Voices of SJC: Oral History

Spring 2017

St. Joseph’s College

Transcribed by McEntegart Hall Library/Archives
Preface

On April 10, 11, & 12, 2017, in conjunction with the College’s Centennial celebration and supported by McEntegart Hall Library/Archives, 11 honors students participated in gathering four oral histories from S. Margaret Buckley (’55), S. Mary Florence Burns (’46), S. Pat Dittmer (’72), and S. Elizabeth Hill (’64). Led by librarians Mayumi Miyaoka and Lauren Kehoe, the students engaged with the College’s Archives to develop a strong understanding of the history of the College and the Sisters of St. Joseph’s. The students also developed strong research skills using primary sources in the archive. Students discussed the theoretical implications of capturing histories orally, in addition to gaining interviewing skills. The group worked collaboratively throughout the honors concentration to understand the history of the College and Sisters and then cooperatively developed a set of questions to ask each interviewee.
Informed Consent/Release Form

This oral history project is being conducted as a part of St. Joseph's College Brooklyn Campus Academic Honors Concentration Spring, 2017. Its purpose is:

- To introduce students to the concept of oral history, the construction of social history, and the process of creating oral histories
- To collect and preserve testimonies pertaining to the history of St. Joseph’s College through the experiences of the Sisters of St. Joseph and the SJC faculty and staff members, and develop a St. Joseph’s College Oral History Collection
- To showcase the SJC Oral History Collection on an online platform as a part of the centennial celebration.

Recordings and transcripts resulting from interviews conducted for the project will be deposited in the oral history collection of the McEntegart Hall Archives, where they will be made available for historical research and public dissemination. Participation in the project is entirely voluntary.

I, the undersigned, have read the purposes of the project and the use of the recordings, and I have agreed to be interviewed/to interview.

I have read the above and voluntarily donate to the project full use of the information contained in the recordings (including video and audio recordings) made on __________ (date) at the Convent at 232 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn NY (location), transcripts of the recordings, and other materials collected during the interview.

I hereby assign legal title and all literary property rights, including copyright, in these recordings and transcripts to the project, which may copyright and publish said materials. The information may be used for scholarly or educational purposes as determined by the project.

Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature

Date __________/10/17

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)

S. Patricia Dittmer
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[Signature]
Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature

Date 4/10/17

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)
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Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature

Pamela Castillo

Date

4/10/2017

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)

Pamela Castillo
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Signature

Date April 10, 2017

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)

Dara Desrosiers
Informed Consent/Release Form

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Interviewee/Interviewer's signature

Denise Trerotola

Date

4/10/17

Interviewee/Interviewer's name (please print clearly)

Denise Trerotola
Transcript

Juanita Arias: This recording was made as part of the oral history project by the St. Joseph’s College Honors Program students in the Spring 2017 semester. It was recorded on April 10, 2017 at 12:00 pm in the Sisters of Joseph’s Convent located at 232 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn New York. The interviewers’ names are Pamela Castillo, Denise Trerotola, and Dara Desrosiers and Juanita Arias. The interviewee is Sister Patricia Dittmer. Thank you very much Sister Patricia for having us here today.

Sister Pat: And welcome.

Interviewers: Thank you.

Pamela Castillo: For a SJC alumna, sister and instructor for the Early Education at Dillon Center, would you describe the most important moment for you personally during your time at SJC?

Sister Pat: The most important memory?

Pamela Castillo: Yes, the most important moment.

Sister Pat: I came to St. Joseph’s for two years. I was two years at a sister’s division in Brentwood, Long Island and then we came to St. Joseph’s for our last two years. I was just amazed because when we were at Brentwood college it was just the sisters and then we came
into “the big world” [makes air quotes] and we saw all the students, and how enthusiastic you were and how you loved St. Joseph’s College and you just felt they wanted to be here.

As well as all of the wonderful teachers that were here, so I would say that was the biggest impact to see all of the students and how happy and dedicated you are, just made you want to be here.

**Denise Trerotola:** Since you have started here what would you say was the most important change or changes that have or has been made to the college during your time at SJC and why?

**Sister Pat:** There have been so many changes over the years.

**Denise Trerotola:** Absolutely.

**Sister Pat:** First of all in terms of the Dillon Center, many different directors and staff members.

Of course that adds to the beauty of the department and the beauty of the school; having the college students come into the Dillon Center and actually work with the children and then working with them in the Child Study 208 because I’m also in the Child Study department has just really been wonderful. So I would say that the biggest changes that impact the school, both the Dillon Center and the College, has been change in the administration and change in staff.

**Pamela Castillo:** As you have already said, you’ve been in the College for a couple of years already
Sister Pat: I’m sorry.

Pamela Castillo: As you have already said, you’ve been in the college for a couple of years already, if you had to pick your favorite memory from SJC what would it be and why?

Sister Pat: As a teacher?

Pamela Castillo: Well, yes.

Sister Pat: My favorite memory in terms of teaching at the College would be teaching various “methods” courses, which of course we don’t have any more with the changes in the State Ed. Department. And so, being able to teach creative arts in the elementary school, social studies methods, the religious development of the child. I miss those things and those were my favorite memories because you got in touch with many different types of students and tapped into everybody’s creativity. Now I teach early childhood education, which is wonderful and I love it, but, I miss all of the other things as well.

Juanita Arias: Can you describe to us one of those classes?

Sister Pat: Pardon?

Juanita Arias: Can you describe to us one of those classes that you used to enjoy so much? How would you develop the classroom?
Sister Pat: Alright. For creative arts in the elementary school, I used to have the students collect things in a box throughout the entire semester. Spools of thread, ribbons, anything they could find. They didn't know what we were going to do with them. And then for the last class I would bring them here in the convent, we would go downstairs to the sewing room, and I would have purchased wreaths, undecorated wreaths. And they had to take out their boxes and they had to decorate their wreaths. And it was so wonderful because all of these students who said: “I’m not creative, I can’t draw a straight line, I can’t do anything” came up with the most beautiful wreaths. Not only that, they helped one another. They created a real sense of community, it was wonderful.

Juanita Arias: Wow, I can imagine! Can I have one of those classes?

Sister Pat: Absolutely, you might change your major to Child Study.

Juanita Arias: Oh, absolutely! I mean my fellow friends who are doing Child Study major they have so much experience outside of the classroom that immediately as soon as they step outside of the class, they are already so prepared that I just cannot [Unintelligible].

Sister Pat: That’s so nice to hear. Thank you, thank you.

Juanita Arias: And in fact we were provided with the magazine that was published in 2005. It said that the students from St. Joseph College’s who graduated the child study department are known as some of the best students in New York to teach.

Sister Pat: Thank you, we’re proud of that too.
Juanita Arias: This actually jumps quite easily to the next question and it is; according to your biography you have a passion for art, creativity, music, and movement and learning. So, how do you merge your interests in music and art to teach your students currently?

Sister Pat: Dillon Center students? Ok, I have to distinguish between the children and the college student.

Juanita Arias: Let’s do Dillon Center and then college students.

Sister Pat: Well, for the Dillon Center what I like to do is, because I teach the older children. I always say that I teach the “seniors” of the Dillon Center. They’re four and five years old. Parents are certainly concerned about the academics because there is so much rigor and so much pushing back of the curriculum so that in a lot of schools kindergarten is like first grade. You’ve heard of this before I’m sure. So what I like to do is use music and art and integrate oral areas of the curriculum. For instance, when we’re doing music, we might be doing songs about counting or subtracting, movement in terms of shapes, art certainly in terms of shapes. Literacy: “would you like to tell us about your story.” And when they’re ready they’re able to write about their story, so it’s just wonderful to be able to do that.

For the college students to come over to the Dillon Center, actually work with the children, to see what our philosophy is, which is a play-based curriculum. And we teach to the whole child, we don’t just teach to intellectual development but to the entire child. And to see how we weave that into actually teaching happy children. Children who want to be here, parents who are happy to have their children here, so it’s a wonderful blend to have the babes and to have the big girls and boys.
Dara Desrosiers: I really wish I had that growing up.

Sister Pat: [Laughs] So do I.

Juanita Arias: [Laughs] And I’m pretty sure these songs will remain with them as they grow older. Do you have any specific memory of a student who came to you and said, “Hey, I remember that song.”

Sister Pat: Well, it’s very interesting because I had a student here a few of years ago. And we had a child whose father was a famous artist, his work was shown in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And he invited the class, the children, to go to the studio, which was only a few blocks away in this glorious house on top of the hill. And this college student came with us and he showed us what his studio looked like, how he designed his things, and it was a fabulous experience for the children, for me, and for the college students.

A couple of years later, she came back to me and she said, “Sister Pat, I’m majoring in art for my Masters.” And she said I had to choose an artist and one of the artists was this parent. And she said, “When I told my class I had been to his house, I’ve seen how he works.” She said they were so amazed. So that’s just one of many stories that right off the bat comes to me.

Juanita Arias: Wow, that’s wonderful. Another question I have in regards to the Dillon Center. St. Joseph’s College is known for teaching education offering child study majors since the early 1940s. What are some of the major changes that you have observed about the Dillon Center and childhood education in general during your experience at St. Joseph’s College?
Sister Pat: Because of the pressures of society and the economy... The Dillon Center used to be just half day programs for all children so we would have a morning session and an afternoon session for just the three year olds, four year olds, and the five year olds. When we started getting enrollment for children who had challenges it then was at that time you would have a room just for children with special needs, a “special education room.” That’s no longer the case, now it’s “inclusion,” right. So that was one of the things. We had one room for that, now we have an inclusion program where one class half the children are typically developing and the other half are children with special needs and have two head teachers in that room and two assistant teachers.

However, throughout the building, children with challenges are integrated into our program. So that’s one thing. The other thing was, as I said, parents had to work, we decided that we had to have to have it full day. As a matter of fact I was the first one to start the full day kindergarten in Dillon. Also computer education. When that started, someone donated a computer and it was in the kindergarten and I went with the Board of Ed. to learn how to do a computer, turn it on, I’m not sure I’m not that much better than that right now, to turn it one etcetera. And so we started the computer program in Dillon so that’s just some of the major changes that have taken place.

Juanita Arias: If you need any help, we are here for you.

Sister Pat: Thank you, good to know. That’s on camera, I hope. [Laughs]
Denise Trerotola: When you first started here was child study the most popular major?

Sister Pat: Yes, it was. Child study was the most popular, but I always loved children and so I knew that that’s what I wanted to do. However, I had no idea that there was a Dillon Center. I didn’t know that and it was Sister John Raymond who was the chair of Secondary Ed. for a long time. She then became the general superior of our congregation and she told me, when I graduated, she said to me, “I think that you would really like the Dillon Center” and I said “what’s the Dillon Center?”

And then she told me and I came, but in those days you had to be invited to teach in the Dillon Center, you didn’t apply. So in those days, usually, a lot of the teachers came right from the graduating class. Sister Margaret Louis was the director at the time and she would come and observe you and this kind of stuff and that’s how I started. And when I first started I taught the three year olds and I loved them and then I moved to the fours and the four’s class. It was great.

Denise Trerotola: So you’ve talked a little about how the college has changed since you started here, what kind of changes and improvements do you think SJC needs to meet the growing student population and to meet the student's needs going forward?

Sister Pat: I think certainly more creativity in terms of what’s being offered. How those courses are offered. I know the big thing now is online, but I can’t help but say to you that we need the personal touch of the teacher, for myself. I need to see the students. I always say to my students,
sit so I can see you, I need to see your face. Because, you know, it’s that personal thing. How
that’s going to happen, I know that there’s module teaching and all this kind of thing, I really
don’t know. I think we have to gain a sense of trust, a sense of community again because with
every change of course there are challenges.

And then of course you say “Oh, next time maybe we won’t do this, we’ll do something else.” so
I think we evaluate all of that and then we go back to our strengths which I think is a “small
college” [make air quotes] where teachers are interested in their students and willing to help
them anyway we can, but also being honest with you, there are some college students who say to
me they wanted to teach young children, but then after having the course or dialogue, they’d be
much better with older children.

And that’s fine. I always say to them it’s better that you learn when you’re younger. Imagine if
you decided, “Oh, I’m gonna teach young children and I’m gonna teach preschool. You’ve
graduated, you take a job doing preschool and you don’t like it and everyday you have to go to
that job and children are perceptive, they pick up on those things. So it’s good that we have that
hands-on and we’re able to help you as best we can.

**Juanita Arias:** So it helps the students and it helps as well the small, smaller students that they
have close connection.

**Sister Pat:** That’s right.
Juanita Arias: We totally also can see that from the other departments as well in St. Joseph’s.

Sister Pat: Sure, of course.

Juanita Arias: Transforming students.

Sister Pat: That’s right, that’s right. [Laughs]

Dara Desrosiers: I would like to consider past events like World War II. World War II definitely had an impact on the entire world. How do you think it affected the women of St. Joseph’s College and how were they involved the women of St. Joseph’s College?

Sister Pat: You should know that I was a little girl then. [Entire room explodes into laughter.] That’s okay. I can just tell you that I think women are stronger today and that there are many more talents that women have. Because they wanted to help the efforts, you’ve read history of the war and they did things behind the scenes. Now, look what women can do, they can be in the armed services, we can do whatever we need to do.

Dara Desrosiers: And also based on past research in the archive, I’ve learned that they even adopted children from France. The women of St. Joseph College, the orphanage.

Sister Pat: I don’t know anything about that. That’s okay.
Dara Desrosiers: According to Alumnagram, there was a strong alumnae presence in the 1930s with the group Alumna Week program and do you think the alumnae relationship has remained strong today?

Sister Pat: I think they’re are continuously struggling to get. Particularly, you have the older alums [air quotes] who are very connected with the College. Which is wonderful why you want to learn about the history for the College so you can feel that connection and I think that’s what we have to do in terms of a change. We have to tell our students the rich history of the College so when they leave they can say, “look what we had, look what we came from. We want to come back and support the College and future education for men and women to come to the College.”

Juanita Arias: That’s very important, Sister Pat, that close connection and I think it’s one of the things that St. Joseph’s needs to really explore.

Sister Pat: Exactly!

Juanita Arias: Because we appreciate so much the help and all opportunities that St. Joseph has to offer, for instance, like this, being able to come to talk to one of the Sisters of St. Joseph, being in this beautiful building. And so all of these experiences, we appreciate it so much that all of us who appreciate St. Josephs should be able to come and build those connections with the students who are coming to St. Joseph's back.
Sister Pat: Exactly, we do that in Dillon. Do you know how many families come back to us and say “oh, Sister Pat! I had you blah blah blah blah blah.” And once you tell me, they’re big now, I’m like “Oh, yes! I can remember.” Or children that I’ve had in the Dillon Center, that then went to the college, that then had their own children, and came back to Dillon again. It’s so wonderful and so rich.

Juanita Arias: So you have them as little babies, college students.

Sister Pat: and then I have them as parents.

Juanita Arias: Oh, what a beautiful story!

Pamela Castillo: So now we will be moving to the College mission and values. So based upon our research, reflection of old photos of nuns in the College, how do you feel about the diminishing number of nuns in the College?

Sister Pat: I’m sad, I’m very sad. I’m sad about the diminishing number, not only for our College, but for so many of the Catholic schools that had to close. But, that’s how society is so what’s God’s plan for us. So there are not going to be that many religious communities or religious communities that are going to be different. Not the way that they are now.
Certainly the way they were when I entered, which was fifty years ago, is very different to the way it is today. I wouldn’t be sitting here dressed like this. I’d have a habit on. I’m not sure I would be as free to speak with you as I am now. So all of those changes are good, but with every change there is a positive and a negative. So I do feel sad about that, but I feel hopeful that we are emerging and we’ll emerge better and stronger, but just different.

Juanita Arias: And this goes back to the Sisters of St. Joseph in Brentwood, the mission of love of God to the neighbor without.

Sister Pat: Love of God and love of neighbor, right. I trust and I believe that St. Joseph will help us. Will help the College and will help our congregations.

Denise Trerotola: So do you think that with the changing of nuns and the changing of the world that we’ve been able to maintain the Catholic values and the College mission?

Sister Pat: I think we’re trying. I think it’s a constant struggle. I think certainly if you’re Catholic, the way you were raised now and the way I was raised is very, very different. And I’m not sure, that in terms of religious education for children today, that they have enough of the foundation that they had when I was younger and I think that’s missing. And I think it’s good to talk about love of God, and love Jesus, and love your neighbor, but we have to give some of the doctrine of the church in order for us to grow and develop. So I think that we need to do more in terms of
sharing those values as we try as best we can, yet giving everyone their freedom. That’s a struggle that we’re continually working with.

Denise Trerotola: Are there any type of religious classes in the Dillon Center?

Sister Pat: No, and that’s because we welcome everyone. We are Catholic based but we talk about all kinds of religion, we leave no one out. No gender, or anything, or religion. We have parents coming in and they talk to us about Passover, about Hanukkah. We had Muslim parents come in and they did Ramadan with us. And it’s so wonderful because it’s wonderful for my education and so wonderful for the children because it teaches diversity. It teaches respect, it teaches love, it teaches all the things that our mission is all about: love of God and love of neighbor.

Denise Trerotola: I think it’s so good that you incorporate that into the Dillon Center.

Sister Pat: Yes, we’re very fortunate.

Juanita Arias: That goes hand-in-hand with the ACES program as well. That also tries to merge the diversity of the College.

Sister Pat: It’s beautiful.
Juanita Arias: Right, the new clubs on campus as well: Asian Awareness Club. That also tries to bridge the different cultures that are present at the College. Were you here at the Holi event that the students were throwing colors at each other?

Sister Pat: Yes, yes, it was fun!

Juanita Arias: All right! There was a student and she was scared of getting.....

Such a beautiful experience to see the different diversities walking in our tradition.

Sister Pat: That’s right. If I could just go back to the babes, I call them the babes, the children for a minute. It’s one of the things I just did with them, we have a treehouse now in our classroom that the parents built with their grandpa and somebody brought in fresh eggs from a farm. Some were brown, some were tan, and some were white. So we looked at the colors on the outside and I said, “Do you think that the brown eggs will be brown on the inside? And will the tan eggs be tan? And will the white eggs be white?” “Yes, yes, yes.” I said let’s find out.”

So we opened one at a time, and we looked, and they said. Of course they see the brown so they think it looks different. Now you know that brown eggs do not look different on the inside. I said okay. So we took them all and we scrambled them all together and I said now tell me which is the brown one, which is the tan one, which is the white one? And they couldn’t tell. And I said it’s just like us. We’re all different on the outside, but the same on the inside.
Then we painted our skin with skin tone paint because some child said she was white and I said okay, let’s see if you’re white. We took a piece of paper and we put it next to her skin and I said, “Are you white?” She said, “no.” I said, “let’s find out what color you are” and she turned out to be a peach. So who was a peach, and who was chocolate, and who was toast, and who was almond? Again, to bring in that diversity and that respect for all people. It’s what’s inside that counts. Part of the mission: “it’s what’s inside that counts.”

**Juanita Arias:** Wow, we should have those tests performed now with adults, I think.

**Sister Pat:** [Laughs] Yes, it’s great. Start them out small, it grows.

**Juanita Arias:** So now with the new current presidency that we’re going to have, what is one of the messages that you think the new president should convey to the entire community about the College, about our tradition?

**Sister Pat:** That he is happy to be here! That he respects what has been and he’ll try and bring us along slowly, once he establishes that trust with everyone, into the future. And that he’s interested in every department, in every building. That he’s interested in what you do whether you’re a student or you’re part of the maintenance staff, or you’re a teacher, or you’re the librarian, or whatever it might happen to be. Again that’s, that respect, right? That’s that respect. All jobs are important and we need you. Just as we need him, he needs us.
And that he will listen to us, right? Now of course you know how it is, sometimes when you have an idea and you think it’s the best idea. Then you realize, wait a minute, there’s a better idea out there. So we have to be open to him as he is open to us. But establishing that sense of trust and community with us and with the world.

Juanita Arias: So what do you wish for the future of St Joseph’s College?

Sister Pat: What do I wish? That is continues to grow, that everybody will see us as this little place is a dynamo as our regent Kathy Cashin said. She goes to all these meetings, these state meetings, and she said she hears about St Joseph’s College and the courageous women and men that are at St Joseph’s College and put forth those efforts, put forth the values of the College.

I always say, when I die if you slit my skin, what’s going to pour out is not blood, it’s going to pour out St. Joseph’s College. SJC On this arm, and on this arm CSJ, the sisters of St. Joseph. That’s what’s going to come out, that’s what’s we need.

Juanita Arias: That’s a beautiful ending to our question. Thank you, Sister Pat. [Students clap]

Sister Pat: Thank you, thank you. I just hope I answered your questions.

[Talking at once]
Interviewer 1: You did amazing.

Denise Trerotola: [Unintelligible]

Interviewer 2: Thank you so much!