Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Sr. Patricia Combies, class of 1965, English department faculty, Dean of Undergraduate studies, President of Mercy Sisters of RI.

Interviewer: Isabelle Gillibrand

Gillibrand: I am Isabelle Gillibrand. I am interviewing Sister [Patricia] Combies on June 21, 2018 for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. She is an alumna of Salve Regina, class of 1965, along with teaching English and serving as Dean of Undergraduate Studies at the university. She’s also spent time with the Sisters of Mercy of Rhode Island. [She has been a Sister of Mercy for fifty-seven years and spent ten years in administration for the community.] So, to get us started, why did you choose Salve Regina for your education?

Combies: I didn’t choose it. I was sent here because I entered the convent when I was 18, right out of high school. I did my first two years of college as a Sister of Mercy in the novitiate in Cumberland.[[1]](#footnote-1) … After three years we were sent to East Providence. Those of us that were going to major either in liberal arts, like English or history, or the sciences were sent to Salve. We came every day on a bus from East Providence and came to school here. So it wasn’t my choice at that point. It became my choice later to teach here, but not in the beginning

Gillibrand: Would you mind describing a bit about student life while you were here at Salve?

Combies: One, you have to remember I was a Sister, and those were the days we were actually in the habit.[[2]](#footnote-2) We were only here in the day time, and of course the students were here all the time. However, from our perspective, from what I remember, student life was pretty formal in a lot of ways. At one point, they had these jackets that are similar to what the Salve people that belonged to Sigma wear now, but they wore those for the main meal. The campus was very different. The campus consisted of Ochre Court, and Ochre Court was partially a dorm. It was the chapel, which was in the ballroom at Ochre Court until we got the new chapel, and downstairs was the cafeteria for both the students and the sisters. That was the first part of the campus, next was Marian Hall, and I think that was just faculty offices when I was a student. Next was Angelus; that was a classroom building. McAuley was the library, both first and second floors, and the third floor were dorms where the servants quarters were. That was it on that side of campus. On this side[[3]](#footnote-3), the next major building that is now Antone Academic Center was Mercy Hall. Where we have DiStefano auditorium was the gym. There were classrooms on the first floor, and then when you walk over to the other part of the building there were science labs and a program we had that we certainly don’t have anymore, but it was called home economics. Women learned all about cooking and nutrition and sewing, but many of the women who took that program later became dietitians. So that was the on campus part, and then we had three dorms on Bellevue Avenue. They’re all still there; they’re all condos. One was right at the corner of Narragansett and Bellevue, that house has been all changed, and then two over on Bellevue heading towards Stop & Shop. The sisters who taught here, and there were lots of them at that time… it was a small school we were probably, I don’t know, maybe we graduated 150-200 students a year, and all women… and the sisters lived in the dorms. They were the RAs[[4]](#footnote-4) because that was the tradition at that time in colleges that you had adults in the dorms with the students. So that’s the campus part. Student life, they had all the kinds of clubs. They had a newspaper, I remember that because they came out all the time. They had dances all the time with people from the War College and the Navy base. The students would invite them as well as students from PC.[[5]](#footnote-5) The women did concerts, music was big always, there were always students involved. They played sports. We were pretty good at basketball and things like that. So student life was pretty good except that I know they had curfews for being in the dorm, and stuff like that because, again, being with the sisters, [the RAs who were also teachers], weren’t going to stay up all night with them. And I think most students lived on campus for their four years, but I’m not sure on that because we didn’t have a lot of interaction with the students, but we got to know them. They graduated in May or June, you know, the end of the school year. We graduated in August for some reason. They separated us a lot in the beginning. Later we would all merge, but at the time I was here we were kept kind of separate.

Gillibrand: Was it, because you said it was a bit different being here as a sister than being here as a student, do you think because it was divided did it ever feel strange?

Combies: No, it didn’t feel strange, and I think what had happened was when they first opened, because most of the faculty were sisters, and we were in the habit then, so you obviously knew you had sisters. In fact, funny thing about the habits was the habit that we had [had] this big bib type thing, but it was plastic. The people that took science courses had to go get the old fashioned ones that were cloth and actually starch them and wear them because the plastic one was dangerous in the labs. It would’ve caught on fire! I think keeping us separate was that the administration were afraid that maybe the women would perceive that the sisters were given special treatment because we were sisters. The other thing is, because at that time, as sisters, we had a much more rigid life. This was before Vatican II.[[6]](#footnote-6) We had… what were called “Silence Days,” or days when you only talked maybe at the evening meal. Now, when we were here I don’t know of any of us that paid attention to it, but I think the people setting up the sisters schedules were thinking we should be quiet when not in class. The other thing was we had to study because once we left here we went back home, and we lived in a house that was an infirmary. We had work to do… we didn’t get a lot of time to study at home, so we had to make sure we did our studying here. But I got to know the English majors, the girls, very well, the women that were in my classes. We got to know about their life, and… it was typical. They were looking to have dates for the weekend, and, you know, their activities, but women didn’t have a lot choices for careers back then. They were mostly going to be high school teachers because they majored… in history, in English, things like that, or nursing, the Home Economics people often became dieticians. Administration of Justice was offered sometime not too long after that, but it was a night course that was done for men. It wasn’t done, you know, in the day time and the regular campus at that point. This is pretty much typical student life as I remember it.. The women had to wear skirts, and when I was here one of the professors, this was the 60s[[7]](#footnote-7) and miniskirts were in, so the girls had these very short skirts, and we had a couple of male professors and they asked that, women had just started wearing slacks all the time, and they asked if the girls could wear slacks because they said the miniskirts were just too short in the classroom. [The administration began to change the dress code. Before the changes it was almost as if had] a uniform per *se*, but it almost looked like they did because they all had to wear a skirt and gloves, but then they got to be more casual in their clothes. Places, you won’t know them now because most of them are gone, but La Forge[[8]](#footnote-8), the restaurant on Bellevue, used to have a counter. Girls loved to go up there because they had the best chocolate cake and milk, so at night they’d go there for their treats. I’m sure they went out to drink, they were probably old enough because I think the drinking age was 18, so they must have had favorite bars in town. I guess it was a good life because we always got students. The enrollment was what it was supposed to be for this size school. But, you know, Miley was being built while I was a student, and O’Hare would open a couple of years after that. It was a small campus and classrooms. The one major event that I remember that we were all involved in was the day President Kennedy died.[[9]](#footnote-9) We were in class and I remember coming out and someone said, “Everyone’s going to chapel.” The whole school was in the chapel, and the chaplain came in and told us that the president had been shot. We prayed for him, and then by the time we left they had heard that he had died. We had to go back on the bus to home because it was the weekend, and the girls went, you know, I think they went and glued themselves to the television for the weekend watching all the events around it. [Another difference, of course, was library research.] There were no computers in those days, so you had to look at microfiche and stuff to see things on magazines and all printed articles. I think those are the major things I remember about student life. I mean they were very involved in the community here too. They had to, they did outreach through campus ministry… through the people. Some of them taught catechism in the different parishes and collected food for Thanksgiving baskets for poor families.

Gillibrand: Great. So after you were a student, you later returned as a faculty member...

Combies: Yeah. I had been teaching elementary school and high school, and I got a call and they said, “Would you like to teach at Salve?” I said I don’t know, so I came down and I met the head of the English department.[[10]](#footnote-10) He interviewed me and they hired me. It was the fall of ‘79.[[11]](#footnote-11) I was going to be half-time teaching in the English department, and half-time working in publications. At that time, again… computers are just being introduced, so we used to do a newsletter every week because there was no email to send messages or websites to put stuff up. We would do a newsletter for all of the faculty, and they put it in the dorms for the students about what was going on, so I worked on that and *Report from Newport[[12]](#footnote-12)*, which we still do, was done in those days. In fact, Dr. [Lois] Eveleth[[13]](#footnote-13) was one of the early people with it, and they would have articles, academic articles, written by faculty as well as pictures of alum and students because we were still very small.. So I did that and then I taught English. I taught mostly mass media, journalism in those days, because I had run a newspaper in a high school, and I taught television courses. I was kind of the English Communications person when I came. I went off to study and got my degree in writing and teaching writing, so when I came back in ‘87[[14]](#footnote-14) I did a lot of work with writing. I created a program for the ADJ[[15]](#footnote-15) majors that we just stopped last year, an English course that they took in writing, but I also came back to teaching literature again. But the changes when I came back because computers were in [would continue to evolve. Since my student days we had added O’Hare and Miley; we would build this building McKillop Library,] that would be the first huge project that [we] would take on.[[16]](#footnote-16) Since then we’ve done the renovations to Antone, built the chapel, all of that, so there were a lot of big changes. For the student life, in [1973], we went co-ed while I was away, so that was a huge change. People were surprised, and in the beginning, if we think we have 60-40 maybe women to men now it was probably more like 80-20 in the beginning. Not many sports for men, but that got to be better. I guess it changed the face of the social life. Oh, the one thing, and I don’t know if anyone has told you people about it, the boathouse.

Gillibrand: Dr. Quinn[[17]](#footnote-17) had mentioned that.

Combies: [Yes,] the boathouse was where the chapel is. It was just a very small building. It was red. It was a bar because the drinking age was 18. On Friday afternoons there was happy hour from 4-6, and faculty and students would go over and hang out. I taught there later; it became a classroom. After the drinking age went up we stopped serving liquor on campus. I always thought that being able to control liquor service was a great thing because when we had events on campus for the students you had the liquor there, so the Dean of Students usually, which was Dr. Sylvia[[18]](#footnote-18) actually at one point when I was working here, they could control it because when they decided students had had enough to drink they would just stop it, but the kids were having a good time so they’d stay and then they’d just have to walk home to their dorms as opposed to going into town. But once the drinking age went up then it became more of a problem. The boathouse was a fun place; it was a good place for faculty and students to gather and get to talk. By then, of course, we had a cafeteria in Miley, so there was a place for people to get together when they ate and so on, and we had added a lot of these dorms that you have now at that stage in the game.

Gillibrand: Great. So when you went to be a faculty member how did your perspective change from student to faculty. Was that transition difficult for you or...?

Combies: What was funny because Sister Mary Jean Tobin, I don’t know if you’ve heard, we had two sisters here that were twins, Sister Eloise and Sister Jean.[[19]](#footnote-19) Sister Eloise taught in the Theology department, and Sister Jean taught in the English department. I had had Sister Jean as a student here, and when I went to study she said to me, “I’m going to continue to teach until you come back because I want to make sure you have a place.” When I had first come she had been very nice to me, but when I came back from studying we team-taught for a couple of years. It was a thrill because she was an amazing woman, she was brilliant, and she began, and she had been teaching for a long time at that point, but she began every year like she had never taught the course before. She introduced African-American literature---at a time that nobody was doing things like that. She was great. So I got to team-teach with her, and then eventually she would leave and I was the sister in the English department. It was a big enough gap that there were very few of the teachers I had had here. Dr. David, Joan David[[20]](#footnote-20), was in the English department with me, and she had just come as a teacher when I was a student. So I knew her, but that was probably it. One of the things, back to the social life of the students, students had to help out with things, and so did we, the nuns. One of the ways they raised money in the 60s[[21]](#footnote-21) was they had teas, these silver teas for the women, really, in Newport, and sometimes the parents of some of the students that lived close by. That was one of our projects was they kept it downstairs in Ochre Court, they had all the stuff stored for the tea thing, and so on Friday afternoons some of the girls and some of the sisters would be polishing all the silver and setting it up for the teas which was a big money maker for the college. The funny things that we did. Coming back to teach was fine. It was challenging. I did teach a lot less journalism when I came back because we had begun to look for someone to teach journalism [and I spent more time in teaching] freshman writing programs that I worked with, and some literature. The rest of what we did was changes that we made in the college itself. At one time they changed the name.

Gillibrand: We had talked a little bit about how it went from Salve Regina College to the Newport College.

Combies: Newport College-Salve Regina. The alumni were furious, and it didn’t last very long. It didn’t make a difference because any way you look at it Salve Regina is just a strange name no matter who gets it, and some of the people kept saying Notre Dame, which has a huge male enrollment, was an all-male school for years and was a name like Salve Regina. It means the same type of thing, so why did we change it? So it did go back, but even the students didn’t like it when we changed it for some reason. It just didn’t seem to be the same thing. I think probably the 80s[[22]](#footnote-22) a lot of the growth was in buildings. We had outgrown everything, so we had the new library. Eventually they would begin to talk about having to add football as a sport with the boys, and then hockey for both men and women… So those kinds of growths affected the campus and what we needed, eventually Rodgers Center. We’re always, and you people know this, we’re always limited, to some degree, because we’re in this historic district. We never can do everything we want because of the restrictions, like, the goal originally with Rodgers was to be able to have a swimming pool because they thought they could go down, but that just wasn’t possible I don’t know if it’s not feasible because of what you’d hit when you go down or if it’s just they had a limit to the size they were going to let us put on the property. But, you know, that was a big deal. The biggest change was, I think, the change to a co-ed school. You just had more activities and we certainly drew students from a much bigger range than we did before. Primarily, in the early days, most of the young women were from, probably, the New England area and prominent, a lot, from Rhode Island because women didn’t go too far away from home for school. That was what I remember most about those years, and the teaching. It was a lot of innovation because we were just getting computers, so you started trying to use them in some way with the students. Not the way we are now, I mean, with Canvas[[23]](#footnote-23) and all that. That’s like the last part of my career coming back to that. It was fun, it was interesting to be here, always a fun school to be at. There was always something going on, some kind of activity. The other thing I think we worked on for a while is raising the academic level of the students who came trying to get students who came in, at that time, with higher SAT[[24]](#footnote-24) scores or higher ranks in their classes just to make people understand that this was a good school and we had qualified people. We had our first students during that time that graduated and went on to Brown Medical School and stuff like that, which really helped the reputation of the school. We began to get all the different organizations, all the different, you know, Sigmas[[25]](#footnote-25) for the different fields and things like that, so that was a big thing.

Gillibrand: Great. After you taught here, you were Dean of Undergraduate Students…

Combies: My last three years before I left, and that wasn’t intentional. I was in community leadership then part-time, but I hadn’t been thinking about leaving to do it. Sister Therese Antone[[26]](#footnote-26) was the president here, she asked me. We needed a Dean of Undergraduate Studies, so I was being mentored by [Dr. Judith Mills, the Academic Vice President at that time.][[27]](#footnote-27) It was interesting because I was in charge of undergraduate education. I had to meet with the chair people of every department once a month to talk about, you know, what we were doing academic, how we’d improve… the schedule for all the classes, all that kind of stuff. I was also in charge of, at that time, academic advising was actually a department with four people. Each one oversaw a class, and they did the follow-up. Like if a teacher had students who didn’t come to class, they would call them and they would check with all the teachers that that student had, and then they’d see the student if it seemed to be a problem. They do feedback. So it was a real… and most of that falls on the student’s advisor, but it used to be we had someone that did it. The library was part of my responsibility, the Writing Center, the tutoring center, basically anything that had to do with academics, and then problem-solving. I had lots of funny things that happened when I was doing it. I always said, and this may or may not be a nice thing to say but it’s true, I found the students the easiest people to work with in that job. The students I found to be very reasonable. They would be upset about something, but if you could sit down and talk with them… and let them explain what happened, and then we’d talk about well can you see why that was an issue. They would usually be able to come to a reasonable conclusion. Unfortunately, some of the adults that I worked with, like faculty and staff, tended to be more difficult at times because, of course, they were usually sure they were right, and it was harder. I had some funny incidents. The dance club was just getting started, and this would’ve been, it would’ve been between 1996and 2000. The dance club and the theater had to use the former gym for practice, at that time, they were still in [Mercy Hall]; it’s now Antone. That part that’s the auditorium that had been the gym was then used by the theater for practice, and it was also used by the dance club. The two just didn’t get along, and they were getting ready for a play. Dr. Masterson[[28]](#footnote-28), who was in charge of the theater, had built the scenery. The play was going to be done in Ochre Court, but he had built it over there and he wanted to leave it out in the gym so that when they practiced he wouldn’t have to move it and set it up, but the dance club had that place for three nights for their practices. They were arguing, so they came to me. We went through this big, long thing, but in the end I said to them, “You can’t do it, I’m sorry, I know it’s inconvenient, but you really have to move that stuff out for the nights that they have it because they have a right.” So the next year, they managed somehow to clear space in the bottom of Reefe [and Hunt] dorm, and the dance group, wound up there. They think they’ve died and gone to heaven now that they’re in Antone because now they have their own space and theater has its own space. But that was one battle. Then student battles were funny because I had one man graduating and he was short a credit, so his mother came to see me. He was going to be commissioned in the Marines at graduation, and I said to him, “Well, what’s the problem?” He said that he never got credit for a course, so I said, “Well did you talk to the teacher?” No. “Did you talk to the department chair?” He never talked to anyone. I have his mother, this is a week before graduation, and she’s furious. So I call the Registrar’s office, the grade was there, somehow it just didn’t show up on his transcript. He was fine, and the mother was furious with me still. She said, “Well, I’m an alum and I’m never going to give you money anymore.” And I said, “Well, I’m sorry about that, but really if your son had just either talked to the teacher or the department chair or come to see me, like you did, we could’ve solved it with one phone call.” It was those kinds of silly things that would happen where mistakes get made, and if people come you can usually straighten them out, but if they don’t tell someone the issue, they become a problem. I think sometimes students just presume there’s going to be some big, huge issue, and it wasn’t, it was just somehow or other it missed the transcript. But anyway, it was interesting being Undergraduate Dean. It was busy though, it was a busy job, and you had the hard things sometimes like if something happened to students… you had to deal with that. Also sometimes dismissing people, but that didn’t happen very often, we didn’t have to dismiss a lot at least when I was in office we didn’t have to dismiss. And there were procedures anyway, most of that was handled on student life side, we didn’t usually have to do it except to inform the teachers that someone would not be coming to class because the Vice President for Student Affairs had to handle all the student problems. I think the other thing that grew over that time were more clubs connected to departments where students were doing things that gave them other insights, something like what you’re doing this summer, with the internships.[[29]](#footnote-29) That’s another program I think that’s grown immensely here is internships for students. Even in disciplines you’d never think of. Why would you want an internship? But more and more students, like for instance the English literature people. Some of them are asking to do internships which they never would’ve thought of before, but if they’re not in Secondary Ed[[30]](#footnote-30) they’re looking to find a place, maybe like Redwood Library or something like that where they could get experience in something they might use for afterwards. I guess maybe that’s the biggest change. When I was here as an undergrad we were completely liberal studies. I don’t know when we introduced business, may have been here when I was here but I don’t think so.[[31]](#footnote-31) Today we are still an emphasis on liberal studies, you know, that the core, but certainly the majority of students are in professional programs: Business, education, social work, Administration of Justice. Administration of Justice and nursing were probably the first two professional programs that were developed.

Gillibrand: So did you intend, did you ever come in with the goal of wanting to be Undergraduate…?

Combies: No, and I didn’t even have a goal to be an administrator. What it taught me, which was… really wonderful, [Dr. Judith Mills,] the woman I worked with who mentored me the first year and then her husband got ill and she left[[32]](#footnote-32). [Dr. Barbara Kathe[[33]](#footnote-33) came in as a substitute vice president,] but I mentored with her and she was nice. What I learned from it was, and, in fact because I’d been offered the Vice Presidency when the first person left, and I said to the president at the time[[34]](#footnote-34), “No, I don’t know enough about this.” I went and took a course at Harvard in the summer, and did one at Wellesley on Saturdays in the winter. What I learned from it is it’s not the kind of administration that I like. It’s wonderful, and for people who love it it’s great, but I like collaborative, and it’s very hard to do collaborative administration in institutions because… if you’re in a Dean’s position, you’re middle management. You have to do what the vice president and president want, and at the same time you represent, in my case, I represented the students and the faculty. I talked with the faculty about stuff, or students would come to me with stuff, I’d bring it to the meeting, but then whatever the administration decided was what I had to bring back. Very often it wasn’t what the students or the faculty really wanted. After three years of that I knew that I never wanted to [do] academic administration. But then I went and… was elected president of our community.[[35]](#footnote-35) But that was different because there were five of us in administration there, and we worked collaboratively, so it was a whole other thing which I liked. At that time I was on the Salve Regina Board of Trustees, just *exofficio* which means I had no power, but I was there because if the Board were to think about changing the bylaws or getting a new president or selling the university or changing its purpose, that had to go through the community, so I was present at the meetings. That really taught me how much work there is to running a university, and how much time and energy the people you put on your Board put in. These are people with all kinds of different expertise and background. Some in education, law, and that was amazing, you know what they did and their concern for the students. Most of the issues they raised were about the quality of education that students were getting which was good. So that’s it on that part.

Gillibrand: Great. So you kind of mentioned a minute ago that you were elected to…

Combies: Yeah, in the Sisters of Mercy we elect our administration, and I had been serving part-time on the team and then I was nominated for president and I was elected that year. I was supposed to be four years, but we were in the process of changing our government structure at the time, so I wound up doing six years. Then I was back and I took a semester off, and then I said, “I’m bored, I want something to do,” so I came over and talked to the person who was in charge of the English department[[36]](#footnote-36), and he had two classes I could teach that spring. Then the following fall I came back full-time.

Gillibrand: Very nice. Do you mind briefly describing a little bit about your experience with the Sisters of Mercy during that time as president.

Combies: Sure! Let’s see. During the time that I was president we were… beginning to show some of the issues we deal with now with an aging community. We had a convent in East Providence, St. Mary’s Academy-Bay View, where the school is, and we had many of our sisters who needed assistance there, and we provided some nursing care and CNAs. They didn’t need skilled nursing because we had Mount St. Rita’s in Cumberland that was a skilled nursing home, and our sisters would go there. But these sisters needed some help, but we knew Bay View would need tremendous renovations plus, at the time, the high school really could have used some of this space that we were taking in the convent. We started looking for a place to have an assisted living facility. In the end, what we wound up doing, is Franklin Court which was already an established assisted living in Bristol. They were willing to take sisters, and we had talked with some sisters in Fall River who had put their sisters in a public nursing home like that and had worked out really well. So a lot of my work when I was on the team in the beginning and then as president was moving the sisters into the areas of assisted living. We got a woman who was a coordinator for them. We had three sites at the time where our sisters were, and she would be at those sites during the week, and she would make sure that the needs of sisters were taken care of. We also, as the sisters moved, we paired each of them with either one of our other sisters or one of the houses in the community who would help them decorate their room and do things, and they built a bonding. The amazing thing about that was the sisters were very scared because most of these women had always lived in convents, and so it was frightening to think about going out on their own, but they loved it because they got to work with the other people that were there. Husbands and wives and mostly older women whose husbands had died and they needed care, and they just bonded well with them. So that was one big thing. The other was the community itself was moving towards merging all of the communities in the Northeast, which is Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, Connecticut and Albany, New York decided they had more in common with us than they did with the group in New York itself. The group of us were working towards how we could become one community which we are right now, the Northeast. That was a big project because it was a lot of education for the sisters; it was a change from six local leadership teams to one regional leadership team serving all six areas. Our regional leadership team would be made up of people from all of those places which, you know, where was the office going to be? So that was a lot of the work I did during that time. Meanwhile, you know, the critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy, which you people are aware of, they had begun. That first iteration of those was in 2000, and they’ve just kept growing since then. Not growing, but going deeper. We’ve kept the same concerns, we just keep going deeper into them. I think here at Salve we’ve worked hard to help students to know that these are the things that we’re most concerned about. The environment, racism, violence, issues around women, and… what’s the fifth one? ..

Gillibrand: Immigration?

Combies: Immigration, yes, the immigration issue which of course this last two weeks has really become a huge issue again in the country, and it’s not solved.[[37]](#footnote-37) I mean thank God we’ve decided to at least stop taking children and parents away from one another with no chance of ever finding one another the way that they’re moving them, but we still haven’t solved the issue because you’ve got pretty strong feelings among some people that we don’t have room for anyone else. Then you also have strong feelings that we as a country were built upon giving refuge to people that are suffering, so, you know, it’s a huge issue. We’ve been doing a lot of emailing, demonstrations, stuff like that. Our people in Washington have been really busy at the White House and at Congress and so on, and the rest of us have been sending stuff. That’s a key piece. It would begin when I was in administration, and it continues now as a member of the community… Everyday we get more information, and sometimes you’re asked to call your senator or call your congressperson, or we’ve had demonstrations like when they had the Women’s March[[38]](#footnote-38) in Providence. I went to that. They had a couple of marches the last two weeks I haven’t been able to go to. It’s mostly different groups of people that are trying to just make the statement that this is our country, and we know what we want it to be. I think, here, at least with the students, the way I see it is it’s a chance to give students another way of looking at the issues in our world. Catherine McAuley[[39]](#footnote-39) believed strongly that as Sisters of Mercy our main job was to read the signs of our time. What are the issues? She knew that women in her time were not treated well when they worked in different places, and some of them didn’t have decent living conditions. Then she realized that women were not well educated, so she worked on schools. And then when they had some illnesses she got nursing. I think that’s our thing today is just to say, “Okay, these are the concerns.” When I present it to students I always make it very clear that it’s one view, and they’re certainly entitled to have others, but I think if you’re going to make a judgement you should know the whole picture, and then you can decide whether you agree or disagree because obviously a lot of [our] stands are pretty liberal, and people don’t necessarily agree with us to say the least.

Gillibrand: That was awesome. I’m glad we got to talk a little bit about that. And you said after you came back for the second time to teach, the second time around you mainly focused more so [on] the PhD graduate program?

Combies: I do both. I do undergrad, and I did University Seminars.[[40]](#footnote-40) I do usually Literary Studies and Global Lit undergrad. When I first came back someone was going on a leave of absence, and they asked me to teach the PhD course Humanities 630, Technology and the Human Experience. and I’ve been teaching that ever since. One of the groups of students had asked me to do another class with them, so I developed another one in the PhD program. I teach it on campus, sometimes I teach it as a hybrid where we’re on campus one week and online another, and then I also, for the last four years, have taught it completely online where they come for three days and we meet for nine hours, and then after that, the next seven weeks, are all online. They don’t come back again. I didn’t think I would like that, but I really do. I love it. They’re adults, it’s a different thing. But I also like teaching undergrads. Undergraduates, one, keep you young. They really do make you have to think about things. They can be challenging because, you know, you have grown up in a very different educational system which is much more active than what it was like when I first started teaching, so trying to find a way to make the classroom active and hold attention is a real challenge today. On the other hand it’s very rewarding. I don’t have any problem with Canvas, maybe it’s because I have to teach the classes online, so even though I have students who hate it they know that everything they need for the class is there. I try to make sure that everything that we do in class is on Canvas so they can go back, other than the lectures. I’m not one of the people who does their lectures online. If I do lectures they’re in the class, and they’ll have to either take notes, or hope they remember if they think it’s important…

Gillibrand: Well awesome! So to conclude do you have any final thoughts or comments that you’d like to add, any final stories?

Combies: When I think of Salve Regina I think that it’s a wonderful testimony to having a dream and waiting for it to come because in the 1930s the Sisters of Mercy were asked to think about opening a college for women, but there was [not a] place. It wasn’t until 1947 when Ochre Court was given to the diocese and the Bishop said that might be the site for the women’s college. Four sisters came here, none of them had experience in a university because we just didn’t do that. They were all high school teachers who came, and they managed with the leadership of the community to develop this school for women. Through the years when things got hard and you would have thought it would fail, for instance at the time it went co-ed, it was probably on the brink of closing because of financial problems and women had gone through stages where women no longer wanted to go to an all-women’s school. By going co-ed they were able to save themselves, and then once they went co-ed they had to invest in the programs that would attract men. That’s probably where the business programs grew much more important, and you had more opportunities. And the ADJ program which very often was a night program more than day because it was police officers coming when they weren’t working. I think those were the, you know, it’s just a testimony to the fact that they believed there was a place for the kind of education that we do. The thing that never got lost from the beginning is, I think, the mission of Catherine McAuley which is to look at the social leads at the time, and to make ourselves aware of it and to know as responsible citizens, no matter what your religions or beliefs are, we have a responsibility to make the world we live in better. That’s the purpose of our education is to enlighten us, and give us the skills so that we can deal with the world. When I think of Salve I think that’s what it has been, what it was founded as, and hopefully what it will continue to be because, as you know and you people are doing this, there won’t be Sisters of Mercy here much longer. It shouldn’t change anything because, I think, people here know the Mercy mission well enough that it will continue because they believe in what it stands for. You know it is not dependent on any one person. It’s dependent rather on the fact that people see that in itself it’s an important message for the world.

Gillibrand: That’s great. Thank you very much.

Combies: Well thank you! You were wonderful!

1. Referring to Cumberland, RI. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A habit is a religious garment of clothing. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “This side” is referring to the side of campus which is now McKillop Library, Antone Academic Center, Wakehurst, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. RA means Resident Advisor, a student who stays in the dorm with other students who acts as a peer supervisor and enforces university policy in residential life on campus. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. PC is Providence College [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Referring to the Second Vatican Council that took place from 1962-1965, which created huge changes in the Catholic church. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 1960s [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. La Forge is an American restaurant that is near the International Tennis Hall of Fame on Bellevue Avenue. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Referring to John F. Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Referring to Brother Gene Lappin. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 1979 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Report From Newport* is a quarterly publication from Salve Regina that is sent to students, alumni, parents, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A professor of English at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 1987 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ADJ stands for Administration of Justice, and was once referred to as Criminal Justice. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “This building” is McKillop Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dr. John Quinn is a history professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Referencing Barbara Sylvia. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sister Mary Eloise Tobin, RSM and Sister Mary Jean Tobin, RSM were twin sisters that taught at Salve Regina. The two are noted for co-writing *With Courage and Compassion*, which covers the history of Salve Regina up through the 1990s. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Dr. Joan David taught English and Theater for almost fifty years, and died in 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 1960s [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 1980s [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Online grading portal used at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Standardized testing scores used to be a significant part of the admissions process. In recent years, SAT scores have started becoming optional components to college applications, including Salve Regina’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Referring to honor societies specific to majors, programs, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Dr M. Therese Antone, RSM served as president of the university from 1994-2009. She had a significant role in expanding the university. She continues to serve as a chancellor and professor. This information was confirmed by the Salve Regina website. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Dr. Judith Mills served as Vice President of Academic Affairs from 1995-1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Referring to Bernard Masterson. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Referring to the work of the Salve Regina Oral History Project completed during the summer of 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ed meaning education. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. From information found in *With Courage and Compassion,* Accounting and Economics were introduced at the university around 1982-1991. Business was not specifically mentioned, but it might have fell into this or stemmed from it. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Referring to Dr. Judith Mills, who served as Vice President of Academic Affairs from 1995-1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Dr. Barbara Kathe served as the Vice President of Academic Affairs from 1998-2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Sr. Therese Antone was president of the university at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Referencing the Sisters of Mercy of RI. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Referring to Dr. John Salessas. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. This along with the next sentence is referring to strict illegal immigration policies imposed in June of 2018 that separated children from their parents. There were many protests and demands to overturn the policy. Although President Trump signed an executive order to halt the family separations, the topic remained hotly debated. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The Women’s March was a worldwide demonstration following the inauguration of Donald Trump. Since then there have been Women’s Marches taking place regularly to advocate for gender equality. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. She was the founding member of the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. This is a required freshman course at Salve Regina University. Freshmen are to take one each semester of their first year. Professors teach a course on a topic of their choosing, and the purpose of the course is to develop students’ writing and communication abilities to be successful in future classes. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)