Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Narrator: Ms. Helen Shea McGowan Gardner, alumnae of the Class of 1962.

Interviewer and Transcriber: Allison Graves, Class of 2018

Ms. Helen Shea McGowan Gardner is an alumnae of the Class of 1962, getting her Bachelor’s in Nursing. As a student she participated in clinicals at St. Joseph’s and Our Lady of Fatima Hospitals, and became the Vice President of Student Government. During this interview we touched upon her memories of the Nursing department, faculty members, student life, Salve’s neighbors, how she has been able to stay in touch with her classmates, and her thoughts on how Salve has grown.

Allison Graves: So your name is…

Ms. Helen Shea McGowan Gardner: My name now is Helen Shea McGowan Gardner.

Allison: OK, and you were a Nursing major here at Salve, and you graduated in the Class of 1962.

Ms. McGowan: That’s right, and I came back and got my Master’s in Health Services Administration and got that degree in ’88.

Allison: OK, can you tell me a little bit about your time here at Salve in the Nursing department?

Ms. McGowan: Well, I guess I could tell you lots of little things about my time here at Salve in the Nursing department. First of all, it was a very very different Salve. It was an all-women’s Catholic college. It was probably sixty percent resident students, forty percent day-hop[[1]](#footnote-1) students, and there was a distinction, socially, between the two. There were lots of rules and regulations. It was probably eighty-five percent religious faculty. For the most part we didn’t question the rules and regulations, but you know the whole world was different back then, in the late fifties/early sixties. It was simpler and it was a happy experience. I will say we were all very well prepared for our fields. For instance, there had never been a failure in the State Board exam for nursing licensure with a Salve student until the more recent history of the program. So it was rigid. We went summers, it wasn’t really quite a five year program, but it was very close to it. Yeah, we started out with over thirty in the class and it went down to thirteen by the time we finished. So some of that attrition was academic, some of it was because some people broke the rules in terms of dating someone they weren’t supposed to date, or not coming in at the right time, or those kinds of things that now would never never be tolerated by the students. So where do we go from there?

Allison: Well, how about the Nursing faculty, what were they like? How was your relationship with them?

Ms. McGowan: Well, because the group was fairly small, even though the thirty that we started out with was large, we were together in all classes so we really did bond. We only had a couple of lay instructors, for Med. Surg. Nursing for Freshman and Senior years. I guess I would have to say that given the fact that it was mainly nuns teaching us you did get a lot of the Catholic philosophy that this isn’t just a job, Nursing is a vocation. And a tremendous amount of respect for people in terms of, it didn’t matter who you were taking care of in terms of what they did in life, everybody had dignity, I mean that really was drummed into us. Not that it needed to be, I think most of us probably were that way, and that’s why we wanted to go into some sort of service type job, but it definitely reinforced those kinds of values and I think to the good. Yeah, definitely, when I look at the way the whole field has changed now. We were definitely the dinosaurs. [Laughter].

Allison: Can you tell me a little bit about what the classrooms were like? I know there were classrooms in Ochre Court, and the labs were at the basement of McAuley?

Ms. McGowan: That’s right. Ochre Court at that time was the hub. There were classrooms there, there were dorms there, the cafeteria was there, the bookstore was there, the mailboxes were there, the smoker if you will was there, and there were dorms…the nuns resided there. There also were classes in Angelus and in McAuley, and there were also dorms in McAuley, and upstairs in Mercy.[[2]](#footnote-2) Phys. Ed. was in the gym in Mercy, and then there were residence halls added later, but that’s where all the classroom activity was. Yeah, and you had the labs in the basement of McAuley. And you know the Nurses were integrated with the rest of the student body for the non-nursing courses, you know your religion, the philosophies, English, those kinds of things. So, we did mix. [Laughter].

Allison: Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember of Mother [Mary] Hilda Miley?[[3]](#footnote-3)

Ms. McGowan: Of who?

Allison: Mother Hilda Miley?

Ms. McGowan: I really…Sister Hilda was off. We didn’t see a lot of her. We had more interaction with Sister Rosalia, who was the Academic Dean. Sister Hilda just seemed, she seemed like a kind woman, but she was remote. That may have been because I was a day-hop, I may have seen less of her, and there may have been times like after class when other students saw her, but I had didn’t see much of her at all. Maybe I’m lucky, if I had been in trouble I would have seen her more! [Laughter].

Allison: So you did mention that you were a day-hop, did you attend any social events on campus? Or in Newport?

Ms. McGowan: Oh, yeah, sure. I mean especially in Newport, because I’m a Newporter originally.

Allison: Ok!

Ms. McGowan: And, I went to whatever was available. At the time, and I don’t know how it is now, but in terms of Student Government the President had to be a resident student, a non-resident could be the Vice President. I became the Vice President. So I was very very involved in campus life. I still maintain that there was a difference between day-hops and resident students, probably couldn’t be helped. Some of it may even have been in the minds of the day-hops who felt different, but no I absolutely [went to events]. There was no barrier to taking part in things, if you could get there it was definitely something you were welcome to take part in.

Allison: Did you have a favorite event that you attended?

Ms. McGowan: Oh! I don’t really know. It was all fun, and you’d work on the committee to plan the dance or the mixer, or whatever. I think maybe the Father Daughter dance was one of the highlights because of the fact that I was the first one in my family to go to college, and so my father was just so proud to be here, and to see his youngest child have that opportunity so I guess I’d give that my top space. And that was in Ochre Court, yeah. It was fun.

Allison: At the beginning of the summer, Allyse[[4]](#footnote-4) and I went through a lot of the old yearbooks. And we saw this one event called the Sapphire Ball, were you ever a part of that?

Ms. McGowan: Oh, sure. That was when you got your class ring. And they actually had like a paper mache of the Salve ring, you came through that. Yeah, that was a big deal. I know when my kids went to college, they didn’t even get class rings, one of them wanted money for a trip to Jamaica instead of the ring. But back then, you just would not think about not getting a class ring. And there was a dance that went with it, and you’re right it was called the Sapphire Ball. Actually I hadn’t thought about that in fifty some years. [Laughter]. Yeah, a lot of things are different. I mean as a nurse we had a capping ceremony, and a pining ceremony, and nurses don’t wear caps anymore, I’m sure they still get a pin, but yeah, different.

Allison: Can you tell me a little bit more about the capping ceremony?

Ms. McGowan: Well, like everything in that day, it had a religious aspect to it, so I mean part of it was sort of you reached this level, and you almost made some sort of recommitment to represent the values that were being taught and we were thrilled. Actually, and I’m sure you’ve never seen a Salve nursing cap, and you may never have even seen a Sister of Mercy in a habit. But they used to wear what I will call, and I don’t know the right name for it, but the bib.[[5]](#footnote-5) The piece here in at the tip that was a big white thing, ok? And then it went around the back of their neck. Well if you took that and laid it here [on the table], and took these two things [at the top], and put them together, and bent this [bottom part] up that was our cap. And they would, they told us, that it was the Mercy Peak, it was like a Dunce’s Cap [laughter], reaching toward heaven. I mean everything had this religious aspect. And it was difficult to work with the cap on because back in those days there were not a lot of private rooms. So you would have patients, and this was Student Nurses at St. Joes and Our Lady of Fatima,[[6]](#footnote-6) the curtains would be drawn between the beds, and your cap would constantly be banging into the curtain, so yeah. But I don’t know if you picture…so yeah that’s a Mercy Cap, but that’s something you didn’t know!

Allison: No! [Laughter].

Ms. McGowan: And now you couldn’t even buy one! I mean, it’s just, anyway, it’s a thing if the past.

Allison: So, did you have a favorite nursing class that you attended?

Ms. McGowan: I did. I would have to say it was Psychiatry, and a funny story, god rest her soul, but I had meeting with Sister Rosalia, and I told her I wanted to do psychiatric nursing, and she said I couldn’t. She said a nurse can’t decide what aspect of nursing [they wanted], a nurse has to just be a nurse. Well, I didn’t argue with the woman, but I mean if you want to be a history teacher, it doesn’t mean you’re not gonna be a teacher. I just…that stands out in my mind, but I guess I felt that in psychiatry I would be using more of me, instead of just doing procedure and following a formula. And the teacher at the time was Sister Marilyn, she was in charge of it, and there was Miss. Carlow, and someone else, and we went to the Rhode Island State Facility, then referred to as Howard, which I think is now not politically correct anymore, and we lived in the dorms, or the nurse’s residence there. My father was so afraid that I was going out there that he bought me a car [laughter]. He didn’t want me to be stuck there, but I just loved it. And Sister had us keep an anecdotal record of everything we said to the patients, so I can emphasize what you are going through with transcribing all of this, but it made you think about what you were saying because I had one woman who was a hypochondriac, and my first week every time I saw her I would say ‘how are you,’ well that was the end of the whole session, because being a hypochondriac that was all she wanted to talk about! And then I did go into Psychiatry after graduation. I went to the VA system in Brockton, and stayed there until I married.

Allison: So, back to campus life a little bit, I know you said you were a day hop. What was the students’ relationship with Salve’s neighbors? I know Wakehurst’s matron was [not fond of them].

Ms. McGowan: Wakehurst, well I can tell you a general story and I can tell you a very specific family story on Wakehurst.

Allison: Ok.

Ms. McGowan: The word was out that Mrs. Bruguiére, I think, somehow the Van Alen’s got involved as well, was very upset that there were Catholics in her neighborhood, and we were kind of afraid in walking down like to Mercy [that] this woman was going to soar over the wall and somehow disturb us. There were rumors that she had devil statues in the yard, and all kinds of stuff like that. But she was not happy to have Catholics who were worse than refugees nowadays to her…the people who lived the life she did in terms of being you know a very wealthy woman.

My father was an Irish immigrant, so was my mother. He worked for the telephone company in Newport, and he had to go to Wakehurst because of a technical problem, I don’t know exactly what. But he went to the kitchen door and explained that to run a wire, I believe, that he would need to cut a branch of a tree. So the woman who answered the door, I’m sure it was some domestic person, went to get Mrs. Bruguiére, and he was asked to wait and to please take off his shoes and step inside the kitchen, which he did. I hope he didn’t have a hole in his sock the poor guy. Anyway the response was he was not cut a single leaf off any tree because she did not want anything to increase the danger of her having to see those creatures. So I told Sister Jane[[7]](#footnote-7) at one of the Christmas socials here at [Salve and] was held at Wakehurst, how happy I was to come in the front door, with my shoes on, to the place that my father had been treated that way.

So that’s one neighbor we didn’t get to know very well! I think the others really…Salve’s been a good neighbor, and I have relatives in Newport and they’ve been struck by the fact that all of the additions and the buildings have been so [good] in keeping with the rest. There’s not an eyesore to be found, and also that in those buildings that were not donated they paid property taxes on, and a lot of schools wouldn’t do that. I think Salve is considered a good neighbor, and I think it always was, other than Mrs. Bruguiére. Of course, I mean I wasn’t in and out of those homes, I don’t really know, but I think being a local person somebody in the family would have known.

And speaking of neighbors, the Young estate is on Ruggles Avenue, and you’re too young, but I was here in the day when John Kennedy would drive his car from Hammersmith Farm over by where we went to lunch the other day, and go to swim in the pool. And we would walk around and he would stop the car, he told us we were fine Catholic girls. [Laughter]. And now I mean there would be Secret Service all over the place and so on and so forth. So that’s another neighbor that I don’t think minded having Salve around.

Allison: At lunch[[8]](#footnote-8) when we were looking through the yearbook, one of the pictures that was brought up was the one of President Kennedy and his wife walking out of the church on their Wedding [Day]. Did you attend? Do you remember what it was like for that to happen?

Ms. McGowan: Some of my classmates are right in the front row of that [picture]. I think they were identifying some of them. It was just huge excitement! It’s so hard now when you look at the division in the country in terms of being polarized, and maybe because I’m an Irish Catholic I was delighted to have an Irish Catholic, and as a Newporter that they had a place here, but for the most part there was just general excitement. You’ve heard that his administration was referred to as like the “Camelot,” and that’s really how people felt. That they had class, and they were attractive, and there was an elegance about them, so yeah, I mean you’d go anywhere you could to get a peak of them, they were like rock stars!

But they were friendly! There weren’t body guards around them and all that stuff, but yeah if you knew where they were gonna be and if you possibly could, you went to get a peak! [Laughter]. But Eisenhower used to summer here, he was over at Fort Adams,[[9]](#footnote-9) and there may have been others, but those are the two that I remember.

Allison: Back to campus a little bit, so you graduated in 1962. We didn’t have Miley, we didn’t have O’Hare, we didn’t have the library. What is it like to come back for reunions and see how Salve has expanded?

Ms. McGowan: It’s absolutely wonderful to come back and see how it has expanded! The one thing, and I tend to be very philosophical, I wonder and I ask myself the question: ‘Have I grown as much as Salve has grown?” And I guess the answer would have to be ‘no,’ but we all take great pride in it. There are some people that unfortunately on my class list that don’t want to maintain their connection. That’s their loss. But in general we’re just thrilled, absolutely thrilled. And very envious of the food that’s on display at Miley! My goodness, I mean there’s something for everyone there! It’s incredible, it’s incredible! You know we take great joy in it, and we just love…we were here just before Christmas and we went up on the third floor because the stars were being put back and we sat there for like two hours, just reminiscing and taking it all in and being so happy that its continued.[[10]](#footnote-10) I mean there was a point when they were really in financial stress, and recovered from that, and not only recovered, but have expanded. So, yeah, we’re delighted, I mean you wouldn’t believe, as I said, everything took place in Ochre Court. It’s like…how often do you go into Ochre now?

Allison: Not very often… [Laughter].

Ms. McGowan: And see, that was the hub. But it was small, I don’t know how many were in my graduating class, but maybe ninety? The bishop came and yeah, very different. Simple. Simple, simple. And you would not tolerate…the strict black and white world that we [lived in]. You could not go into the Cafeteria with Bermuda shorts on, you could not have your hair in rollers, you couldn’t…you got one late permission a weekend. So I mean it was very very different. At our fiftieth they read some of the complaints to Student Government, and we were hysterical laughing, but you know at the time we went along…the places you couldn’t go! You couldn’t go to the Hunt Club[[11]](#footnote-11) at all, now it’s not a dry campus. But all in all we’re very glad that it has become what it has become because its kept abreast of the times, and maybe they learned from some of the mistakes they made with people like me in terms of being a little too rigid. [Laughter]

Allison: Ok, so we’ve mentioned Ochre Court quite a few times, Robert Goelet donated the building, and he was around a lot during the years that he had left, did you ever meet him, ever see him?

Ms. McGowan: No! No, I had no idea that he was around.

Allison: Hmmm.

Ms. McGowan: No, no.

Allison: Alright, that’s ok…

Ms. McGowan: Is that a true historical fact?

Allison: Mmmhmmm, he was around at least during the beginning. I wasn’t sure if he was still coming around with your class or not.

Ms. McGowan: He may have been, he never entered any classroom that I was in, no. And I had…I thought that he was long gone for the nuns to have gotten the building. Hmmmm. I’ll have to check that out!

Allison: Ok! [Laughter]. So, we did meet for lunch with seven other members of your graduating class. How have you guys been able to keep so in touch, and meet four times a year?

Ms. McGowan: A lot of it is geographical because people are not that far away. There’s a couple that actually at the last minute bailed out on that luncheon. And it’s also the ease of social media, you can text people, and email people, and we try and arrange it so that…I don’t know if you had left, but the woman kind of kitty corner from you, she goes to Florida so we are going to something in September before she leaves for Florida and that kind of thing. We do it maybe three times a year, and to be very honest, we do it more now than we did before and that’s partly because you’re working, you get married, you’re raising a family, life is very centered on that. Then as the kids leave, and you kind of pick up relationships again, and fortunately that’s what we’ve done. But we were a small class, and we have been close, we have been very close. And look forward to those gatherings and as we started to say, it’s so much more fun as you get old because you will soon see that when you come back for reunion in the beginning people are a little competitive, like well what kind of a job does she have, or is her date good looking or not good looking. And then you get to: well what schools are her kids going to, or his kids going to, you get beyond all that, and you’re just so glad that you’re healthy and can get together with some old friends. And we reminisce! The stories…I mean you’d be laughing out loud, I mean we stole a cat to do the anatomy exam, we had the cat on the fire escape on Mercy Hall [laughter]. We weren’t perfect children. Yeah, so we just have a lot to laugh about. And some of it I think is the fact that we know that our time is short, so we want to do as much as we can together.

Allison: Are there any stories that you’d like to add and put on tape?

Ms. McGowan: Well, the cat story you have now. [Laughter]. My cat was named Ambrose, you worked in pairs. Well, because I was not in the dorm, I would be telling you hearsay because I wasn’t there for a lot of it. I can tell you that one person almost got expelled from our psychiatric affiliation because she answered the phone by saying ‘hello.’ And you were supposed to say ‘good morning, nurse’s residence, miss. so and so speaking.’ So as a result of that a conference was held with all of the nursing…well the psychiatric nursing faculty and the students and we were asked to explain why this person should not be expelled. And she is now a rising senior. And so I raised my hand and I said ‘some rules are more important than others.’ The nun said ‘Miss. so and so get a piece of paper and write that down,’ and that was the end of it. But that person almost lost [everything] for the way she answered the phone. And some of it may have been the state of Rhode Island’s rules because we also were compelled to have our shades at a certain point in the window, exactly halfway. So whether the state of Rhode Island was saying to the faculty the windows…I don’t know, you know, and we never asked, but another person as I implied was let go because she was dating a resident at St. Joe’s, and that was not allowed, a medical resident.

Allison: Wow.

Ms. McGowan: A lot left because they weren’t holding their own academically, it was a very rigorous program. And we got in trouble one day because we were using a hula hoop waiting for the nun to get into the class. We were just being silly, saying ‘look at Helen and the way she does the hula hoop,’ and Sister walked in…terrible things weren’t they! [Laughter]. And we used to get driven, we lived at Chapin which used to be a communicable disease hospital in Providence, and I think it’s now part of the Providence College campus, but a school bus would pick us up and bring us to St. Joe’s or to Fatima and the driver of the bus was an ambulance driver, and we would literally fall out of our seats! He’d take these turns, his name was Tony. On the other hand when we were freshman there was no dorm for us, and we had to rent rooms in Providence, again near the PC campus, but we had to walk all the way up Smith Street to Mineral Spring Avenue where our Lady of Fatima is. We had to walk to Fatima for our Clinical, we had to have our uniforms laundered at an outside facility. And I don’t think that would be considered appropriate now. But anyway, good old days! [Laughter]. Didn’t do us any harm. But you know if you spoke to some of the residence students, they used to…there were food things, and nuns helping them, and nuns covering for them if they were coming in late and that kind of thing. The nuns were the RA’s.

Allison: Oh! [Laughter].

Ms. McGowan: Picture that! So that’s it kid, anything else?

Allison: There’s nothing really that I can think of,

Ms. McGowan: Ok,

Allison: Oh! If you don’t mind if I take out my phone I have a picture, it’s just of you’re yearbook bio, and I did have one question.

Ms. McGowan: Sure

Allison: It says here, the very last one is called “Shea’s Principle: it is felt that…” So I was wondering what that…

Ms. McGowan: That’s the story I told you about the girl who was going to be dismissed, so Shea’s Principle was that some rules are more important than others. See! [Laughter]. I’m very transparent! [Laughter]. That’s it.

Allison: Yes, when we were going through the yearbooks it was quite fun to read all of the bios,

Ms. McGowan: I bet, it’s even fun to go back now. “The Big ‘M’” I know was in there, and that’s the Mooring, which is now just a restaurant, but in our day it was a bar and dance floor, and “O.C.’s,” those are Officer Candidates from the Navy, [they] would be there, so it was a place to go on Saturday nights. Yup, that’s it kiddo. [Laughter].

Allison: Well, thank you so much for coming to speak with me.

Ms. McGowan: My pleasure, my pleasure.

Allison: If there’s nothing else to add…

Ms. McGowan: Nope, nothing else, I’ll just wait for Joanne.

Allison: Ok!

1. Day-hop students commuted from home to school. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mercy Hall was the original name for the first set of stables that were donated by Robert Goelet soon after Ochre Court. The other half, when acquired was called Wetmore Hall, and now after the combining of the two they are known as the Antone Center. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mother Mary Hilda Miley was the second president of the University. She was president from 1948-1964. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Allyse Zajac was the other student affiliated with the Salve Regina Oral History Project. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The bib that Ms. McGowan is referring to is known as either the wimple or the quimpe. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The hospitals are St. Joesph’s and Our Lady of Fatima located in Providence and North Providence respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sister Jane Gerety is the current president of Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Allyse Zajac and I attended lunch at the Safari Room with several other members of the Class of 1962 about a week before the interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Fort Adams is a fort located in Newport that was established on July 4, 1799. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The stars were being restored on the top floor of Ochre Court. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hunt Club was a jazz club located on West Broadway. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)