

Mike Puro Oral History Transcript

This Oral History was recorded on November 15, 2019 in Goshen, Indiana.

Those present are: David Miller-Derstine, videographer of the Community Resilience Guild; Phil Metzler, interviewer on behalf of the Goshen Historical Society and Community Resilience Guild; and Mike Puro, former mayor of Goshen, Indiana.

The transcript was created by David Miller-Derstine and edited by Phil Metzler. This is not a verbatim transcript and has been edited in several places for enhanced readability and clarity.

[A video recording of this oral history is available online at this link](#)

[An interactive version of this Oral History is available on the Goshen Guide](#)

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Mike's Early Life in Goshen

Phil: So Mike, thank you for joining us this morning for this oral history. I want to welcome you to introduce yourself and to start, maybe, by talking about your childhood or your background here in Goshen.

Mike: Well, thank you. I'm Mike Puro. I grew up here in Goshen. My father was a local public accountant. My mother was a choir director, pianist, organist at the First Brethren Church here in town. I went to Parkside grade school, same place where my mother went, my two brothers and my two sons—so we have an affinity with Parkside grade school. I grew up on Garfield, which for folks is about two blocks from the millrace and Shanklin Park; I spent a lot of time there as a child. I graduated from Goshen High School in sixty-seven, went to Purdue University. I later went to IUSB, got a masters degree in business. Along the way I got married—Laurie Tweddale is my wife. We have two sons. Eric, the oldest, now lives in Finland with our granddaughter Aada, and my youngest son, Matt, lives in town with his wife Erin Floyd.

Probably the reason that you're interviewing me today is that along the way I became the mayor of the City of Goshen.

Phil: We'll have plenty of time to address some of the themes, both for you as a mayor and also for you as a resident and somebody that grew up and chose to stay around here in Goshen. Back to the neighborhood that you grew up in, what was that like, growing up for you here in Goshen?

Mike: Yeah, well, that was the 1950s. Things were a lot different back then. The town was a lot smaller. In the neighborhood in the summertime, we'd have breakfast, you'd get out the door as fast as you could. There were a lot of kids that lived in the neighborhood, and we played until somebody—oh, some of the parents blew a whistle; some of them just yelled out the door, that it was noon and we were supposed to come home and eat—and as soon as we ate we were right back out there and kept at it until basically it would get dark.

Back then, there weren't a lot of boundaries. We had certain areas we had to stay within—couldn't cross Main Street, a big street like that. I wasn't supposed to be down at the millrace, so of course I went there all the time. But the neighbors would look out. If they saw you doing something you shouldn't be doing, you either got disciplined by them, or they'd call your parents. There were a lot of eyes out there watching over kids, so yeah, we had a lot more freedom, fortunately, than kids do today.

Phil: Did you have any favorite activities around the neighborhood that you recall?

Mike: Yes, it was mostly boys that lived in the neighborhood, and we organized, particularly I remember the football leagues. We actually would have a football team from our neighborhood and we would play other neighborhoods in football, mostly down at the little park on Wilson Street, sometimes over at Shanklin. Wilson Street also had a baseball diamond, so there was a

lot of baseball being played down there—broke a lot of windows in the neighborhood houses. It was a small field.

A lot of it was generated around sports. One of the fathers organized an olympic event one year during the olympics and we just had any number of things including a bicycle race down at Shanklin Park.

And in addition to that, one of the really fun things clear out through highschool was—Shanklin Park had a parks program during the summertime. There would always be a Goshen High School—usually a senior boy and a senior girl—that would have programs and stuff down there. And then there were also just games to play that you could play with—just pick up Monopoly or something and play other people.

Phil: And did you have any activities around the millrace itself? Did you say you were discouraged—

Mike: —Well, I was not supposed to—the millrace would run very, very fast back then. It was still being used to generate electricity, and it could. The reason that the flow is not too fast anymore is because the banks aren't as secure as they were back then. So, that thing really flowed fast, and it was very, very deep. There's a lot of sediment in there now, but it was—you fell in, you were going to be in trouble. So yeah, I wasn't supposed to walk to Parkside along the millrace, and as any young boy tends to do, whatever you're not supposed to do, that's what you did.

Phil: Well, I'm sure we'll talk more about the millrace as we go forward because it seems to have changed a lot in terms of its accessibility since the way it was.

Mike: Certainly. Back then Nipsco would run a car up and down and do inspections on the bank. If you tried to drive a car through there now, I think half the bank would collapse.

Coming Back After College and Entering Politics

Phil: So you grew up and went to school here. You chose to go elsewhere for college. What brought you back to Goshen?

Mike: Well, simply put, when I graduated from Purdue University, there was a bit of a recession going on. There weren't a lot of jobs for people with business degrees, and I had gone through a lot of applications at Purdue, did not have a job, so I came back to Goshen. I had virtually zero money. Tapped out every resource. I paid most of my own way through college. So, towards the end I bought, I think it was twenty boxes of macaroni and cheese, and I got one of those a day to through the last month, so there weren't a lot of choices. I had to come back to Goshen.

I lived with my parents for a while, worked at Goshen Rubber company, just as a laborer. I was a member of the United Rubber Workers Union. Did that for several months in order to get

enough money to get my own apartment and then ended up with a management job at Goshen Rubber.

Phil: So, that provided some of the background for you being in a position to step into politics here in the community, but that started early on.

Mike: Yes, when the Kennedy-Nixon election happened, I was just enthralled by that whole process. I was a sixth grader. Kennedy was this young man, didn't look like any of the politicians you'd seen on the TV—they were all old, and they were all male. Kennedy obviously was male too, but it was old-white men that were running the show, and here's a younger fellow that really excited a lot of people.

I watched both the Democrat and Republican convention. They used to cover those gavel to gavel—they were very long TV programs. But the thing that sort of cemented that was I had a sixth grade teacher—her name was Mrs. Judkins—she had a mock election in our classroom and there were students that did the jobs that were done at the precincts at that time. There were Democrat inspectors, judges, clerks, and sheriffs and those were the people that would check records, make sure that you were eligible to vote.

I put my name forward for a Democrat side because I knew most of the kids' parents in that class were Republican. So I ended up being the Democrat judge for that mock-election. The day before, teacher came up and said, "Now, our principal Park Lantz is going to come in and he's going to want to vote, and this is for children only—the students only—to vote, so you need to tell Mr. Lance that he can't vote here, and because he can't vote here he needs to leave the room."

That was a scary thing, because back then you didn't talk to the principal. The principal sat in an office, and if you ever met him it was for something that you did that was bad. But he was in on it obviously, I didn't know that, but he came in, and I had to explain to him, and he thanked me and left. But made quite an impression on me.

And actually, ran into that—well, I had somehow found her address. When she retired she ended up in a retirement home in Ft. Wayne. We exchanged Christmas Cards, and I was able to go over one time and see and talk to her. At that point in time, I'd already been Mayor, and she wanted to know why I hadn't pushed that and run for higher office. So, she was a teacher. That's the kind of thing teacher's do.

Values That Influenced Mike's Childhood

Phil: Were there other people that you remember who had a particularly strong influence on you here in Goshen?

Mike: Well, my father who was an accountant. I can remember him saying one time that a neighbor—he did taxes for any number of people in town, but this was a neighbor—and the

neighbor brought in all of his W2s and everything else you need for your taxes, and dad asked him, "Now, is that everything?" And he goes, "Yes it is." And [dad] said, "Well, I happen to know that you run a lawnmower business—a lawn mowing business—and you do that pretty extensively during the summer, so we need to count that as income." The fellow said, "Well, that's cash. We'll just do that off the books," and my father said, "That's fine, but you won't have taxes done by me," and asked the guy to leave.

And those kinds of stories—there's others. The First Brethren Church through the Sunday school programs, this, that, and the other—those kinds of things would stick with you. [My] favorite teacher in highschool was Mr. Bosser. Everybody loved him. Because his son was in my class, we ended up getting him for four straight years as a teacher, which nobody else would get to do. Excellent, excellent teacher and really loved mathematics. I actually was a mathematics major for one year.

Phil: Were there other values that you remember being formed at that point in your life through your home or through the church life or from the community itself?

Mike: Well, from the political standpoint, there were statesmen—what we would call statesmen back then—who were elected officials, and which I'd be hard pressed to say that we have those individuals now. Those are individuals who thought of their country, number one, and thought of their own constituents and the rest of the people that lived in the United States. That was their major concern, and the political concern was way, way down the list.

Everett Dirkson was a senator from Illinois, was one. Lindsey from New York. There were just many of those kinds of people back then, and politics was a very honorable profession back then. It was something to strive for, and I always wanted to do something—well, to go back to John F. Kennedy, he made the famous statement when he was inaugurated, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." And it really stuck with me, and I'm thinking of the kinds of things that I could be doing—become a doctor, this, that, and the other—none of those appealed to me as much as being able to be involved in politics and to be able to affect people's lives in a positive manner.

First Steps Towards a Political Career in Goshen

Phil: So what were some of the other things then that brought you into politics? Some of the early roles or activities you would have been involved in?

Mike: Sure, well, Allan Kauffman, who was mayor after myself, and I, we knew each other from seventh grade on. And in highschool we took a trip with the Young Democrats here in Elkhart County—a bus trip down to Indianapolis—to see Lyndon Johnson who was president at that time, running for reelection, and gave a speech—an outdoor speech—just thousands upon thousands of people were there. I vividly remember he would always wear a Stetson cowboy hat. At the end of his speech, he'd take that off and toss it in the crowd and that thing must have got ripped into 400 pieces by the crowd trying to get a piece. Very, very popular at the time. Of

course, if you know anything about Lyndon Johnson, he ended up getting out of the race over the Vietnam War.

But it sort of drew attention to both Allan and myself. Some of the older—and again it was all men back then—but older Democrat men in Goshen invited us to a meeting where they were doing some strategy stuff, and they had recognized that both of us had an interest in politics, and they were going to start trying to bring along a new generation of people in town that were interested in running for office.

Phil: So you had come back to Goshen somewhat out of necessity, but yet it was home. The opportunities to be involved in local politics, was that part of what kept you here?

Mike: Well, sure. If you're interested in running for politics, you lose your complete base by moving. Let's say I had gone to California. You start from scratch. Nobody knows you there; you have no friends; you have to work up all of that kind of background; you've got to be very, very active in politics there, and start to work from scratch.

Here, you know, I was known in town. Puro isn't the most common name in Goshen—it's not the most common in Indiana—so people would instantly connect me to my parents. I had all the schoolmates. I had worked here. It was a natural place to stay. Plus, I really loved this community. This community has been looked after and tended by generations of people, to try to make this a better community to live in.

So this is the place that I decided I'm going to try and see if I can have a political career.

Stepping Stones on the Way to Becoming Mayor

Phil: What were some of the other milestones or stepping stones on your way to mayor?

Mike: Well, I had been the Democratic County Chairman for two years. I'd also been the president of the Young Democrats Club, both here and Elkhart County. We were in the 3rd congressional district at the time. So, all of those roles, I was learning, meeting a lot of people around the state that were involved in politics.

In 1982, I ran for state representative against Phil Warner. Phil Warner had been, I believe, in the House of Representatives for twenty-some years. I ran against him with the thought of learning how to run a campaign, get more name recognition out there, had no illusions that I would be able to win that contest, and low and behold, on election night I won.

The election board, however, was still looking at the results because there was a problem. There just weren't enough votes cast in our race. They were comparing it to other ones, and there's a massive falloff and they finally found—it was the first year that the County had used the punch-card system—and it was programmed incorrectly, and my opponent was not getting

all of the votes that he deserved. So I ended up losing that race, but we had a recount to make sure that there weren't any other errors in that program.

During that process, my name recognition soared, and I thought, Well, If you're going to do politics, you better find out if you have any aptitude or if you're electable. I had a business background, so I ran for clerk-treasurer in the city election the next year and was able to win that. So that sort of set the stage then with four years of experience in city government, to be able to run for mayor.

Phil: So, who was in office while you were the clerk-treasurer?

Mike: Max Chiddister was serving his second term as mayor when I came in. Max Chiddister was a Republican—didn't particularly like Democrats. We had a few words in the first several months, and part of it was myself learning what the clerk-treasurer's role was. But over time, I was able to work a lot more on the budget which is a major role for the clerk-treasurer.

Mayor Chiddister, however, had to do an awful lot of that himself, or took that upon himself for whatever reason the prior four years. When I started giving him the information that he needed to finish off the budget, he soon realized that a good portion of this was going to be lifted off his shoulders, and Max was an avid golfer, got himself out and golfed a lot that summer, and after that we had a very cordial relationship.

The Political Context That Preceded Mike Into the Mayor's Office

Phil: So what was some of the broader political context here in Goshen then, as far as preceding Max Chiddister and what that mayoral history had been leading up to the point that you became clerk-treasurer?

Mike: Yeah, people were under the assumption that this is a Republican town. Certainly the county elected mostly Republicans. Goshen had had a three-term Republican mayor, Ralph Schenk, and the council during that time was predominantly if not completely Republican. So during those three terms, that's when Goshen got this reputation of being a Republican community.

However, going back clear into the late 1940s, it had been a Democrat mayor, succeeded by a Republican, succeeded by a Democrat—it went back and forth for years, and years, and years. And that's exactly what happened when Ralph Schenk decided he wouldn't run for his fourth term, and that's when Steve Chisick, a Democrat, came in. Steve Chisick had one term and was succeeded by Max Chiddister, so that kept on. That was from the late 1940s clear through the 1970s.

Phil: So, how did you perceive then, the transition ahead of you? Max Chiddister—how did it go from his mayorship to you deciding to run for mayor or becoming mayor?

Mike: Well, he had decided that he was not going to run again after two terms, so it was going to be an open seat, and at that point in time, I felt that the four years background I had handling the city's finances was an excellent background. I felt confident that I could handle the job as mayor, so I ran that year.

Larry Sarver was the police chief, and he ran as the Republican. And I was fortunate enough to win that election.

Phil: And what were some other things that were happening in Goshen at that time that were significant or that you may have inherited coming into the office as mayor?

Mike: Well, and I ran on this as one of the issues, the streets in Goshen were in fairly bad shape at the time. I talked about the fact that I would find money within the budget to start doing some dramatic improvements in the road system. In local politics, there is nothing that residents want more than just a public transportation system that works. If they're driving down—and it wasn't so much maybe traffic jams, we see some of those in town now—but it was just the lousy condition of the road. And they're just reminded every time they hit that pothole, something isn't being done right. Not casting aspersions on Max Chiddister's administration, but it was something that needed to be done.

I ran on that. People—it was just an easy thing for them to understand. Then I had to actually do something about that, and we did. We found money within the budget, made it a priority, got the streets back in shape. More importantly, got a maintenance program going on so that we would keep the roads in good shape.

And then soon after that, we had an assistant engineer that started to work to wring out all of the improvements we could in our system. Because we were working with the same streets that were [built] maybe back in the 1940s. So we started looking at one-way streets, left turn lanes, anything that was fairly inexpensive that could help move traffic in town, and we wrung every efficiency that we could out of the current system up to the point in time when we had to start doing some major projects—the Third Street project being one. That started under my administration, was finished under Allan Kauffman's.

Phil: I know transportation brings up a number of themes that I think we'll probably touch on here, but just to kind of fill in the timeline a little bit, what year were you elected mayor and then when did you finally leave office?

Mike: I was elected in 1987, took office in 1988, and in 1997 I took a position as the general manager of the Indiana Toll Road. So in the midst of my third term was when I left.

Working Well With the Chamber of Commerce

Phil: So going back to you coming into office, what were some of the other dynamics or other things that affected your ability to lead the community forward?

Mike: Sure. Very quickly, within a month of my taking office, Bud Beller, who was the Chamber of Commerce president at the time, asked if we could get together and meet. And he explained to me something that I was completely unaware of—and I don't think a lot of people in the community were aware of—but back when he came in as chamber president—and this was under Ralph Schenk as mayor—they made an agreement that the Chamber of Commerce would do all of the outreach to try to find companies to come to build here and provide jobs in Goshen. And that would be their responsibility, not the City's.

And in many communities, the mayor will be out there doing that too, and it's in competition at times with the chamber because you've got egos on both sides and people wanting to take credit. And it doesn't do the community any good to have that kind of friction between these two groups.

And Ralph Schenk agreed to this, and on the Chamber's part, they said, What we'll do is we will not push the City to do any tax abatement, so that you're getting the full tax load from these new companies and can use those to have the best infrastructure that you can have. Use those taxes to get the roads in good shape, to upgrade the Water and Sewer Departments, and make sure the parks are nice so that the people that come here to live and work in these factories will have a place to go with their children. And it made just a tremendous amount of sense. There's a lot to do as mayor, and not to be out there trying to get companies to come into Goshen was almost a relief.

So that was a handshake agreement under Ralph Schenk. Bud Beller was still there when Steve Chisick came into office; the same handshake was made. Bud Beller was still there when Max Chiddister came into office; the same agreement was made. And I made the same agreement with him. And it really worked well for Goshen.

In fact, I talk to other mayors. Mayors get together a couple of times a year just to sit around and talk about all of their problems, and usually there's another mayor that's seen that and has a solution. You exchange information back and forth.

I brought Bud Beller with me to one of those meetings, and the mayors were upset with me. "What do you have a chamber president here for?" and I said, "Don't you get along with your chamber president?" and to a person they said, "No, we fight with the chamber all of the time," and it did not make any difference—Republican, Democrat mayor, they had a bad relationship with their chamber president.

And so, this was very, very unique with Goshen, and it served Goshen very, very well I think. And that continued when, Sam Willits came in as the chamber president. I wrote up a history of this City/Chamber cooperation and gave it to the current chamber president. I don't know if there currently is a cooperation agreement with the Chamber. I don't stick my nose into local politics to a great degree anymore. But at least the current chamber president knows the history of what's happened here in Goshen.

Working Across the Aisle and the Beginning of Maple City Health Care Center

Phil: So, in the context that provided you to help lead the community forward, what were some of the other strategies or particular ways that you viewed—or with how you approached some of the improvements to the streets and working with the various departments—that allowed you to be successful during your terms?

Mike: Sure. A lot of things, have happened by accident and have had really wonderful outcomes.

We had a fire station on the north side of town; it was on Middlebury Street, and it was very much needed because for years, decades, we had no overpass. So the Central Fire Station, if there was a train coming through, had no way to get to the north side. But by the time I came into office, that overpass was there, and those two fire stations were not that far apart. Plus, the maintenance on that fire station on Middlebury Street had been allowed to deteriorate. And when I came in, the best use of that building was to take the equipment and the personnel and move them to Central and close that station. And there was an uproar.

That's on the north side, which was predominantly Democrat at the time. There were Democrats up there that didn't talk to me for years and years and years after that because they saw that as the only presence of government on the north side.

Very, very fortunately, Dr. Gingerich comes back to town; he's looking to set up a clinic; this building looks to be something that would work perfectly for him. We had several meetings. I think we were able to help find some funding, some grant money for him to renovate that. And I think we charged a dollar a year for rent for a lease, so he was able to start the clinic. So a fire station that you only needed in an emergency, became a clinic where people were getting help on a day to day basis, which was very much needed.

After that experience, there were a couple of Republicans that bumped into me, and they said, We were really worried about you when you became mayor, that you were going to be—it's all Democrat, Democrat, Democrat—that you would be paying favors to certain people. And after we saw that with the fire station, we knew that you were going to play it fair for both sides.

And that certainly was my attitude going in. We have Republicans and Democrats on Election Day. After that, in this community, people come together, and the elected officials work for the betterment of this community, and we set politics aside.

It's another strength of Goshen. You don't see that in some communities. You can see what happens with the Indiana Senate and the House of Representatives. Now in the national government, there's no way that those people are working together. And it's a shame, and it's to the detriment of our nation. Here, people work together, and it's positive for our community.

Planning Beyond the Mayor's Four-Year Term

Phil: So, did you feel that you had the space to look beyond just a four year term, in terms of the direction that you were trying to help steer things and the work that you were trying to get done?

Mike: Well, sure. One of the problems with elected government is that there's a four year horizon. People, they run for office, they say their going to do 'x', they get into office, hopefully they're able to do x, and if they run again, it's the next four-year increment. There's nobody that's looking out, in many instances, way out into the future. And if you're not doing that, you're going to have problems.

We saw that pretty immediately. We needed to get a new fire truck, and I said, "Well, what do we have saved up for this, and how long has it been planned for?" And they go, "Well, it's falling apart."

Well, "I understand that that hook and ladder truck is falling apart, but what's your plan for replacement of your major capital items? Your fire trucks, your ambulances?"

"Well, we don't really do that. When something starts to go bad, we start looking for money."

Well, that's no way to run a business, and government truly is a business. You've got to plan for those things. Those are huge expenditures. I would guess, in today's dollars, a new fire truck is in excess of \$250,000. You can't drop that into a budget given six months notice.

So all the departments had to start developing a capital budget—the large items, when they're going to need to be replaced. We started setting aside funds and whatever to do that sort of thing. And in the process of that, the departments were all asked, "What do you want your department to look like ten years down the road?"

Many of them go, "Oh, I don't know. I've got stuff to do today." And I said, "Well, if you're not looking to see what the Police Department's going to look like ten years from now, who is?" Because it certainly isn't going to be the mayor. You don't want the mayor sticking their nose that deeply into a department. You want the people that have years of expertise in that department to take a look into the future and prepare a plan. Then if you can get the mayor's buy-in, actions can be taken to make that plan a reality.

Department heads felt that they didn't have the time to do that, and that happened around the same time I instituted a total quality management program that gave authority to departments to make decisions. Say the Fire Chief doesn't have the time to plan for the future of his department, the idea was to push responsibility down so that the assistant chiefs and the officers below that started taking more responsibility while the fire chief looked out into the future. And it really, really worked in the instance of the Reliance Fire Station. The rank and file firefighters said, "We want to be a part of planning this. We know best what a firehouse needs to look like."

So they did. They helped design it. Most of them all have tremendous construction capabilities. They run little one-man operations as plumbers, and electricians, and this, and that. They offered their time to come in and do a lot of the work to keep the dollar amount down, if we would take those dollars that they saved and put it into additional equipment that we otherwise couldn't afford.

When that project was done, the pride that was shown by those firefighters was just unbelievable. To the point that—firefighters were all male then, I believe they still are—but they realized that at some point in time there was going to be a female firefighter in Goshen, and they had a restroom and a separate portion in the dormitory area that would accommodate a female, and that was huge coming from that group.

When they opened that, there were retired firefighters that came from I don't know how far to come and see that operation. And [they had] the biggest smiles on their faces, including a fellow that I went to school with who had tangled with Mayor Chisick over the length of his hair. Back in the 1970s hair length on men was a big deal—and he never got over it; he was upset. My goodness—couldn't get three words out of him. When we opened that fire station I couldn't get him to stop talking. He was so thankful and happy of what happened.

And that's the kind of thing that can happen in government. Very, very positive kinds of things for our community.

Delegating Leadership Roles to the Departments

Phil: Are there other examples that come to mind where you kind of distributed leadership or created opportunities for other people to lead in ways they hadn't before?

Mike: Well, it basically happened in every single department. Some departments took it to heart more than the others. The consultant that came in told me, "Now, you're going to have to sit back, and you can't be interfering and wanting to know everything that's going on, because then you're in this leadership role where you've got to be hands on, and this doesn't work. This is not a hands on type of leadership."

He said, "What's going to happen here is that—you became mayor partly because you're a good problem solver, and so everytime here comes a problem, boy you want to dive in; you want to help; and you want to put your stamp on it. Not so much a credit type of thing, but just to get the best possible result that we could." He said, "But you need to understand that if you're going to be involved in every single one of these things, maybe ten things could get done in a three month period with you involved. If you step back and get out, you aren't going to believe—you're going to have fifteen or sixteen things, major things that happen, and you're going to sit there and go, 'My goodness, if they had just asked me, I could've told them do this to and it would make it that much better.'"

He said, "What would you rather have? Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen projects that are ninety five percent as good as you could do, or you get involved in them and now you're down to ten and you've added that little five percent?"

And I saw what he was saying. I learned to do problem solving. This was a process where our employees could learn to do problem solving. And the morale and attitudes changed dramatically—in those departments where they took it to heart; it didn't happen every place.

So, I would sit in my office, and I had free time. Time for me to look out into the future and do the kinds of things that maybe mayors ought to do. It was very, very uneasy for several—in fact things were happening that I didn't find out until they were already implemented, and it took all I could do to not go down and say, "Look, I may not be involved, but you've got to start letting me know when these things happen."

It was a very, very good process.

Building Trails in Goshen

Phil: And so, I know there's probably examples of that, like you said, throughout all of the departments. But again, transportation was something that you focused on particularly—with the streets, with public transportation, with bike trails. What were some of the things that were most prominent then, for you as far as thinking about outcomes that you were proud to have had some influence on?

Mike: Sure. Well, nationwide there was a big push to take abandoned railroad lines and turn them into bicycle paths. It was called the Rails to Trails program, and that was basically a county type of thing, or multi-county. Shipshewana trail is a perfect example of that—the Pumpkinvine. But some communities that were starting to do some bicycle paths within their communities, and I had been reading about that.

Went to see the park superintendent to talk to him about this issue, and he smiled and reached over into his desk and pulled out a file where Mr. Kosnoff, who was on the Park Board at one time, had envisioned a bike path that went down the millrace and would circle around to what was the old Goshen Junior High School on Indiana Avenue, and then hook back up at the dam.

So I took that and started talking with some folks, and we came up with an idea of doing a major bike path within the City of Goshen. We had no funding, but this was part of that looking out into the future, doing some planning, and perhaps we would be successful in having this come to fruition if we could find funding. A local business man, Bill Johnson, who ran and owned Goshen Rubber Company, put up some money for a consultant to come in, and we ended up with a plan that ran down the millrace and used Eighth Street as the circle to come back. And then the idea was that, as time would go by, we would connect it to all of the schools, and downtown, and Goshen College, and all the parks within the community.

So we have this. It's sitting on the shelf. We have no money, and lo and behold that was the year that the federal government passed the ISTEA Act. ISTEA allowed for—required that ten or fifteen percent of all funding on transportation be used for alternate transportation projects like bike paths. So, here's the money available; we've got the plan; MACOG is the regional agency that handles federal funds; and we were able immediately to get a grant and get that first portion started.

MACOG helped us. They found CMAQ money, Congestion Mitigation for Air Quality—funds. We unfortunately had pollution problems in Elkhart County caused mostly by the paint booths in the RV industries, but that brought with it some money, and if we were able to get people onto bikes and walking instead of on their cars, that was a legitimate use. So the money just started coming in, and because we had the plan, they just kept funding us and funding us to the point that by the time I left office, there were more miles of bike path in Goshen, Indiana than in Indianapolis.

Phil: So there were some real benefits to being ahead of the curve in that respect. Was there pushback, or was their resistance as well?

Mike: Oh, there was pushback. Oh yeah. Some of the most prominent supporters of the bike path system now were not at the time. The bike trail program started in an election year and my opponent felt he had to oppose it. But universally, once it was in, it was seen to be a positive thing.

The process we went through to find a consultant to do the actual design work, is that I walked them down the millrace. I wanted to make sure they knew what this was, talked to them about the history, what we wanted to see here, what we wanted to accomplish, and asked how they could do that. The engineering firms had never done bike paths before and they were very much into how deep the asphalt needed to be, and how wide it had to be—very technical.

We also had a landscape architect firm that came in. And he was talking about the amenities that we could have with this, and he said, "Would you be willing not to use asphalt or concrete?" He said, "We can use a really fine grade of limestone that will pack itself, that will give you a very country feel. It will be a feeling that is more conducive to people—because we knew people would walk this in addition to bike it. Bikes can use it; it's a good surface. And we did that, and it just feels better. If you can envision walking had been made out of asphalt on an eighty-five degree day in August and the heat that would be generated, it just wouldn't be the same thing. And he got the job—absolutely got the job.

Redevelopment Along the Millrace

Mike: As we got down towards the tail end of the project, and it's being finished, the consultant said, "You know, down here where the trail is meeting the downtown, this is going to be an economic development project." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "There's going to be businesses that come because of this trail." And I said, "Well, we're in it for the recreation. If

there's something like that that could happen, that certainly is icing on the cake," and I walked away going, Well, I don't see how a trail could do this.

Well a trail did that, and it's become quite a positive thing in our community as now you see the Hawks building that's been developed there. I'm not so sure that would have been that attractive had we not had the bike path there.

There was an old plumbing and heating company that was just a very, very old building, and they had trash in the back—just a real eyesore. That all got cleaned up. Interra Credit Union came in and did a massive improvement on that corner with their building. And I tell you now, people want to live along these trails, too. I believe it helps property values for those homes that are sitting alongside this trail.

Phil: I don't know how much ties into some of the redevelopment that happened as mayor and how much happened as you were then the redevelopment director for the City afterwards, but what are some of the other aspects of the redevelopment along the millrace that really stood to you, or that you most appreciated being involved in?

Mike: Well, I did come back after the toll road—came back and served Allan Kauffman as Redevelopment Director for two years. I was the first redevelopment director that the City had. And the focus had already been on that millrace corridor, to improve that. There were some very, very old, decrepit factory buildings, some of which couldn't be saved. The Hawks building is one that certainly could be saved. That thing is built like a bunker. I think you could drop a bomb on the top of that thing and it would be fine. It certainly needed a lot of work, but it was worth saving.

The Hawks Building was the Barler building when I grew up. My uncle was the treasurer of the Barler company, so that was the first factory that I'd ever been in; learned things like, don't stare at the welders because that bright light is going to do bad things to your eyes. So, that experience of being in that building and my uncle being there, really helped in the process of the City owning that property.

There was a man who used a portion of The Hawks building for a concrete company. And the City had tangled with him in the past; we had found out that he was using water from a fire hydrant to do some of his concrete mixing, and of course that wasn't metered, so he was getting his water for free. We politely asked him to quit, and he certainly did, but it wasn't a really nice situation. And he doesn't want to sell to the City. "No, I just don't want to."

And now I show up—knew him a little bit—and asked him if I could tour the building. We took a little bit of a walk, and I explained to him about my uncle. Lo and behold he knew my uncle extremely well. My uncle was Spotty Gill. He really liked Spotty, and we started to have a discussion, and we got pretty much to terms that he would start the process with us, and he would sell us the building.

The other one that was very, very interesting was the old NIPSCO maintenance building which is now the Goshen Brewing Company. Mayor Kauffman, was very interested in having a microbrewery in town, and that one fit the bill. Microbreweries need very, very, very tall ceilings for the vats that they brew in, and this particular building had extremely tall ceilings. I was not able to get Goshen Brewing Company to come in, but we did work with Mad Anthony's Brewing Company out of Ft. Wayne, and that was just a fun experience and learned a lot about brewing. It didn't come to fruition with them, but fortunately that is now a microbrewery and it is a real draw for our community. If you go in there, you're going to find that easily forty, fifty percent of the people there have traveled a distance to come and visit. And then with the music that they're doing. It's a social center for the community.

Goshen Is a Vibrant and Unique Place

Phil: So could you have imagined some of this millrace redevelopment as a kid, growing up along the millrace?

Mike: No, no. No, I couldn't. It's a wonderful thing. Most communities that you go to in Indiana and across the nation—small communities—and you look around and you're going to see the fast food franchises and other national chains. And then you can go a hundred miles away to a similar sized community—they're going to look just like the other community. Goshen's not like that; we're very unique.

We have, Goshen College on the south side of town that is a wonderful employer, but we also get a lot of Goshen College graduates that stay in the area, so we have that influx of college educated people, many of whom are starting businesses. So we get that vibrancy that comes out of Goshen College.

We've had the cooperation between the government and business that Allan Kauffman extended into the school system and other places, where we cooperate to try to improve our community. And then, obviously the millrace when it generated power was a magnet to draw companies into the area, but now as a primary recreation area. And now that it's tied to the Pumpkinvine trail, we've got a very, very unique recreational area in our community.

And people know about us. They think of Goshen, and one of the first things that they're going to think of is the Maple City bike path system, and that's just great. People that move to Elkhart County because of work have a lot of choices as to where to live, and there are a lot of people that once they get to Goshen and look around, they don't look any further. This is where they want to live, and when they settle, they start, in turn, working to make this even a better community.

Phil: Is that theme or focus on quality of life something that you remember emerging at a particular time, or is it just something that evolved out of the intuitive sense of what needed to happen here?

Mike: You know, there were two TV shows: Seinfeld and oh, I can't remember the other one now—they always ended up in a coffee shop all the time, it was—

Phil: Friends?

Mike: Friends, yes. Those two shows started to teach people about living in a city again. Now, obviously those are bigger communities—I think both were in New York—but people got the idea—you know, those people got on bicycles; they walked; they had a corner coffee shop that they went to; all of the amenities that are in a downtown. And people started to want that, and Goshen started to provide that.

The Electric Brew, when it was on Main Street, was something huge in this community. It was the first place where younger people could go and gather. And they had music at night, and the place was full. My son learned to play guitar, and his teacher had him in there within two months playing at the Electric Brew, back when the performers were sitting this close to the audience because the place is so small. Many of Goshen's musicians got their start at the Brew)

It was just a wonderful, wonderful opportunity. Now I hear, with younger people, there is a real interest in getting a job at Goshen Brewing Company, or the Goshen City Market, or the Electric Brew. These are prime jobs for people. And for many people it's as they're sorting out what they want to do in life. It's not their end job, but it's some place where they are having fun and they think it's a place that's worthwhile to spend their time in. And that's a real pull.

Goshen has the community now that can sustain young people. There's things for them to do here, and we have the jobs. And for people that are my age, one of the things that we want to see, if possible, is can our children come back here and live. My youngest son lived in New Orleans, but he and his wife now live in Goshen, and they have jobs here and enjoy this community. I don't know if they're going to stay here forever, but it is just wonderful to be able to have them here now.

Navigating Growing Diversity and Rising Tensions

Phil: So as the downtown was redeveloping, were there other things that happened during your term as Mayor that stood out to you as significant?

Mike: Well, yes. Because of all the industry in Elkhart County and in Goshen, you would have times when—and we're in one now—where businesses are expanding, and they're expanding so large that the work supply—the number of laborers—can't keep up. And we were getting quite an influx of Latinos coming into our community to take those jobs, and it was causing problems within the community.

These are first generation Latinos. Their culture is still very, very strong from the country that they came from. Goshen was a community that did not have large minority populations. We

didn't have small minority populations. I mean, we were basically a white community, and so there were misunderstandings. It wasn't working out well. We were having problems.

And it was extremely frustrating to me, and one day I picked up The Paper, which was—it's a free paper that is delivered to your front porch, and they had Speak Out; you could call them anonymously, leave your comments over the phone, and they'd put them in the Speak Out column. It was something that many, many, many people in the community did not like because of the anonymity. People could make very nasty statements and there was no name attached to it. This happened; somebody took on the Latino community and was saying just terrible, nasty things, and I was pretty upset about that.

And it happened to be the next day, I was to speak with the Ministerial Association. I went in and talked to them and did my usual spiel about what's happening in Goshen. At the end they said, Well, what can we do as ministers to help in the community? And I said, "Well, we've got a problem that needs a solution. Our community is not handling the influx of a Latino minority population well at all; and talked to them about that comment.

And very quickly a couple of ministers said, I'm so glad that you mentioned this. Something needs to be done in the community. And I said, "You guys have offered. I don't know if there's things that you can do from the pulpit about talking about how we need to be communicating, cooperating, whatever appropriate things that we can be doing from your standpoint. Unbeknownst to me, Goshen News covers ministerial meetings, so there is a reporter in the background that I didn't see, and I was more frank than I probably would've been. I'd have been more guarded if I knew the media was there, and thank goodness I didn't because the article that they put in the newspaper, front page, about mayor's comments on the Latino community, really got things started.

Nobody was talking about it. The community realized that there was a concern, and it was just sitting there without anything being done. And from that, things got started. Particularly, it was seen that there just had to be more opportunities for people to learn the English language, and that was worked on very quickly.

The Klan and Diversity Day in Goshen

Mike: It wasn't terribly long after that, that the Ku Klux Klan decided that they would come to Goshen and let people know what they thought about the Mexicans. And obviously, this is extremely upsetting in our community. The Ku Klux Klan was having a little bit of a revival in Indiana at the time, they were having more of these meetings. I wouldn't say that they were growing larger, but they got a lot of press, and it isn't the kind of thing that you wanted your community to have to go through.

The State Police said, "Have an alternative event. Have it far away from your downtown, and make it a type of event where the responsible people in the community are going to this, and they are not going to go downtown and watch the sideshow that's going to be presented down

there. We had one in Shanklin Park; a lot of people came. There were community leaders who would come to visibly show their support for the Latino community. It went on most of the day.

The Ku Klux Klanners came. There was a group of people that were protesting them, and there were words, and it was exactly what the Ku Klux Klan wants. So there was that story, but there was also the story about what happened with this event. And this event then morphed into the ethnic festivals that we had and was the impetus for the Human Relations Committee that we got formed in Goshen.

Goshen's Past as a Sundown Town

Phil: Are there other pieces of these cultural transitions that you had to help navigate as mayor? Going back to the—knowing Goshen's history as a sundown town?

Mike: Goshen was a sundown town. I mean, we've acknowledged that—which we should. Growing up I did not know that Goshen was a sundown town, and it was still being enforced to a degree. There certainly were no blacks or very, very few blacks that lived in Goshen at the time. There were a lot of unfortunate things that were happening up and through the sixties.

The Chamber of Commerce pointed out in their advertising that they would give to new companies, that we had a virtually zero negro population. And that just kind of sat there by itself, but there's a reason that they were saying that. Yeah, we weren't the most welcoming community.

When I got in as clerk-treasurer, I was the custodian of the minutes—the Council minutes—and all the ordinances. Because the urban legend was that there was actually a sundown law on the books, and I wanted to find out if that was true. I went back and looked through all of that stuff, and no, thank goodness, Goshen hadn't codified it as a formal law in Goshen, which I believe happened in some communities. So that's a small thing that was a positive thing to know, but the fact that we were a sundown community, there's just no escaping that. It was basically being enforced by hotel owners who would not allow blacks to stay in hotels, and the police department explaining to people it might be the good thing to do, is to leave. So it's not a good part of our history. It certainly isn't, but Goshen today isn't Goshen in the 1960s at all.

Goshen's Present as a More Welcoming Community

Mike: I think the Latino community in particular would say that they've been made very, very welcome in this community. When Jeremy Stutsman ran for mayor, I was at the meeting when Latino leaders came in and were talking to Jeremy because they were determining whether they wanted to support him. And the very first question was, Are you going to keep the same police chief? And I'm thinking, oh no, there's a problem here. And no, they said, We want the same police chief. That man has just done wonders in our community, and we'd like to see a commitment that he would stay.

I don't think that happens in many communities, I don't know. At least it does here, and I'm thankful for that.

Phil: So, some of the awareness from your experience as mayor and as an adult, how has that reflected maybe your experience or perceptions as a child growing up here? Were you aware of some of these attitudes or histories of Goshen then?

Mike: No. Blissfully, I remember one kid who had come from Cuba, that I went to school with, and that was about it as far as diversity the whole time from grade school clear through highschool.

I remember down on the millrace, walking that, and came up to an older gentleman, a black gentleman, who was fishing. And I talked to him a little bit, and he said, "Do you live nearby here?" which I did. And he asked me, "Could you bring me some water, if you've got an old Coke bottle that you could just put water in?" I said, "Okay." It was about three blocks to get back home. I went home. My mother wanted to know what I was doing, and I said, "Somebody that was fishing needed some water," took it back to him. It was the first time I had an interaction with a black person, and by that time I was, I don't know, pushing highschool age, and didn't again until I was in college. So, this was a pretty lily white community run by old men, and thank goodness that's not the case anymore.

Phil: Are there aspects of Goshen that have contributed to it being welcoming overall?

Mike: Sure, oh absolutely. Goshen College and the service attitude that they have, and that global outreach attitude that they have. Those students that are going on SST and learning. And those professors—that was a big change with the professors at Goshen College, that got out of Indiana and actually were in third world countries and had those experiences, and it changed them. So that's certainly a huge thing, but it's just not Goshen College and the Mennonite churches. There's a strong church base here in Goshen.

The owners of industry in this community, they depend on a good workforce. And part of our good workforce now is the Latino community, and that Latino community has to feel safe within this community; it has to feel welcome within this community. So, for those owners, it's in their own best interest to be supportive so that we have the Latino community and the rest of the community working together.

And the perfect example of that is when ICE was going to be building this detention center. We were never quite sure what that thing was going to be—a full prison, a detention center, whatever—it didn't sound good to very many people. I actually did research on the company that was coming in, which had a terrible record in the states and the communities that it had been in as far as how they treated their own workers, let alone the people that were being detained there. Jeremy Stutsman—and others, I'm sure—worked with the business community about the terrible message that this would send to the workforce in Elkhart County. And those

business leaders stood up and got a hold of the power structure in Elkhart County government, and explained to them that this isn't needed and there was a stop put to it very quickly.

Transportation Issues in Goshen

Phil: So, going back to your time as mayor, are there other things that you want to touch on? Or any other things that you might want to touch on as part of that history?

Mike: Well, a little bit on the transportation side. One of the things that's a real challenge for Goshen, is that we've got State Road 119, State Road 4, and 33 that come through this community. You have a major river that cuts through this community. You have a major canal that cuts through this community. We have all these natural barriers to a good transportation system for streets. We're going to be facing this in the future as we continue to grow because this is a growing community.

Just one—another historical note—the Chisick administration had a plan to fill in the millrace and make that a street, so we'd have another major thoroughfare that would cut through north and south in this community. I think that one lasted maybe about ten minutes until the community told them, No, you absolutely are not going to be doing something like that. And thank goodness that that was nipped in the bud.

Everyone Working to Make Goshen a Better Place

Mike: There are problems here, but we work on them. In many communities you're paid a decent amount of money to sit on a board or commission. In Goshen, I believe the only—the Board of Works, those members get a little bit of money; but they meet every single week, so it's a lot of time. There's no other positions that I know of—and I would guess were up to maybe twenty or twenty-five board and commissions. People agree to be on these boards and commissions because they know that there's work being done there that improves our community.

The Shade Tree Committee is working to have more trees in this community. And now we have this very, very lofty, but hopefully doable goal of increasing our tree coverage in Goshen by a certain date—a tremendous project for our community.

So, very, very good work is done, and pretty quietly, by a lot of people in this community. And we worried—it was during my administration—we were worrying because many of our local businesses were being bought out, and there were companies whose headquarters were three states away. What is the commitment going to be with those people that come in to be supportive of our community? Are they going to push for their employees and management to take part in the community, or are they going to stand aloof over here on the side? If we would've lost that base of people, it would not have worked well in our community, and thank goodness the new businesses stepped up.

You can find people that are willing to serve on these boards and commissions. And some of them are tough; Plan Commission is tough. You get in some of those meetings, and that could very well be your neighbor, or your parent's neighbor, who is extremely upset with something that's happening, and those are not nice things to deal with.

I remember one of the biggest negatives during my administration was that we resurrected the Tree Board. We didn't have anything, any group, that was really looking at our tree cover. We put that in place, and unfortunately, at least from my standpoint, there was a member that was appointed by the Council who hated the idea of a tree board, got himself on there, and saw what he could do to destroy that board. And was being very successful at it.

You know, a lot of people in Goshen, our background, Brethren Mennonite, we're not very controversial. We're not 'stick it in your face.' We look for consensus. This man wasn't looking for consensus, and he just took people by storm. I had to be very ham-handed in that situation. I just dissolved it; dissolved that board. We changed the name of it, two months later passed it again, talked with the Council about not putting this person on, and then we got a new start and got going.

So there were some bumps along the way in the community.

People in Goshen Don't Vote

Phil: But would you say civic engagement exists at a higher level in Goshen than in other places?

Mike: No. And from this standpoint: because it's now just a week or so from an election in Goshen, and I believe—I haven't run the numbers yet—but it's something like twenty-five percent of our community got out and voted. Probably five percent of the Latino community got out and voted. Some people say, Well, people are satisfied with what's happening in Goshen, so they don't bother to vote. There wasn't a mayor's race this time, so that's going to cut down on vote.

I don't know. It's a civic responsibility. Part of being a citizen is to take part in elections, and if you feel things are going the right way, why wouldn't you go out and support the people that are doing that for you?

I mean, this was an extremely small election. If a faction gets together in Goshen and decides that they want to be a major (replace with player) part, and perhaps it's a faction that may not have the community's interests at heart. With low voter turnout a small faction can mobilize their voters and have success at the polls.

In the 2019 election, I was going door to door and making phone calls, talking to people who said, "Well, I don't think I'm going to go vote. I didn't pay attention, this and that." And I said, "Well, that's unfortunate because we have Goshen High School students that are working." And

they were excited about coming. They get off school; it's an excused absence, and the state legislature understands that being part of an election is a good thing for students to have as part of their background. They're calling people. They're knocking door to door. They're enthused about being part of this, and they're talking to people that said, "No, I don't think I need to vote this time." What kind of a message are we sending to the youth of our community that voting is not something that is really to be valued?

So from that standpoint, I don't think that we have high levels of civic [engagement].

Now, there's very, very, very, very many more examples of where we do have high levels of civic engagement, but this is a major one, and there's just a problem here. I don't understand it, and it bothers me. And I know it bothers Mayor Stutsman; he's talked about it in the past. Allan Kauffman and I had a meeting yesterday where we talked about this.

Normally we handle community problems by bringing stakeholders in and working on a solution. I don't know who the other stakeholders would be on this. I don't know that they see it as a problem. I have told the Latino community, "You may be satisfied in what's happening, and you don't feel you have to vote." I said, "How terrible is it going to be that we elect some people—that we have people on the council or the mayor—who would've welcomed the ICE facility into our community?" And now you realize what happens when you have elected officials that will not work in the Latino community's best interest, or as I believe, the whole community's best interest. Now you're going to be active, and you'll turn it around. Why wait? Why wait and have to go through that sort of a situation?

Mike Leaves the Mayor's Office

Phil: In your own journey, in your own story as mayor, you eventually decided to step down, or to end your term as mayor. How did that transition unfold for you?

Mike: Well, I had an undiagnosed thyroid problem, so I wasn't getting enough thyroid into my system. It makes you extremely tired. There's a lot of—nothing that's terrible that's happening to you, horrible pain or this, that, and the other—that's why it doesn't get diagnosed. But just a lot of things that just don't feel good. And I took it on as stress, that that's what was happening. And I knew that I did not want to run for a fourth term, and I was starting already to look and say, "What's the future going to be?" My sons were getting ready to go to college. Goshen pays its mayor well; (add it) doesn't pay its mayor very well.

And at the time, Frank O'Bannon had just got elected [governor]; the head of the toll road was going to jail, there was an interim person in there, so I applied for that position. I knew Governor O'Bannon a bit, and it is a governor's appointment, and I was lucky enough to get that position. And so, I resigned as mayor mid-term, and that's when Allan Kauffman was put in. The process is precinct committeemen of the Democratic Party get together and elect him, and there was a race during that meeting. Patty Morgan, a council member, also ran. Allan was successful. I moved up to the toll road and stayed there until Mitch Daniels became governor and decided he

wanted to sell the toll road. He put his own person in charge, which was fine; certainly understood that. I was kept on and stayed up there until the sale went through, and that's when I came back and worked for Allan Kauffman in redevelopment.

Phil: And then you were also involved in Shipshewana for a bit?

Mike: Yes, yeah. The opportunity came available to go up to Shipshewana. That was a period of time when the State had—because of some property tax changes—had really limited the revenue to city government. Allan Kauffman was looking for any way he could to find efficiencies and save money for large projects. Quickly, they were going to put three departments together. He wanted me to run that. There were members on the Council that didn't seem fit to support that, so I told him, "Well, your idea is good. Go find somebody the Council feels comfortable with." And I applied the next day to the Shipshewana town manager's job, and within a week I was up there working.

Wonderful place to work. Town of 500 people that will have upwards of 10,000 people on a good day because of the flea market. Just great people to work with; I enjoyed that tremendously. I've been involved in trails my whole political career. I get up there and they're still trying to do the last portion into Shipshewana and it was controversial with many of the people that lived next to it, so I got back into the wonderful thing of trails. And I knew these people would like it, but we've got to get over the hump, so had to go through that controversy again. And got it done; got that part finished.

Retiring and Hiking the Appalachian Trail

Mike: By that time I was starting to figure out how I could wind down my career and ended up retiring from that, and four months later I was hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Phil: What led you to take that step?

Mike: There's an author, his last name's Bryson, I can't remember his first—

Phil:—Bill Bryson?

Mike: Yeah, wrote a book that I had read back, well, when it first came out, about his adventures hiking the Appalachian Trail, a 2,200 mile trail that goes from Georgia to Maine. And I was captivated by that, and I always thought I'd like to try it. I was sitting in a doctor's office one day reading a magazine and it talked about the new lightweight equipment that is allowing old people to hike—very, very lightweight equipment. Normally a hiker will have forty pounds or more on their back, and when you put that amount on your back, you're wearing great, big, huge hiking shoes that weigh several pounds that you have to lift every step you take. I read that, I go, "I can do this, if I can get my pack weight down."

So I ended up hiking in running shoes with a twenty pound pack. I had hurt my back and been in rehab right up until that point in time and decided that I'd go ahead with the hike anyway just to

see if I was going to enjoy it and see how far I could get, and then really make a go at it the next year. The hiking was the best thing you could do for your back. I got 500 miles, realized my back's fine, because I'm not carrying all this weight, my body isn't deteriorating like these twenty-two year old kids who had forty pounds. And in some cases I saw people with eighty pound backpacks going up mountains and down who are just—they're falling apart.

I had no blisters. I'm in better shape than most of these kids, and I can walk—by that time I'd walked myself into a physical shape that I could walk the twenty-five miles a day that they were walking. And I realized I could do it, and I go, "Oh my God, it's going to take 'x' number of more months, and barring an injury, I can do this whole thing—I'm not so sure I want to." My son was in college. I missed my wife, so I called a stop to it.

Two years ago I went back. I was going to hike another significant portion of it. Did another hundred miles and I was making some errors. I got dehydrated. I was not being too smart. At that time I'm pushing seventy years old, and sometimes your decisions aren't too good, so my wife has been told, if I head that direction again, she's to take a gun and shoot me before I can get up there.

Phil: So you did it on your own?

Mike: Yeah. Most people that hike the Appalachian Trail do it by themselves. As you're hiking, you'll run into a hiker and you'll hike with them for several miles. Probably a third of the people are women; most of those women hike by themselves. A good portion of people are sixty-two and over, that are hiking. You get your social security and this is a way of—and that's why I did it, was to get myself in the best shape I could possibly be for my retirement. That was part of it.

A lot of kids that are twenty-two years old that didn't get a job out of college, and they're doing this because it's cheap. So, you get the sixty-two year olds and the twenty-two year olds, and for the first month or so, the twenty-two year olds don't want to talk to you. Why are these old people out here? Look at this old guy. You're plodding along, you know, and telling stories about when you were a kid, and they don't have any interest in that. After about a month, they've got pain, they're sore; they realize that you're still there; you're hiking every bit as much as they are. And all of a sudden, it all comes together.

And that's what I missed about leaving, is that you get to know some people extremely well. I'm fairly introverted and for whatever—they've done studies on this—the Appalachian Trail attracts introverts, and you end up coming out of your shell a little bit with these strangers. But you have to—you have to depend on each other for safety and this, that, and the other.

So it was a wonderful experience. It's a lot of fun.

Reflecting on Mike's Work and Legacy

Phil: Did you find yourself reflecting much on your time here? I know coming back to Goshen and this question of being in this position of mayor and what your legacy might be, what were some of the reflections in that regard?

Mike: Well, yeah. On the Appalachian Trail, you're certainly reflecting. You're hiking eight to ten hours a day, and a lot of that's by yourself, and it's just beautiful, but it's step, step, step, and you start thinking of things. For me, my routine was I had three Appalachian folk songs I knew that I would sing. Once everything warmed up and I'm feeling good, I'd sing my three songs. That was a lot of fun.

Then I'd start thinking. Oh, I wrote a book in my head and this, that, and the other while I was doing this. But I also thought back on the stuff that was fun, the stuff I wished I had done different.

In retirement, you do take a look back on the things that you've done with your family and with your work. Legacy seems such a—presidents have legacies; governors have legacies. I kind of like to be remembered as the person that had something to do with getting the bike paths started in this community. But I'll be remembered how people remember me. I'm not interested in trying to formulate that or trying to influence what that's going to be like. Mayor was a wonderful job, the best job I ever had. You get a lot of respect from people, it's wonderful. But it is the mayor, you know; you're not the president, you're not a congressman, or this or that. You're just a person that's trying to do some good things for your community, and if I did that, I'm happy.

Phil: Is there anything else you would like to reflect on here, or touch on before we wrap up?

Mike: Well, just simply, I appreciate the opportunity. We had gotten together for a bit a couple of days ago to talk about this. This helps me—a lot of good memories get popped up by going through this process. And I've found through time when people have asked me to do this and asked me to do that, and to help on this and help on that, certainly there's a lot of satisfaction in being able to do that. But I always get more from it, I feel, than whatever I put into it. There's a tremendous amount of good feedback from doing things like this.

Phil: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with us and do this interview.

Mike: I appreciate it. Thank you.