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 Elizabeth Hill  
**Date of interview:** April 12, 2017  
**Location of interview:** Founders Hall, St. Joseph’s College, 232 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn, New York

**List of acronyms:** SEH = Sister Elizabeth Hill, LB = Lubna Batool (student), CC = Cayla Caravella (student), YF = Yesenny Fernandez (student), LK = Lauren Kehoe (moderator), MM = Mayumi Miyaoka (moderator),

**Recording Link:** https://youtu.be/t6JDCEsQ5dE

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St. Joseph’s College
SEH: We start from here. What would like to know about this house? Why don’t you tell me what you know?

CC: I really don’t know much about it really.

LB: Since we are both tour guides here in the Admissions Office and we do give tours around the campus but we don’t - the only thing that we mentioned about this is that the sisters live here. So we never actually get the actual history of it, so if you can give us that, that would be great.

SEH: This house was built in 1874 by Charles Pratt, the founder of Pratt Institute. He built it to raise his family here. He had a large family and as each of his sons who was getting married they built homes across the street. So that you have three homes: 245 which we own, the Bishop’s house 241, and what they call the Caroline Ladd Pratt house where the president of Pratt, Tom Schutte lives. There was a fourth home built by a son which is cross Willoughby, but that was damaged by a fire and it eventually got down and was replaced by the apartment houses that housed the workers and the Navy Yard during the Second World War.

If you look at this house this was built obviously as the grand style, he was a partner of John D. Rockefeller. This was, of course, before the income tax, so he had a lot of money. [Laughing in the background] He pretty much did whatever he wanted. We think that when the Pratts built the house this part [elevator] was not there - but this wall and the elevator were not there because if you look at this, you see this white marble hallway that sweeps around, and goes right up to marble stairs. At some point we think they decided to add an elevator and they wrecked the whole entrances- but frankly we are very happy to have it now [laughing] because we would have a very hard time managing without it.

So, anyways these were their formal living areas. This was at one point a parlor- it is obviously now a chapel. This is what we call the North Parlor probably because it is on the north side of the house- again you see the magnificent ceiling. This used to be more ornate. At one point it collapsed and so they never reconstructed it with the kind of ceiling like that or like this. But this was kind of structure all through the house. You see the woodwork is magnificent. I believe they brought workers in from Italy to really work on site. So we still have these working doors. It’s just incredible. [Opening the wooden sliding door] We have them here in the chapel, if you look at the etching, this is all original, all of this goes back to 1874. We have folks from the Metropolitan Museum here about two years ago, they were enchanted because of the way it has been preserved, there has been so little change.

LB: Yeah, and I think in Touhy Hall, we also have the Burns Hall and next to it is the Parlors, I see the whole structure of the building it definitely resembles this building.
SEH: Yes, that was the home of Herbert Pratt, one of his sons. So this is the parlor, and all these little rooms. Probably this was when they were having guests, that refreshments would be brought up and prepared here and brought in to be served [chucks]. [Walking] We are now basically in the servants’ area - oh and we have dumbwaiter.

CC: Oh!

SEH: Yeah, and the kitchens were all downstairs, all the food would be cooked downstairs and then put it on dumbwaiter and sent it up. We would then have the butler’s pantry.

[Dr. Raymond D'Angelo and Sister Mary Florence Burns in the butler room]

Dr. D’Angelo: Well, hello.

SEH: Well, look who is here! These young ladies just interviewed me.

Dr. D’Angelo: Oh, I heard about them. Honors students.

SHE: You know Dr. D’Angelo, I assume.

Dr. D’Angelo: I don’t know them, I know their faces. But I haven’t had them yet.

SEH: You will know Dr. D’Angelo very soon, hopefully you will have the opportunity to have couple of classes with him. And this is Sister Mary Florence, who I was referring earlier- [talking to Sister Mary Florence] I said some things about you- well not nice.

S. Mary Florence: Oh, really?

[Crowd laughing]

SHE: Anyway I am giving them a little tour. This is what we used to call the priests parlor, because when the sisters would have mass every day the priests would have breakfast here. But we think maybe perhaps Mrs. Pratt met with her housekeeper and set plans for the day or had guests. We do not know exactly what this room is for.

[Sister Mary Florence]: No, but what I suspect that Mr. Pratt may have used it on occasion for a little business, that would be my guess. Because Jerry Pratt said that, his mother used the room on the second floor...

SEH: On the front...

Sister Mary Florence: In the front, which we now call the computer room. She used that. If you notice, there is a door that connects to the community room and the major bedroom was there with this connecting door.
SEH: Right, but anyway frankly, we don’t know. That is the bottom line, we do not know.

Sister Mary Florence: We don’t know.

STUDENTS: Nice seeing you [Dr. D’Angelo & Sister Mary Florence]

Dr. D’Angelo: Nice to meet you all.

[Walking]

SEH: This is what we call our pantry, this is not the kitchen. The kitchen is probably twice the size of this down stairs. This is the famous dumbwaiter which we still use. [Pulls the dumbwaiter]. The food comes up and down.

YF: Wow, just like in a movie!

LB: Is it heavy?

SEH: When we used to have visitors, when my family came, children see this, and they all want to ride. We don’t cook here, the food comes up, we put it here, and then we eat inside in our dining room. It is a little weird. [Chuckles in the background]

CC: It looks like you have all the stove, toaster for real cooking.

SEH: I know! We can microwave stuff, we can make toast- this is pretty much for breakfast. We have yogurts, juice, toast, and cereal. But for the main meal, this was the dining room. Back in the day when there were 40 sisters living in this house, there were long tables that went this way and they squeezed 40 bodies in here- I do not know how they did it [chuckles in the background] but right now there are just 10 of us. We had this habit of leaving the table set all the time.

YF: Do you guys have someone that helps you with cleaning and maintenance?

SEH: Yes, we do have a lady that comes in on Saturday mornings, Anna. She’s wonderful. She does this floor, she does parts of this floor, the basement, the laundry room, and the kitchen. But then we share the rest of the house. We all have what we call “charges”.

LB: Like chores that everyone has...

SEH: Yeah, so I have a certain area of the house that I am responsible to keep clean, and Sister Mary Florence has hers, Sister Margret has hers, and we all do them. As sisters, we never had a tradition in our communities, as in some communities had traditions called choir sisters who never worked and lay sisters who did all the housework. We never did that, all of our sisters- the teachers, the nurses, everybody all so pitched and helped to keep the house going.

LB: Who would be in charge of the cooking?
SEH: Well, we have a cook, aren't we lucky?

LB: Oh, wow.

SEH: Yes, we have a cook but what we do is take turns with buying, so right now I’m on the buying. I have to do the shopping, and plan the menus because the cook comes in at three o'clock in the afternoon, so if you have anything like a roast chicken or something you have to be sure that it’s get in the oven before she arrive and we eat at about a quarter to six. She’s very good, and she comes and takes good care of us. We are one of the few convent that still has a cook. At most convent, sisters usually take turns cooking.

CC: That is a lot of people to cook for everyday if you had to do it yourself [chuckles].

SEH: Well, it would be, and right now my life is very hectic. I’m out a great deal. Sister Margaret is also, and Sister Pat is with the children. The other sister, Sister Betty is at Stella Maris, assisted living facility, and she gets home around eight o’clock at night so she couldn’t cook. It just wouldn’t be practical for us at this point. In other houses it is different. They work it out differently. Each house decides for itself on how it is going to manage.

CC: What is it like living all together? [Laughs] I don’t know.

SEH: We all get along very well. We have lived together for a long time, I think they know each other's perks. We managed very, very well, there is a deep love and affection. Once in a while there is a little frustration [student laughs]. You just get over it. I mean you figure, 9 or 10 women living together. The one thing that is always the problem is trying to decide when we had to change the carpet here, because everybody of course had a different taste. That becomes a problem. In a day to day people are very supportive, people are very caring – I mean it’s not nirvana, but we are a very happy house.

YF: I like the engraving of the dinner [The Last Supper].

LB: Engraving?

SEH: Yes, this is the Last Supper [on the wall]. And these fireplaces are of course all gas fireplaces. They didn’t have wood burning- but we never use them, it’s just for décor. But again just look at the detail. It is amazing. This is concession to the fact that we are all getting old and we get cold. The windows are the original windows which means that there are many, many, many drafts that comes through. And we don’t have those double pane windows. When the wind blows from the west during the winter time it can get like icicle here. So that is it, this is our happy home.

LB: How many bedrooms are in here?

SEH: I do not know, there are a lot.

SEH: Seriously. I really had to sit and think it through [laughing in the background] because there are some on the second floor, on the third floor, there is even some in the attic. Which we do not use it at this time because we don’t need them, but back in the day every inch of space the sisters had to double or sometimes even triple up in rooms. Which was apparently challenging when they’re all going up to graduate school with their own piles of books, and there were three of them in this small rooms tumbling over each other’s books and stuff- but they all got through it. But it is a very big house.

CC: Even the ceiling. It is so big and so open.

YF: The architecture, very beautiful.

LB: Yes, there is definition in every corner you can see.

SEH: Yes, thoughtful and very intentional. We were on *Law & Order* one time. They wanted to use- Mayumi, you probably have a clip of that- Angela Lansbury and Antonio Banderas [Angela Lansbury and Bradley Cooper in *Law & Order: Trial by Jury (2005)*] were the two starts. They wanted to use this room, as a courtroom and I said “no”. We had a lot more sisters here at the time and it would have been very distractive. There were Sister Alice, Sister [inaudible], and Sister Winifred, who were in their 80s and 90s and I just said “No, we cannot do that”. But they did use across the street, the Parlors and they took all the furniture that we had there and brought in other, and it was Angela Lansbury’s Upper East Side home. I said “Oh that was very nice”. Antonio Banderas, of course, was her son and he was the murderer but she didn't believe it so she was trying to bribe everybody, it was really one of those. But what they could do with the camera! When I saw the actual movie or the TV thing, they made the room look twice the size with the perspective- the way they used the camera they went deep and broad. It was amazing. We also had the walls- basically, this sort of neutral blah color and they came and painted the wall gray that they are now. And when they leave, of course, they restore everything exactly the way it was, and they began to bring in the bucket of paint, and I said “no, no no, we like the gray”. When they first painted I said “Gray, who even paints it gray”? But it was perfect. They had the artistic sense they knew what would work better. So that was a happy accident. So it has a little interesting history.

CC: The neighborhood had obviously changed so much since you’ve been here, what is like how the neighborhood how it has changed, and living in the middle of a College campus?

SEH: Back in the day, it’s true, when I was a student in the 70s, it was a dangerous neighborhood, quite frankly. It was tricky. But now they are opening up restaurants every other foot, people are moving in; young families with babies and doggie, and all kinds of nice things. It is also a very diverse neighborhood. It is a very nice blend of all different types of people. We have gay and straight, we got black and white, all mixtures of ethnicities and languages. I was walking on Myrtle Avenue the other day, I went to the store. And it was just marbling as I passed different group of people speaking all different languages, some of which I couldn't even identify. But I just said “Isn’t this great? Here we are, all getting along.” I think it is a very nice neighborhood right now, and I feel supremely safe- I mean… “Would I go out at 2 o'clock in the morning by myself and walk around? No!” [Students laughing]. I wouldn’t do that in Garden City, where my parents lived.
I wouldn’t do that in Garden City, either. But certainly during the day, taking subway, I feel very at home and calm. Of course, I’ve lived here for a gazillion years.

YF: How many years?

SEH: I’m not going to tell you. Longer than you have…. Probably twice as longer than you’ve been alive. Let’s me put it that way. [Laugh]

YF: Thank you so much for everything.

SEH: It’s been delightful meeting you all, and are you all juniors?

CC: I am a junior.

LB: Freshmen.

YF: Sophomore.

SEH: Okay, so we have at least one more, three more, and two more years left. So I wish you all great success in your studies. Are you all History majors?

STUDENTS: No.

CC: I am a Child Study.

SEH: OK, but you are history [inaudible].

LB: Nursing.

SHE: Nursing. That’s wonderful.

YF: Computer Information Technology, and Art minor.

SEH: Oh, an Art minor. That’s wonderful, and that’s a great combination. I wish you all success and happiness. And thank you, Mayumi. It’s been good.

MM: Thank you so much, Sister.

STUDENTS: Thank you so much.

[Walking out]

[17:14]

[Recording ends]
[Image Credit: IMDb - Angela Lansbury and Bradley Cooper in *Law & Order: Trial by Jury* (2005)]