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.

S. Margaret Buckley
Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature

Date 3/11/17

Interviewee/Interviewer's name (please print clearly)
S. Margaret Buckley

Brooklyn Campus 222 Clinton Avenue, McEntegart Hall, Brooklyn, NY 11203-3688 phone 718.940.3878 / 3880 fax 718.636.7290 www.sjctoday.edu
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Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature
Rebecca Bollmann

Date
April 11th 2017

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)
Rebecca Bollmann
Informed Consent/Release Form

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Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature

April 11th, 2017

Date

[Signature]

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)
Rebecca Bollmann: 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.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: It was recorded on April 11, 2017 at 3:30 pm in the Sisters of Joseph’s Convent located at 232 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn New York.

Rebecca Bollmann & Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: The interviewers’ names are Rebecca Bollmann and Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez. The interviewee is Sister Margaret Buckley.

Rebecca Bollmann: Okay, this is about your personal relations and memories from St. Joseph’s. How would you describe the most important moment for you during your time at St. Joseph’s?

Sister Margaret Buckley: I know you gave us that question in advance, but I found it really very hard to answer because you know I was a student here, and then I was a faculty member here, and then I was the Academic Dean so it’s hard to pick out one important moment. My years as a student were challenging, interesting. I had some very fine teachers and I made friends. I made friends here that are still my friends today 60 years later. Even though they are all over the country when we meet and start talking I always think it’s like we’re resuming a conversation that has been going on. Because I think that our experience as students had such a strong impact on us. That it has lasted...It created a bond and it has lasted. I sometimes wonder if the experience students have today is quite as strong because our lives in those days were somewhat
simpler. You have so much more going on in your lives, so much stimulation that I’m not sure college, college was our whole life when we were here, that was it.

When I was a faculty member here, after I graduated from college I was a high school English teacher, in a public high school in New York City before I went in the convent. Then when I came here to teach I was in the secondary education or adolescence education department, and that was also a very challenging and interesting job with many important moments. Many important moments. At that time Sister Mary Florence was the Dean and I became the Assistant Dean, the Associate Dean, and then eventually she became the Academic Vice President and I became the Dean. So in my life as a Dean, which I was for like 20 something years, there were many big important moments too working with faculty. When I was a faculty member, I liked working with students; when I was the Dean, I liked working with faculty, and librarians and all kinds of other people: staff, administrative. Those were very happy years.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: The other question that we have is also related to the past, so your past at St. Joseph’s. It is what would you say was the most important change or changes that have or have been made to St. Joseph’s College during your time here and why?

Sister Margaret Buckley: Well as you can imagine I’ve been through a lot of changes. Not long after I attended as a student St. Joseph’s College for Women, but shortly after I came here as a faculty member in 1969, the year after I came, we went co-ed. So that was a kind of controversial step at the time, but it has proved, I think, to be a good thing. Would you agree?
Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Of course.

Sister Margaret Buckley: I’ve had some great male students as well as female students. And then of course, developing the campus on Long Island was a very big change, which expanded our horizons, increased our population. We grew considerably.

So it’s in many ways a different school, but I think in many ways it’s retained certain basic qualities. I think being value oriented, student centered, and we hope that as we continue to grow I hope that will continue.

Rebecca Bollmann: I know it’s hard for you to pick one favorite moment, but out of every other thing, is there one thing that you remember as your favorite memory of St. Joseph’s?

Sister Margaret Buckley: My favorite memory… [Long pause as she averts her eyes to the side] I thought about that because you did ask the question. I thought about it, but it’s hard for me to pick out one thing. I don’t know what to say to you.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: That’s fine if there is not one specific…So then since when have been talking about changes that have been made to St. Joseph’s, we want to talk about the ACES program and what inspired the founding of the program and how did this affect promoting diversity on campus and the student admission process?

Sister Margaret Buckley: Are you in the ACES program?
Sister Margaret Buckley: So you know it from the inside. This is my recollection. A faculty member Kenneth Bauzon in Political Science, had done some research on the demographics of New York City and he came to a meeting and he showed us the immigrant populations which were coming in, especially to Brooklyn and Queens, well to all the boroughs. It seemed out of that discussion came the idea that this was a population that St. Joseph’s could really serve very well because of our small size, personal attention to students and welcoming atmosphere, welcoming climate.

So the next thing we did was we involved a group of our alumni who were principals and superintendents in the public school system and they had a lot of real current experience with immigrant students. They were very positive about doing this kind of a program. One of them as a matter of fact, Mary Butz [’69] is the one who created that name ACES. Which stands for academic center for...

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: I don’t even know myself and I’m...

Sister Margaret Buckley: Well, excellence…

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Students?
Sister Margaret Buckley: I can’t remember. Isn’t that terrible? Well it was very important to us that this did not appear as a remedial program because it was not directed toward marginal students. It was directed to good students who needed additional help in the English language in order to function at their full potential. Maybe it was Academic Center for Enrichment Services. I think that’s it, Academic Center for Enrichment Services. So it was enrichment not remediation.

Then the whole year went into planning it and we hired the first director, whose name was Sydelle Brookes, before your time. She was a very talented woman who had a lot of experience in another local college with ESL programs and she really created it from scratch. Developed courses and the whole structure of the program and then, I think by the end of the first year, she brought in someone she had worked with before, Mik Larson.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: OK.

Sister Margaret Buckley: You know Mik, right? They shared the same philosophy of how to work with the students. Now Mik has moved to a new job and now Kate Meehan is the Director, but she also has been in the program for a long time and I know that she shares the same philosophy and my office in secondary education used to be right opposite the ACES center so I became very friendly with them all. I used to be so impressed when I would walk in and see, especially on Friday, Friday is sort of a light day on campus, not in ACES because students didn’t have a lot of classes they would come for individual one-on-one work and I think if you’re trying to improve someone’s writing, one-on-one is really the best way to do it. And they also hired a number of tutors to work with them and Mik was very fussy about the tutor. He wanted
the right kind of people who would have respect for the students, be reliable, and work hard. I think he succeeded. I should also mention that the husband of an alumna, did I write her name? Marygrace Calhoun Dunn gave a big donation and that’s why the center is named. Her picture is hanging in there someplace and her name is over the door, Marygrace Calhoun Dunn. The center is named after her, but I think other donors have contributed. I know Steve Somers ['82], he’s a graduate himself, and he’s contributed two scholarships for ACES students.

Of course it’s kind of easy to sell the program to benefactors because it’s so clear that it’s a wonderful program and really serves a real need. I think the students over the years have genuinely appreciated it. Some of them have gone on to spectacular achievements, medical school, graduate school, all kinds of wonderful things. Now, they work very hard, my observation of them in there is that they work very hard. The tutors work hard, but the students work hard too, and they therefore grow greatly.

The course used to just be one year and I think they’ve extended it now to sophomore year. And then the tutoring is always available to you for four years. Anyway, I’m a big fan of the ACES program.

Rebecca Bollmann: Has it become a challenge to maintain the Catholic values of the College?

Sister Margaret Buckley: Well, I guess it’s a challenge. I think we have many very dedicated faculty members and administrators. The Sisters, there are fewer of us all the time and that made it a little more visible, I guess, the Catholic values. But I think that many people accept and
practice the same values of, we say inclusive love. And it is a challenge for not only St. Joseph’s, but all kinds of schools where the number of quote: [makes finger quotes] religiousness is declining to how to carry on what we call the charism, the values of the congregation. We try to talk about it a little bit, not really a lot, but I think they're somewhat embedded in the philosophy, mission of the College.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: So just related to that how do you think about the diminishing number of nuns, in the whole world, but especially in St. Joseph’s?

Sister Margaret Buckley: Well I don’t feel happy about it [Entire room laughs], but it’s a fact. I mean there it is. So you have to… That’s why I say the challenges to find ways to have faculty and administrators and staff understand the charism and adopt it and try to implement it in their own work. So far I would say that, that’s happened because I do think the values of the Sisters of St. Joseph’s underline the values of the College.

Rebecca Bollmann: This questions is based off the students’ interests. What kinds of changes or improvements do you think St. Joseph’s needs to meet the growing student population today and to meet the student’s needs? For example, new buildings, facilities, and programs.

Sister Margaret Buckley: Here in Brooklyn we built the Hill Center, which fortunately, I think it was a great asset. It’s such a beautiful building and even if you’re not an athlete I think you’ll enjoy having the building. I have to say we have limited space. In the city, space is so…it’s such
a priority and with limited space we’re creative and flexible. Like the Nursing program, which is only in its...is it its second year?

**Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez:** This is the second year.

**Sister Margaret Buckley:** Second or third year.

**Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez:** Second year.

**Sister Margaret Buckley:** Second year. Requires special facilities so they’ve taken the library, they’ve taken computer labs and I hope they don’t take all of those books, Lauren. Some of them have disappeared I noticed, but anyway. In other words we’ve made creative use of a limited space to meet new needs. Because it was absolute need to create these specialized facilities for nursing because although the Nursing program is new we want it to be first rate. So in order to do that, you have to have a special...

There’s also an example of a new program that was introduced in response to student request I think. It appeared to be a very popular field and therefore we created it. It required hiring additional faculty as well as creating special space. But, apparently they tell me they just had an Admitted Students Day, and the number of students coming for Nursing I think it was the largest of any department. So that shows that it’s the right program at the right time.
We’ve added a number of other programs over the years and, I guess, we have to always be open, listening to what the students want and what is needed. However, I also believe in keeping our traditional programs strong. So I wouldn’t want to spread out so much that it weakens the traditional programs which have always been strong, I think. We have always had a strong academic reputation.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: OK, so now we’re going back to the past when the school became co-ed. So what kinds of changes did the College going co-ed bring to St. Joseph’s and how did the faculty also become more diverse when the College went co-ed?

Sister Margaret Buckley: I remember, I think for a period, at first, for a short period of time, we created a position called “Dean of Men.” That is we had a Dean like Sherrie at Student Services that area. But they created, they thought they needed a separate dean for men. That position didn’t last too long. In other words they decided it was necessary to have a separate person for that job.

This is a funny story. When I was a student here, modern dance was a required course because the president or someone at that time believed that it helped make the students graceful...which is probably true. However, it was required. When the men came, we had to stop making it required. [Laughter ensues.] I think that was the only curricular change we made though. I think, I’m trying to think of it.
And I don’t know whether it reflected the diversity of the faculty. Even though in the earlier days we had many sister faculty, we always had laymen, and laywomen and priest faculty. So I don’t know that we suddenly began to hire more men. I don’t know. I don’t think so. We always try to hire the best person for the job, the most qualified person for the job. But I guess in fact proportionally the number of men faculty increased. I think it did if I look back over the years as the number of sisters shrunk and we hired new faculty. Not all of whom were men but… The diversity of the student body though, I think, has increased over the years, but I think that’s not so much a matter of policy as it is of the changing demographics of New York City.

I remember when I was the Dean I was always interested in getting Asian American students because you know they have a reputation, Mayumi, for being good students. I’m not sure they all are, but they have that stereotype. It’s a stereotype, isn’t it? I don’t think we had any at that point. Occasionally someone would come for a tour or something like that and the student would say, quite appropriately, how many Asian American students do you have here? And I had to say, “Well, right now we don’t have any, but you’d be the first one.” She didn’t come, needless to say. But all of a sudden after all of my efforts, which didn’t do anything. All of a sudden all these Asian American students arrived just because the number in Brooklyn and Queens increased so much. So I think we have an interesting diversity of students at present.

**Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez:** So do you think that besides diversity, were there any other changes that being co-ed brought to St. Joseph’s?
Sister Margaret Buckley: I don’t think so. In the archive if you saw old pictures of an awning that was over the entrance to Tuohy Hall, which wasn’t called Tuohy Hall at that point, the walkway from the sidewalk to the door was a green awning that said, “St. Joseph’s College for Women.” So one day they had a ceremony, took it down, and I think that they cut up pieces and gave them away as souvenirs.

Rebecca Bollmann: What was your reasoning for coming back to St. Joseph’s and becoming a teacher? Like starting your career here?

Sister Margaret Buckley: In those days, in the convent, you went where you were sent. So they sent me here. That’s why I came. But I think the reason they sent me was that I had been a public school teacher. The other person in the secondary education, Sister John Raymond, had become a member of the general government of the Sisters of St. Joseph’s. She had another job so she couldn’t do everything that she had been doing here. So she needed help. So they thought since I had been a public school teacher. A big part of the job is supervising the student teachers, going out to the schools and visiting the students when they’re student teaching. They thought that I would find that easy to do because I had had experience in the public school. Really, I wanted to be an English teacher, but I became an education teacher.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: It seems like you love it, since you were like “Oh!”

Sister Margaret Buckley: It had many interesting things. I learned to love aspects of it. Most of the students were wonderful. That was interesting to go out and to see them. The final outcome
of their studies was their student teaching so it was interesting to see them and almost all of them really do a very good job.

We also imported, exported the secondary education program to the Long Island campus. It wasn’t there from the beginning, but at some point we brought it out. And then, for like eight years, I also supervised student teachers out there. That was a challenge to drive from Brooklyn to Riverhead or someplace way out there, with which I was quite unfamiliar, to supervise student teachers. However, it was interesting to see the difference between the urban and suburban schools. That was an interesting experience for me.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Since we are part of the Honors program we found it important and interesting that you are the one who came up with the idea of it.

Sister Margaret Buckley: Yes.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: So we were just wondering why and how did you come up with it?

Sister Margaret Buckley: I wanted to be sure that we were sufficiently challenging our best students. I think we tried to reach all of our students, and I think we do a pretty good job, but I wanted to be sure that we were sufficiently challenging, pushing our best students. So I thought something that would demand more of them would be worth trying. It’s had ups and down and it’s gone through some evolution. And I think Michael Burke, Dr. Burke, is now in charge of it.
And he has done some new things, some creative things. Programs like this always have to evolve. Jane Beckwith has done travel abroad. As a matter of fact. Oh, I should have mentioned that! I wouldn’t say it’s the highest point, but it was a high point. I went on two different travel abroad trips with the Honors Program Students. Once to Paris and Nice and once to Italy, so they were high points.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Yeah and they’re going back to Italy now, this semester.

Sister Margaret Buckley: Pardon?

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: They are going back to Italy now this semester.

Sister Margaret Buckley: Right. Are you going?

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: No, I’m not going, but I really would like to… next year.

Sister Margaret Buckley: It’s because I went to the President’s Council and I said, “Can we provide a subsidy because it would be very difficult for them to pay the whole thing?” So, I think it was Sister Elizabeth at that time who was the president, who said we should pay half, half the cost of the trip, which I think made it more possible for students to do it.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: How do you think that the Honors Program benefits us as students?

Sister Margaret Buckley: I think it pushes you, maybe, to do some things that you might not otherwise have done. There are all kinds of different ways of getting an Honors credit but, in some of them the Honors Program students are together. One of the things that makes an Honor course an Honors course is when you have the best and brightest together. In other words, the level of discussion, the level of thinking should be higher. Our Honors students are not isolated all the time, and I don’t think they would want that, but once in a while it’s good to have that
Honors Program experience with just the other honors [students]. But I think some of Michael’s creative courses there are just for Honors Programs students, right?

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Mm-hmm. Yup.

Rebecca Bollmann: Yes.

Sister Margaret Buckley: Have you done one of those?

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Yeah, I have done two actually already.

Sister Margaret Buckley: And what were they?

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: So one was we actually studied Boston and we actually went to Boston to see the history of it. And the other one was with Professor Beckwith, it was actually studying art. So it’s just like going back to the history of something. It’s the same thing that they are going to do now. Like going to Italy, it’s just like to study its background and culture and everything.

Sister Margaret Buckley: Mmhmm.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: It’s not like just to go and see the city, but actually do some work and...

Sister Margaret Buckley: You’re not just tourists.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Yeah.

Sister Margaret Buckley: No, it’s an educational experience. But you had fun too, right?

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Of course, I wish I could go!
Sister Margaret Buckley: And how about you? Have you done one of those special programs?

Rebecca Bollmann: Yes, since I’m a freshman I did Freshman Experience, but Honors side. So that’s when I met the honors people in my grade. We did with Jane Beckwith. We did the art and history and storytelling of New York City. Then we did an English component and an Art component with Professor Hamm as well.

Sister Margaret Buckley: Oh, that’s interesting.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: So one more question about the Honors Program. Do you think that as of today we have lived up to your expectations of the Honors Program?

Sister Margaret Buckley: You mean, has the Honors Program lived up to if or have I lived up to it?

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Yeah, to you, like to the expectations that you once had?

Sister Margaret Buckley: I think so. One of the features of the Honors Program that may not have affected you yet, but will at some point in the future, is that at the end is public presentation of thesis or research or something. Now you said Accounting, right?

Rebecca Bollmann: Yes.

Sister Margaret Buckley: Now I think you don’t do a thesis in accounting, but we’ve managed to find a way. Because I think, one of the things...We want to challenge a very good student to be able to present clearly and effectively in a public setting. They weren’t all enthusiastic about doing that, but we made them do it and I think they’re still doing it now.
Rebecca Bollmann: Yes.

Sister Margaret Buckley: In fact they extended it to other students now. Other departments are now having public presentations, right?

Rebecca Bollmann: Lastly, what do you wish for the future of St. Joe’s?

Sister Margaret Buckley: Well...Well...I hope it continues. I hope it continues in Brooklyn because I think Brooklyn is a special place. Brooklyn has certainly evolved a great deal since I started coming here. I hope it grows. But, I would like to see it grow a little bit, but I wouldn’t like to see it get so big that it loses the personal quality that I think is one of it’s greatest strengths. The relationship between students and faculty, the close relationship among students, I think you don’t always get that. I interviewed a transfer student yesterday who was coming from an upstate state university. And she is...That’s basically the reason she’s transferring. She felt kind of lost. Her sister had gone here and liked it very much so she already knew something about it, but she felt a different climate would be better for her. So I think we want to hold on to that as we grow and change.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: Anything else, or that’s all?

Sister Margaret Buckley: [Laughs] I think there was a question on there about tuition. I’m happy you didn’t ask it. [Laughter from the students.] But I wanted to say I guess that one of the things
that has to keep on happening is that we have to keep up to date with technology, which is one of the reasons why cost keeps going up because technology is so expensive. Unfortunately, what irritates me is that, everything is obsolete in three years. You have to keep buying new ones.

But I think up until now we have managed to provide pretty good technology resources for our students and our faculty too. That’s one of the things that we’re going to have to continue to do. Not only grow, but just continue to exist. You need to constantly improve your technology.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: I think this is it.

Sister Margaret Buckley: Thank you very much.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez & Rebecca Bollmann: Thank you for your time.

Sister Margaret Buckley: It was very nice to meet the two of you.

Alondra Vilanueva Sanchez: I was nervous at the beginning, but then it was pretty good.