

# *Jim Landwehr, by Julie M. Luker*

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**James Landwehr**  
**Narrator**

**Cole Steinberg**  
**Concordia University, Saint Paul**  
**Interviewer**

**Landmark Associates**  
**Transcriber**

**August 14, 2023**  
**Minnesota**

**CS: Cole Steinberg**

**JL: James Landwehr**

**CS:** 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 August 14, 2023, and I'm here with Jim Landwehr. My name is Cole Steinberg, and I'm an undergraduate student at Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today I'll be talking to Jim 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 have defined childhood as birth through 17 years of age. To begin, please state and spell your full name.

**JL:** James G Landwehr. J-A-M-E-S G Landwehr. L-A-N-D-W-E-H-R.

**CS:** Please identify your race and gender.

**JL:** A white male.

**CS:** Please state your date of birth

**JL:** December 11, 1961.

**CS:** Finally, please share where you grew up, such as the name of the neighborhood or a nearby street intersection. Include any major moves you made during this time period.

**JL:** I grew up, the large part of my growth was at the Summit and Lexington area of Minnesota, but I also lived for a time near Frogtown as well as in the McDonough housing projects at one point.

**CS:** 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.

**JL:** I come from a family of seven kids. We lost my sister at the age of five to a Wilms tumor. My father then went on a downward spiral, and he and my mother were separated, and he was beaten to death in a bar fight, a racial bar fight, in 1967 at the age of 5 for me. It was a racial incident. I was too young to know what happened, but evidently, it started in the bar, and he was kicked to death, basically, by a gang of youths. Yeah. That was the start of our family. At that time, we were living in the McDonough housing projects, and my mom saw to it that we got out of those projects into a rental home on Hubbard Avenue for a time.

Then we eventually got the house on Portland, which is right across from St. Luke's School. The early memories were a little rough at the beginning because, financially, things were a little tight. Then just growing up without a father was just a unique experience. There was six of us, so we had each other to lean on, and that helped a lot too. It was, for all intents and purposes, a fairly normal childhood outside of those tragedies, I guess, but still, a little unique in that way.

**CS:** Did you have any family pets?

**JL:** Yes. We always had a stray dog or a stray cat we had picked up over the years. We had a German Shephard. We had Brandy, it was a dog. We had innumerable cats, some of which were let out at night, and they'd come back three days later. You'd think they were dead, and they'd come back. We always had stray pets that were out and about. Yeah, we had several that we loved over the years, I guess.

**CS:** Which family members did you engage with the most growing up?

**JL:** My middle brothers. My two younger brothers, actually. I have two older sisters, and an older brother, and then two younger brothers. I tended to hang out with the younger kids, if any. My brother, Rob, was probably the closest one in the family to me, but he passed away in 2011 of cancer. The tragedy for my mom continues to this day. She's been through a lot. She is the one that held the family together and made sure that we knew that family was first and family was important.

**CS:** How were household chores divided between members of your family?

**JL:** Because of the single parent situation, my mom was at work all day every day, so it was every week, each of us had dishes for the week. If the dishes weren't done by the time mom got home, people would hear about it. Everybody had chores, although my sisters tended to take on more than most because they're the mother role. It seemed that my oldest sister especially took on babysitting roles and that kind of thing. The rest of us just helped out where we could, although we were kids, so you tend to be messy and that kind of thing. We all had—it was known to us that, when mom came home, the house better be in some semblance of order or we're gonna hear about it.

**CS:** Can you share a memory to help describe what mealtime was like in your family?

**JL:** Being, like I said, in a single parent family, she was very good about having us around the dinner table, I don't know, four to five nights a week. Weekends, we're on our own. It was pretty certain that she'd have something on the table almost every night. Sometimes, it meant us preparing it before she got home from work. Putting pork chops together with mushroom soup on 'em, the classic midwestern meal. Things like that. It was a dedicated time to at least meet around the table and talk about our day. Then we'd run feral again.

**CS:** Thank you. Next, please describe the way in which your family's economic status influenced your childhood.

**JL:** I guess we were taught to be frugal but not cheap, I guess. We were taught the value of every dollar, but it was also, our situation was different than that. When my dad died, I think we each got social security checks for a small amount to each child. Those checks drove our budget, our family budget. There was a time or two when a check got lost in the trash or whatever. I remember my mom and us digging through trash bags to find this check.

When it was tight, it was very tight. She did start dating my stepdad in 1971, '70, somewhere around there. They dated for 10 years before they got married in '79. They were married for five years, and then they divorced. That helped. He was at least a father figure in some respects, but he also helped with mortgage and that kind of thing. It didn't increase our status greatly 'cause he had his own former family that he had to provide for too, but it was a definite help.

**CS:** In what way has your family's financial circumstances shaped your spending habits today?

**JL:** I've always been frugal, and I would almost say kind of a miser, cheapskate. It's something I'm still working through. I see the same kinds of things in my own kids, for some reason. They're very cautious about the way they spend money. They're savers. They research stuff before they buy. Absolutely, it taught me the value of not only spending wisely but putting

something away for the future. I retired about a month ago, and I was sure to have a nest egg there because I don't think—my mom obviously did okay, but she couldn't put away what she needed to put away at time 'cause she had to provide for us. That's the, I guess, take away from it all is that my generation and now my kids' generation had taken that value of saving and spending wisely.

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

**JL:** We were raised Catholic. My mom made sure of it, even after my dad passed away that we were going to be in the Catholic school system for not only religious reasons but just for what she thought was a better education because it was just important to her that we did it. All of us, for the most part, went through grade school and high school in the parochial school system. As far as the actual church going, we went through communion, and confirmation, and all the sacraments as kids and memorized the prayers and all of that, but church going was tough because she had six kids. How do you rally six kids on a Sunday morning?

She'd go at it for a while and try and get us to go. After a while, it just became too much, and she'd stop. She's still very much a practicing Catholic. I went the re-church way for a while myself, Evangelical church. Now, I'm not on unchurched, but we don't really attend anymore. We've gone full circle, and it's like, I don't know if that's a bad or good thing, but none of us in the family, really, other than mom, is much of a church going type anymore, but we have the values shaped from it.

**CS:** What, if any, impact do you feel that religion's had in your life?

**JL:** I think for the moral underling of it all because it's so important to have knowledge that there's a higher power and that all the good moral choices you make are important. For me, I guess of all the family, I would say they would maybe even look to me as being the religious one. It's always been important to me to acknowledge that, and that comes from my Catholic faith. I said as different as it was from the Evangelical church I grew up in, there's still a foundation of reverence and respect for God. It's carried through in my life a little bit more than the others, maybe, 'cause I went to church for a long time up until about two years ago. I see God and religion in the world differently. Nature is my church kind of thing, but with respect for the fact that it was all created.

**CS:** Okay. Now I'd like to learn more about the neighborhood in which you grew up. If you moved during childhood, you may wish to reflect on more than one neighborhood. This is fine to

do, but please indicate as you do it. Please describe what comes to mind when thinking about the relationship—I'm sorry, the neighborhood in which you grew up.

**JL:** I guess I'll stick with the Portland neighborhood. It was all big families it seemed at the time. There was kids out and about. We played pick-up games of baseball. Night games, we'd play tag, and war, and all that stuff. It was just a really different time than I've seen. I went back to the neighborhood recently, and I didn't see that big family thing. I didn't see kids out and about. It's a gentrified neighborhood now, and it's all different. It was a little bit disheartening, but at the same time, I'm grateful for what I grew up with.

It seemed that neighbors took care of each other as much as they could. We had a few neighbors over the years, and some were good, some were not so good. For the most part, they understood that this was a single parent trying to raise six kids. The house wasn't always kept up the way it should be and that kind of thing. It was a great time. We grew up two blocks from Paul Molitor. There's just a good feel to the town. I still call it home even though I haven't been there in 30 plus years. I just, I guess I'd say it's your typical boomer neighborhood at the time. Everybody just runs out until the streetlights go out or come on, and then they go in the house.

We did a lot of biking all over the city, the river, Como Zoo, down to just all over the place. We were given free reign by our mom 'cause she was at work during summers with the thought that we'd have to tell the older kids. That freedom was really cool to be able to explore and do some things that were probably pretty dangerous, like walking the blocks of the Mississippi and that kind of thing. We came out okay, and I think we're better for it.

**CS:** To what degree were you satisfied with the quality of your living conditions?

**JL:** I would say I was very satisfied. I would say I live in a house now that's not as big as the house I grew up in. It's not quite as old, but it's all that I need. I think growing up in that middle class home has made me realize that you don't have to have McMansion in a gated community to have a nice life. I think it was absolutely—when she got that house, that was so important to her to have a place to put down roots, and she's always said that because we were renting at that place on Hubbard. That's not your house, you're still renting it from somebody else. This was, when she got it, and she was surprised to get it because who wants to sell to a widow with six kids. Yeah, I have no qualms about where I grew up.

**CS:** How well did the residents in your neighborhood know each other, and what were some of those relationships like?

**JL:** I could name almost every person as you went up the block by name. Some you know pretty well, like the guys across the street, or the black family across the street that we interacted with a

lot. The owner of a Lexington restaurant lived right on the corner of Lexington and Portland, so we played with his kids a lot. Just we knew the [Zimlawetts?] to our east and all the way up to the railroad tracks. People knew each other from school, and they all walked or biked to school. It's not like today where everybody's driven or dropped off. It was cool that way. It was nice to know you had people watchin' out for you a little bit. Every neighborhood has nosy neighbors or bad neighbors, but for the most part, ours were pretty good.

**CS:** Next, I would like to learn about the values shared by your families and your neighbors. Values are principles or standards that help guide behavior. What memories come to mind that demonstrate what these values were for your family and your neighbors?

**JL:** I think my mom modeled hard work, and showing up on time, and being accountable, and that's carried through. When we were goin' to school, and we didn't wanna go to school we'd fake sick. She said, "Just have some breakfast and see how you feel." She didn't want us to miss out. The values of attendance, and hard work, and just showin' up was probably the biggest takeaway for me. Also, just being nice to one another, to saving your money, to doing the right thing, to watchin' out for your own family was all very strongly put across by mom that family always comes first, and that church and religion is part of it, but just being a good person goes a long way.

**CS:** Can you share a memory where, growing up, you behaved in a way that reflected one your values?

**JL:** I was a pretty solid B student, and showed up to school, and was always the quiet kid, I guess, in class. I never bullied. I was a police boy at school. I tried to do all the right things, I guess. I think that just comes down from above. It's like your parents instill that kind of thing on you. Just caring for people nowadays. As a retired person, I'm volunteering and have a strong connection to helping others. I've been in the Big Brothers program. It's always been a big thing to me to have a male role model. I've done the Big Brothers thing, and I try to carry that through as well. Those things, I think, stand the test of time.

**CS:** Now I'm going to ask you all about leisure time. Describe some of the ways in which you, your family, and your neighbors engaged in leisure time when you were growing up.

**JL:** I guess some of the biggest things are we would play baseball or softball across the street in St. Luke's parking lot, did a lot of football down at the Greek Orthodox church a block away, and just pick-up games of that, and ditch, and just a lot of nighttime games as kids, but also grade school sports and that kind of thing. The family itself, we spent a lot of time going to the beach. It was a big treat for us on a Saturday to take us to Owasso Beach or Bayport were the two big

beaches for us. They'd pile some of our stepbrothers and sisters in one car, and us in another car, and we'd all go out to the beach. Those were the biggies. Sporting events too.

I remember my grandma taking us to Twins games and that kind of thing. For the most part, it was kids who were left to entertain themselves. We did a lot of biking trips to the Mississippi River to go carp fishing and things like that that you would shutter if you thought of your kid riding his bike three miles away, and going fishing, and all of that. It was a different time, and like I said, we had free reign pretty much of the city within limits.

**CS:** What types of toys did you play with growing up?

**JL:** I was a ball sports kind of kid. I had football, baseballs, you name it. I guess the best Christmas present I ever got was an electric football game. It was with little players, you line 'em up. This was the '70s, so we had a lot of different toys. Some of 'em safe, some of 'em not so safe. All the toys of that time, I guess, were the big ones. We did a fair number of outside activities too. Bikes, and even minibikes, and that kind of thing. We put the whole ramp in the middle of the street and do bike jumps and that kind of crazy stuff. It was, like I said, a lot of it's, the toys are one thing, but it's the entertainment the other way with making it up as you go. That was fun too. My sisters had Barbies and stuff, but for us, it was largely Monopoly, and Life, and all those board games and that kind of thing.

**CS:** Which bands or music genres were your favorite?

**JL:** I was a '70s kid, so I grew up largely in the rock world. When disco came along, it was a big anti-disco camp versus rock camp. I grew up with all the popular bands of the late '70s, early '80s. They were, I guess, the Cars, and Doobie Brothers, and a lot of the '70s bands. Talking Heads, and a lot of new wave stuff when I was in college. I was still living at home. Mom always said, "You can live at home as long as you're goin' to school. Otherwise, you're paying rent."

Most of us did that, rode the bus to and from school and that's what gives U of M a commuter school name. A lot of kids just didn't live on campus, and I was one of 'em. At the same time, I was able to actually get through college by working at Montgomery Wards and not taking out a single student loan in my four years at school. The ability to pay for your tuition is now a dead thing. It just doesn't happen. Back then, I made enough at Wards, I could pay it off. Whatever \$1,000, or \$1,200 for one quarter. It was pretty cheap. Those are long gone days, I guess.

**CS:** Next, let's discuss your experience with schooling. Please describe what it was like going to school as a child.



**JL:** I went to the Catholic school system, had the uniforms and everything. I started at Saint Agnes. We went to Mississippi for a year or two and then go into the Catholic school system and went to Saint Agnes. There they had uniforms that had a little snap tie. If you didn't wear the snap tie, you had to wear a cardboard one with this paper clip to it that the nuns would make you wear just so you'd fit the role.

St. Luke's later had uniforms as well. If you didn't—girls weren't allowed to wear their slacks underneath their skirt in the winter. They'd have to take their slacks off, except for recess time and that kind of thing. It was different in that you're always under the authority of both the teachers and the religious teachers, the nuns, and later in high school, and the Christian brothers. I wrote a book called *Cretin Boy*, and it's all about my Cretin experience. When I tell people I went to an all-male military Catholic school, they're all a little bit shocked, but it was a unique experience.

The Christian brothers, they live right on site at the time. It was not bad; it was just different. Had I to do it over again, I probably wouldn't go to an all-male school. I'd go to a co-ed school 'cause I think boys mature faster when they're around girls, but that's just me. It was unique enough to make me go, "Hm. This might be good material for a book," 'cause it's so unique. You throw the military oppression on top of the religious oppression, and it's just made for this weird high school experience, but it was all good. I made some good friends in my day. Just had I the chance to do it over again, I probably would've gone to public school or out, or just not the military route. In hindsight, it was unique enough that I'm glad I did it.

**CS:** Which teacher stands out to you most in your memory, and why?

**JL:** Probably my high school teacher, [Bill Tierney?]. He was a social studies teacher, but he always taught us to think outside the box. His pat saying was, it's the corporations. The corporations are after us. Just taught us to think critically about everything and not to trust authority. It was really a different mindset than this complacency you have in most places where they just say, "You just gotta do it because that's the way it is." He always thought, why do we have to do that.

We should be upset about the fluorescent lights above us because who knows what it's doing to our skin or whatever. Just a really interesting teacher and a good guy on top of it. There was several others. There was [Wally Westcott?] in grade school. He was our football coach and just a great guy in the community. He did paper drives, and rummage sales, and that kind of thing. Those are the two that stand out the most, for me anyways.

**CS:** In your opinion, how diverse was the student body of the schools you attended?

**JL:** Not very at the time because the Catholic school system was fairly expensive. There just wasn't a lot of diversity at all. I think in high school, there might've been, I don't know, four or five African Americans in my class. Grade school, a little bit more, but not a lot. I think it's interesting that my kids grew up in something totally different. They're totally immersed in a very diverse, accepting school. It's just a whole different experience for them. It's interesting how it's shaped both of us so differently. I'm still learning from them now. It's pretty cool.

**CS:** For our final topic, I'm going to 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?

**JL:** Early on, the biggest one for me was the Vietnam War only because I remember peace protesters marching down Summit Avenue toward the capital, eventually. It was just one of those things that was in your living room every night on TV, and it was the first time we had ever seen the war on TV. I remember there was rumors of a neighbor a few houses down burning his draft card and that kind of thing. My own brother, I think, had a draft card, and never got drafted. It was that threat of it. The fact that it was an unwinnable, very divisive war for a lot of reasons.

That was probably the biggest one that had the most impact. I remember the hippie movement opposing that. Going to a military school after it was all over and done with was a little odd too 'cause it was just, you're not the good guy anymore or whatever. You're looked down upon. It was different. I guess the other big item at the time was the energy crisis. We had lines at the gas station, and gas was goin' out of sight right about the time I bought a car that was a gas guzzler. It was just an uneasy time.

I remember seeing some graffiti on the side of a boarded-up building that said, Ford skis while we freeze. Gerald Ford was out skiing, evidently. It was a tentative—and the Nixon resignation. All of it. It was a very unrestful time of our country's history, and the racial thing had just happened. My dad was killed in '67. Later that summer, they had the riots in Minneapolis that were race riots. It was a lot of political and social unrest. I saw it again with George Floyd, and I was just like, wow. This has just come 360.

**CS:** How safe or unsafe did you feel in light of these issues?

**JL:** Pretty safe. I don't think I ever—I was too young for Vietnam, although I did have to register later. Once I think you turn 18, you have to register for the draft. It never happened as far as being called up. In high school, I had a guy from the recruiting agency try callin' me about tryin' to get me into the army or something, and just badgered me to no end. It was one of these, I don't think I wanna do this, so I just stopped answering his calls. I don't know that we ever felt

unsafe. I don't think—the Cold War had pretty much blown over and whatever. The energy crisis and some of the lines was a little bit disturbing, but the rest of it was not too bad.

**CS:** Before we wrap up, is there any other topics either from this section or other sections that, maybe, you forgot to cover? Don't feel pressured if you can't really remember anything, but just if you wanna hit anything before we wrap up.

**JL:** I don't know if Julie told you, but I have written some books. The Portland House is about a house on Portland Avenue. Cretin Boy is about my high school experience. I have a couple of other memoirs that are about the Boundary Waters canoe area where I would canoe with my brothers and bonded with them. I don't think there's anything else other than, a lot of my family, right after my mom divorced, she sold the house. There was this flight to the suburbs. None of them ever really moved back.

My daughter now lives in Minneapolis, but the rest of the family is all in the fringes of New Brighton, and Oakdale, and that kind of thing. I think part of that was there was issues with crime, and that kind of thing, and they just didn't wanna deal with it. It's unfortunate because I love Saint Paul, and I visited for a book signing recently. Really, it was literally on the corner of Grand and Snelling. It's just like going home for me, but it was all different too at the same time and a lot more traffic. The trees were much more mature and that kind of thing, but it was pretty cool to be able to go back to that.

**CS:** Okay. This is the end of our interview. Your responses are invaluable, and we really appreciate that you took the time to do this today. Thank you so much for participating.