

Timothy Blaeser
Narrator

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JL: Julie Luker

TB: Timothy Blaeser

JL: This is an interview conducted as part of a larger faculty and student research project initiated by Dr. Julie Luker of Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today is Monday, August 21st, 2023. I'm here with Timothy Blaeser. My name is Julie Luker, and I am an assistant professor of psychology at Concordia University.

Today, I'll be talking to Timothy about what life was like growing up in the Twin Cities. During this interview, I'm going to ask you to reflect on your childhood life experiences as they relate to a variety of social topics from that time period. For the purposes of this interview, we've defined childhood as birth through 17 years of age. To begin, please restate and spell your full name.

TB: Timothy. T-I-M-O-T-H-Y. Blaeser. B-L-A-E-S-E-R.

JL: Please identify your race and gender.

TB: I'm male, and I've got two races. I've got German and Norwegian.

JL: Please state your date of birth.

TB: April 7th, 1960.

JL: Finally, please share where you grew up such as a name of the neighborhood, or the nearby street intersection.

TB: West Saint Paul between Oakdale and Robert on Haskell.

JL: Thank you. I would like to learn more about your family life. Let's begin with the memories you have for immediate and extended family. Please share some memories that you have about these relationships.

TB: Well, compared to what's going on now, I've had my whole parents my whole life. My parents stayed together the whole time *[laugh]*. My dad just died five and a half years ago. My mom's still with us. I'm the eldest. I have a sister and two brothers. My sister and I are almost two years apart. My brother after my sister are exactly two years apart. Then, there's my littlest brother who is 14 years younger than I am.

JL: Of those siblings, did you find that you were closer to some over others?

TB: I think over time it changes. Right now, I'm closer to my middle brother just because he lives close to me, and we do stuff together. My sister lives down in Lakeville, so that's not near West Saint Paul at all. It's 40 minutes away or whatever. Then, my youngest brother lives up in Buffalo, Minnesota. He's way away. We don't see him very often at all.

JL: Did you have any pets growing up? If so, could you describe them?

TB: I had the salamanders and turtles that every kid comes home with. The bird with the broken wing you find on the sidewalk coming home from school. Those didn't last long. My turtle was put on the front porch and it froze to death because I got it for my birthday. My birthday's in April, so it's still a little cool sometimes. It froze *[laugh]*. One of those little, tiny turtles that was big as a half dollar *[laugh]*.

We've had a couple of dogs. We had one named Sheila, a West Highland terrier. She was really nervous, but she was young, I guess. She lived for a number of years. Then, my dad came home and decided to give her to somebody else. We had Cinder, a black lab. She was with us for a long time.

Then, we were going to college and getting to that age so we couldn't be home enough to take care of it. He gave it to somebody up at the cabin in Wisconsin. We had another lab as well. That lab's name was Magic. He was a great dog. He then was adopted by somebody else after six years or something.

JL: Thank you. Next, please describe the ways in which your family's economic status influenced your childhood.

TB: Did what to my childhood?

JL: The ways in your family's economic status influenced your childhood.

TB: Oh, sure. My dad had his own business most of my life. He had five beauty shops. He was a real macho strong guy. He was a paratrooper in the Korean War. Back in the '70's, it wasn't men who were in beauty. They were considered to be homosexual. He wasn't, but he said a lot of men were in that industry that way. I had to deal with that.

Razzing in the schoolyard, and during recess and such. "Your dad's a gay. Your dad's a faggot. Your dad's a homo." He's not. I mean, he married my mom. He had me *[laugh]*. I mean, he's never been that way, but I had to always defend that because that's just what kids did. My hair's naturally curly.

It's hard to see in this picture. They thought because all the guys in class had straight hair and I had curly hair that my dad was doing my hair. No *[laugh]*. It just is naturally curly. They thought well 'cause my hair's curly all the time that my dad had something to do with it. Well, he did genetically, but that was it *[laugh]*. My dad has curly hair as well.

JL: Did your mom work?

TB: Yeah. She worked. Initially when I was up to third grade, fourth grade, she was a stay-at-home mom. Then, she started working part-time at a factory. It doesn't exist anymore, but down on University Avenue in Saint Paul, there's a company called Brown and Bigelow. They would make advertisements, and calendars, and playing cards, and stuff like that. She worked there intermittently, on and off.

Then, she went to school, and became a beautician, and helped my dad run his empire. They were both working. Then, she went from that, and she got into education. She became a trainer of cosmetology at Saint Paul Technical School, which is now called the Saint Paul College right by the cathedral there. That's where she worked for 20 plus years.

JL: You describe the extent to which you felt your family's income met your basic needs.

TB: Oh, that did easily. Of course, you never think you have enough as a kid. I wanted a new car. I got my dad's old car. It was still a great car. I wrecked it almost immediately, but that's another story *[laugh]*. I had to pay for college myself, and that's just what we did. I had a really good job.

When I started college at the University of Minnesota for my undergrad, back then, way back then, a full term that had three quarters to a year at the time, which is weird. Three quarters to one year. They had summer session, which was two more quarters, but they were double time in half the space. We were really five quarters if you look at it that way. Anyway, one quarter, which is 10 weeks if I remember right. Maybe eight. I don't know.

The fall, winter, and spring term were \$350 for a full term. If you signed up for 12 credits, that's full-time, anything over 12 is free. Once you hit the 12 mark. I had a job the summer before I started school, working in construction. I wasn't building a building, but I was moving that pile of dirt from this place to that place. Moving that pile of blocks from here to over there, or taking them up the scaffold, or whatever. Just that kinda job.

I had a really good job, and I paid for all my tuition. Because it was a union job, I had a card. A union card. Back then, they gave you a card. It looked like a business card, but it had the months of the year on the edge. You'd go to the office and pay your \$8, or whatever it was, and they click it. They had a little star thing on it, or whatever, so you could see that you were paid up for that month. I sent it in. I sent \$72 or whatever it was all at once. I'd send it on a check.

They sent it back to me. Said, "Get your dues paid up. Pay your dues for over the school year. Come back in the spring, you'll have a job." I said, "Great." I did all that. Then, finished my freshman year. I went in there to my employer, and I said, "Okay, I'm ready. Here we go." He looks at me. Says, "Ah, we're not doing college employs anymore." *[Makes noise]* they said, "If you want a job, go down to the union hall. Sit there, and they'll get you a job." I said, "Okay."

I'm 18, 19 years old. I listened to 'em. I went down there in my broken car that I wrecked already *[laugh]*. I went in there, and I put myself in front of the receptionist desk. I said, "I'm Tim Blaeser. Here's my union card. It's all filled up. I want a job." She says, "Okay. Sit next to those four, five guys over in the seating area."

They're all drinking stale coffee and smoking old cigarettes, and looking at magazines that are four, five years old in the late '70's'. I'm like, *[inhales]*. I sat there for about two minutes, and they're watching a black and white TV that's going *[makes noise]*, in and out. I said, "Yeah. This is not good." *[Laugh]* I sat there for maybe three minutes, five minutes at most. I got up and left. I never was a fan of unions since then *[laugh]*.

I got different jobs, but they didn't pay as well as construction. I saved my money so I could pay for school. Every year since then, tuition went up and up and up and up. By the time I left, the University of Minnesota got up to be like \$1200 a term or something. Now, it's more than that, I'm sure.

It was such a big deal 'cause every year it said, "It's going up three percent, or five percent, or eight percent." I was like, "Okay, that's not so much at once." Over time, it kept growing and growing. Eight percent of the previous tuition, plus the three and five percent added already. It really exponentially grew. It was quite a deal. Had to get student loans. That's about that.

JL: Now, I'd like to know about your experience with religion such as Catholicism, Lutheranism, et cetera. Describe what you can recall about your family's religious practices when you were growing up.

TB: Sure. My family's extremely Catholic, and so am I. I go to mass at least once a Sunday. I got to Adoration every Saturday night. That's my hour. That's from 10:00 to 11:00. Holy days of obligation. That's really not rubbed off on my kids *[laugh]*. I have to drag my daughter to mass, and my son just said, "Ah, not so much."

He knows everything. He's a doctor as well. We have Dr. Blaeser, and my son is Dr. Blaeser. He's a pharmacist. I'm a real doctor *[laugh]*. He's just got a technical degree. They just gave him a doctorate. People like us, we're real doctors *[laugh]*. Yeah. He just says, "Yeah." "When's the last time you've been to confession?" "Well, about six years ago." Like, "What?" It's not gone in too much. When he comes home to visit, in fact, he didn't have a Catholic wedding.

This is wild because my sister, she's Catholic and goes to mass sometimes, I guess. Her daughter, lovely daughter, the eldest cousin of that generation, she's Catholic, went to Catholic school, went to St. Ben's. She is now one of his—I don't know what to call it You take a course online and suddenly you're a pastor, or you're a minister. You can officiate weddings. She did that.

She put on a long gown-ish like thing and read a few scripture readings. Then, married my son to his wife in front of everyone at this wonderful hall. We were all there, but that was their wedding. It wasn't with a priest. It wasn't with a minister of anything, other than herself. Then, she goes to mass the next day. I'm like, *[makes noise] [laughs]*.

JL: It sounds like for you, religion has always played a very important role.

TB: Yes, it is.

JL: When you were younger, did you go as frequently?

TB: I'm sure there was times. When I moved to campus after my first year, I moved into the fraternity house, which is three doors down from the Newman Center on campus. It doesn't even exist anymore. At least not there, where it did. That's where we'd go to mass. Sometimes, from the night before having too many beers or too many parties going on at the frat house, I'm sure I excused myself from mass *[laugh]*. I still would go most times.

JL: The same for elementary school, high school?

TB: Oh, yeah. All the time. Every time. Yeah. My parents and I, and my brother and sister would just go to mass on Sunday. Sundays, you go to mass.

JL: Okay. Now, I'd like to learn more about the neighborhood in which you grew up. If you moved, you can reflect on more than area. Please describe what comes to mind when thinking about that neighborhood in which you grew up.

TB: Serenity [*laugh*]. It was a storybook. It really was. We lived on Haskell Street. Nothing happened on Haskell Street, which was wonderful. We could play baseball in the street, or hockey in the street, boot hockey, or football. Whatever we wanted to do. The guys and I would get together and throw the ball around, or we're gonna play baseball. We're gonna play football. It was just a kid's paradise. It really was.

We had swings in the backyard. We had forts in the trees. We rode our bikes. We took our bikes apart, put 'em back together, and did all these fun things that kids do. At least guys do. We'd build our little go-carts without motors generally, and we had to push 'em up and down the street. It was just fun. We just had a good time. People would move in and out slowly. In fact, we moved from 160 East Haskell, all the way up to 172 East Haskell. We went from 160 over a lot, and to the next lot. We were two doors up.

It was a bigger house, and we had four kids and my parents. It was just a great place. Then, a huge yard. It was a yard that was a lot. They could've put a house there, but they didn't. Was it just a great, great lot. We played baseball and whatever else in it. It was just wonderful.

JL: Was it the type of neighborhood that had ma and pa shops on the corner? Do you have to go a ways to get [*crosstalk 15:40*]?

TB: Oh, no. Right on the corner was the grocery store. Mom would give me a list of things. Go up to [Schlikerbeer's?] and just write a note. Then at end of the month, she'd pay up whatever it was that was due. Just that's how we did it. Not all the time. Most the time, she would go shopping. She'd want me to go get something, so she gave me a list. I'd go get the cake mix and the eggs, or whatever it was, and I'd go get it and bring it back.

Then, the other corner the other way, a couple blocks away was another grocery store. I'd go to that store for the meat. I'd go to the other place for the groceries. Then, across the street and down was a hardware store. I mean, it was just a great neighborhood. It was fantastic. Everything was right there.

Church was down the block, and school was down the other way. Then after a while, church and the school was at the same place. We went to public school initially. Then, when I got to grade six, we went to St. Michael's, and went to church at St. Michael's. Everything was a one stop shop. It was wonderful.

JL: Do you feel like you knew your neighbors really well then as well?

TB: Oh, yes.

JL: How safe did you feel you were? I assume very safe.

TB: Very safe. I could walk in anybody's house or knock on their door of course. They would let me in. "Oh, Tim, what's going on? What's wrong?" If I couldn't get in, there'd be rare the time I couldn't get in my house. My parents bought a cabin in northern Wisconsin when I was in sixth grade, fifth grade. Fifth grade, I guess. We'd just leave. We wouldn't lock the door. We'd come back, and just walk in there. Everything was fine. We just not have to worry about such things.

JL: Great. Next, I'd like to learn about the values that are shared by family and neighbors. Values are principles or standards that help to guide your behavior. What memories might come to mind for you that demonstrate what those values were for your family and your neighbors?

TB: Nothing went wrong, so I don't know. Everybody was Catholic or Lutheran on the block. Everybody went to mass or service on Sundays. They just did. We had that guiding light *[laugh]*. The only thing wrong I think, was microscopically wrong, was the neighbor was a plumber. Great guy. We called him Uncle Ray, and his wife was Aunt Jenny. They weren't really aunts and uncles. That's what you called them. They helped raise us 'cause we lived on one side of 'em, and then we lived on the other side of 'em *[laugh]*.

I didn't know this until after I was in college, but he was an alcoholic. One time he came home, and this was before the big Dutch Elm thing. Dutch Elm was a big disease that came through the mid to late '70's in Saint Paul and decimated most of the trees. Not all of 'em, but a lot of 'em. He came in and was too drunk to drive, but he drove anyway. He hit the tree that was on one side it was *[inaudible 18:59]* to get into the driveway. He hit that, and he ripped off part of the bark of the tree. I mean, that was it.

He came up the next morning. Had to put spray paint on it to stop it from bleeding out, juicing out, or sapping out, or whatever it was. Eventually, that tree went down with Dutch Elm anyway. You could see down Haskell Street, and it was like an archway with all the trees. It was just covered. Then, that tree's gone. They left 'cause of the Dutch Elm came in.

JL: I bet it was really pretty.

TB: It was wonderful. Green and lush. It just was the best place to grow up *[laugh]*.

JL: I'm going to ask you to talk about leisure time. If you want to expand a bit, you talked a little bit earlier. Describe some of the ways in which you, your family, and your neighbors engaged in leisure time when you were growing up.

TB: Sure. Sometimes the neighbors, the adults when we were kids, would decide we're all gonna go to a particular lake. A lake in the Twin Cities. Go to Lake Phalin or whatever. Someone would bring the hotdogs. Someone would bring the pop and whatever. We'd all go out and go

swimming, and having hotdogs and hamburgers, whatever on the little grills that they always have. We'd do that for a couple hours, or maybe go fishing. We'd get in a boat and do that.

JL: You mentioned that there was a cabin. Did you spend a lot of time at that cabin?

TB: Yes. Yes. We spent until about—my dad's gone five and a half years, so three and a half years ago, my mom sold it. It's just too much for her by herself. She sold it. None of us could afford to buy it. They went to the market, and she got a good price for it. Now, somebody else owns it.

We spent pretty much every weekend there. It was just wonderful. On this great lake. We could go fishing, and boating, and swimming. I had some girlfriends up there. I took a girl to prom that I met up there. One of my proms. I went to seven proms one year. *[Laugh]* I was that guy *[laugh]*. This was black and curly, not white and curly *[laugh]*.

JL: Awesome. Well actually, that's a perfect segue if we wanted to jump into schooling. Did you want to talk about what it was like for going to school as a child and as an adolescent?

TB: Sure. Well, grade school was at Oakdale. That building doesn't exist anymore. It was funny because there's Oakdale Avenue, and Oakdale School was on Oakdale Avenue. When I was a kid I saw some movie about Annapolis, the Naval Academy. Oakdale and Annapolis meet. They intersect. I went to school at Oakdale School. I figured Annapolis had to be on Annapolis Avenue.

[Laugh] I said to my mom. I was six, seven, eight years old. She said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm gonna go to Annapolis." She said, "What do you do there?" "I wanna see that school where all those guys with the white hats walking around." "Oh. How you gonna get there?" I said, "I'm gonna go to Annapolis." She said, "Why are you gonna do that?" I just explained to her what I did to you. "Yeah. That's not how it goes."

I said, "Well, Oakdale School is on Oakdale. Annapolis is a school." "That's the name of the city, and it's the Naval Academy at Annapolis." *[Laugh]* course I was seven. I didn't get it *[laugh]*. I said, "I'm gonna go to school there." Said, "Okay. Well, that's good." That was it. I just associated things that way. It was in West Saint Paul, and especially my neighborhood, that's the right way to do it. Oakdale School was three blocks away on Oakdale Avenue, so that's how it worked.

JL: I assumed you walked back and forth to school.

TB: Oh, yeah. It was easy. It was faster than driving. You didn't have to stop at the stop signs *[laugh]*. We'd ride our bikes maybe sometimes.

JL: Can you describe a teacher that you liked, or maybe didn't like?

TB: I liked my first-grade teacher. Ms. Stensgard. I liked my fourth-grade teacher Ms. Cooper. She was a Marine. On November 10th, she wore her uniform from World War II. I liked Mr. [Gisky?]. He was my fifth-grade teacher. Then, the sixth grade, we went to St. Michael's. I went to St. Michael's. I had Mrs. Charlie. That was her first year as a teacher. Before the church closed, that particular school and church, she was the principal.

That took 40-some years or better. 50 years to get from grade schoolteacher to principal. That's nothing against her. It's just that I finally bumped into her again when she was the principal. It was fun. High school was one year at Brady. I don't know if you remember what Brady High School is. There used to be a bishop named Archbishop Brady here in Saint Paul. Since all the archbishops get schools named after them *[laugh]*.

We went to Brady High School, which is the southeastern population of Catholic's high school. My cousin went there. She was in the first class, but she decided to drop out. She never graduated high school. She is six or eight years older than I am. I went there. I would've been in the class of '78, but I went there for one year, ninth grade, and there was a big scandal at Brady.

The president of Brady, he wasn't a brother. He was just a layperson, but he was the president of the school. As president, he can just walk into whatever room he wants, and do whatever he needs to do. Doesn't have to knock. He walked into the principal's office and found Brother Dominic and Brother—I don't remember the other brother's name right now—doing things they're not supposed to with each other. At school. In the principal's office.

He said to the principal, "You're fired, and you have to the end of the term" or whatever. Something like that. That put the big kibosh on me going to Brady. I went to Sibley, which doesn't exist. Sibley's now called Two Rivers. We have to bury our heads in the sand. We can't look at history anymore. We have to pretend it doesn't exist. That's the best way. They'll tell you.

I went to Sibley. Graduated in '78. Had a great teacher there, Mr. [Tokyme?]. I went through every one of his electronics classes. That got me interested in the military. I joined the Marine Corps and did all these naval classes. I became a Marine Corps officer.

JL: Wow. That's great.

TB: Through the ROTC and all that at school. At the University of Minnesota. I didn't go to the Naval Academy, but I went to ROTC *[laugh]*.

JL: Close enough *[laugh]*. Excellent.

TB: Not according to the Naval Academy *[laugh]*.

JL: *[Laugh]* right. For our final topic, I'm gonna ask you to reflect on local and global issues such as war, poverty, discrimination, social unrest, et cetera. In your opinion, what were some of the biggest local or global issues affecting the people in your neighborhood when you were growing up?

TB: I'm gonna sound corny, especially in retrospect, but the Vietnam War was big when I was a kid. I mean, a little bit. One of my neighbors, whose name was Tim as well, he was of age to be drafted. He was drafted, and he was killed in Vietnam. That got pretty close to home. At the same time Vietnam was happening, I was 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 years old. Also, the radio turned on. On the radio was rock and roll music.

On the same time as that, there was all this stuff about just social unrest. General social unrest in the U.S., especially racial tensions going on, that I didn't know about before 'cause I wasn't alive before. In my little Timmy head of being 8, 9, 10, rock and roll, Vietnam, and racial tension all mixed together and made a really bad mix. That causes war, and strife, and that music is bad. That's just the way it came into my head.

War's bad. Strife is bad. The rock and roll's playing at the same time, so it just mixed that way to me. I still love the Beatles *[laugh]*, which at the time was really bad. Not bad, but that's part of that whole mix I just described. That's strife. We didn't have any racial issues at high school.

We had one Black family that moved into town, into West Saint Paul, spring of my senior year. We had one Black kid in my class. Not that it mattered, but there was just that one. Now, there's many more, and that's fine. It was just weird because it was so new, and it was just different.

JL: Did you know him?

TB: He was on my track team. I ran track. I don't recall his name. He ran really fast.

JL: This is the end of our interview. Your responses are invaluable, so I really appreciate that you took the time to do this today. Thank you.

TB: It was fun.