

Keith Ballard

Grace, class, and dignity – those are the three qualities this dedicated educator strives for each day as he battles ALS.

Chapter 01 - 1:00

Introduction

Announcer: Dr. Keith Ballard's education career started in Coweta, Oklahoma in 1972. Two years later he moved to Oologah, Oklahoma where he was a teacher, assistant high school principal, administrative assistant, assistant superintendent, and then superintendent as of 1986. Dr. Ballard joined Claremore Public Schools as superintendent in 1992, and then became the executive director of the Oklahoma State School Boards Association in 2000, where he served for eight years. He has served as an adjunct professor of school law for Southern Nazarene University and Oral Roberts University.

Ballard retired from Tulsa Public Schools after seven years as superintendent. He spearheaded Project Schoolhouse which addressed changing student populations and school building utilization.

Due to Keith's battle with ALS, his speech has been affected, but he is very understandable as he discusses this challenge and his life of education. Our thanks to Keith for sharing his story with the oral history website VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 11:27

ALS

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is January 15, 2021. So Keith, would you state your full name, please?

Keith Ballard: Keith Edward Ballard.

JE: And your date of birth?

KB: July 23, 1949.

JE: And your present age?

KB: 71.

JE: As we are recording this, I'm in our office here at VoicesofOklahoma.com and where are you as we record this by phone?

KB: I am sitting at my desk at home. I'm pretty much confined now to working from home. I'm actually sitting at a desk that I built whenever I was 15 years old.

JE: Wow.

KB: It is a direct result of one of my all-time favorite teachers, an industrial arts teacher at Kiowa High School where I graduated along with my...31 of us graduated together. Most of us started kindergarten together. So anyway, I had an industrial arts teacher...I really had no ability in that area...but I had an industrial arts teacher that had a great impact on me and on decisions that I made later in life.

JE: Amazing.

KB: And it was because of him that I built this desk that I am sitting at right now when I was 15 years old. Truly I do not have the ability to do that.

JE: (laughs)

KB: But thanks to Mr. McKinley, I did it.

JE: Yes, and that's an amazing...and it has stood up all these years despite the fact you felt you weren't good at carpentry (laughs).

KB: That's right.

JE: But right now your home is in what town? Where is your home?

KB: I moved to Claremore when I left Oologah and I became superintendent here. We leased a house for a year and then we built this house, and all of my kids were living here when they graduated from Claremore High School.

JE: You have faced many challenges in your life, in your career, but you are facing a challenge today that would be, I would imagine, the biggest. And we're going to talk about it a little bit now and we'll get into your story and then we'll conclude with a bit about it as well. What was the first sign that you knew something just wasn't right?

KB: Well, we had gone to Sweden to visit our youngest son and his three kids. That was in February, and they had just had a baby in mid-January. We went to Sweden to see the new baby. My son is principal of the International English School in Orebro, Sweden. He is a very outdoors type and along with his two older kids, we went on the most arduous hike. We had an absolutely great time. I was coming off a time when I had walked 180 consecutive days of 10,000 steps or more. I was in great shape. We had a great time in Sweden and we returned in late February. Then I just began to notice around the first of March that I was beginning to feel just off a little bit. I was feeling kind of light headed and my gait was off. I was walking a tremendous amount in walking my dog, which I absolutely loved to do. I just began to notice around the first of March that things weren't quite right.

And, of course, with the COVID scare going on, the first thing that my doctor did, and I see Dr. Beasley at OU...and the first thing that I did was they had me go get a COVID test. It proved to be negative. But it just kept getting worse from there. I began to see a number of doctors. Dr. Beasley, for whom I have the utmost respect and personal like for, was very concerned. At one point, they actually diagnosed me with pneumonia and they treated that, but things just did not get better. In late summer...I'm very busy and very active in my yard...I take great pride with all of my flowers and actually I over-plant, I over-do, but it is something that I really enjoy, as well as my tomato plants. I had two or three falls, really nasty falls, outside working. So I continued to see...at one time, I was involved with five different doctors and they were trying to figure out what was going on. Then ultimately they said OK...I had had some tests done with a neurologist who was also affiliated with OU. They couldn't turn anything up so they said OK, we're sending you to Mayo Clinic. My first thought was "yeah, right, nobody gets into Mayo". It is very difficult, but I will say that my doctors with assistance from my wife of 49 years...they wrote a really nice letter just about what I had done in Tulsa. And I don't know that that really influenced anything but it was a really nice letter and, the next thing that I know, I am scheduled to go to the Mayo Clinic in September. My wife and I actually drove up to Lake Superior and walked all around and hiked all around, although I was unstable and off balance. Just being careful, I was able to do all of that. Then it really began to go downhill. I saw doctors at Mayo in September and October and then the final diagnosis came in December.

JE: And that diagnosis is?

KB: ALS.

JE: Also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

KB: Yes. And there could be some other complicating factors. Just last week, I started seeing a doctor and he is an ALS specialist in Oklahoma City. He suspects some brain degeneration that also is impacting this. But today, I am very weak and I require a walker to get around. So you're right, John, it is the biggest challenge of my life for me personally, and there is a reason that I say that. I met yesterday with a physical therapist that I have been seeing for a couple of months now and he is working on a wheelchair—a very elaborate wheelchair that meets a lot of needs. You can tell that my voice is off. I always prided myself on being a really good public speaker. In fact, speech was one of my majors in undergraduate—speech and psychology, I had a double major. Little did I know that I would be superintendent in Tulsa one day, Tulsa Public Schools, but I think that undergraduate work in speech and psychology probably helped that.

JE: Well I admire you taking on this assignment here of oral history but I want you to know that your speech is very clear and those who are listening to this can understand you. There is not a problem there. So thank you...

KB: Good.

Chapter 03 - 13:15**Loving Family**

John Erling: So let's begin here and talk about your parents. Your mother's name and her maiden name, where she was born and where she grew up?

Keith Ballard: My mother grew up...and I'm really glad that you're wanting to talk about my parents because I had an amazing family. I really did. I absolutely adored my parents and they were absolutely great parents. My mother grew up on a farm with eight siblings. There were actually nine siblings—one died shortly after he was born. But she grew up on a farm near Hazelton, Kansas. I grew up in Kiowa, Kansas, and it was only 6 miles from Hazelton to Kiowa. My parents moved there to put my sister and I in Kiowa schools. I started kindergarten there. But my mother, specifically back to her, she was a terrific mother.

She was very active as a child riding horses. My grandfather had a very active farm. He tilled the ground and they had a huge cattle operation and several horses. I grew up on that farm as well. But my mother and my father married very young, while they were still in high school at the age of 17. They had two kids by the time they were 19 and a third at 21. We were a very close-knit family. The church was important to my family. I swear that I was in church before I was a week old and it was just standard procedure that we were in church every Sunday. My parents were warm and loving. Although my father never really had the...you asked about my mother but if it's OK, I'm going to move into my father.

JE: OK, Keith, let me just ask you...your mother's name first, what was her name?

KB: Norma Jean Gates...Norma Jean Gates Ballard.

JE: And then your father's name?

KB: William Edward Ballard.

JE: Yes, and now talk about your father.

KB: OK, My dad was an extraordinarily bright guy. He really was. They were married young and they had these kids and they totally dedicated their lives to their kids. They were great parents. My father did whatever work he could get in Kiowa. To say that we grew up poor would be accurate—we did. As far as having things, we did grow up poor, but we grew up rich. It was a very strong, loving family; very supportive. My dad actually worked just whatever he could find. They were determined not to leave Kiowa and it was a great place to grow up. For a good period of time, my father was the janitor at the school where I went. My father had an enormous IQ and I'm not exaggerating that. He was absolutely a brilliant guy. He really found his place in the church and was a leader in the church. And I'm curious about this—he was such a person of well read, high IQ, and he swept the floors at the schools in Kiowa, Kansas in order to ensure that his kids would have a bright future. John, I swear that I really believe that my parents began talking about college when we

were in the crib. That's all I ever heard—not all I ever heard. There was a huge emphasis on you will go to college, and we all did. But there are other things that I want to say about my family but I'm going to stop there and let you ask the questions.

JE: I'm curious...the church you attended, what denomination was it?

KB: Methodist.

JE: OK. And can you name your brothers...did you have brothers and sisters, your siblings?

KB: Yes. I had an older sister—a little over a year older than me—Connie Jean Ballard. I had a younger brother. We were so close. We played sports together. We were very active in sports. We were all three really good sibs. I don't want to sound braggadocios but that was the expectation from my parents. My brother and I were extremely close and, sadly, he got cancer and died at the age of 20. It was a monumental moment in my life. I was so upset. I was so emotional. I can't begin to stress how close-knit my family was.

My older sister was kind of the commander of the corps and she was a fabulous older sister. My brother was a very good athlete. He went to college on a football scholarship but he could have gone on a basketball scholarship. He was a very good student as well. He got cancer and died at the age of 20. Now I'm going to go ahead and say this, John—on his deathbed, two days before he died...I was teaching in Coweta at the time and we had gone home for the weekend. We knew that he was likely going to die soon. So he called me into his bedroom. This is very impactful. While I have not the sharpest memory with this ALS, I can still remember it like it was yesterday.

He called me in and said that he wanted to talk to his brother and he is lying there on his deathbed. He told me that he really appreciated the fact that all of us siblings were so close, so protective of each other, very loving to each other, and he said, "I'm not going to be able to go on, you have to accept that I'm going to go to heaven very soon, and while I don't want you to live your life for me, I want you to do really well in your life. What is too bad is I believe that you and I would have always been connected in some way".

Actually he was one semester short of graduating from college and what he had decided that he was going to do, he was going to teach and he was going to coach, but he was going to live in Kiowa and on the side, he was going to keep the agriculture part going. That's what his will was. It had a huge impact on me. It was motivating for me for the rest of my life to do well because I was not only representing myself but I was representing my precious brother.

My sister and I remained extremely close. My brother's name was William Joseph Ballard but he went by Joe...Joe Ballard. My sister and I remained extremely close over the years. My sister started out as a home ec teacher. She was a wonderful cook and she really enjoyed that. She ended up being a librarian and she moved to Topeka, Kansas. We remained extremely close until she died of cancer a few years ago. Right before I took over at Tulsa Public, my sister died.

Both of my parents...my father died fairly young. My mother lived into her 80s; I actually moved my mother into assisted living here in Claremore where I live and so she got to be a part of our lives at the end. I get...well, I'll sum all this up by saying I was absolutely blessed with a splendid home life. Did we have money? No, we did not. But we had opportunities.

I went to work on the farm when I was really very, very young. My brother and I ran a hay crop and we never wanted. We never wanted because there were ample opportunities. I had uncles who were involved in agriculture. I had grandfathers who were involved in agriculture. I grew up hauling hay. I grew up herding cattle. I grew up driving a tractor—I didn't even know how old I was when they put me on the tractor. But I had a blessed upbringing. No we didn't have money but we had everything else. We had the church, and I believe that it laid the foundation for my future success. My father always talked about all of his kids going to college; two graduated, a third was one semester short. I'm glad that you lived with my family, John, because it had a huge impact on my life.

JE: Yes.

Chapter 04 - 5:45

Home, Church, School

John Erling: You went to school in Kiowa. When you were in high school...high school in Kiowa?

Keith Ballard: Yes.

JE: And were you a stand-out student there? Were you involved in lots of activities?

KB: I was a good student. I was very involved in athletics. I was a three-sport letterman. We had an undefeated high school football team. We had an excellent basketball team. We did well. I ran the half mile in track and I actually qualified for the state track meet. To do that, you had to win at regional or place in the top three. I actually won at regionals.

I also was a very good student; I really was. But there were only 31 people in my graduating class and we were all good students. We were blessed with absolutely wonderful teachers, phenomenal teachers. We had an English teacher who taught us to love literature, who taught us to write well. I had math teachers who were unbelievable. I prided myself all the way through my career on being an excellent - and I don't overstate that excellent - typist, and it was because of Julia Fritsy who taught me to type in the 10th grade and it served me really, really well. I had a phenomenal education. Yes, I was a very good student.

I was very involved in extracurricular activities to the hilt. I've already said what I did, and it was a very active life because we were also very involved in the church. I actually

had a neighbor of mine say to me a couple years ago; he said to me, “Keith, you’re one of the most successful persons ever to come out of Kiowa. What do you attribute it to?” and I said “well, I wasn’t the most successful person” – that’s the language that he used – “to come out of Kiowa. Look at you, Craig! You’re a medical doctor. You’re an M.D.” There were legions of people who came out of Kiowa and the reason is three-fold – first of all, we had absolutely great parents in Kiowa, Kansas – and we did. And secondly, we had a great school system and we really had good teachers, John. We really did.

One of my best friends, his dad was the superintendent there. They just ensured quality teachers. The third reason that I gave him that people were very successful coming out of Kiowa, Kansas was the church. Those three things were very instrumental in my growing up.

JE: What year did you graduate from high school?

KB: 1967, the class of '67. They have rallied around me; I mean, you wouldn't believe. We had a class reunion via Zoom about two weeks ago and most of them showed up. Every day I get some kind of communication from a classmate. We were extremely close-knit. The class of '67 – we took great pride in all of our accomplishments. My classmates have been very successful. We still talk about that undefeated football team. We didn't have the state playoffs or it would have taken a really good team to deny us a state championship.

Forty years after we graduated, they invited us back. Labor Day they have a big parade down main street and they had the football team from that year and the graduating class of '67 and the underclassmen who played including my brother, who is a better athlete than I. So it was a great time. It was a great place to grow up in and it's no wonder that legions of kids were very successful because of home, because of church, and because of school.

Chapter 05 - 7:10

Fort Hays State

John Erling: After you graduate high school in '67, then you go on to college. And where was that?

Keith Ballard: I went to Fort Hays State. The reason that I chose Fort Hays State was that my sister went there. My sister and I were very, very close. She was only one grade ahead of me and so we were...as you can tell, John, all of my siblings, the three of us, were extremely close, very loving with each other. And my sister had gone to Fort Hays State. I was a little bit leery about college, although I was a good student, but it was...I grew up in an environment where we didn't do much other than work and school. We didn't go on

vacations. We were very close-knit. I've already established that. So I followed my sister to Fort Hays State and she got me a job working in the cafeteria system where she worked and I did that for all four years in college.

JE: So that was in Hays, Kansas. And what was your major at Fort Hays State?

KB: I had a double major – psychology and speech.

JE: Were you planning to follow that pursuit in psychology and speech or was there a point here that you started thinking about education? When does all that happen?

KB: Well that is a very interesting question. And oh, by the way, I was president of the senior class at Fort Hays State. That is really a good question, John, because I really thought that I wanted to major in psychology and I wanted to pursue a career. In my junior year, we visited an institution that I was being prepared to work in. I was really unsure at the time that I really wanted to pursue that.

So I went back and I talked to my advisor who was a psychology professor at Fort Hays State. I still remember where I was sitting in that office and I told him I was mid term of my junior year. I said while I've enjoyed the classes, I don't think that I want to pursue a career as a psychologist. I already had enough hours for the major, John. He said to me, "Well, what do you like, Keith?" I still remember that so well. I actually had a mental picture of this one teacher that inspired me to build the desk, my shop teacher. And I said, "Well, I really like school. I really like my teachers". And he said, "Well you want to be a teacher?" and I said "maybe".

Now I'm going to stop here and say that I absolutely loved Fort Hays State because they were about children. I've been inducted into their alumni Hall of Fame. It was a great honor for me to go back right in that grade with my wife. They only named five or six each year, but they did everything around the best interest of their students. It was a phenomenal place to get a college education. And when I said I really like school and he said do you want to be a teacher and I said maybe, that is very appealing to me. I've already said this – I was halfway through my junior year, there was no way that I would have been able to get all the classes in without them going to extreme measures to help me.

My brother had cancer at the time. It was a very difficult time in my life. I was changing majors. And Fort Hays State did everything they could to help me. In fact, they actually assigned me to teach in an area that I wasn't really certified to teach in – and that was history – so that I could stay in Hays because while I was doing my intern teaching, I had to take classes in order to graduate on time. I owe a tremendous gratitude/debt to Fort Hays State University for helping me in any way that they could. I go back and I talk to students. I've heard from people in the alumni division already.

In fact, the lady who heads up the alumni division is planning on coming to Claremore to visit with my wife and I. I have stayed very active in the alumni association at Fort Hays

State. I can't say enough about how grateful I am for the college education that I got and for the way they moved things around to help me at the end of my college career.

JE: So then your degree is in education from Fort Hays State?

KB: Yes with a major in psychology and speech.

Chapter 06 - 6:00

Christie

John Erling: So you mentioned your wife and we need to bring your wife in here because she was instrumental in your education world as a profession. Your wife, Christie - how did you meet her?

Keith Ballard: Well, I actually wish you could see my face. I actually broke into a smile when you mentioned Christie. We had a huge WKY teen hop. I grew up in a sparsely populated part of the country. WKY would come down and have what they called a teen hop at the Legion Hall every year. It was around Labor Day. So I had just graduated from high school. Kids would come from all around to go to the teen hop. There would be a huge number of kids.

So I'm going about my business enjoying the evening. My brother came up to me and his exact words were...I really remember where we were standing in the Legion Hall at Kiowa, Kansas...and he said to me "you're not going to believe our luck tonight" and I said "how so?" and he said "I just met two twins and they are really good looking, they are a lot of fun, and we have had a really good time this evening, and they're from Burlington". Then he paused and he said, "And they have an older sister who is really good looking. I've already met her". So we walked over and he said "there she is" and he was right - she was really good looking.

She was dancing with somebody. At the end of the dance, her sisters were there, the twins, and they introduced us. She was actually dating a guy but we really hit it off. We've been married 49 years. She is a huge fundamental part of the successes that I have had in life. She has really kept me grounded. She ensured...she was a librarian all those years, started out as an English teacher but fairly quickly she got her master's degree in library science and moved into the library. She was an extraordinary educator. She is a fabulous mother. Without her, I would not have had the success that I did, and I mean that so sincerely. She kept me grounded. She ensured that I knew what the world looked like from a teacher's viewpoint. She is a phenomenal person, a wonderful Christian lady, and we've been married 49 years.

Frankly, I hope that I survive ALS. I'm not trying to be a macabre, I'm not trying to be overly emotional, I intend to survive it and I intend for Christie Castle Ballard and I to have a huge celebration on our 50th wedding anniversary. I can't say enough good about her.

JE: I just point out that WKY was a radio station in Oklahoma City and then they came to Kiowa. So you were married in 1971 and then you moved to Stillwater where Christie finished her English degree at OSU.

KB: Well I'm chuckling because that was part of the deal. I had just graduated. Vietnam was looming out there. I went ahead and enlisted and went to Kansas City and took my physical and did not pass the physical. I had had some health conditions that I just didn't pass it, but I decided to get it out of the way. I was involved in protests of the Vietnam war but I also would have gone. Once that was out of the way, we decided to get married. I was the one who really wanted to get married and she finally said OK but I'm going to finish my work at Oklahoma State. So I went to Oklahoma State. We moved to Stillwater. We got married on August 6. I've already said it, we will celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary this year.

Chapter 07 - 11:45

Reading Specialist

Keith Ballard: I needed a job so I got a job at a local freight company. I went to work at 4:30 in the morning but, as I've already said, I grew up on the farm. I grew up on the back of a hay truck. Work was not something that was foreign to me. I went to work at 4:30 in the morning and we began to unload these huge trucks that would come in overnight and by 8:00, I was working the back allies of Stillwater delivering freight. But I grew up on the back of a hay truck and I grew up working for my uncles and my grandparents. Work was not something that was foreign to me. I would finish the day loading up boxes of paper at Moore Business Forms. Often I would work from 4:30 until 9:00 or 9:30 at night. But I was married to the love of my life and she was finishing her degree and it was a good time.

John Erling: You had a teaching degree and maybe sending out letters to schools?

KB: John, that is an uncanny question. I wrote over 100 letters and I believed that I needed to hand type them. So I hand typed over 100 and then I quit counting, trying to find a teaching job. But when you're undergraduate major, I could teach one of two things - I could teach psychology or I could teach speech and that's all - until I didn't get a job.

JE: But then Christie graduates and she gets an English teacher's job in Coweta Public Schools. As I understand, the superintendent hired her and that meant she wanted you to

have a job in the system as well.

KB: That is another great story, John. The superintendent at Coweta at the time was a former vo-ag teacher. Christie's father, L. E. Castle, is in both the Oklahoma Agriculture Hall of Fame and in the vocational Agriculture Teachers' Hall of Fame. As far as I know, he is the only person ever from Oklahoma that is in both of those halls of fame. Right away, the superintendent had picked up from her transcript that Christie was L. E. Castle's daughter. And, by the way, I absolutely loved my father-in-law. I had the absolute greatest relationship with him.

So we're in there, we're interviewing, and the whole interview the first time is all about Christie Castle Ballard, who her father was, because the superintendent - I don't know if I said this or not - was a former vo-ag teacher. And he declared immediately in that interview that L. E. Castle was the best vo-ag teacher that this state had ever seen. He also farmed on the side. They had a huge farming operation at Jet, but he farmed and taught.

So the whole interview centered on Christie and what he had. At one point, I said, literally about an hour into the interview, I said what about me? He looked at me and he said, "What about you? You can teach one of two things. You can either teach psychology or you can teach speech. Now we have some openings at Coweta Junior High. What do you think you're going to teach? Are you going to teach psychology or are you going to teach speech? Now I want to tell you this - we have openings for your wife and we want to hire her and we understand that you are a package deal. We have some needs being met." (Little did I know what those needs were) "and we will be talking with you".

And so I've already lined out what I was doing, John. I was going to work at 4:30 in the morning. I grew up on the farm. I am a hard worker but I was getting weary of that. It was the spring and we were uncertain. My wife picked me up one afternoon/one evening from the freight job and she said, "Mr. French called us today and he wants both of us to come on Saturday and he wants to talk to both of us about a job". And I said, "Surely you're being serious. Don't kid around about this". And she said, "I'm serious, and he has something in mind for you". Did he ever! So we go down and we meet with him on Saturday. He offers my wife a contract for teaching high school English and he turned to me - and this just shows what foresight that this guy had. The superintendent at Coweta turned to me and he said, "OK, we have several kids at Coweta Junior High who have difficulty reading and we need to confront that issue. We need to see what we can do to get them on track".

This was a monumental moment in my life. It was divine intervention is what I have always called it. He said, "I've checked your transcript. It's a very good transcript, not quite as good as your wife's", (because my wife only had one B in all of her college career; I don't need to tell you what the other grades were - they were all A's) but he said, "You

have a good transcript too. I've done some checking and if you will go back and take nine hours of reading somewhere, anywhere, I don't care where, I will hire you to work with junior high kids who can't read".

That was a huge turning point in my life and in my career because we were going to work on the farm. That's what I did from the time I was 14 years old was run a combine, a hay truck and tractors. So I go back home. I was scheduled to work for her father at Jet, Oklahoma, only about 25 miles from Alva, Oklahoma, which had Northwestern Oklahoma State University. I go back and talk to her father and he said, "Sure, if that's what it takes to get a job, yes we will work around that".

So I go over to Northwestern at Alva and I talk to two ladies who had spent their entire career in the reading specialist program. So I decided I would take nine hours that summer, I would become certified and I would teach junior high kids who had difficulty reading. It was a turning point in my life, John, because I absolutely loved that program. I loved those two ladies who had never married and spent all of their adult career in preparing people as reading specialists. I loved that program and I would go on to get my master's degree as a reading specialist. I would stay two years at Coweta.

I was also the head coach of the 7th, 8th and 9th football team the last year that I was there. That was just kind of a chance thing. They needed someone to help out with the 7th grade football team. I was talking about football with one of the coaches. I actually played one spring at Fort Hays State. I had a few offers to play college football and so I was not lacking in experience, so I coached the 7th grade the first year there and then they made me the head coach over 7th, 8th and 9th. That's what I was doing at Coweta. As a part of our work, they would send me to scout other teams on Friday nights. That was my first introduction to Oologah. You drove across that lake and went to the most spectacular facilities ever. I really was enamored with Oologah.

Chapter 08 - 7:08

Oologah

Keith Ballard: One day I was just casually looking through job openings and they had an opening for a reading specialist at the high school. I would graduate that summer with a master's degree as a reading specialist. I was just curious about the job. Christie and I called the high school principal and immediately he said "I want to talk to you, you're saying that you have a reading specialist degree. We're putting in a program at the high school where we are going to work with kids who do not test at 10th grade or above

with their reading level". So we go over and we talk to the superintendent and the high school principal and they hire us. My wife was working on her master's degree in library science. They said, "Well by coincidence, we're going to open a library at the junior high and elementary level and if you have your degree in library science, your master's degree, and you work out as a teacher, then we will hire you for the library position". We would move to Oologah after only 2 years at Coweta, and we liked Coweta, and we would stay 18 years. I was the superintendent of schools when we would leave there.

John Erling: That was Oologah-Talala Public Schools.

KB: Yes.

JE: So then while you're there in Oologah, you start taking classes in school administration and you earned your administrative certificate.

KB: Well that is an interesting story as well. The only place in Oklahoma where you could get a master's degree in library science is OU. So I was there. I needed to take something. Like I say, I was there in Norman. My wife was going to school. I just feel like that much of what happened in my life was meant to be because I was there in Norman and I enrolled in administration classes. I took a couple of summers of administration classes. I was very close to being certified so I came back and enrolled in the program at TU. I would end up in the doctorate program at TU but I wouldn't finish my doctorate because by then, we started having children and I just didn't want to commit the time.

So we were at Oologah. I was tired and I worked for three years in the reading program. Then thanks to the fact that I enrolled in administration classes at Norman and decided to finish at TU, I was fully certified. We had a new superintendent come to Oologah and one of the board members said...we had a real turnover in administration and one of the board members said to the new superintendent, Lonny Parrish, who came from Okmulgee - he was truly a blessing in my life. One of the board members said, "There's a guy teaching in the reading department at the high school and I think he has his administrative certificate and he has a really good reputation as a teacher. You really ought to talk to him".

One week into Lonny Parrish's first week on the job, he had his secretary call me and she said, "The new superintendent wants to talk to you". And I said, "How did he even know who I am? What does he want to talk about?" And she said, "He didn't say". So I went on Friday and talked to Lonny Parrish and he revealed that he had been told that I was a good teacher and that I had my administrative certificate and would I be interested in joining the administrative team. And that is how I got into administration at Oologah.

I will just say this, John, I did absolutely everything - and by everything, I mean every assignment possible - in preparation for the superintendent's job. By that, I mean truly I was director of transportation, I was over finance, I was over curriculum, I was even the

athletic director. I did everything under Lonny Parrish and then I would succeed him as superintendent. My wife was the librarian. She taught English for a year and she was the librarian at Oologah. We would stay 18 years.

JE: So you're about 36 years old then, I think, when you took Lonny Parrish's position?

KB: Yes that would be about right.

Chapter 09 - 4:50

Tornado

John Erling: There was a defining moment there in Oologah because it was April 26, 1991. An F4 tornado...

Keith Ballard: At 9:44 p.m.

JE: Say that time again?

KB: At 9:44 p.m., April 26, 1991, 9:44 p.m. The largest natural disaster ever to strike a school in the history of the state of Oklahoma.

JE: It caused \$10.5 million in damage. It was an F4 tornado. So then tell us what you did. You obviously had to go out and speak in the community and to discuss the disaster and the recovery. Tell us about that moment.

KB: It was a huge learning experience. I already knew about the importance of communication, of building relationships. That was what I built my career on - listening to other people, communicating. We managed to rebuild that school in approximately 70 days. It attracted a huge amount of attention.

I was in the doctorate program at Oklahoma State. I was working on my dissertation and my advisor called me and he said, "Keith, you're going to do your dissertation on the aftermath of the tornado and the reconstruction". I said, "I'm already into my dissertation. I don't want to shift off". He said, "This is the largest natural disaster ever to strike a school in the history of Oklahoma. You're doing your dissertation on disaster preparation and recovery". Well who was I to argue with the chair of my committee?

It turned out to be a very fortunate thing for me. We did rebuild the school. We did start on time. We had enormous difficulties replacing the entire transportation fleet. Fortunately, I had a guy by the name of Bob Boyd who was my deputy superintendent at Oologah and he was actually a cabinet maker on the side, meaning that he really understood reconstruction. He really understood and was an expert in that area. With Bob's help and my holding the community together and working with the community like I did, the next thing I knew, I was on the circuit. I was getting regular phone calls from

people. It was, after all, the largest natural disaster ever to strike a school in the history of the state of Oklahoma.

So I went on the circuit, little knowing that it would have a transformational impact on my career. I had a very high profile. I was talking all the time about disaster preparation and recovery. Then the offers began happening. I won't even divulge where some of the offers came from. All I'll say is that Bill Salwaechter was retiring from Claremore. Claremore was in close driving distance to Oologah where my wife was very happy. By then, she was the high school librarian and had been for several years, very happy with her job.

Chapter 10 - 7:30

Claremore

Keith Ballard: I got a call from Claremore wanting me to interview for the job. I will just be candid and say that I didn't really want to leave Oologah, although those were very tumultuous and difficult times. It wasn't without a lot of stress. But I didn't even go interview for the job. On the day that the applications were due, I get a phone call from a board member who said, "We're looking through the applications. We don't have yours", and I said, "Well, I decided not to apply". They really wanted me to apply. They wanted to talk to me about how we had rebuilt Oologah. So eventually I said, "Well, I'm not going to apply for the job but I will come talk to you".

So I went there and talked to the board members. I was so impressed by the board. I really did not want to leave Oologah but they really made it attractive. My worry was about my kids. Matt was going into the 10th grade, and you know who Matt is - he is the district attorney here in Claremore at the courthouse. Michael was going into the 4th grade and Michelle was going into the 6th. I wanted to take the Claremore job and they were really pursuing me for it, but I did not want to move my kids. Then Matt, my oldest, went into the 10th grade, came and had a heart-to-heart talk with me. What he said was "the kids and I will move, we will move, dad, and we will do it willingly". We had a meeting. That's actually what he said. A 4th grader, a 6th grader, and a 10th grader held a meeting and they would be very willing to go. So the rest is history, John. I took the Claremore job. I absolutely loved living in Claremore. That's where my home still is. I took it believing that I'm staying in Claremore forever. That is how I ended up at Claremore.

JE: And we should point out you had been in Oologah for 18 years, so it was difficult to uproot there. But while in Claremore then, you became involved with education initiatives

at the state level. You served as president of the Oklahoma Association of School Administrators and United Suburban Schools Association, as well as helping form the Oklahoma Education Coalition. So you were able to be superintendent of schools and then get involved in those positions in the state.

KB: I was very active in state organizations.

JE: So then in the year 2000, the Oklahoma State School Board Association was looking for an executive director and you took the job because you wanted to effect legislation and state policy and I think you trained school boards and you were working with state leaders. You might comment on that.

KB: I was only the third executive director of the Oklahoma State School Board Association, OSSBA, in 50 years. I was approached by Bob Mooneyham, who was the outgoing executive director. He had stayed 25 years and his predecessor who started OSSBA had stayed 25 years. I was doing a lot of speaking at different...I was very active in superintendents associations and I was doing a lot of speaking. I was speaking at various... well every year at the OSSBA conference and Bob Mooneyham approached me a year before he retired and he said, "I'm retiring in one year and I want you to take my place".

So I was unsure because my kids were in school at...Michael was going into his junior year. We did not want to move. My wife was a couple years away from retiring. She was still at Oologah. We had a lot of things to work through, but I interviewed for the position with the executive committee on the State School Board Association and I absolutely loved everything about it. It was the opportunity to go to the state level. My wife and I worked it out where we would buy a condominium in Oklahoma City. We would stay with our home in Claremore. Michael would graduate. She would finish out her work life before retirement and we ended up taking the job at OSSBA and now I am involved at the state level. I absolutely loved that job. I loved the interaction at the state level. I worked with the governors. I worked with Speakers of the House and pro tempore of the senate. It was a great time and I really, really enjoyed it.

Chapter 11 - 11:20

Tulsa Public Schools

John Erling: And at the same time, you were adjunct instructor with the University of Oklahoma. And then you were going to finish your career as a professor there. But then one day, you received a phone call that you never ever expected to receive.

Keith Ballard: That is very true. I did receive a phone call and the president of the board of education at Tulsa Public and vice president of the board wanted to talk to me. Now in my role as executive director of OSSBA, I worked with/I did board training extensively. We not only had a department that did board training, I personally did a lot of board training. I had worked with the Tulsa Public Schools Board of Education on more than one occasion. The president and vice president of TPS board wanted to talk to me. Look, I lived in Claremore. I read the paper. I was good friends with the superintendent of TPS as well as Oklahoma City. I knew that there were divisions going on and that there was a very difficult time. I personally liked the superintendent but he really didn't know how to bring groups of people together. He wasn't very good at communicating. He was old school in that he believed in talk down leadership.

So I get this phone call and I go meet with the president and the vice president of the board. I truly believed, John, that they wanted to talk with me about the difficulties that their superintendent was having in the community. I knew him really well and I met with them frequently. I actually opened discussion at lunch that day defending him. I was mistaken about what they wanted to talk to me about. I thought they just wanted to discuss their superintendent's difficulties that he was having. So I launched into urban superintendents are hard to find. You have a well intentioned person here who really has a lot of attributes. He understands research. He is really a good guy. You need to hang onto him. I really did not know that they had decided they were going to buy his contract out and they wanted to talk to me about the job. I had no idea. I actually opened the conversation with defending him.

And then the board president and vice president said, "It's probably gone too far. He is not going to be able to survive in this job. We have initiated discussions with him about buying him out. Would you be interested in the job?" I will just be candid here and say that I did make it clear that it was not going to be predicated on whether or not I would take the job as to what they would do with their current superintendent. In fact, I finished that conversation that day by saying, "You go back and you work out your differences with this superintendent. My advice is that you work to keep him. But if you don't decide to keep him and you work out some kind of agreement on departure, then and only then will I discuss the prospects of being the next superintendent at Tulsa Public".

I went home...I have to include this...I went home and I told my wife what they wanted. I simply said "they want to talk to me about being superintendent in Tulsa should they not be able to work out their differences". My wife kind of stopped and said, "Yeah, sure, what did you say to that - no?" And I said, "Actually, I said yes". She had her back turned to me and she spun around and she said, "What? You actually said that you would go

back?” I said, “I said that I would consider it” and she said “why, why would you do that?” And John, my answer was spontaneously, “because that’s what I am”. And that is how I see myself. I see myself as a superintendent who was blessed with several opportunities. I think it is significant that I said it in that moment in time without even thinking about it because that’s what I am.

JE: Yep.

KB: And the rest is history.

JE: Yep, and then you became superintendent in October 2008. Let me just jump through here something that you can comment on. I am well aware that your voice is getting weaker and so I want to work with you here. You can comment on some of these. You brought in “Teach for America” as a “Teach for America” site in 2009. You secured a \$354 million bond issue in March 2010. It was the largest school bond measure in state history. You also included in that a field house at McLain High School. There might be something in there that you would like to comment on.

KB: I don’t know how you know that but I really tried to bring a wide open perspective on everything. McLain needed a new field house. They needed that. They were having difficulty. I did find who they were. McLain was a really good high school. I loved going to McLain. Yes, it was a troubled high school. So I am a very inclusive leader. I believe very strongly in input and figuring out and taking into consideration the will of the people. I had a very strong board of advisors on all bond issues. When I asked them, that group did not want to build a new field house at McLain. So I finally said we won’t build any field houses if we don’t approve building a field house at McLain. We won’t build any. It’s your decision. You need to tell me as my advisory what you will and won’t do, but it is extremely important to me that we build that field house at McLain.

I will tell you this - John, I can be an emotional person and when I read in the newspaper last summer, I believe it was, about the field house opening at McLain, I literally wept. It was a spontaneous outburst of emotion. I pick up my *Tulsa World*, which I read absolutely every day of my life, and I saw the field house in McLain had opened and I was just overcome with emotion because every child deserves the absolute best opportunity. We needed to build that field house at McLain. And I did take a tough stance but fortunately, if you’re into building relationships and people trust you - and I really believe that I behaved in a manner that incited trust, that caused trust - and when I took that very firm position, then they agreed that we needed a field house at McLain just like some of the other high schools. That was an important part of my legacy.

JE: Yeah, that’s a great story.

Chapter 12 – 6:36**Project Schoolhouse**

John Erling: By the beginning of the 2010-11 school year, Tulsa Public Schools was facing many major challenges. I'm coming now to Project Schoolhouse. You assessed all 89 schools in the district over a six-month period. You collected as much information as possible. Then in May 2011, TPS board approved the Project Schoolhouse plan resulting in the closing of 14 school buildings to eliminate 5,600 empty seats to save the district about \$5 million a year.

Project Schoolhouse moved 6th graders to elementary schools, relocated 7th and 8th graders to separate areas of high school buildings or kept them in middle school buildings which were renamed junior highs to better prepare them for high school. This is a project, Project Schoolhouse, you had to sell and to call on your contacts that you had in this community.

Keith Ballard: Well I think by then that the community knew what I stood for and that was absolutely building relationships, and I had done that. I had done that in every aspect of the community. In particular, I paid a lot of attention to the clergy because people always believe their pastors. I had all kinds of advisory groups. I met regularly with all kinds of advisors. But I had a group of pastors that I met with regularly and I had built that relationship with them. People listen to their pastors. That's not why I formed those relationships. I formed them because of the respect that I have for the clergy. But I do believe that my relationship with the pastors had a lot to do with Project Schoolhouse being successful.

We had so many community hearings. We did not enter into it with our minds made up. In fact, I wanted to sell Mayo. I had an agreement in place. I thought that we would keep Mayo intact and the kids would just relocate in a vacant school. I went up there that night to several hundred people and I listened very carefully to what they had to say. I knew that when I left there, that was not a good idea. I remember very well driving away that night from Mayo and calling my wife on the phone. The first thing she said was "how did it go" and I said "just fine" and she said "tell me about it". It was a volatile meeting. So I told her all about the meeting. I still remember pulling out of that parking lot and my wife saying to me "just exactly what was it that you thought went well", because it was rather tumultuous. My answer was "because I got my answer".

That group that night changed my mind. I believe that that is an attribute that I had that I didn't think because I climbed into a chair that I was the end all/be all. I did not believe that I had all the answers, rather I was a steward of the community and I needed to listen very carefully. That's not to say that I didn't take hard stances when I

believed...case in point, we already talked about McLain. But I think that Schoolhouse was successful because we really listened. We didn't have our minds made up. We knew that we needed to consolidate and we knew that we needed to save money.

But the bond issue that came after that really says it all...that we would have that kind of support after going through Schoolhouse...that we would have that kind of support, that kind of a large bond issue. I believe the percentage passed was 86.7% or thereabouts. For me, that is the defining moment of the importance of forming relationships, of listening carefully, of communicating with people and not believing because you climbed into a chair that you had all of the answers - you don't. And so I think that last bond issue, which I had a public display of emotion...I think that really says it all.

JE: Yep. Nice honor too - you received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

KB: Yes.

Chapter 13 - 6:22

Politics

John Erling: I don't know - were you involved in politics in any way? I know you inserted yourself in the state superintendent of schools race. Joy Hofmeister was elected and the incumbent was Janet Barresi, the sitting state superintendent. She was defeated. Was this about as active as you were in a political race?

Keith Ballard: Yes. I was very careful about taking positions but Janet Barresi was toxic. She was not good for the state of Oklahoma. She really believed that because she made it into a chair that she was the only finger in the room, that her opinion is all that mattered. That flew in the face of every belief that I had. Then when she threatened to actually announce that she was closing one of our high schools without even consulting with us, that was the last straw. So we became, for lack of a better term, we really did become enemies.

A lot of people thought that I was going to run for state superintendent. I actually had breakfast with Joy Hofmeister, who was on the board at that time and she was superb. She was a person who believed like I did that relationships mattered, that getting input mattered. She was absolutely a spectacular board member. I wanted her to run. She thought that I was going to run. At that breakfast, I said, "Joy, I'm not going to run. My family situation is not conducive to me running. I don't want to run. I don't want to be state superintendent". Now whether she was right or not, her answer was "but everybody wants you to run" and I said "I'm not going to run and if you think I'm going to, you're going to be disappointed when the day after the sign-up ends; if you want to run, you're going to

be disappointed because I'm not going to run, I'm not going to do that". Long pause and she said "well I guess I better go file then".

She is a phenomenal person. She really is. Christie and I got absolutely behind her election. Barresi was toxic and not a good leader. In fact, she embodied and exhibited all of the traits that I was opposed to. Just because you make it into a chair, you are not the only thinker in the organization. Rather it is a sacred position that people have placed their faith in you and you better communicate, you better involve people and do all you can to exercise the will of the people. I'm not saying that you don't take stances. I think my record is pretty clear that I took stances, but you must do it while building relationships.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 14 - 4:25

Back to Teaching

John Erling: Currently you have a position now with the George Kaiser Family Foundation, chair and leadership at the University of Oklahoma Tulsa?

Keith Ballard: I love teaching. I am a teacher at heart. Thank you for asking that, John. I always believed...I believe that I resigned from the same school board association to go to that position and then TPS happened. I'm glad that TPS happened, but I ended up leaving TPS because I am a teacher at heart and I felt called, I felt led to go off of my experiences and take it to the classroom. I absolutely love what I am doing as the George Kaiser Family Foundation professor in working where I work. And I absolutely love teaching. I love the classes that I teach. I've even joined the online program this year. Dr. Gregg Garn was dean of the college of education when I took over this job and he recently was elevated into director of all online programs. I wasn't sure, John, that I even supported online programs but I've always prided myself on being open minded. So I agreed to teach the class, politics in educational administration - I agreed to teach it and I took the training for online.

I realized that I was wrong, that I could deliver as quality of a class via online instruction as I could face-to-face. I'm very excited about the program. Even with my illness, I continue to teach. I know my voice gets [indecipherable] but I'm going to work around that. I am a teacher at heart and I love teaching. I believe that I was led through my entire career to culminate as a university professor to share my experiences and my philosophies with students who will one day lead schools.

JE: What is the biggest threat to public education today?

KB: That's really a good question. I do believe that adequate funding is a threat. We must make sure that we are meeting all of the needs. Also there is a movement going on out there against public schools. While I support the charter movement, and I really do - I opened some charter schools that I believed were in the best interest of students. But there is an unrest going on out there about public schools. We must do all that we can to combat that. I will just say public opinion is a threat.

JE: Yep.

Chapter 15 - 8:15

Dignity, Class, Courage

John Erling: Now back to the challenge you're facing. What are you drawing on now on this? You've talked about your faith, challenges in the past. What is it you're drawing on as you face this challenge?

Keith Ballard: Well I'm drawing on my faith for sure. And I'm drawing also on family. I'm really glad that you asked that question. Every single Friday night I have seven grandkids at my house. We play cards. We eat. At any given time, I have seven grandkids who live very nearby and at any given time, they could show up. Actually today we have two grand dogs who showed up this morning. I draw and I get a lot of strength based first and foremost on my faith. We have always been very active in the church. I am a person of faith. I have a great relationship with my pastor and I talk with him regularly. But I also draw on my family. I am very grateful - and I'm just going to say it - if a poor kid from Kiowa, Kansas would have all of the opportunities that I have had...I am so grateful...to be down in the mouth, to exhibit irrational behavior would be a slap in the face to all of the trust that has been placed in me.

I intend to face this illness with dignity, with class, and with courage. I intend to be positive. I intend to do the work that I am doing. I built this online class from scratch. I drew upon my many experiences in my years of experiences. I have been truly blessed. I do believe that I have fulfilled what God's mission for me was and now it is time for me to give back. I will do that through the online class I actually started from scratch. On January 25, I started that class and on January 28, I teach on effective leadership. I draw upon absolutely fabulous speakers like G. T. Bynum and others, Chris Binge and Mike Neal, Andrea Eager...the list is endless...relationships that I have formed. I am here for a reason. I will fulfill my mission on earth. I refuse to play the part of woe is me. I absolutely refuse to do that. I will stay busy.

Fortunately this disease does not affect cognitive ability. I am very fortunate in that I got to go to the Mayo Clinic and I got to find out what is wrong with me. I pray every day and I have legions of people praying every day for my health and for my ability to cope with this. I'm really glad that you asked that question, John, because I absolutely intend to face this with a very strong reaction and I intend to be positive. I realize that I am a public figure and that a lot of eyes are on me but that is who I am.

JE: Yep, and then those who may be listening who are also facing ALS, they take inspiration from what you have just said. How about young students thinking about a career in education? It seems like maybe there doesn't seem to be as many young people that are anxious to become educators. What would you say to them to encourage them to get into education?

KB: That is a great question. It is a wonderful life. It is a fulfilling life. I didn't really intend to go into it but I was led into and I am so thankful. So I would give this message. It is a rewarding career. It is a fulfilling career. It is a career of giving to others. And it is a magnificent career. I am fortunate that as I look back over my life, I would not change a thing. I believe that I followed God's will. I believe that I utilized my capabilities to the fullest. It is a great career and people ought to go into it because of the rewards.

JE: And a question that I ask all my oral history in my interviews is how would you like to be remembered?

KB: I would like to be remembered as a person who genuinely cared about making a difference in this world. That really sums it up. I genuinely cared about making a difference. I listened. I communicated. I involved people in the process. I would also like to be remembered as someone who knew how to involve and motivate people to do the right thing for children.

JE: Well you will be remembered that way. Let me just say how much I admire you in your career but also the way you're handling this ALS and the fact that nearly two hours you've talked with strength and I'm sure it hasn't been easy, we've understood you, and that you would even do this I admire a lot. So this will be listened to by generations to come beyond you and beyond me. That's why we do Voices of Oklahoma so that the future generations can learn, and they will learn a lot from listening to you. So I thank you, Keith, on behalf of the community, those professionals, your former staff people, all the people in the education business are joining me right now in saying - Thank you, Keith Ballard, for what you've done for our state.

KB: Thank you, John. I have enjoyed this. I appreciate the opportunity. I admire and I respect your work as well. Thank you.

JE: You're welcome. God Bless.

KB: God bless you.

Chapter 16 - 0:33**Conclusion**

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

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