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/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 April 12, 2017 (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.

S. Mary Florence Burns
Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature

Date April 25, 2017

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)

S. MARY FLORENCE BURNS
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Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature: Amarei Collado

Date: 04/12/17

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

Date, July 12, 2017

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)
Susan Reyes: This recording was made as part of the oral history project by the St. Joseph’s College Honors Program in Spring 2017 semester. It was recorded on April 12, 2017 at 2:00 pm in the Sisters of Joseph’s Convent located at 232 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn New York. The interviewers’ names are Amarfi Collado and Susan Reyes and the interviewee is Sister Mary Florence Burns.

S. Mary Florence: And I’m very happy to be here with you.

Amarfi Collado: Thank you. Let’s start with the first question. The first question is what would you say was the most important change that have [has] been made to the College during your time at St. Joseph’s College.

S. Mary Florence: Well, let me begin by saying I was not here in 1916, even though you may think I was. I wasn’t but I have been here through so many significant changes that I find it hard to single out any one. Briefly, let me just say that higher education in the United States remained… if you want to say stable or it remained static that depends on your point of view… from early on with the first colleges in the country really through World War II. In other words, programs remained the same, colleges were built to be pretty much the same, and so major changes did not really occur, really major changes did not occur until the 1960s.

And the biggest single change, I think in higher ed, occurred then. With the...with the student revolution at Berkeley, in roughly 1964, 65 and it took until almost 1970 for that student
revolution to come through to the East Coast. The East Coast was more conservative than the West Coast. It started out in California, it travelled over.

So that for many of the years that I was here, there was no significant change. And then with that student revolution, declarations that things needed to change, that students needed to be considered more, that curriculum should be different, there should be fewer regulations. And of course that also brought with it, with fewer regulations, that transfer from one college to another became possible. You’re all familiar with that now, but believe me there was virtually no transfer from one college to another until late in the 60s and that was a very, very significant change.

So, for St. Joseph’s College then I would say that a number, a number of the changes were provoked partly by that student revolution, by the change in attitude, change in the New York State Education Department, a much greater openness to differences, differences among colleges, difference in curriculum. And then there was a minor economic crisis in the New York area in the early 70s and so St. Joseph’s College was forced to make some changes and it was in those early 70s that the college made the decision to establish a campus in … First in Brentwood Long Island at the motherhood of the Sisters of Saint Joseph and then from there they move out to Patchogue. You’re all familiar with the Long Island campus now, but that Patchogue campus didn’t come until 1978 or 79. With that, dramatic growth came to the College. Not here in Brooklyn, Brooklyn remained stable, began to grow again. But in Patchogue we went from the first move out there with something like 150 students going from Brentwood to Patchogue and in the interval of that summer the number increased by another 150, and it continued to grow until 2010. So a major, major change and a major change not just physically, but in the students, the
Brooklyn students to this day are urban students. You’re knowledgeable about what happens in the world. You’re accustomed to getting on a subway and going to the city. And I shouldn’t say this but the students in Patchogue, I think to this day, have to be brought in by bus. Their parents had moved out to the island in the aftermath of World War II. And they fled the city, they wanted the countryside and they kept moving out from Queens on out into Nassau, out into Suffolk, and they kept...clearly had to keep their children out in that area. So you have a population in Suffolk that has never lived in the city, is not at all accustomed to what you take for granted, and is certainly not accustomed to the diversity in population that we take very much for granted in here. So many, many changes on every level and you can explore all of them, but I don't think that’s what you want to do right now.

Amarfi Collado: So many changes so interesting, right? I didn’t even know of half of these changes that occurred. Very interesting. Now that you’ve told me about that, if you had to pick off your favorite memory of St. Joseph’s College, what would it be and why?

S. Mary Florence: I’ve thought about that question. That gave me more difficulty than any other, I think. I don’t think there is any one. I think that the memories that I have of some very difficult times ….and I think it’s important always to know that difficulties come and they have to be faced and you can’t ignore them, they help to shape you as students, shape faculty, shape institutions, but you have to get past the difficulties. And so I would say when I look back, I have very happy memories of teaching because I was doing full time teaching in the English department for 19 years, from 1950 until 1969.
So some of my happiest memories are of some of those students, and I’ve stayed in touch with some of them. Just working with them, watching them grow, watching them come to understand literature, and with that to understand what I consider to be so important: critical thinking. The ability to analyze, the ability to understand why something is said this way. We’re living now in a world of tweets and tweets don’t tell you very much.

So part of that very happy memories of teaching. I loved it. And then in 1969 I was appointed Dean. We were just here in Brooklyn, there were 569 students. Catholic colleges throughout the country were closing, beginning to close. It was a difficult time for everybody, it wasn't a great economic time. And so Sister George Aquin became President, I became the Dean, and what are we going to do? And I would say when I look back I have, among my very happy memories, a sense of very real purpose, a sense that we were doing something and doing our very best to make it happen because we believed in higher education. We believed in that as the way to the future for the students we were working with, the way to happiness and success. So the struggles and the achievements, each one of them in its own way, was a happiness.

Certainly happy to get past each struggle and to get onto the next achievement. With that I think one of the things that still makes me happy is the sense of a team, the sense of people working together, pooling their resources, to achieve what needed to be achieved. And I think in the world we’re living in, there is now so much competition that it’s important to emphasize that we all do better when we work together.
I think that has gotten lost to some extent over the last few years. I’m hoping that here at the College where students can… If you want a new club, you apply to have a new club and you show that there’s a reason for it and you’ve got a base for it. I think that all of that is a form of working together as a team. And each of those team successes, I think brings, brings a sense of happiness. Every Middle States visit, and we have one coming this next February or March [2018], when the team went out the door there was always a great sense of achievement and happiness and success. “It’s over and they’re gone and we have done well!”

And certainly among the things that I treasure are the faculty. I shouldn’t say the things I treasure, among the memories I treasure are of many of the faculty because they are truly very dedicated. Dedicated to the students, dedicated to wanting the students to develop fully as persons, and that has been a major objective of this institution.

Susan Reyes: We’ve talked about change and how the college has been changing since the beginning and something that has changed a lot is the faculty. How do you feel about the diminishing number of nuns that exist in St. Joseph’s now?

S. Mary Florence: Well, I’m sorry, but here we are and this is the way it is going to be. That’s all I can say, I’m sorry. I think we played, the Sisters of St. Joseph certainly played a significant part in the history of this institution. Those first sisters and the congregation with the financial support it gave, the congregation was responding to a need.

You look back and we know from history, New York State tended to be anti-Catholic. I don’t think it really is now, we are much too diverse. But, it was anti-Catholic in its origins and in its
attitudes. And while the graduates of the academy of St. Joseph in Brentwood were welcome, were academically qualified to go to Barnard College, here in the city up near Columbia, they were not welcomed socially.

And so the sisters decided that they needed to establish a college that would welcome the graduates of their academies. And so, St. Joseph’s College was put in place, was developed with full support from the congregation, both financially and in terms of personnel.

So I am sorry that there will be no more of this, and it’s going to come back to you to carry forward, the mission, to take with you from the college some sense of what it means to be in this kind of an atmosphere and to convey that to all the people you meet for the rest of your lives. And to, I hope, to cherish some sense of what is what like when you were here, when you saw the last of the sisters, practically speaking.

Susan Reyes: Moving to the economic side, you mentioned that there were some economic problems. We have a question about the tuition. Why do you think it has been increasing since the 1990s to now?

S. Mary Florence: Well, it has increased because it has had to increase. I mean it's as simple as that. There’s no way to pay for faculty’s salaries, there is no way to maintain the buildings without increasing the tuition. It has happened in every institution. I think St. Joseph’s is still among the lowest and depending on how you add numbers we might be the lowest right in this area. That’s partly because, even today, there is some contribution from the sisters. For many
years, you see, the contributed “services” as we called it, of the sisters. The sisters took no salary. We received a small amount of money, a stipend to live on, but we never received a salary. So while you could operate on that basis you could do many things that you can’t do when you have to pay everybody a salary. It’s just a hard fact of life.

Amarfi Collado: That’s true. I think that one of the biggest changes besides all of the amazing changes that you mentioned is that the College went from only being for women, it changed from being to men, co-ed. So what kind of changes, improvements do you think that St. Joseph’s College needs for example new buildings, programs, activities etc. to meet the growing students’ population and to meet the students’ need?

S. Mary Florence: I don’t think I can answer that. That has to come from the current administration. We have a new president coming in, he’s coming from another state, coming into New York and into Brooklyn. I think he will bring another point of view to bear but he’s going to have to deal with the realities of the population in this area, and it’s a very diverse population, and with the economics of this area as well as the economics out on the island.

So I can’t say that, I would say that what is most important, money aside, what is most important is that the College continue to focus on students. On what is best for the students, what the students need, and that relates clearly to the academic. What are the programs that students need? Where is the future? We’ve always been academically strong, but oriented to helping to prepare our students for their life work. That’s always been part of it, there has always been some element of career preparation because that’s just being real about what people have to do in this
world. So I think that the most important thing is that the new administration continue the concentration on the students, and their needs, and what those needs call for.

Amarfi Collado: OK. What do you think from going for only being for women to changing to be to [for] men [as well], what do you think was the biggest benefit of that?

S. Mary Florence: Well, I think you’ve heard me talking about necessity and external circumstances throughout this because that’s what I experienced. And we went co-ed because we virtually had no choice. I think we would … Back in the late ‘60s Sister Vincent Thérèse as President had set up some efforts [of] coordination with St. Francis College. St. Francis was all male, we were all female. It seemed natural to try to bring them together. When Sister George Aquin became President in 1969, she immediately reopened discussions with the Franciscan President of St. Francis College. And it became clear by the middle of the year that St. Francis was seriously considering going co-ed and by Easter time, I guess in the Spring of 1970, they told us they were very sorry, but they were going to go co-ed. When they made that decision we then had to make our own decision. Are we going to continue as an all girls college or do we in turn have to become co-ed? And as we looked at the scene and we looked at the location, we felt we had no choice. It was a very slow start but the first male students came. We had had a few come to take courses here and a few girls had gone down to St. Francis, but that arrangement ended when both schools went co-ed. But it was one of those forced choices.

Amarfi Collado: If it were your choice to...let’s say that the school says it was your choice decide between becoming co-ed or not, would you choose to become co-ed?
S. Mary Florence: Excuse me what did…?

Amarfi Collado: If it was your choice to say, “I want the College to become co-ed.” Would you say yes?

S. Mary Florence: Well I said “yes” back then. I mean we met as a team, we sat up, we considered the options, and we said, “We don’t have a choice.” Because it’s going to be very tempting for the girls to go to St. Francis and unless we go co-ed and have boys begin to come here, we’re going to face a problem. So it was a forced choice as in many ways you see, not just a year or two later we made the decision to try putting something in place out on the island.

The beginnings of the Patchogue campus and it started in Brentwood because the population here in Brooklyn was changing. The financial situation wasn’t strong. The City University had decided to drop any kind of qualifications so that anybody could now get into Brooklyn College for instance. And there was no tuition at all. So that circumstances were… and other small Catholic colleges were closing and I can hear Sister George saying, “There has to be a St. Joseph’s College. So we will see what we can do, in Brentwood, on the grounds of the Mother House of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Brentwood.” So event that move was, if you want to say, forced.
It came, it was forced by circumstances. And throughout life, I think that’s much of what happens. You have to deal with reality and then you try to bring the values that you hold dear, you try to bring them to influence the way in which you make changes.

Amarfi Collado: Okay, now you mentioned WWII and while we were researching to do our project, we found out that this war had a big impact on women. So do you think that WWII definitely had an impact on the entire world but do you think it specifically had a bigger impact on women than for men when it comes to education?

S. Mary Florence: I think it probably did. I think until...I hadn’t thought about the question that way... I think until, up until WWII higher education was not dominant for women at all. Most women did not go to college. Following the War and the fact that so many women had gone to work, because the men had gone into the Army. So the women for the first time were out of the home working and began to think that to some extent they liked it. Not totally, and it impacted on families, but I would say that there was...that women had a different sense of their own role in life. That work, work outside of the home, was acceptable. And with that, for some at least, came an interest then in advancing in education. And so to some extent I think WWII, indirectly, had that effect on education and higher education in particular.

Susan Reyes: Well, we said how this room is gorgeous and the building itself. Many of the buildings here in St. Joseph are named after prominent figures of the College. One of them is Burns Hall. Could you tell us about how and when it was decided that the building was named after you?
S. Mary Florence: It was named after me when I retired as the Academic Vice President, the Chief Academic Officer of the College. I retired in 2003. And at that time Sister Elizabeth Hill arranged for a wonderful party. If you want happy memories that was a very happy memory. And we held it, it was a big affair, held out on the Island at Miller Ridge Inn in the special house that they have out there, a special hall that they have. And in the course of that evening, with all of the faculty and administrators present Sister Elizabeth Hill unveiled a picture of what I still call the 245 building. I never call it Burns Hall. The 245 building, the original real College building, and they had done a mock up with the name “Burns Hall” on it. That was the occasion. I had come to the College...well I graduated from the College in 1946. I went straight onto St. John’s for my Masters and then entered the convent in 1947 [and] was sent back here to teach English in 1950. So I taught from 1950 until 1969 [and] became the Dean in ‘69.

When we had the Brentwood Campus in place, Sister George decided that we needed a Vice President for Alumni and Public Relations and therefore we should have an Academic Vice President. So I was named Vice President for Academic Affairs in, I’m not even sure, I think 78. It could’ve been 77, 77, 78. Sister Margaret Buckley became the Assistant Dean. And so from roughly 78 until 2003 I was the Chief Academic Officer. As the College expanded, as we moved out to Brentwood, and then to Patchogue, so I was the major academic figure and when I retired they named the building for me.

Susan Reyes: So all the other names have been the same way?
S. Mary Florence: To some extent. They’ve all been named for one person or another. The townhouse next to the main building across the street, Lorenzo Hall, was named for Sister Lorenzo, who had been Registrar and I think Librarian as well back in the ‘20s. And physically saw to the move of the library from the main building into that building which is now named for her, Lorenzo Hall. So you can take each one of the buildings and look at it that way.

The main building was named for Sister Vincent Thérèse Tuohy and it wasn’t named for her until after she died. She had resigned as...well she had done the first major expansion of the College she had appealed to the alumnae. The alumnae had never been asked to contribute money to the College from 1916 until Sister Vincent became President in ‘56.

Somewhere in the early ‘60s, she said, “We just have to have money, we need more buildings.” And so she appealed and they came through. And so the first building was the present library, McEntegart Hall, named for the Archbishop who lived across the street, Archbishop McEntegart, who was very generous to the College. [He] made the largest contribution the College had ever made up until that point and so McEntegart was named for him.

And then, within the next two or three years, Sister Vincent succeeded in having the Dillon Center built. And the Dillon Center was named for Monsignor William T. Dillon, who had been at the College from 1920 until 1955. So it was named for him and he started the preschool. I think even before we really had the Child Study major, he was interested in the little ones and so they had their space over in the original 245 building and then this was built and named for him and appropriately named, he really was very good with the little children. So that was...
Susan Reyes: Yes, and Child Study is one of the best programs we have here. Talking about programs, there are some programs that are [important] to diversity. One of them is the ACES program, which we are a part of. We just wanted to know what inspired the founding of ACES and how did this affect promoting diversity on campus and the student admission process?

S. Mary Florence: Well I think, I think ACES, Sister Margaret Buckley is really the authority on ACES. She was the Academic Dean, but certainly I was, in a minor way, involved. She did all of the work. But we were beginning to have some students... the diversity had begun and we had some students from other countries coming to us as 18 year olds. Coming out... They had come to this country, they were going either through the New York elementary school system or some of them came in high school. I don’t know in what year you came…

Students: In high school.

S. Mary Florence: In high school. And so they came, they were bright, they were interested. A number of them from Asia... and a number of them from Latin America, but as they came the problem was with their ability to keep up with the reading. It wasn’t a matter of intelligence. That was clear. And so we had the students before we had the program and as we began to see that we had 10, 15 students who needed help and they needed it systematically from people who were prepared to give it. And our regular faculty were not prepared to help students of a second language and so we advertised and Sydelle Brookes, who had been teaching for some time down
in the community college, downtown here, and had worked with students who were speaking English as a second language.

And she came and started the program and set it up and Mik Larson came and joined her, and we’ve had others since then. And the program continued to grow but the students had come first and therefore the need to provide for them and to help them systematically to do well. And that’s what had us develop the ACES program.

Susan Reyes: We’re very grateful for that.

S. Mary Florence: Well, Sister Margaret has a very soft spot for the ACES program.

Amarfi Collado: Thanks for your time, you were so kind to have us here and gave an amazing point of view. Thanks a lot.

S. Mary Florence: And I thank you very much and I hope, I hope... let me give you the word of advice that Sister George Aquin gave in her last interview, about a year before she died. And when she was asked, “What would you wish for those who come after you?” And her comment was, “Have heart and hold on.” And that’s the final advice I would give to you, “Have heart and hold on” and move forward. And have very happy lives. Thank you.