

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### Gannon Basketball: Big-Time Athletics Downtown

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
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*Gannon Auditorium opened in 1948*

The opening of then-Gannon College's new auditorium at Perry Square was revolutionary. The huge downtown building, Erie's largest indoor venue at the

time, promised to put the city “on the map.” While the “Audi” was to become mostly connected to basketball, hosting local college and high school contests, the Harlem Globe Trotters, and several professional exhibition games, the space was used for other events as well. I recall attending Gene Autry and Roy Rogers cowboy expos there during the 1950s when I was a kid. Gene rode out onto the gym floor on his horse, Champion, to thunderous applause, then he sang songs and had his faithful companion perform a series of clever tricks. Circuses were held there as well, with elephants, lion tamers, and acrobats.

Having a local college basketball team was an amazing opportunity for us kids. And during an era before outrageously expensive ticket prices, we would regularly walk to the old auditorium in groups of 10 or more, buy reasonably priced tickets and popcorn, and become rabid fans. During the early days of Gannon basketball, the downtown college hosted enough well-known teams that it seemed like big-time sports were happening right here in Erie.



*George Hesch came to Gannon during the 1950s from Warren, Pennsylvania*

I had a special connection to Gannon basketball. George Hesch, who became one of Gannon’s all-time greats, was a high school classmate and neighbor of my cousin from Warren, Pennsylvania, Phil Johnsen. Much of my family, which was originally from Frewsburg, had moved to Warren just a few miles away and I spent

a lot of time there when I was young. An odd meeting with Phil and his good friend, George Hesch, shaped my decision to go to college. No one that I knew had gone to college, nor had any members of my immediate family, and without that chance meeting, I wonder if I would ever have enrolled.

During the summer of 1953, while staying with family in Warren, Phil invited me to join him and George as they were shooting baskets in his driveway. The two of them were catching up after the previous year of college, their first. Phil was attending the University of Michigan and George was at Gannon on a basketball scholarship. As Phil, George, and I were shooting baskets, they asked if I had plans to go to college. Just a grade-schooler, I was unsure at the time. George mentioned that he loved Gannon, adding that Erie's downtown college was a great school and that I could probably save money by living at home. I was inspired. Back in Erie, I watched every Gannon home game during the George Hesch era and often went courtside to chat with him after contests. He was always gracious, taking time to talk and express interest in my life.

George was a superstar player at Gannon. A shooting guard, he became the leading scorer during the 1954 and 1955 seasons and continued to be Gannon's all-time scoring leader for years after graduation. He was also an exceptional student, making the dean's list as a chemistry major. Most have forgotten that George was drafted by the NBA upon graduation (Milwaukee). Instead, he matriculated to the University of Notre Dame, where he earned a master's degree in chemistry. Then George returned to Gannon to teach in the Chemistry Department.

George was at Gannon in 1960 when I enrolled as a freshman, and it was easy for me to choose a major: chemistry. George became my first-year chemistry professor and adviser. Sadly, I did not have the academic skills or dedication that he had demonstrated. I was a decent student, but my heart was not in chemistry. I had only signed up as a chemistry major because of George. At the end of my first year, he asked to meet and quizzed me about my career plans. That was when George Hesch had a second and more profound influence on my life. He wondered if I was excited enough about chemistry to pursue a graduate degree so that I might become a high school teacher. He noted that his path to a college professorship would not be available by the time that I completed my education. Noting my math skills and technical interests, he wondered if engineering might be a better path. He was gently and unselfishly pushing me away from chemistry. At my 1964 graduation, George was the first faculty member to congratulate me.

I continued to be a Gannon basketball fan through and after my college days, and while George was not playing, there were some exciting teams. Then in my sophomore year, a remarkable thing happened. Gannon had recruited legendary Farrell, Pennsylvania high school coach Ed McCluskey to become a full-time Gannon coach that season. McCluskey, who eventually won seven state basketball

titles, recruited several new players. The college seemed on track to significantly elevate the quality of its program, especially by elevating the coaching position to a full-time job. Prior to that year, Gannon coaches like Milt Simon, who was the 1960 coach, were part-timers who were paid a stipend.

But with September approaching, Gannon's new coach backed out, explaining that he had a child who would have been disadvantaged by moving and that he had to choose family over career. And that was when Gannon asked George Hesch to leave the classroom and take over the team as head coach, a responsibility that he assumed for two years. George's teams were remarkable -- tough, scrappy, and disciplined, a clear reflection of their head coach. His 1961-1962 team overperformed, going to the NCAA tournament for the first time. There was a tournament glitch, however. Freshmen were not allowed to participate, which was a major blow since three starters were freshmen that season. While George was an exceptional coach, he missed the classroom and after two years took a leave, went to Purdue University, and earned a Ph.D.

While I missed the presence of George Hesch on the sidelines, Gannon basketball went on through several exciting if not controversial coaches. I especially recall "Easy Ed" Sparling and Jim Harding for the imprints they made. Harding went on to coach at the professional level. Meanwhile, George Hesch returned to the classroom, where he continued as one of the college's all-time best professors, both for his ability to make chemistry and science clear and fun, and for his thoughtful advising, which impacted many Gannon students.

In 1970, when I returned to Erie and took a faculty position at Gannon, he was at the faculty orientation program to welcome me, tell me how proud he was of my academic accomplishments, and wish me well. Without realizing it, he had influenced my approach to advising and helped to make me a better professor than I might have been without him.

But one of my very best George Hesch memories came a few years later when he and I were playing on the "faculty basketball team" in a charity event at the Gannon Audi against a team of administrators. After managing to grab an offensive rebound just a few feet from the rim, I spotted George closing on the basket from the opposite baseline. I threw him a nearly perfect, behind-the-back, bounce pass, which he laid up for two points. As we ran back to play defense and I was silently congratulating myself, he chastised me. "That was an extra pass," he said. "You should have taken the shot, yourself. And lose the behind-the-back passes," George added. Of course he was correct!

After the game, George asked if I was still in contact with my cousin, Phil (his high school friend from Warren). We talked about Warren, Phil, and the old days for several minutes, and then he told me to be sure to say hello when I next saw him.



*Dr. George Hesch*

Sometime around 2005, I was at the Erie Yacht Club, having dinner with family, when I glanced out toward the docks and saw George walking on the lawn. It was the first time that I had seen him in several years. I wandered out to the edge of the water where he was quietly gazing at the horizon and greeted him. He explained that he was visiting the club for a family party and wanted to get away to watch the sunset. Pure George. I showed him my sailboat and then left him with his thoughts. Less than a year later, I was shocked to learn that he had passed away.



*Coach George Hesch, second from the end in the top row, poses with his 1961-1962 team.*

There have been other Gannon coaches, some seemingly quite successful, most far more flamboyant than George Hesch. Tom Chapman comes to mind immediately and would be most Gannon fans' choice as one of the very best, but his player graduation record was abysmal. That would have been unimaginable for George Hesch and the academic in me found that aspect of Chapman's coaching priorities to be beyond unacceptable.

For me, a close second was Jerry Slocum who came to Gannon after a long career at smaller colleges and managed to win games while graduating almost every player -- an amazing accomplishment. Slocum went on to Division I Youngstown State University after Gannon, where he maintained his amazing work ethic and continued to be a role model, demonstrating life's most important lessons: hard work, integrity, and dedication to the classroom. Slocum retired as one of the most winning basketball coaches of all time (723 career wins) while firmly guarding his values. I think that my admiration for Slocum was based upon his coaching similarity to George Hesch.



Slocum was amazing, but for me, the very best Gannon basketball coach of all time was George Hesch. I miss him and I am sure that I am not alone.

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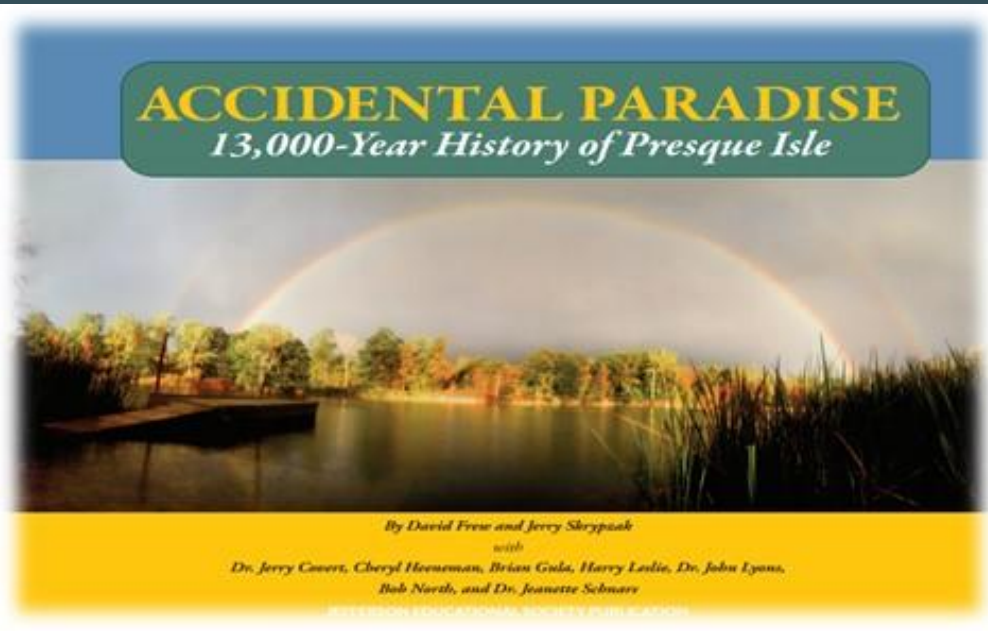
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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.*



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