have been a cheerleader and the other was a state-champion runner in two different events. When the school year started, there were a lot of days when I just left school crying, because they should have been there.

A couple of months later, I agreed to go to this Presbyterian church with my mom, right across from Lakeview High School. I remember feeling so angry and so bitter and saying, "Okay, God, if you've got anything to say to me, I'm here." And it was like He was speaking just to me. The gist of the minister's sermon was, If something good happens, why is it our doing, but if something bad happens, it's God's fault? Cancer, pestilence, an automobile accident—we pin that on God. But a promotion or the birth of a child or anything positive—that's us, that's *our* accomplishment. That's what started the whole healing process for me. Now I attend church regularly, sing in the choir, and have become a deacon. Instead of believing God is up in the sky manipulating all of us, I believe it's each person's responsibility to know which of your friends needs a helping hand, and that God is working through you to bring comfort. It all comes down to this inter-

related network of individuals helping one another and caring about one another.

A lot of people are really afraid of high-school kids; and the older they get, the more afraid they are. But I like the upperclassmen because they're poised right at the edge of the rest of their life, with all these decisions to make. The first year I taught, there was a teacher who seemed jealous of all the new teachers, who were all young and enthusiastic. Some of the kids would come to me with their problems. One day this teacher said to me, "They come to you now while you're young, but you just wait until you get older." Sometimes I sort of get scared that they *will* stop coming, but it's been sixteen years and they haven't yet.

While Jody and I were together, she told me that her cousin Michael had just retired from the army and taken a civilian job in Florida. I took down his new phone number, and when I returned home I placed a call to Mike in West Palm Beach. He was now a regional director for PRIDE (Prison Rehabilitative Industries and Diversified Enterprises, Inc.), the private corporation to which the state of Florida had turned over the running of its prison industries.

"Basically, I'm doing the same thing I was doing at Fort Leavenworth," he said. "Although I am enjoying myself, I must admit that I deeply miss the military. I guess I will always be a soldier."