

Freshman Year (1982-1983)

Almost all of the kids from my junior high went to the same high school because it was only a couple of blocks away. Those of us who lived by the canal were closer to a different school that had most of its students from other areas.

I assumed my "girlfriends" from junior high would all be going to the same school, and who knows what might happen? Those relationships were bound to continue, right? However, that summer, all three girls got pregnant and had to go to the special "preggo girl's school." I didn't see one again until after high school (Kim), one caught up with me on social media 30 years later (Gina), and one was never heard from again (Jennifer).

Life had different plans for them, and just like that, my old junior high romances were over. But high school had new faces, new experiences, and, apparently, new girlfriends.

NJROTC and the Goon Platoon

To get a "variance" to attend Moon Valley instead of the school I was zoned for, I had two options: learn Latin or join NJROTC (Navy Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps). So, I tucked my hair up under my hat and said, "Imagine that!" Yes, sir! A couple of other rock-and-roll guys and I became known as "The Goon Platoon." We were always getting demerits or extra duties for not cutting our hair or polishing our shoes enough. I dreaded "uniform day" because I had to walk a mile and a half through the middle of town in those shoes. The "townies" and upperclassmen would drive by honking and yelling, occasionally throwing stuff at us.

Kelly and the Walkman

My new crush was sweet as can be—Kelly. She was in the JROTC program also and looked great in a uniform. She was a little reserved, as rightfully a fourteen-year-old girl should be. One of our favorite things to do was listen to music together. I had a Walkman, well not an actual Walkman—but a Sanyo model with a radio AND a cassette player, a graduation present from my grandma. I concocted a headphone splitter with parts from Radio Shack so Kelly and I could listen to albums together while walking to class. That was a super-cool thing to have and do back then. Unfortunately, Kelly accidentally broke my Walkman, and I never got it fixed. It was very expensive, especially for a poor kid from our neighborhood.

The Great Supply Hut Standoff

In ROTC, I joined the rifle team, where we would go to the local shooting range and compete in marksmanship. I also joined the drill team, whose job it was to raise and lower the school flags and perform with drill rifles (balanced rifles that can't fire). One day, the Goon Platoon and I commandeered the supply hut with our drill rifles and demanded better shoes. Someone said we had the rifle team guns, and we were suspended from school. I almost lost my variance, but at least I got better shoes! This all happened in the shadow of the movie *Taps* starring Timothy Hutton, Sean Penn, & Tom Cruise, which had just been released and was fairly popular, especially in those circles.

Theater, Lighting, and an Unexpected Promotion

One of the selling points for switching schools was an alleged better drama program. Performing arts was the closest thing to filmmaking available at high schools in those days. At least it had some of the same attributes—lighting, sound, script, dialogue, wardrobe, and sometimes even a few special effects. The "special" effects were usually lighting effects such as a strobe light or sometimes a fog machine that would be operated by the lighting department. I petitioned to join the lighting crew on the first big production and was selected along with five very cute girls chosen by the "macho" senior lighting lead. He taught us the basics of running the state-of-the-art computerized lighting board and how to wire and hang the lights.

Shortly thereafter, he was expelled from school for sneaking into the boiler room with a couple of girls and some beer. The play was in trouble because there was no one else to run the lights. It was a desperate time, so I stepped up and became the only freshman to run any crew, especially the largest, most complex, and arguably the most challenging crew. In addition, at only thirteen years old, I was the youngest kid at the school (by two months). My crew was all girls, and some of them were even sophomores. I already had somewhat of a reputation as a "ladies' man" but this cinched it. Ultimately, I was the youngest official Thespian attending the school, ever.

Gammage Auditorium and the College Assistant

On at least one occasion, I would get a call from the only other venue in the state with the same equipment who was looking for a technician who knew how to operate that console. One job that I did at the ASU Gammage Auditorium was for a black-tie symphony. I accepted the Friday job on Thursday and told them I would need an assistant to help configure the presets between scenes. They agreed and said they would have someone there for me. They knew I was in high school, and they expected a young person, but I don't think they were quite prepared for a fourteen-year-old to show up.

"I'm looking for Frank."

"I'm Frank. Who are you?"

"I'm Jack, your lighting director."

"You're what!?"

It was a classic moment. It got even better when he introduced me to my gorgeous college-girl assistant! The hits kept coming.

Michelle and the Wild Side

Later that year Michelle came along. She was cool and slinky like a cat. Wild and wise. She was sixteen and wanting to be my girlfriend. She showed up around my birthday and stole me with passion. Gave me "special" birthday presents. Let me drive her mom's car. We drank beer,

smoked cigarettes and other things, and hung out in seedy arcades listening to music and playing games.

One of the best things about arcades was that you could hear the music before even stepping inside. The sound of Joan Jett, Pat Benatar, or Foreigner mixed with the beeps and boops of *Pac-Man* and *Galaga* created an atmosphere like no other. There was an unspoken hierarchy in those places—who was good at which games, and who got the most attention. Some guys were pinball wizards; others dominated the vids. I played a little of everything, but I was best at *Pac-Man* and *Hogan's Alley*. Mich's game was Donkey Kong.

The High School Experience

Outside of school and arcades, we had some late-night hangout spots. Sometimes, we'd go to the parks and run around like idiots. Other nights, we'd pile into someone's car and hit a drive-in movie or drive aimlessly, looking for something to do. Gas was cheap, freedom was new, and we felt invincible.

Moon Valley was a proving ground. It was where we figured out who we were, where we fit in, and how far we could push the limits. Some of us stayed on the straight and narrow, and some of us took the scenic route. Either way, it was one hell of a ride.

Go Rockets!!