Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Cheryl Mrozowski, class of 1970, Chairman of the Salve Regina Board of Trustees (c. 2019)

Interviewer: Isabelle Gillibrand

Gillibrand: I am Isabelle Gillibrand. I am interviewing Dr. Cheryl Mrozowski on January 30, 2019 for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. She is an alumna of the University, and is on the Salve Board of Trustees. So to start us off, what brought you to Salve?

Mrozowski: Well, I grew up in Newport, and my mother said, “You will be applying to Salve.” It was a woman’s college, and that… felt appropriate. I was a commuter, so I lived at home, and, we’re talking the sixties, so I think it was a more protected environment… I was delighted because I had been a product of public school. I had always attended public schools, so to attend a woman’s college in a small, intimate setting was absolutely delightful. I couldn’t have been more thrilled!

Gillibrand: Awesome! And what year did you start at Salve?

Mrozowski: I started in ‘66, and I graduated in 1970.

Gillibrand: Great. And what was your major?

Mrozowski: I was a history major with a minor in secondary education. I had completed student teaching and had done an internship for Senator Pell.[[1]](#footnote-1) The History Department was fairly active at the time. We were picketing the local supermarket for the rights of the grape pickers in California, at Bellevue Gardens… (the store is now empty), but it was a supermarket called Almacs. In order to show our displeasure that they were not paying the workers what we felt… [were] fair labor practices, we picketed there for a solid week… we felt strongly about social justice in the sixties.

Gillibrand: And that kind of leads into my next point to ask what the University campus was like at the time because even though you were commuting back and forth this was a very high time…

Mrozowski: I was commuting back and forth, but I held a class office. I was Social Chair for my class… there were two social chairs; one for the residential students, and one for the commuters. But since I was the Social Chair for the commuters, I was on campus all the time. Obviously, I didn’t live in the dorms, but I spent a lot of time here, and, because one is organizing events for other classmates, you become acquainted with everyone… Let me say that when I started at Salve in 1966, we were required to wear dresses, skirts, so in 1968, my junior year, they allowed us to wear slacks. Now, slacks with quotes around it since they had to be pantsuits, a full ensemble, but that was revolutionary. And also it was the time of Vatican II[[2]](#footnote-2) and the clergy were able to wear lay-clothes, so that was happening simultaneously. It was a time of great transition. A time of great change, I would say many of the Sisters of Mercy that I began college with were not here by the time I graduated. They had just taken different paths.

Gillibrand: Absolutely. From the sounds of it, you were very active in those movements and great change.

Mrozowski: There were only 15 history majors at this time, so we had a great deal of flexibility. Professor Robert McKenna,[[3]](#footnote-3), who taught at Salve for 30 year, was active politically in the state of Rhode Island. He established internships for the history majors to travel to Washington D.C., and intern with Senator Pell. This was exciting in the ‘60s during the Cold War, and [we] observed the Senate while it was in session. At that time, there was a great deal of discussion in Congress about the ABM, which was the Anti-Ballistic Missile System. The two superpowers, United States and Russia, felt it was important to protect their interests. It was an exciting time in America but also a changing time, and for the better. There was also the Women’s Movement. My attitude towards the Women’s Movement was equal pay for equal work, and 10 years later, I returned and campaigned for the Equal Rights Amendment in Washington D.C. Even though women are still not paid equally in comparison to men, this movement gave visibility and awareness to the problem… And that’s good.

Gillibrand: And would you mind talking about your internship with Senator Pell a little bit? That sounds like a neat experience.

Mrozowski: It was incredible! There were four of us that went down from Newport, and when we arrived, we toured the capital, and visited the different organizations. We did some licking of stamps and mail and general office work because that is what you did. It was pre-computer days, so there was a great deal of work in the office to be done, but then we actually attended a session of Congress. Senator Pell was a gracious man who believed in education. He spearheaded the Pell Grants which gave access to education by the general public. He really supported this effort and gave his time. He was a person born to wealth, who felt strongly about public service and educating the next generation… The four of us that went down, all did things either in education or politically because I think we were incredibly inspired by what we saw in D.C. And I will tell you that it was a scary time. We took a bus, while we were staying on Capitol Hill, and it was not considered safe at night, and walked around Georgetown. We got really lost, and it was a little fearful… Fortunately, it’s not like that now… It really opened our eyes to the way other communities live, and the problems they deal with. I think we all returned to Salve with a broader view of the world.

Gillibrand: Awesome. So Dr. Quinn[[4]](#footnote-4) had mentioned to me that you were involved with Miss Rhode Island. Is that true?

Mrozowski: \*Laughter\* I actually was Miss Rhode Island!

Gillibrand: Okay!

Mrozowski: … Actually, I don’t know if you know anything about the Miss America Pageant, but this Program is the number one scholarship program for young women in America. It gives approximately 45 million dollars a year for scholarships. It’s a very competitive program, and it’s based on platforms, talent, how you present yourself, lots of different criteria. So what happened is I had actually been Miss Newport, and competed for Miss Rhode Island before I entered Salve. Then when I won the state, I went to Miss America the first week of college, so I actually started late my freshman year because I was in Atlantic City… But it was a wonderful experience and it financed my education, so I’m grateful to this organization, but secondly, as Miss Rhode Island, you make appearances and, you meet people. I had grown up on the island here, and so the island is very different from other parts of Rhode Island. After my experience as Miss Rhode Island, I realized how diverse Rhode Island was, and it really educated me in terms of… what was happening… I graduated in 1970, I walked across the stage, got my degree, and got on a plane and left and came back because I had family here, but was gone… for close to 25 years. I moved to Newport in 1994 but hadn’t come back to Salve yet, I ended up being on the Board at Miss Rhode Island, and someone had approached me about talking to Salve about supporting the Miss America program. So I came to Salve and negotiated a scholarship for Miss Rhode Island, and now Salve supports Miss Rhode Island with a full tuition scholarship on the graduate level, and a half tuition scholarship on the undergraduate level. How do these things happen? and then I came on the Board of Trustees in 2007, and now will become chairman of the board next summer. Very grateful to the program for all that it has given me, and the access it has given me. It’s a good thing.

Gillibrand: Awesome, thank you for sharing that. Would you mind telling me a bit about your post-Salve career? You kind of touched upon it when you… jumped on a plane and that was the end of that!

Mrozowski: I jumped on a plane and went to Dayton, Ohio and taught history on the secondary level and directed the drill team. Ohio had reciprocal agreements with Rhode Island, so when I moved to Ohio I was certified to teach. I, also, danced with the Dayton Ballet. I had always danced, and I would have loved to have the program that you have here at Salve now. In fact, it’s just wonderful… We did not have that when I attended Salve, but I danced with the State Ballet of Rhode Island, and when I came to Salve I ended up teaching, and I did some choreography for the theater productions they did. They produced the “King and I,” and Joan David directed it…[[5]](#footnote-5) Did you know Joan David?

Gillibrand: The name is familiar.

Mrozowski: She was in the English Department and was a beloved faculty member here at Salve. I met her when I was in high school, and she produced the “King and I” and I did the choreography. Then I choreographed a few things while I was here at school, but since there was no program in the arts, I did not think about pursuing a career in dance, “I stayed in Ohio for a couple of years, and then I moved to England with my husband, as part of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, I was not allowed to work on the economy because military dependents would take jobs away from the local people. So I decided to study with a woman from the Kirov Ballet in Russia who married… a pilot during World War II. She was in Cambridge, England, and I lived west of Cambridge, so I went to Cambridge every day and studied with this woman [for] four years, six days a week, and got my teaching qualifications from the Society of Russian Style Ballet Schools, and then started dancing with the Cambridge Opera Ballet. When I returned to the states, five years later, [in my] late 20s, I realized that, “If I’m going to do anything in dance, I probably need to have (I was dancing with a company in Virginia)... an American degree.” So I auditioned for a teaching assistantship at American University at Washington D.C… I was at American University [starting in 1979] through the 80s, and then I finished my graduate work at AU, and came on the faculty.. So that was my circuitous route, and it’s really because of World War II. Had I been able to work and teach, I probably would have pursued that pathway and wouldn’t have danced. In a way, it worked out very nicely… I loved history, but dance was sort of in my blood.

Gillibrand: Things work the way they’re supposed to.

Mrozowski: That’s exactly right! That’s right.

Gillibrand: And now you’re currently a professor of dance right at Wheaton?

Mrozowski: At Wheaton College, yes! Well, that’s another story. When we finally moved north, I had been teaching at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival… It’s called the PAT/MFA, Professional Actor Training Master of Fine Arts program, at an exact replica of the Stratford upon Avon in England. It was in Montgomery, Alabama. Incredible program, incredible! I was on the faculty there, through the University of Alabama, and my husband, who was in the Air Force at the time, received orders to Boston.” I have to say, I was not thrilled. I really liked it in the south very much, but we came north, and that’s when we lived in Billerica, and I was reading Art Search and I saw a job opening for Wheaton College. I had just moved to Billerica, and this was … June of ‘87, and I had just broken my foot dancing doing a turn in Boston. I applied for the job [at Wheaton], but I was on crutches [and] in a cast… It was between two of us, and they hired the other person who had been in higher education the entire time, whereas I had had a professional career. I had been in higher education, but that wasn’t my main focus. My main focus was with a nightclub group, and a ballet company. I didn’t get the job, so this is July ‘87, and I’m in Newport now because we’re renovating our house and my son was a year and a half. My husband called me to say that Wheaton had called the house, and they wanted me to take the position. I think the other person just didn’t work out for whatever reason. So I came in September of ‘87 to Wheaton to direct the dance program, I wasn’t familiar with the placement and progression of dance in higher education in the northeast, it was in athletics… I thought, “This is interesting,” so I spent the next fifteen years basically trying to get dance out of athletics [and] to gain academic standing for it. It was very difficult, politically… nobody would allow me to become a member of their department and I had to find a department to take me, and there was no motivation to do so, since my discipline is work. Then fate lines up… a provost sees the wisdom of this move, and in 2001 I am invited into the theater department. I achieve a concentration in dance in 2003. I obtain a minor in 2005, and then I propose a major but, politically, it’s very difficult. There is tension in my department which results in me chairing the department, I go before the educational policy committee and explain why we need a major in dance. I was not successful then, but somebody advised me and explained, “This is what we need to do.” So in 2008, I finally achieved a major in dance. Then I was promoted in 2012 to full professor. It’s been a very circuitous route.

Gillibrand: That’s amazing though… Huge way.

Mrozowski: Huge way! And, you know, I tend to be goal oriented. Well… it struck me… it’s my sense of fair play. Why, if theater and music and all the other performing arts and all the fine arts, if they all have majors, why doesn’t dance? That’s just made no sense to me! I have to say, I have thought about this fact and. I blame the Puritans because the instrument is the body. I ran into this attitude in England a little bit too, it’s that ambivalent attitude towards dance.

Gillibrand: Yes.

Mrozowski: … We all struggle, so that’s where we are now. It’s good, and we have a great program. We really do.

Gillibrand: Awesome. And… you’ve touched on it a bit with the whole the process of how you got your career there, what have been some of your responsibilities along with that as a professor of dance?

Mrozowski: Well, basically, I’m a one woman department. Because of that, I promote dance in every way. Actually [I] wrote a chapter in a book that Lindsay,[[6]](#footnote-6) who is head of dance here at Salve, edited along with Wendy Oliver on jazz dance. I teach all the technique classes, I run the company, I chair the department, I bring in dancers. I try to make dance... foremost, you know, and perform. I do a stage performance every semester. There’s a lot going on. At Wheaton, I have my company, which I teach all the academic dance, but we have… a club [there]. We have six groups in one studio. It’s challenging.

Gillibrand: It sounds like it’s a pretty big department in terms of dance…

Mrozowski: For people who are interested in dance, we brought in a good freshmen class this year, we have really strong dancers. In my company I have twelve. TRYBE, which is the multicultural group, they have thirty. Tap Out Loud, which is our tap group, they have fifteen. Salsa has twenty-eight. Soul, which is percussion that they do with their feet and body parts, have thirty-five. And Ballroom has forty.

Gillibrand: Wow!

Mrozowski: It includes quite a few students. The student groups organize themselves, but I am in charge of the space. We always invite groups to be part of our main stage production. We invite TRYBE, we invite Tap Out Loud, to allow us time to change our costumes during the show. The relations between the various dance groups is really wonderful, and a lot of my dancers… dance in some of the other groups. So they can literally dance for four or five hours a day. I’m amazed at them because the company is a huge commitment. We meet Monday through Thursday, 2 hours a day, and then they come in on the weekend and I bring in guest artists… And then when the show is, there is a tech and it’s all night rehearsals. It’s huge. I added it up because I had to explain something to some of my other colleagues, and in one semester we spent 217 hours… So it’s a huge commitment.

Gillibrand: I believe it. Dance is a lot of hours.

Mrozowski: That’s right!

Gillibrand: That’s incredible… Transitioning back to Salve a little bit, so now you’re on the Board of Trustees, and you’ll be taking over the chair next summer?

Mrozowski: Yes, absolutely.

Gillibrand: So how did you first get on the Board? Were you appointed? Did you volunteer for the Board?

Mrozowski: You’re appointed. Sister Therese,[[7]](#footnote-7) who is now the chancellor, was the president in 2007, and … she spoke to me about coming on the Board, and I was absolutely thrilled. I couldn’t have been happier. I thought, “How? I never could have planned for this.” But to come back to my alma mater that I feel so strongly about, and be able to witness its growth and all the things it has become, it’s a really proud moment for the alums, it really is. It’s very near and dear to your heart. It’s like your family… When you start off on this journey of life, you don’t realize where life will always take you? You have your personal goals, career goals, life goals, all those different goals. Then as time passes, you realize that all your personal goals have been replaced with wanting Salve to increase its name recognition, increase its visibility, and become successful. One realizes that so many of our small, single-sex colleges are no longer with us now. I am very proud that Salve has become a university and it offers so many choices. I really see bright days ahead for this institution. I think, This is an exciting time at the school.

Gillibrand: Absolutely. And what are some of the responsibilities that come with being a Board member?

Mrozowski: Well, the biggest responsibility is that we want to stay open… Everyone on the Board has a different expertise. You have business people, you have Sisters of Mercy, you have people in higher education, and… we serve on different committees. For example, the committees I serve on are University Relations and the Mission. The Mission, which I’m sure you know about… and the tenets of the Sisters of Mercy, but what the Mission Committee does is make sure that everyone who is here, who is connected with Salve, who works at Salve, who attends Salve, who is a Board member, but that the mission is present in everything we do. It guides us when we’re making decisions about where to place our resources, or what major, or whatever decisions we are making as a Board of Trustees, the mission is what guides us, and that’s important. So that’s part of the responsibility of the Mission Committee. Then with the University Relations, that’s exactly what you think… When I was a student at Salve, the relations between the city of Newport and Salve were not as harmonious as they are [now]. Salve is such a good neighbor, and such a good neighbor to the city. Now, they work closely together. It’s a win-win, for everybody. Newport has a large summer community that comes here, so when people visit Newport we want them to know Salve. Many people choose to retire in Newport because the University is here and it provides so many opportunities. You can take classes, you can attend mass, there’s lots of ways to get involved, and that is one of the functions of the University Relations Committee. Then there’s an Academic Committee, and that’s to make sure that there is rigor in our offerings and we follow best practices, the Finance Committee insures our fiduciary responsibilities and allocate resources to accomplish all our goals, and there’s a Properties Committee because one of the things that’s very important, especially with the properties that Salve has, is to keep up the maintenance. One of the things I personally am very proud of at Salve is that there is not deferred maintenance. Here, especially with the properties we have, the fact that we don’t defer the maintenance is essential. It really is something for Salve to be very proud of… there are a number of components to the Board, and… we bring on new Board members and we’re always growing. I met with a potential Board member last week, someone I think who could bring another expertise to the Board. It’s a group of people from all over the country that come here. We meet four times a year. Then we have meetings… before the next Board meeting… but there’s a lot going on. A lot behind the scenes… which is all positive.

Gillibrand: Awesome. So from your Salve experience as a whole, do you have any major names that come to mind, or certain experiences that really have stuck with you throughout the years?

Mrozowski: I mean I would say, in terms of the people that were here, there was a Sister Corleen,[[8]](#footnote-8) who was a Sister of Mercy who left the order.. But when Sister Leona[[9]](#footnote-9) got all the names of the Sisters of Mercy at the chapel, I don’t know if you’ve seen that, but she researched every Sister of Mercy who has ever taught here is on a list at the back of the chapel. I found Sister Corleen Fogarty, who was a history professor. Wonderful! I had Latin American history with her, I had Russian history with her, I think I had American history with her also. She was a wonderful teacher, and she really excited me. I always liked history, [but] I felt the teachers here were exceptional… and Robert McKenna who taught political science, economics, geo-politics. I don’t know if you have these courses now… My thesis mentor was Mr. Matthews, who was a Brown University professor who came to Salve once a week. He was just great! He was exciting, he was young, he was enthusiastic and handsome. I felt that we had excellent teachers, and because our classes were so small. We’d have a seminar and there might be eight of us in the class. It was exciting, and in our day it was all women, so there can be an intimacy… with a single-sex school. The world was very different. When I was here, for instance the curfew was 7 o’clock at night, so everyone had to be in their dorms by 7, and Friday night was a late night. You could stay out until 11, and Saturday you could stay out until midnight. Now those kinds of rules don’t exist now. I mean, nobody tells you have to be in your dorm room by 7 or states a curfew, but nobody thought anything of it because the world was different. A lot of it, I think, was sort of, especially for women, the way you should behave and the way you should conduct yourself… But it was all reinforced by the outside world too… Anytime you went to anything we had gloves. For instance, my freshman year we had a white blazer and a beanie… I’m trying to think of how long you had to wear that, but… when you were a freshman you had to… wear that. I loved it, I thought it was great. Well, I like costumes, so that works!

Gillibrand: Right up your alley!

Mrozowski: That works just fine! I think the teaching really impressed me. I felt that my education was so solid. Not many people who had an undergraduate degree did a thesis, and then you orally had to defend it. We had to take GREs, Graduate Record Exams, and this was just to graduate… I also felt like holding the office of Social Chairman for my class was really significant, especially as a commuter because, and it often saddens me, I knew other people that came here and they never come back. I try to encourage them to return for reunions… I don’t know, they didn’t invest in the community, they didn’t develop that relationship that maybe they could’ve. I see people in town, and I’ll say, “Didn’t you graduate from Salve?” and they’ll say, “Yeah!” and I’ll say, “Well, I didn’t see you…” because, actually, you know, next year is my fiftieth reunion, so I’m hoping to get some people back here. But I think because I was Social Chair for four years, and was really involved… this was home to me… And I worked two jobs, so I was either at Salve or at my two jobs, or studying. That’s what I did for four years because you didn’t have time to do much else… Which is what I’m sure you’re doing!

Gillibrand: Yup! It’s exactly the same! And in your opinion from your experiences at Salve to what you see now, being on the Board and witnessing to what’s going on campus and everything, what’s your opinion on how Salve has changed throughout the years?

Mrozowski: Well, the world has changed, so of course, becoming a co-educational institution, but I am always struck when I come on this campus of how happy everyone seems and how polite the student body is. I mean I work on a college campus… In fact, it just happened when I came into the library. A young woman just held the door for me. I was a few steps back. That never happens, and I teach on a college campus! And it’s not just the students, it’s also the staff. When I enter an office and I’m trying to conduct some business, they couldn’t be more helpful. I mean I feel like everyone here on this campus lives the mission. It is very much present in their attitude. I think they’re happy to be here. They feel grateful to the institution. I’m struck by that. That, and I think a lot of the choices that we’ve chosen to develop, our arts program… our cultural and historic preservation, we have cyber-security now [in] our Administration of Justice [program], our athletic teams are competitive, and, because we were a women’s college, we didn’t have that before. I feel that Salve is making all those hard choices, and I’m excited about our future… I think we have a good and strong pathway to our future. I know we’re going to be facing challenges like all liberal arts institutions in the 21st century, but I think Salve is really unique… Someone who was one of my colleagues, she’s retired now, at Wheaton was on the NEASC [board], which is an accreditation agency for the University, she was heading it up when she visited Salve, probably about six or seven years ago. It was in passing and I was just talking to her, and I said, “How did Salve do?” and she said, “They did great!” And she said, “I feel like mission-place institutions… they’ve been forced to answer a lot of the questions and really present themselves in a way that is very attractive in the 21st century.” I’m sort of optimistic about our future… We really have a lot of great people from the students to the faculty to the staff to the Board all cheering for us. When I’m out in town I do a lot of things in Newport, and the reputation of Salve is strong. People… perk up. I think all those things bode well for its future… Now are you graduating this year?

Gillibrand: Next year. [I’m a] junior, so I still have a little bit left.

Mrozowski: You’re class of 2020?

Gillibrand: Yes! I try to push that off as much as I can!

Mrozowski: \*Laughter\* Absolutely! So you’re going to graduate. Are you thinking of going to grad school?

Gillibrand: It’s still kind of playing out.

Mrozowski: Well, in some ways, there’s lots of different ways to look at it, but I do think it’s good to get out there and work a little bit. Because I thought I would always teach, but I thought I would teach history. I never thought I would end up dancing and performing. I did, I did that and at 24 I had taught in a high school for two years and I’m just so happy that my life went in a different [direction]. Not that there was anything wrong with what I was doing, but everyone… I was teaching in a public school in Ohio, I was directing the drill team, that was my real job, but all the people here that I knew that taught in public school they retired as soon as they could, and I’m still doing all those things that maybe had I chosen other pathways I might not still be doing them. I feel fortunate about my life choices. So I think in some ways, you know it’s… serendipitous how things present themselves and you are not sure which path to follow? I think if you’re out working then maybe it sort of clarifies itself in which direction you should go.

Gillibrand: That makes total sense! And before I stop this, do you have anything else that you’d like to say that you think that we missed or anything?

Mrozowski: I did write a few things down. I think we covered them all… I guess I would point out is you always have to be open to all possibilities. The work on the Board made me realize, that higher education is really an industry, and we all come from different backgrounds and because one is usually focused on their discipline that they are not thinking of higher education as an industry, and you should look at it as such. That revelation to me has been really sort of freeing and illuminating… Perhaps I was so focused when I started at Wheaton that dance, needed academic standing, to give it respect, but in some ways, maybe, I could’ve looked at higher education a little bit differently. I think it takes that sort of single focus to move things forward. Because if you don’t… along the way you get setbacks, you can be discouraged… but you f have to have passion inside… For me, it’s just a sense of fair play. What’s fair, and that, to me, was what was fair… I can see in hindsight now somebody else might have gone… but that was just sort of that illumination of higher education, and it just gives you a different perspective. The Board work has definitely given me a different perspective, on work and on your career, but on life really.

Gillibrand: Right. Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing all [of that].

1. Senator Claiborne Pell was a senator from Rhode Island who served from 1961-1997. He died in 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Referring to the Second Vatican Council that took place from 1962-1965, which brought about major changes in Catholic practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert McKenna was at Salve Regina for about 30 years. He started in 1965, and worked as both a professor and administrator. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dr. John Quinn is a history professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dr. Joan David taught English and Theater for almost fifty years, and died in 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lindsay Guarino is an Associate Professor of Dance at Salve Regina, and runs the Extensions dance company. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dr. M. Therese Antone, RSM served as president of the University from 1994-2009. She continues to serve as chancellor. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sister Mary Corleen Fogarty was an alumna of Salve Regina, class of 1961, and taught history and social sciences at the University from 1967-1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sister Leona Misto was a professor of mathematics, a director in the graduate extension program, and the Vice President of Mission Integration at Salve. She died in 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)