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 Sivillo  
**Interviewer’s names:** Danielle Armato, Antonio Ariza, Gabrielle Brodski, China Monroe, St. Joseph’s College Honors Program Students  
**Date of interview:** Thursday, April 26th, 2018 at 1:00 pm.  
**Location of interview:** Founders Hall, St. Joseph’s College, 232 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn, New York

**List of acronyms:** DA = Danielle Armato (interviewer), AA = Antonia Ariza (interviewer), GB = Gabrielle Brodski, CM = China Monroe (interviewer), SM = Sister Mary Sivillo (interviewee)

GB: This recording was 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 Thursday, April 26th at 1:00 p.m. in Founder’s Hall located at 232 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn, New York. These interviewers are Gabriel Brodski, Antonio Ariza, China Monroe and Danielle Armato. The narrator is Sister Mary Sivillo.

AA: Hi Sister.

SM: Hi.
AA: My name is Antonio. Obviously you’ve been here a long time at St. Joseph’s. When did you first become involved at St. Joseph’s College and the Dillon Center?

SM: Okay, I’ve been in St. Joseph’s College only 20- almost 20 years. That’s not really as long as some of the other Sisters who you have interviewed already or will interview. And that’s because I had a different, [laughter] different, what am I gonna say- ministry along the way, okay? Now when I came here, I was really hired to fill in a spot that Sister Alice Francis had. You may not have heard of her, okay, she only died a short- a few years ago. But she was here forever. And she was very involved in the Dillon Center and the Child Study Department.

So, I did not come for that purpose. I really came for the College to fill in her spot. Which at that time, was really mostly office work, okay? But I’ll tell you about it later if you ask the right questions [laughter].

AA: What is it about St. Joseph’s College that has kept you here for 20 years?

SM: [Laughter] Good question. You know, I just love what I’m doing, and I love the students, and I’m very happy in the Child Study Department. And it has been a very, interesting and very fulfilling experience for me- different from what I was used to, what I had been doing.

AA: Now you said previously that you’ve only been here for 20 years and you did work before.

SM: What did I do before the 20- oh, okay.

AA: Can you tell us more about the work you did prior, before joining St. Joseph’s College?

SM: Yes, I would be happy to. Okay so when I first entered the Convent, and then I became a Sister, alright. And we came out- we called the different places that we were sent to- they were our missions.

And the first place I went out to was out in Flushing. And I taught kindergarten- no, second grade and then first grade, there for about nine years. And then from there I was sent to another school and I taught- first grade. And from there I went to a third Elementary School and I taught first grade.

So my great experience was, the first grade. While I was a first grade teacher in our Lady of Perpetual Help out in Bay Ridge, someone in my community approached me and she said “Do you think you’d like to be a principal?” Wow you know, that was- well I’ll try it- you know, it was a small school.

So I became a principal, a Lady of Mount Carmel in Williamsburg. And I was there for only 7 years. From there I went to Holy Spirit in Borough Park- there was a- the principal was leaving and they needed a principal there. So I- and I lived in the Lady of Mount Carmel Convent. That was the usual thing at that time, you lived where we worked.
But when I went to Holy Spirit in Borough Park, there was a small Convent and there were six Sisters living there—they really didn’t have room for me. But I did want to stay there and be principal there. So I looked around that neighborhood for a convent and the closest one was St. Rose of Lima, which was not too far away, it was across Ocean Parkway in Newkirk Avenue. So I went there and the Sisters there welcomed me to the Convent. And so I stayed living there for 30 years.

And I stayed as Principal of Holy Spirit for 17 years. And then for the next—how many years—7 years. And I came to St. Angela Hall—needed a principal. So I was principal of St. Angela Hall, which was right, you know, right where we are. To get there, I had to travel. And that’s when I began to travel to my workplace and so I went came to St. Angela Hall and I stayed there for 7 more years. And unfortunately the School had to close. St. Angela Hall was a community run school and it no longer could be kept open because of the small number of students and other problems.

So when that was closing, I got a telephone call from a Sister from over here. And she said, “Listen, we have an opening for Sister Alice’s job. Would you think you’d be interested?” Well, I needed a job, and I didn’t really want to be principal anymore—that was a long time to be principal for 30-31 years. So I said, “Sure, what is it like?” “Oh, it’s just going to be office work.” I said fine. So, I went there for an interview and it sounded good to me and that’s how I became involved in St. Joseph’s College. However, I became involved in St. Joseph’s College before this. While I was a young Sister and I made my final vows, we were then sent out to college and I was sent to St. Joseph’s College. And so I was very happy. I came here for my Bachelor’s Degree. And it took a long time, because we used to come for two afternoons a week—Tuesday, Thursday afternoon. After we taught all day, then we came here from 4:00-6:00 for classes and then on Saturdays, so that’s how we got it. It took— you know how many years it took?—7 years to get my degree.

Everyone: Wow.

SM: Well because, that’s the way, you know. So, but I got it. And we’re very happy that I did get it. So that’s my other connection with St. Joseph’s College.

[6:39]

AA: What made you interested in Child Education in the first place?

SM: You know, what I—okay. I’ve always wanted to be a teacher, from very young—VERY young. I was in first grade and somehow—and I remember this—first grade—Sister, Lord have mercy on Sister Mary Emily—she must have said something to me one day about—“Would you like to be in the Convent?” and I said yes. “Alright, you go home, when you go home, ask mommy to put your pajamas in a bag and a toothbrush and you come back.” And I only lived a block away from the Convent. And that’s what I did, I actually went to the Convent that afternoon with a paper bag with my pajamas and a toothbrush.
And years later I remember- I said you know what-when I went back, I did go back to that Convent as an adult. I said, “There’s something I wanted to check out. Do you have a sink in your dining room?” And they said “Yes, how do you know that?” [laughter]. Sure enough, in the corner, in their dining room- there was a sink. I guess they did their dishes right there, I don’t know what they did. But anyway, that was my first time in the Convent.

I always wanted to teach. That was attracted to the Sisters and I used to- of course, had my poor younger brothers- they were my students. And when my cousins came over to visit- they were students. And I had a little blackboard when I was a child-like most, a lot of little kids who do that, you know they want to be teachers. That was my- understand that? [laughter].

So that was my beginning of wanting to be a teacher and I think also, the seeds to becoming a Sister. When people say to me, “When did you know you wanted to become a Sister?” and I say to them “Well very, very young.” [laughter]. And I’ve always had that in mind that I wanted to enter the Convent.

So when high school time came to choose, at the time that I was graduating, our community-the Sisters of St. Joseph- ran a school in downtown Brooklyn and it was called the Junior Aide of Sisters of St. Joseph. And that was for young ladies who were coming out of Elementary School- mind you- who were interested in becoming Sisters later. And so it was a small school and it was a great school, we had wonderful teachers there. And again, because it was so small- the community couldn’t afford to keep it open. So it was open until two or three years after I graduated.

So, my intention was to enter the Convent. When I graduated in June of 1953- okay, that September, I entered the Convent. And here I am- about 65 years later, something like that.

DA: I have a question. So when you told your family you wanted to enter the Convent, what was their reaction?

SM: Well, I always said I wanted to be a Sister. It was no big surprise. You know, honestly- it was not a big surprise. So it wasn’t- and because I went to that school, you know they knew that it was in the back of mind that this is really what I wanted to do.

And also, when I- at that time, which was in the 1950s- a number of young girls, you know, did come to the Convent. I had a big- when I entered the Convent-our group was, I mean, 80-we were about, 80 girls entered that, right. That was a big group. And a lot of them left on the way, you know, but- that’s how many wanted to become Sisters at that time. So it- you know, of course today, nobody wants to. Or very few.

DA: Yeah, very few.

SM: Very few. Yeah, so that’s-there weren’t- I also, this is beside- I have a brother, Lord have Mercy on- he died-he’s- a few years ago. But he became a Priest. He was behind me- they were twin brothers. He- that was his thing too. He thought he liked to be a Priest, and he thought of that early on in life. And he went to a special school again, Cathedral College. And that was for
fellas who were interested in becoming Priests. And he was, and he went there and eventually became a Priest- a wonderful Priest.

[11:11]

GB: I have a question. Was your family very religious? Were you raised, religious?

SM: My mother was very religious. My father- he kind of worked on Sunday’s so he seldom got to church. He had a truck, where he sold ice and coal. And so he did that also on Sunday mornings. But my mother was very religious. And you know, we had statues in one particular bedroom. And she’d be on her knees, and she was- I got that from her. Yeah, she was a good lady. And he was a good man, I don’t mean to say, but because he was working and he was taking care of us, with- by doing that. So, anything else? [laughter].

CM: Yes, so I had a few more questions about the Dillon Center.

SM: Oh okay. You know I don’t know too much about the Dillon Center [laughter], but go ahead. I mean I’ve been there a long time. I mean the fact is, that the Child Department teachers, have offices in the Dillon Center. That’s our involvement there. And the reason is, because our young ladies, the girls who come to Child Study have to do field work, where they have to go into the Dillon Center and observe the students and they write reports and things of that nature. So they, it’s kind of- the Dillon Center-what’s the word-I’m sorry I can’t think of the word. Anyway, we use that. The students use that for their field work, mostly.

CM: Okay, so you said you’ve been at the Dillon Center for about 20 years now. So my question was, in the past 20 years, how has the Dillon Center changed?

SM: It has changed- in the numbers, there are not as many students as there have been in the past. That’s the big change. Teachers that are there now, are wonderful and I’ve seen many wonderful teachers come and go. But the numbers- we’re concerned about the numbers of students coming.

CM: Okay and I have another question. So based-

SM: Laboratory. That’s what it is- it’s a laboratory. [Laughter]- I knew it would come. So yes, the Dillon Center is a laboratory for our students.

CM: That’s very interesting. So based on what you just said about the numbers dwindling. How do you think that will impact the Dillon Center in the next decade?

SM: Well- I’m not too sure that I can really answer that, okay? The number is beginning to go up again so that- we’re confident that it will go up again. You know, we have a lot of competition with this free kindergarten and pre-kindergarten and all that. You know, so there is a lot of competition. But there are people who want the kind of education that the Dillon Center gives, and therefore they’re willing to spend money because their tuition is- you know-not peanuts, that’s for sure.
DA: It’s not cheap [*laughter*].

SM: No, it’s not peanuts. That’s for sure. But they get a wonderful education there. And you know, there’s a big thing about play. In regular kindergartens, in many of the kindergartens in public school, they don’t believe in play in kindergarten. It’s all academic. So we definitely in the Dillon center- play is a- everything is- and they learn. They learn to socialize and that’s so important- that the children learn to socialize. Especially when they first start. They’re adorable-they really are. They are adorable. So that’s the way I’m answering that one. Okay?

CM: That’s about it. [*Laughter*]

SM: That’s about it [*laughter*].

[15:12]

GB: So I wanted to ask, in comparing your personal experience working with schools, do you think the reliance on technology in schools is more helpful or more harmful? Why?

SM: You asked the wrong person [*laughter*]. Technology and I are not great friends [*laughter*]. You know, I learned to use the computer but I’m not great on the computer. There are things I have to run for help for. Now I did some observation, you know, I don’t know if you know- I did some- I helped- this is what happened. I started off in the office as I explained to you before. And while I was working in the office, I realized that there were big classes - big junior class one year. And only two people were observing- doing the observations, going out to the schools. So I remember saying to Susan, she was in charge at that time, “Susan, I would be happy to help out with the observations.” “Oh, that’s great.”

So I started going doing observations with the juniors in public schools. And I was really happy to do that, I wanted to get in there, I hadn’t been in public schools. And the schools I had gone to, really were doing wonderful, great jobs, I have to say. You know I saw some things that I wouldn’t do, or wouldn’t agree to. But on the whole, they’re doing a good job. So, then, when that group graduated into senior year, they needed help for the senior group. So I went into- I started going, observing the seniors also. And I learned a lot about the public schools, you know.

And I think when I was doing the observation, they were just beginning to do- they had computers. I never went into a school where all the students had a computer, or sat at a computer. Most of them had a couple computers in the room and the children could go to it. But they were beginning with the smartboard at that time, and the teachers were learning it. So I think that, I mean, that seems to be the route that everyone is going- that you have to have computers- you have to have technology in the classroom. To keep the students interested and knowledgeable, it is very important.

GB: So what advice can you offer Child Study majors, and other graduates of the College.

SM: [*Laughter*] Child Study and graduates? Or you mean, students?
GB: Majors and other- yeah, the students. And other students within the school.
SM: Just general?

GB: Yeah, just general, I guess [laughter].

SM: Work hard and do the best you can, and get out as much of the college- your college years as possible, because they go fast. And you do learn good stuff here. I don’t want you to have to regret, ‘oh I should’ve done this- should’ve done that’. Do it now. Sometimes I say to the Child Study students because, I say to them, you know- could you just hold off on your boyfriends? [Laughter]

DA: I totally agree [laughter].

SM: Maybe? You know maybe for four years, you can just go easy, you know. Because they have so much work that they have to do. I’m sure this is true of all the departments, okay. So the social life- you should give yourself something on the weekend. You should- you know, do something nice for yourself on the weekend. But don’t do it all, you know save some time, even on the weekend, to catch up- especially if you’re behind. But work the hardest you can, because again- you know this is really, a very important time. And, you know, be social here too, you know. Don’t miss out on some of the fun things they do, okay?

[19:20]

AA: Find a balance, basically.

SM: That’s right, thank you, that’s a good one. Balance. You’re right. Your life should be balanced, too, you know but- I think, you know, once it’s gone, it’s gone. And then you don’t want to regret, you know. Okay, anything else? Yes?

DA: So this next question-

SM: I’m sorry, I can’t remember your name, so I can’t say-

DA: My name is Danielle.

SM: I know, but you know I’m going to forget it [laughter].

DA: This next question has less to do with your work here and more to do with your opinions on the Catholic Church. So my question is what are some current issues in the Church that you feel are the most pressing ones?

SM: I think, the lack of young people in the Church. I think that we’ve lost a great generation of students, young students, young people. They’re not coming to our churches. And of course, you know, I’m only talking from what I see and what I hear. There are some areas where there- the young people are very involved. Most of the- from what I hear- I’m talking about Brooklyn, and
Queens too I guess. Young people, are not churchgoers. They consider themselves spiritual-able, but they don’t know- that’s the word I’ve heard. But they don’t consider themselves, part of the Church, you know. And I think that’s a- very, very serious. And after all, this is the future- of our Church or any church.

DA: Yes, of course. Do you think Churches would benefit by the creation of more youth groups, or things along those lines?

SM: I do, I do. You know, because I’ve been involved in parish work, you know while I was principal. And- it’s not always easy to get the young people to come, to some of the activities that you plan for them. But, parishes are able to do with- there are some key people who are able to do it. You know, and I think that we have to get people to go and talk to them, and say you know “What do you do?” and “How do you do this?” and share. And again, I think it might be happening, but I am not aware of it, unfortunately.

When my brother was a Pastor for many years- you know, I remember, you know we would talk about these things. And he had young people group. I remember his one first group that he had at his first parish, he wasn’t a pastor then. And the young people they did so many wonderful things, you know.

And I think young people are still doing wonderful things today, when you hear about them, you know. They don’t get enough publicity, unfortunately, you hear about all the bad things that are happening. But I think that, it’s important that they come back.

DA: Earlier you mentioned in the classrooms today, that technology is very important. Do you think if the Church- somehow used more technology- that would maybe draw in more youth?

SM: I don’t know, you know, how would they do that?

DA: That’s true.

SM: I’m just thinking- I’m trying to think of- they, you know there’s a- we have a Catholic station- on TV channel- 97- and, they do special things on that. You know, I don’t know how many young people, I don’t think too many old people watch it either, never mind young people, you know. I don’t know how they would do that, honestly. But that’s a good idea. Do you belong to any kind of a group, yourself?

DA: No, I was when I was younger. My Church- Our Lady the Miraculous Medal- in Queens, actually has a pretty involved youth program, at the moment.

SM: Really?

DA: Yeah, they have meetings every two or three weeks, they’re always doing some sort of service project.

SM: That’s wonderful, that’s wonderful.
DA: And right now, the Church is planning this pilgrimage to Italy and they’re trying to get teenagers to go to it, if they can.

SM: Right.

DA: They’re trying to make it affordable, so that people can afford it.

SM: It’s a little expensive, but that’s great to hear that.

DA: Yeah, I’m very glad my Church is doing that.

SM: Right, yes.

DA: So the last question is, is right now, we’re in the Convent at Founder’s Hall. And many of the Sisters of St. Joseph’s live here. Do you live here at the moment?

SM: No.

DA: And why is that?

SM: Okay, I think I explained about, not being- okay. When I first went to the- when I was principal, my second school that I was principal, there was no room in the Convent, so I looked around for this other Convent, which I found then I stayed there because, it was a nice- a wonderful group of Sisters. And when I then was assigned to Angela Hall, I didn’t choose to move in here. This was the closest Convent then at that time. I chose to stay where I live because it was very- I was happy there.

DA: That’s good.

SM: I know and then I had to use the car to get there. [laughter] But that was nice. I mean that was not a hardship, you know, to have to drive here. But that’s really what it was. They invited me. The Sisters who lived here, did invite me, you know. I said “thank you, but I think I’m going to stay where I am now”. You know, that is- that’s all new. At one time, we never did that in the community. All religious communities have changed since Vatican Council, which was back in 1962- ‘63- ‘64- around there.

And, we all- you know there was a time when you lived in the Convent where you worked. And that was it. You didn’t do any of this traveling. But we’ve become- open, I guess is the word. And- because, it makes more- some things made more sense, you know, anyhow- but there are a lot of changes in our religious communities throughout the years. And you’ve noticed mostly the habit.

DA: Yeah, of course.

SM: Because you don’t know the old habit at all, you’ve only seen pictures of it- right.
DA: I don’t believe I’ve seen- yeah.

SM: There are Sisters today who do wear habits, and they are newer communities, they’ve just been formed in the last 10, 15 years. And they do wear a simple habit. And actually, I loved my habit. When the time came, you know, we were all renewing ourselves- that was the question- that was the Pope had said, “You really need to renew yourselves. Go back into your, read into your constitutions and you know, see what areas you need to update on, or do something about.”

And one of the things was, we learned, or we did know, that when my community was founded- 18- 1750, I hope I have the right date- sorry if I don't. But anyway- they were wearing the dress of the day. The women, were wearing what the widowers were wearing- because they didn’t want to be picked out. There was persecution going on- especially in France, that’s where we were founded. And the persecution- they were persecuting members of the Church, and especially if you were religious. So the Sisters, who formed- it was a small group, it wasn’t a big group. They wore- the dress of the day. So part of our renewal, back in 1960, whatever, was that we could wear the dress of the day. Did it- and it made people- made us more accessible to people, it really did. People felt, “Oh, you know they’re real human beings.”

They used to think we had no legs, had no hair- because everything was covered. [Laughter] Especially the children- younger people, you know. But no, we were real human beings. And so it did make people more- open to us, and we were open to them. So, it had a good purpose.

AA: That’s good, that’s good.

DA: So does anybody else have any questions, they want to ask?

AA: I have a question. So you stated that you previously worked as a first grade teacher and as a principal?

SM: Yes.

AA: Which one did you prefer more?

SM: First grade teacher [laughter].

AA: Why?

SM: I liked- I love teaching. And when I was asked to be principal- I said well- I knew they needed a principal, so even though when I was principal, I used to go into the classrooms- often. And sometimes, if I had a teacher who was absent-

AA: You’d take over?
SM: I did [laughter]. Except for math- upper grade math. I said, I can’t do this. I wasn’t- but that didn’t happen often. But I did fill in. Yeah- I love teaching, over being an administrator, I did. I was, I mean being an administrator had its good perks too, you know. But, I did.

DA: Anybody else?

CM: Yeah, why first grade? Over all- 

SM: [Laughter] Why?

CM: Yeah, why first grade?

SM: Well, I started out in second grade, okay. And then, what happened was- in the first grade- the Sister was a nun, the teacher- got sick. And so, you know, people realized how important the first grade was. So, they asked me to change from the second grade to the first grade. And they got a lay teacher to fill in the second grade. We began getting lay teachers at the time, but at one time, this school was filled with Sisters, you know. And then we had some lay teachers, and then- that’s what happened. And I always wanted the first grade, so I- you know. And I think I did a pretty good job as a first grade teacher [laughter].

DA: I’m sure you did [laughter]. Anybody else?

SM: Being an administrator was different, and in- really, you could reach more people as an administrator. It was a wonderful job too, to tell you the truth. Whatever my- my jobs have all been- I’ve been very blessed. You know- my present job I’m blessed with too.

DA: Well thank you for your time today, Sister Mary.

SM: You’re welcome. Did I talk too fast?

DA: Oh, no [laughter].

SM: And I answered all your questions?

DA: Yes, you answered all of them- some of them before we even asked them [laughter].

SM: Thank you very much.

DA: Thank you.

SM: Good luck with whatever you’re doing, okay? And nice being with you.

[30:09]
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 4/26/18 (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.

Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature

Sister Mary Sivillo

Date April 26, 2018

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly)

Sister Mary Sivillo
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Interviewee/Interviewer's signature  

Date  

Interviewee/Interviewer's name (please print clearly)  

4/24/2018  

Danielle Armato  

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

Interviewee/Interviewer’s signature

Date 4/26/18

Interviewee/Interviewer’s name (please print clearly) Galerieve Brodski
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.

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Interviewee/Interviewer's signature

China Monroe

Date

April 26, 2018

Interviewee/Interviewer's name (please print clearly)

China Monroe
Informed Consent/Release Form

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Interviewee/Interviewer's signature

Antonio Ariza

Date

April 26, 2018

Interviewee/Interviewer's name (please print clearly)

Antonio Ariza