Preface

Voices of SJC is an oral history project curated by McEntegart Hall Library/Archives in collaboration with St. Joseph’s College Brooklyn Campus Honors Program. The project was inaugurated in the Spring 2017 semester as a part of the College’s centennial celebration. Led by the Library faculty moderators, students engage with the College Archives to develop a strong understanding of the history of the College and conduct an oral history interview. Interviewees include but are not limited to the Sisters of St. Joseph, current and former faculty/staff members, and alumni. The students develop interview questions, discuss the theoretical implications of capturing histories orally, in addition to gaining interviewing skills.

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Interviewee’s name: Sister Mary Florence Burns
Interviewer’s name: Madison Acosta, Peter Grabowski, Peter Maxham, Andrew Wenzler, St. Joseph’s College Honors Program Students
Date of interview: Tuesday, April 24th, 2018 at 1:00 pm.
Location of interview: Founders Hall, St. Joseph’s College, 232 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn, New York

List of acronyms: MA = Madison Acosta (interviewer), PG = Peter Grabowski (interviewer), PM = Peter Maxham (interviewer), AW = Andrew Wenzler (interviewer), MFB = Sister Mary Florence Burns (interviewee)

MA: Hi, I’m Madison, I’m a Child Study major.

MFB: Good.

Madison: Yeah, and I’m a freshman.

MFB: You’re a freshman. Whoo! Alright, very good, the end of your freshman year?

MA: Yes.

MFB: Alright, and all is well?
MA: Yes.

PG: I’m Peter Grabowski. This is another Peter so. I’m a Business and a Marketing major. I’m also a freshman.

MFB: Oh, my.

PG: Yeah, so I did the oral history last semester too with Dr. Tom Travis.

MFB: Oh, sure.

PG: I liked it, it was fun.

MFB: Okay, alright.

PM: I’m Peter Maxham, other Peter, also freshman, I’m doing Hospitality and Tourism and History, dual major.

MFB: Hospitality and Tourism, well, they go together sort of, don’t they?

PM: Well, Hospitality Tourism is one of them, and History is the other one.

MFB: Oh, History, alright.

AW: And my name is Andrew Wenzler, I’m a freshman and I am also a Child Study major with a concentration in Speech.

MFB: Alright, so four freshman. Well, I can’t discourage them then, can I? [laughter] I better be careful. [laughter] Alright.

MM: Ready to start?

Everyone: Sure, yes.

MM: OK, then who’s reading the lead script?

PM: This recording is made as a part of the oral history project Voices of SJC by St. Joseph’s College Brooklyn campus honors program students in spring 2018 semester. It was recorded on Tuesday, April 24th at 1PM in Founders Hall located at 232 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn, New York. The interviewers are: Peter Maxham, Madison Acosta, Peter Grabowski, and Andrew Wenzler. The narrator is Sister Mary Florence Burns.

MFB: Well, here we are [laughter]. I’m very happy to meet all of you, I’m glad you’re interested in this kind of thing. I’m astonished that you’re all freshman [laughter]. Well, anyway.
MA: So we start. Did you grow up knowing you wanted to become part of a church?

MFB: No, I wouldn't say that I grew up knowing it. I think the idea began to creep in somewhere, probably in high school. I went all through Catholic grammar school, high school, college, and in those days, many young women went into the convent so the idea was, these days you would be greatly surprised if someone said she was interested in going to the convent.

It's a very different world that we're living in, so I didn't but somewhere by the end of high school, and then I thought about it on and off through college and had made up my mind by the time I finished college, but I haven't worked up to telling my mother [laughter] nor my father, and I didn't realize that my father was going to be just as unhappy as my mother. I didn't put that piece together until I told them, so it took me another year after college. In that year, I went to St. John's University I applied.

Sister Joseph Immaculate encouraged me to apply to St. John's and got an assistantship so it didn't cost anything and I went there and got my master's in one year between September and June and had notified my mother and my father and so one year after college I entered the convent.

PG: What did your parents want you to do besides, you know--

MFB: It isn't that they... They had encouraged me certainly to go to college, that was understood, and in those days, believe me, most women did not go to college. I mean, it was fairly unusual. Now you can start anytime, back then, normally you started in September but I started in January of 1943, went a couple of summers to make up credit, and graduated in June of 1946 and that was before most women-- before most people went to college. It was before the whole city university, there wasn't one. So I was very fortunate and the other girls in my class were, I think, equally fortunate and we stayed friends, there's still one from my class with whom I'm in regular touch. One just died two years ago, so we're into the home stretch [laughter].

PM: So you taught in the English department here at St. Joseph’s.

MFB: Yes.

PM: So what was your research interests in literature?

MFB: Well let's start with a sister who had been teaching here. Transferred to the Catholic University of Puerto Rico and there was therefore the need for somebody and because I had my master’s, I became the 'somebody' so I was moved in here. Now what you'll never understand in a world of multiple choices about everything, everything for you is a choice, or at least a possible choice. Back then, every college in the country ran very much the same way. There was almost no choice. You had some colleges that leaned into science, and you had some that leaned more broadly in- Science is part of the liberal arts, but when we say liberal arts, we tend think of English and history. it should include, and it does include the sciences, but apart from some
colleges that emphasized, for instance, math and science, and a few that emphasized technology of which there wasn’t much, not the way we know it today when every time you pick up the papers, there’s something being developed.

All of the colleges were running on the same basic program and there was very little choice so you will, even as freshman, are going to find it hard to believe that freshman did not really have a choice in what they were going to take no matter what college you went to, you were going to be told in your first year to take composition and start English literature, and start either history or math, I mean those were your two basic choices, but even apart from that, here, and we were like every other college, there were 70- well as late as 1969, there were 72 specifically required credits, so they were named. It wasn’t just you had to take English and history, you took THIS English course, and THIS history course, and THIS math course.

Math and science a little more freedom because depending- and language, depending on how much you had coming in, you had to be fitted into, but I think it's impossible for you to grasp that. There was nowhere in this country, was their real choice. You came and you took the program and the program was very much the same no matter what college you went to and you came out well educated [laughter] and today, you’re making all kinds of choices and some people, like me, say “I wonder what they’re learning” and you have other people saying they’re learning exactly what they need to learn and I agree with that for this world that were living in, but it was- I mean, there were no choices. So the choice that I had was what major did I want in college. The major that I took was English and I took Secondary Ed. on the side so that I was prepared to teach high school. When I came back to teach, I expected to go into high school eventually and instead I came here.

[8:45]

PM: So were there any particular authors or works that inspired your interest in literature?

MFB: Well, as I’m explaining to you, we were kind of programmed, so you took surveys, we went straight through, but eventually I had two main interests and one of them was Chaucer, Geoffrey Chaucer, the Canterbury Tales. The late 14th century, he lived like 1346 to 1400- something, roughly we are talking about. That’s before the Renaissance even, before Shakespeare. And the second major interest that I had eventually was Shakespeare. And that’s the course that I taught for the longest time. After I became dean and stopped teaching, the one course I did not want to give up was Shakespeare, and I kept it.

PM: So you would say that Shakespeare would be like the particular, like the works of Shakespeare were the ones you used most often when you were teaching?
MFB: Yes, that's the one I continued with for as long as I taught which went some time into, I don't know, 1990 maybe.

PG: So when you were doing your academic research as a professor and you getting your PhD. writing dissertation, So it was a lot different than you were saying how academia now, we get to make all our choices we have freedom almost, than the professors, but how was it then just doing a basic research paper compared to now? What were your experiences then and how you see us doing something like this and just how it feels seeing a difference.

MFB: A different world [laughter], that’s what it was. When I read this, I had a very funny reaction. I looked at this when there was no internet. There was certainly no internet, or copy machine, or scanner, or email back in the 1950’s. I said “copy machine, we had a copy machine” and then I said, we did not have a copy machine [laughter] there was no such thing as a copy machine. The first one in this institution came into the main building. A single gadget of some kind that was a- I’ll call it a Xerox machine, I’m not sure if it was Xerox, and it went into the main office and that was one. Now eventually we got them all over the place and you're beyond that. Now you're streaming and just plugging into computers. Well, if I tell you that, as late as I finished my dissertation, I got my Doctorate in 1961, and finished the dissertation, and it had to be done, had to be typed and even in the convent, it was understood we couldn’t do the final typing so you did the typing all along but in the end, there was a man whose name happened to be ‘Finger’. So Mr. Finger [laughter] was the typist for all of us in this house who got Doctorates, and he did the final typing but he had to do it with four carbons. Now you have probably have never used a carbon, you probably don’t know what carbon is [laughter].

For our checkbook upstairs, we still have a carbon. I hate it. You can’t make it dark enough or clear enough, but I don’t even see carbon anymore, but four carbon copies and the worst of that was that if you made a mistake in the typing on the first page, the mistake went down to the next and had to be taken out on every page as it went down. I mean, it was a horror. So the one good thing in the whole process was that no one of us, we all had learned to type- no one of us had to do the final typing. Mr. Finger [laughter] was stuck with doing the final copy and producing four carbon copies and you filed those copies- Columbia University had carbon copies, if you can believe this, because one copy went permanently on file, one copy, in a sense, was to be available to scholars who wanted to see the work, another, I don’t know. Anyhow, you had to have four carbon copies. That was a horror scene [laughter].

But even the research, because there wasn’t any Xerox- so I did most of my research over the 42nd street library in the main reading room over there- but used index cards, and those I was faithful to. I mean, if you did it on paper, you ended up in a mess, I mean if you took notes. But you went over, you asked for the books from librarians who were not always helpful [laughter]. They didn't always like to take care of you over there, and you sat at a big table, and you had a
A stack of index cards and as you read or did your research, you made notes on your index cards. So on every card then, you had to have some kind-you developed a system for how am I identifying this? Made it as short as you could, but you had to take your notes and if you were foolish enough, you did it in pencil. I mean, I did it all in ink so it wouldn’t smudge, but you took your notes and indicated that this was this book, this page-when you look back now, and see the amount of time, just the time it took to do it, research today must take three-quarters less time because so much is so readily available, and you don’t have to be making all these, you’re not writing it on index cards.

[15:13]

PM: What topic did you do your final dissertation on?

MFB: Well, I did it on an 18th century edition, Thomas Tyrwhitt edition of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Canterbury Tales were written somewhere in the late 1380’s-90’s Thomas Tyrwhitt is working in the late 1700’s going back and anyhow, I was working on his edition because it wasn’t clear what text of Chaucer he had available to him in his time, and he said that he used 20 different texts because it was fashionable in 1780, 1790 to say you used many texts. So he said he used about 20 and there were roughly 20-30 variations on Shakespeare’s-on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. No one of them in Chaucer’s handwriting so you know quite where they came from. They were all slightly different. He said about 20 and my topic became to try to determine which of all of those he had used most, and I was successful [laughter] because as I went through it, I realized he considered it was important in his day to say he used many. In fact, he used one for most of it and two others where there were gaps in the first one, but the interesting thing is, that he had in fact, chosen the best of them all as the first one. The one that came closest to the current scholarly version of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. So that was my earth shaking, world changing, topic [laughter].

AW: How long did you say it took you to finish all of this?

MFB: I don’t know [laughter]. Once I got the topic, it wasn’t so bad. The whole degree took 10 years, but three years of that time I had finished all of the course work and I passed the orals and then was the matter of getting a topic. And it was getting the topic, I lost three years in there trying to arrive at a topic. Now in the end, I was lucky. This was not the topic I think I would’ve chosen but it was safe. You probably don’t read the papers, but even today, you will see in the paper occasionally some little hanky-panky going on in the universe today and a graduate student having trouble with a professor- that kind of stuff. It's still happening but I guess it goes all the way back to Adam and Eve [laughter]. But in any event, the topic itself was very safe. I mean, it wasn't exciting. The breakthrough- when I finally realized I had something, I’m really a little bit unclear. I think that by 1955, I had finished all of the course work and I think in three years I
couldn't get a topic. I thought of one which would probably have been a disaster, the Gothic novel which would've been interesting but at Columbia they told me for me to work on that, I would have to go to England, and I wasn’t about, at that time, to ask to, in the convent, to go to England. So that one was out and then I tried for another one, and then my major professor took a year off on sabbatical. So finally I ended up with the topic I had. So I would think probably it took two years by the time I finally got the topic.

MA: So you were saying before how when you went to St. Josephs it was very cut and paste- all your courses were planned out for you and how much choice in what you took, so if you could attend St. Joseph's now with all the courses available, what would interest you? Would you still stay in the English and Lit[erature]? Or would you broaden your horizons and try--

MFB: Well, I might try something else as a sideline, but I have loved English Lit[erature]. It was right for me and I think I was lucky to have chosen it to begin with. So I would stick with it. But probably if I were your age, I think I would try to do something with technology because things are just going to get more technological not less, and I couldn’t even do the research now because I know I wouldn’t have the patience to learn the technology [laughter]. So I think I would stick with English Lit[erature] but look into something else-- and part of the history of St. Joseph's College is that from the beginning, although the curriculum, as in other colleges, was planned out, there always was room for something that will help the students to get a job.

So in the very beginning, It was education even though those courses and credits didn't count towards the degree but nonetheless the students were prepared to go out to teach. The 1930’s, the depression was the only time until recently when anything else displaced education whether it was Child Study or Secondary Ed. And during the depression, when the teaching jobs had shriveled up, there wasn’t any money. The College, in effect, developed a program which helped the students to go into working for charities, so it was a more applied-- instead of education it was, how do you help people to get jobs, how do you help them get into a hospital, it was that approach then came the 40’s and it right back to education again, until these more recent years when everything has changed so significantly.

PM: So you mentioned in your previous interview about the importance of critical thinking. In it, you said “we’re living now in a world of tweets and tweets don’t tell you very much”. Would you have any advice for anyone listening about how to be more keen about critical thinking especially with all the information that we now have available to us?

MFB: I know. I feel for you [laughter]. Believe it or not. I think it’s very hard. I think once you pick up, I know I have a belt around my waist with a phone in it for security purposes. I don’t use it much as a phone at all but I’m in the house alone much of the time and if I were to fall and needed help, it’s here but it makes me very conscious that all of you are walking around with
them this way [laughter]. I look down the street and two students are walking side by side each one talking to somebody else on the phone and I think it becomes obsessive. You look strange if you’re not doing it almost and yes, this constant looking at these things, there’s no time to just, kind of, stand still and look at the leaves that are coming out. You can’t give it up because it’s the world we’re living in and this is now how people connect but I think if you could build in some space and it doesn’t have to be a lot of time, just to go quiet, just to relax a little bit and think about maybe who did you meet today, or did something happen today, was there a nice thing today? Was there some kind of a treat?

I’m beginning to see in the newspapers op-ed pieces saying that everybody is too much on a gadget and there’s beginning to be a sense that we need to get off these gadgets and look at one another because where you’re looking at the thing, you’re not even looking at another person and even though you’re hearing, maybe, what someone is saying, or you’re reading what someone is saying, you’re not getting facial expression, you’re not watching a little twitch, which means I’m not comfortable with this conversation, you’re not relating, you’re not directly connecting, and I don’t think you even know that because you think you are. You’re on a gadget, here you are. It’s instant, you can be in instant communication but there’s more to relationship than instant communication.

So if you could build in a little time, just to think back over the day with-- some people do it at night, some people do it in the morning. It all depends, but if you can think back over the day before and how did it go, was there something you would do differently. Just a few minutes of getting off the gadgets.

[25:57]

PG: So I’m guessing you’re happy that you’re not really in our shoes in our age group.

MFB: I am. I think it's very hard. Even I now go on to the computer at least three times a day. Morning, afternoon, evening, to see what has come through. Now what am I getting? I’m getting ads [laughter] for things I’m never going to buy and occasionally I’m getting some kind of emails, but nonetheless, I go on. The sense in which I think you never get off. The other thing that I get on now and brings me closer to what you are doing, Solitaire. Do I need Solitaire [laughter]? I don’t need Solitaire, but if you go on to Solitaire and you play one game, you’re going to play three games.

AW: Of course.

MFB: That's right [laughter]. And there was an article within the last week or two in the New York Times about the fact that Facebook- that's was it. Mark Zuckerberg, who is in such trouble
right now, poor guy, with all his billions [laughter], and Facebook and how they have built into Facebook- I’m not quite sure how they do it because I’ve never been on Facebook, but they built in something that is serving as an attraction that you can’t resist. So it becomes like an obsession, and once you’ve clicked into it, you’re going to click in again and that is how they’re making their money. Because even I am getting ads from companies I never dealt with. So I go on to Amazon, I do go on to Amazon, and just see what's being published and then I am getting ads from companies that connect- because Amazon now is into shoes, is into all kinds of clothing, you’re getting all kinds of products. So this constant bombardment which I think leaves you with no time to take a deep breath. [laughter] Anyway-

AW: You’ve mentioned many of the changes that you’ve seen in the College throughout the years, would you say that St. Joseph’s has changed for the better in your time here?

MFB: I think in most ways, yes, I do. I mean, I think we’ve moved with the times. You couldn’t have a college today without technology, but that was a major, major change probably the biggest one apart from surviving, from 1969 on. I think part of life, is moving with what’s happening, resisting some of it, embracing some of it, being skeptical about some of it, but I think evaluating as you go, yes, I think most of the technology has been for the good. I do. You can’t live in this world now without it. You just can't.

PM: So you previously spoke about the development of the ACES Program which was made to meet the changing demographics of the student body during the late 1990’s, early 2000’s. Were there any efforts to diversify the campus during the 60’s and 70’s during the Civil Rights Act?

MFB: There really wasn’t, but let me go back and explain to you that somewhere in the early minutes of the Boards of Trustees. So go back into the 30’s, I guess, late 20’s early 30’s. There is reference to the fact that they considered, ‘should they admit black students?’ Now it would be girls, because it was all girls, and the decision was yes. Now that was a major decision for that time and that became part of the tradition of the College. How many black students actually came over those following years, I have no idea, but I can tell you that in 1946, one of the graduates was a black student who lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant and who had come here and we were all friendly. I can also tell you that in those days, well you have something like it, you have a big night for junior year and so on. We had Junior Week, that kind of stuff and everybody went out to a restaurant, we went to a party.

Norma Weekes always made an excuse. She knows she couldn’t come out to dinner because something had to happen at home. She couldn't go to the theatre because there was something else she had to do, and it was her very gracious way of avoiding a problem because even in the 1940’s, there were many restaurants, most restaurants would not accept anyone- it wasn’t just blacks, I mean, Asians were not welcome. So that, it’s hard for you to understand especially in
New York where we got everything. We got every kind of group. And even back then, there were many such groups, but they lived in specific areas. I mean, they stayed together. There's still some of that, but that's a degree of comfort, or now it's a matter of real estate, I mean, where can you get in? But back then, there was no bar, and black students were welcome. There was no need in the 60’s and we didn’t have a lot of money to do recruitment, but there were certainly black students here, there began to be Asian students, so that there was an openness to it even though it was-- now, I mean, now we have, we've got so many individual ethnic groups and that just, it happened.

Out in Patchogue, under Sister Elizabeth Hill who was president until four years ago, there was a deliberate effort. The Patchogue area, was in its own way segregated. There were the comfortable people, and there were poor people and the poor people were various ethnic groups and they weren't coming to us, they didn’t have the money. So she put it to the Board of Trustees and made a very deliberate effort to bring in others than white [students] and set up a program in which they went to four different high schools and you couldn’t just bring one, so they wanted two so that you had some company. So I think it started with a group of eight, maybe ten and in over four years you then had 40. I wouldn’t say that it was highly successful out there but it was a deliberate effort to mix things up and Patchogue needed it. Brooklyn on its own by the 70’s into the 80’s into the 90’s, just the population, was making a change.

[34:05]

PG: Stepping off on that, so in your previous interview, you talked about how St. Joseph’s College went co-ed in the 70’s, and you also mentioned how, just down the road, kind of, St. Francis was an all male college, St. Joseph’s was an all female college. So with the two, one being all male and one being all female, was there any specific relationship that the two schools had back then? Or were they all separate entities and how did that change to co-ed affect the school?

MFB: There was no direct connection between the two schools but they were two Catholic schools right here and there weren’t any other Catholic colleges apart from St. John’s and that was already at a little distance from us, it hadn’t yet moved all the way out from where it is now. The students had their own connections because they were all coming out of the same grammar school. Almost all of the Catholic students went to Catholic grammar schools and, you know, you walk ten blocks and there was another Catholic grammar school. So they knew one another and they had connections and so at dances and dances were held regularly, boys from St. Francis came but it wasn't the two institutions that were connecting. The sisters didn’t have a direct connection with the brothers. The students were connecting and then, the early 70’s, you see, was another one of these times when money was tight and it got worse and the brothers, I think, decided-- Sister Vincent Therese, who was President from ‘56 to ‘69.
In the 60’s, [she] tried to make a more direct connection with the brothers, and there was some discussion of perhaps the boys could come here for science courses. St. Francis was not strong in science, we were strong in science and maybe the girls could go to St. Francis and take a couple of business courses. So there was talk about doing that and there may have been a few students, I don’t think the girls ever went, I think a few of the boys might’ve come. It didn’t work out and so Sister George Aquin became President in July of ’69. She opened up a connection with the brothers, but by the Spring of ’70, the brothers said that they were very sorry but they were going to go co-ed. So if they were going co-ed, and they did it effective that Summer, It was then a case of ‘what are we going to do’ and the decision was that if they were co-ed, we were going to have to go co-ed or we were going to go out of business. So we went co-ed. With all apologies.

AW: What was it like those first few years having boys in the school for the first time?

MFB: I don’t think it was the greatest [laughter]. On the other hand, let me say, that any boy who wanted a date had no trouble [laughter]. They were so outnumbered. And there had always been a tradition here of-- goes back to Monsignor Dillon in the early days of the College of faculty never interfering with students, never being intrusive, and I don’t know when it stopped, but in all the years I was teaching, he had insisted that each student was Miss so-and-so. You never used first names. There was a kind of built in professionalism among faculty. You didn’t have the sisters going around and minding people and watching people. We had grown up in a tradition in which you did not do that. Students were adults even if sometimes they weren’t [laughter] and you just respected that. So I would say from that point of view, we weren’t minding the boys and we weren’t worried about things. So it took a few years before the numbers began to grow.

[38:55]

MA: What were the interests, major wise, for the boys? Did they come in having the same majors as the girls?

MFB: That's what we had. And even if I’m right, I think that the first Master’s Program, I think, and it came in Sister George Aquin’s last year so we’re talking 1997 maybe? The first Master’s Program, I think, was in Child Study on the Patchogue Campus. But the next one was in Business and that was driven heavily by the boys and by their interest in business. Now the men, I should be saying instead of “the boys” [laughter] initially went heavily into science. I mean it was a strong interest that way. Not all that many ever went into Child Study even though I think it's a good field for men.
AW: It's still the same today. I'm the only boy of my age in the program.

MFB: You’ll probably end up a principal of a school [laughter] because there are so few who go into it, but watching those little kids out there is wonderful. I hear stories about them [from] Sister Pat Dittmer.

PG: So real quick before we move on. I just wanted to ask you, so you said that in the 70's it was really tough economically.

MFB: Yes.

PG: So basically, from what I’m gathering, going co-ed saved St. Joseph’s basically. If it wasn’t for that, the school wouldn’t have stayed open?

MFB: I don't know that, that's true. I think we had to do it.

PG: Okay.

MFB: And I think that it was one step, but there were whole series of steps. When Sister George Aquin came in, it was a time of radical change in this country, and in higher ed[ucation]. It’s ancient history now, its back as far as Chaucer [laughter]. Call it 1964, 1965-- came the revolution in higher ed[ucation] out in California. It started in California and took four years to make its way East. The East was most resistant and it started really over the wars. Over, first Korea, and then Vietnam and Vietnam became a very divisive issue in this country and it led to college students objecting to government policy and staging protests and the real protesters were out there. The East was much more conservative, believe it or not. In some ways New York State still is but anyhow, this wave of opposition to the war and to the government for sponsoring the war, and so on swept the country, and somehow into all of that, went objections to the way the colleges ran things, takeovers of a president's office starting in California ending up with Columbia University. They were celebrating, I think the 70th anniversary of the takeover of the president's office at Columbia in the Spring, 70 years ago. And they took over, and with it then went an assistance in change in curriculum.

I mean, why have we been putting up with what the government has been doing because we’ve been taught to put up with it, alright? We need to see things differently, we need different choices and so this insistence on radical change in curriculum, and once that began, New York State was not the first but if you consider that we had 72 required credits- each one labeled, now the rest you had some choices. But 72 specifically required credits and there’s one college in the east here that eventually gave up all requirements and we were being pressured to do it here given our student body and our understanding of our students, we resisted that, but we dropped,
in the early 70’s, from 72 required credits down to something like 52, maybe 55. And in addition to dropping the number of required credits loosened up so that you didn't have to take English 101 or History 101 and so on. You could choose within those fields. There were still requirements, you had to take courses in the major areas but you could choose among a handful of courses. So that was the beginning of radical change all over the country and certainly here.

MA: So you mentioned Sister George Aquin a couple of times and how she was part of radical changes in St. Joseph’s and it seems like you worked really closely with her. Could you share some of your memories you had with her? Your favorites.

MFB: Could I just read off to you what happened? She was president from 1969 until 1997, that was 28 years, very significant years, and they are the years that saved the College. I think we would have gone out of business except for the steps she took and I’ll be quick. We went co-ed, alright? That was number one. Opened a branch campus, first in Brentwood and then in Patchogue, Initiated the first cooperative program in New York State with LIU CW post. They had never been a cooperative program. It didn't go well, but it got us out of Brentwood and out to Patchogue. Created the Division of General Studies which still exists under somewhat different name, you know, it’s an adult program. Started, within her term, we started a connection with the high schools so that we could try to encourage some students from two of our high schools to come here to college. Fundraising activities were expanded. She started a dinner dance and a golf tournament or she got the trustees to do it. Introduced business courses, and before she went out of office, the health professions. [She] had the first successful capital campaign to put up a new library out in Patchogue, made renovations here on campus, the enrollment increased. We went from 570 students to 4,000 by the time she went out of office, and went up from there to 5,000. [She] started an endowment program for scholarships, started the first graduate program out in Patchogue, started a weekend college for adults, because instead of expecting them to come Monday to Friday, they could come Friday evening to Sunday evening. And of course that was controversial to begin with because it meant that you were having classes on Sunday. We were a Catholic college, but we weren’t a Catholic college by that time. She took us through the whole process of becoming a college in the Catholic tradition [phone rings] that was the most painful thing-- Let me check. I forgot to turn this off. I’m sorry. Did it stop? [beep] It’s off [laughter]. We’ll find out who that was later [laughter]. The new athletic center went up in Patchogue, that was in her last year. All of the technology began to be introduced under her, and she worked very closely with the Board of Trustees and they brought in some people who could be really helpful. Now those are major, major achievements including saving the place, but it wasn't just going co-ed, it was moving first to Brentwood then to Patchogue. Even today, if we have a 1,000 students here in Brooklyn, They have 4,000 out there. There are so few colleges out there. Here we’re surrounded by the City University, I mean it's a whole other world in here. Do I have time to give you a little glimpse of her?
PG: Yeah, go for it!

MFB: Those were the major, major-- we wouldn't be here today. I do think what made it easier was, you’re either going to do something, or you’re going out of business [laughter]. When you know that that’s it, I think it’s easier to take some chances. Because you’re going to lose anyway so you might as well take a chance, and the chances worked. Her PhD was in Sociology and her whole sense of things was of team building and so she built a team, an administrative team-- Tom Travis was part of it and it continued on. But a couple of funny things, Brentwood was the first extension from here and we would drive out once a week to Brentwood, to that campus, and we would drive back at 6 o’clock at night, 7 o’clock at night and we never stopped and I’m a three-meal-a-day person [laughter]. I know it was three years and I said to her “could we stop and have something to eat?” Well the expression on her face, “why would you do that?”, “why would you spend money that way?” We stopped at an ice cream parlor in Queens, I was thrilled [laughter]. It was kind of a breakthrough. Not that we did much of it. We never went to a restaurant for a long time. After a while, we used to stop in her last years, we would stop at a diner in Queens on the way back from the big meeting in Patchogue. The thrill-of-the-day was, we could stop at a diner and have supper in a diner. Part of that, she used the expression, ‘I’m a child of the depression’ and her father had lost money and he was a builder and at the time of the depression, he lost-- now, they were not out on the street, but their scale of living changed and it made her very conscious of the effect that money has on you.

And so, to give you one example, the College owed the Diocese, the Bishop of Brooklyn at the time, something like $90,000 that had been advanced to take care of some project or problem in the College. And she had gotten an extension, and the Bishop was very understanding. He was the Chair of the Board of Trustees and he never pressured. And we were getting ready, the Board of Trustees had decided we would buy, or try to buy, the property in Patchogue in Brentwood. They had the opportunity to buy the property out there. It was going to be a long term payment arrangement and so they’re all set to do it, and she said to them, ‘but we owe the Diocese $90,000’ and the Trustees said to her, ‘but the Diocese isn't pressing, the Bishop understands. The Diocese isn't pressing for repayment’ and that was the time that she said ‘I’m a child of the depression, I cannot, we cannot take on more debt... and we were taking on debt, you know, long term debt to go out to Patchogue-- ...while we still owe money to someone who has been good to us’. And so very reluctantly, the Trustees agreed and they paid off the last of the debt. So there was a brief period in 1978, ‘79 when the College had absolutely no debt. It was like 10 days [laughter] and then they signed the papers for Patchogue. “I'm a child of the depression” and believe me, that affected the way that she spent money. The first few dinner dances that the College had, and they started on to her, and they were meant to be fundraisers. But the chief administrators, herself and a handful of us, including Tom Travis, would go out there and we’re putting the programs at the places-- no we didn't set the tables, but we didn't have staff so you didn't send a couple secretaries out to take care of this. You went and you did it. That's one of the
memories that I-- Tom Travis used to call her a force of nature [laughter]. That was his feeling about her.

[53:10]

And the last memory that I would share with you was six months before she died and we were going to an event, we didn't know it would be six months. We were going to an event in Douglaston out in Queens and as we went out, Sister Elizabeth Hill was driving, Sister George and myself, we went out of the house and out into the backyard out here where the cars are parked and whatever happened as we got out that gate she stumbled and fell and smashed right into the back of a car, head first down into a car and slid down on to the ground and Elizabeth, by that time had a phone, I just got one a year ago [laughter], she had one and pulled out-- this was 2007, she pulled out the phone and called the men, the maintenance men and they all came. She said “I need you all here right now”. So the maintenance men came and they looked and they picked her up, and she stood up and she said “my heroes” is what she called them “my heroes” and then she said “now, is there blood? Do you see any blood?” and I’m saying “we don’t have to go to this event. I mean, let go back into the house and make sure everything is alright” and she is saying “No, there is no blood. Alright! We’re going. Thank you, gentlemen.” [laughter] --and we went. Now when we got in the car, and you gotta a look. One stocking was torn and there was a little bit of blood and she was uncomfortable but, by gum, she got there and we got through the event and that's very much who she was. Six months later, she was dead. That was May and she died in November of that year, but believe me [laughter], she had lived. Alright.

AW: We spoke a lot today about the past of St. Joseph's College. What do you think is next for the College? Where do you see it going in the next 10 years?

MFB: I was never the visionary [laughter]. Sister George had much more vision than I had, and Sister Elizabeth Hill had much more vision. I was the academic person [laughter] and struggled with, ‘this is what they want to do and how are we going to get this done?’ Much more at the practical levels...saying if they’d stopped thinking, life would be easier. So, I don’t know. I think that the College is in a difficult position at present, as is every other college. You look in the newspapers and they're telling us, because everything is so uncertain. And people are concerned about money. There has not been real increase for ordinary people. The billionaires are making billions and ordinary people aren't. So, it's not an easy-- it’s not the worst time, but it’s not the best. I don’t know. I do think that President Boomgaardens understands this place. I think he had the right personality dealing, initially, with faculty and he began to establish that over the summer before any of you came into school. I think he had the right personality to deal with our alumni, and to deal with the business world. He has both a pragmatic sense and that “arty” sense, I mean, he’s a musician. He's got the right personality for this kind of an institution. He’s already
allowing some of the proposals for more pragmatic programs to go ahead and I think that would probably continue, and I see that-- go all the way back when we started with teacher education so that our students have real employment opportunities when they finish. What it will be specifically? I don’t know. I pray for the College every day.

I hope that it’s going to continue I think if we got through, the 1969 to 79, and those were the critical years, I think then, I think, there is every chance that we can get through the next. I think all the right steps are being taken. There has been tremendous cooperation from faulty over these last four years from the time Sister Elizabeth went out of office, until now. I think we’ve got the right man as president and I think if none of us had ever understood how important a president was, and I’m not sure that we did, I think as we’re living under President Donald Trump we have a better understanding of the role of the president whether you like it, or you don’t and that the president puts a stamp on a place and I think that President Boomgaard is going to put the right stamp on it. I think he will manage to retain the emphasis on values, the emphasis on being who you are- becoming who you are. The “esse non videri”, “to be not to seem”. To be who you are, and to play your part in this world as it’s continuing to evolve and it will continue to evolve. I don't think things will get easier. I’m hoping that we will ease up on technology so that we give more time to thinking and to critical thinking and I think that President Boomgaard will encourage that but the specifics of what will happen, I don’t know. I do think, that in President Boomgaard, we have a man who understands that you have to deal with the real world you’re living in, and then you try to put the emphasis on your values and on the contribution that each one of you can make to that world.

PG: Okay, well, we want to thank you for your time [all thank each other] it was a pleasure, I enjoyed it [all speaking and laughing]. I hope you did too.

MFB: I’m very happy to have met you and I’m going to follow your careers [laughter]. I’ve got your names and we’ll see how it goes. Really, I’m very happy. I thought “what more is there to say” until I got your questions and these questions are better than the first set. Really, I thought “I have nothing to say”. Well here we are [laughter] It’s an hour later. It has been a very great pleasure.

All: Thank you. Same to you.

[1:00:36]
Informed Consent/Release Form

This oral history project is being conducted as a part of St. Joseph's College Brooklyn Campus Academic Honors Concentration. 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 St. Joseph's College Brooklyn Campus, 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 24, 2019

Interviewee/Interviewer's name (please print clearly)

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Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature

Peter Maxham

Date

4/3/18

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)

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Interviewee/Interviewer's signature  

Andrew Wenzler

Date 4/24/18

Interviewee/Interviewer's name (please print clearly)  

Andrew Wenzler
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Interviewee/Interviewer's signature

[Signature]

Date

4/24/18

Interviewee/Interviewer's name (please print clearly)

Madison Acosta
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Interviewee/Interviewer's signature

Date 4/24/18

Interviewee/Interviewer's name (please print clearly) Peter Grabowski