Salve Regina Oral History Project

Date of Interview: October 17, 2018

Date of Completed Transcription: January 23, 2019

Interviewee: Kathryn “Kitty” Rok, Senior Lecturer of Special Education (1980-present), former director of Learning Unlimited

Interviewer: Isabelle Gillibrand

Gillibrand: I am Isabelle Gillibrand. I am interviewing Mrs. Kitty Rok for the Salve Regina Oral History Project on October 17, 2018. She is a Special Education professor[[1]](#footnote-1) along with being involved with several programs on Salve’s campus including Learning Unlimited and Best Buddies. So to start us off, what brought you to Salve?

Rok: … I had been a special education teacher teaching children with autism in Cincinnati public schools, and then had a teaching position at Miami, Ohio. I had a mentor colleague there, Dr. Kathy McMahon Klostermanwho actually graduated from Salve, and did her undergraduate work here. She used to talk very highly of Salve, and of the “City by the Sea” and Newport. She’d say, “You have to go visit!” So one summer I came out to visit, and she said, “While you’re there please stop in and see Sister Katherine Mary Murphy.” (There’s a lot of Katherines in this story.) Sister Katherine Mary Murphy was the head of the Special Education… Program in the Education Department, and was one of Kathy McMahon Klosterman’s [professors] when she was here. So I stopped in to Sister Katherine Mary Murphy, and in talking with her, just that very day that I stopped in, she tells me there was a position in Special Education, a faculty position that was just opening up. We talked about it, I got my resume together, interviewed with a few people on campus, and was thrilled… to start… It was America’s Cup Summer, so, in those days, we didn’t start in those summers until October. I had all of September to get ready… for the courses and things, and I started that fall. Did I say the year 1980? …

Gillibrand: Excellent. So describe your experience a little bit about teaching as a professor in the special education department.

Rok: Well, it’s been a great run! When I first came in… my first responsibilities at the University as a faculty member was to teach two courses, and then direct and develop a program that eventually was known as the Learning Unlimited Program. I was brought in to develop this program where adults in the community with disabilities would be working with Salve students in a learning environment, an adult appropriate learning environment.

Gillibrand: Great. What type of classes did you teach when you first came?

Rok: Sorry, I didn’t really answer that first question totally. So that’s what I did when I first came, and I’ll back up and say I taught a Methods in Special Education course. I taught in collaboration, working with families of children with disabilities and working with the community [along with] collaboration working with other staff members in the school, all to support children with disabilities. So that’s a course that I’ve taught, and I started teaching that when I first came, and directing the Learning Unlimited program… I taught other courses [such as] an Introduction to Special Education course, and an Introduction to Education course. [There were] a few others, but those were the courses I’ve taught. I also did a ten year stint… as the Director of Disabilities Services here at Salve, so coordinating supports for students who came to Salve with disabilities. I did that for about ten years as well, and in between while I was here at Salve.

Gillibrand: Excellent. So with [the] Education Department it is a little bit different in terms of your students because your students go out into the classrooms and do firsthand experience. So what’s the experience working with students, and seeing them in the classroom? What are some of the responsibilities that come with that?

Rok: Sure. In special education… I told you I was teaching that Methods course, and that course has a field component. Students go to Fall River public schools one day a week, and I go with them. They’re each assigned to work with a special educator who’s working with children with disabilities or otherly abled children. I love it because it keeps me up in the field, very practical, as they call them “Boots on the Ground,” in the classroom, learning from young learners [about] how they learn. The population has changed somewhat over the years. We’re definitely seeing a lot more students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and students with other neurological difficulties [including] ADHD,[[2]](#footnote-2) certainly there’s a spike with students with difficulties with mental health… that we see working in special education. It keeps me abreast of what’s happening, and I meet some spectacular teachers, and some just terrific young students. My students go out, typically on a Tuesday morning. They carpool up to Fall River, and they go to one of three schools. They all go into different classrooms working with different teachers, and I head up and I bounce between classroom and classroom. I go in and watch how they are interacting with students, how they are teaching these students. The beauty of it is that I can coach in the moment. I can sit with them and I can model certain strategies that they can then practice when they’re working with the children. It’s a wonderful, wonderful, and very necessary component to our teacher education program, that field experience. I’m glad you asked that question!

Gillibrand: Great, I’m glad that you were able to talk about it! As you’ve kind of alluded to, you’ve had a lot of involvement outside of the classroom as well, especially with Learning Unlimited, Special Olympics, correct?

Rok: Yup.

Gillibrand: Do you mind describing those experiences a little bit, and telling me about what that was like?

Rok: Well, I’ll tell you about Special Olympics because that’s probably what I have the least involvement in. I mean I do go to it, and I know all the Salve students that are usually involved in running it, but that was happening before I came on campus… [John Rok[[3]](#footnote-3) and Paul Cardoza[[4]](#footnote-4)] started with a group of students who were really interested. They started the Special Olympics which… continues to this day. It’s the spring track and field competition in the East Bay, so Newport County region. So you mentioned Learning Unlimited, and I had said that I started here charged with developing this program. Can I go back beyond earlier than when I came?

Gillibrand: Absolutely!

Rok: Because I think the history is interesting. So Rhode Island was one of the first states to move forward with the deinstitutionalization movement. Prior to the mid [1970s], people with disabilities, in particular people with intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities, were cared for in large institutions. Through a series of advocacy and lawsuits, states began to deinstitutionalize, bringing people out of people out of these institutions and providing them supports back in their homes communities, and places to live back in their home communities. Rhode Island really led the way which is really exciting. I remember reading about Rhode Island initiatives back when I was studying in college. I had got here, and what happened was Rhode Island had closed large institutions, and they had large communities of people moving back into their hometowns, so Newport, Middletown, Portsmouth, Jamestown, were opening, at that point we called them, group homes for people with disabilities. Those adults that were moving to these homes had not learned, incidentally, these things that most of us learn when we live in a “normal,” more normalized setting. They lived in an institutional setting. They were cared for, almost in a custodial way, so they didn’t have to learn a lot of the things that you need to survive… more independently in our community. There was a partnership that was developed between some of these support agencies… that were running the group homes and with Salve so that these adults could come to Salve and continue their education with the help of or alongside Salve Students… It continues to [this] day… The Sisters of Mercy saw it as a real clear illustration of their mission. I still talk to people that were in Learning Unlimited thirty years ago, and the difference that that made in their lives. Those people were traditional Salve students whose lives were changed because of their experience with Learning Unlimited, as well as people from the community who had disabilities who came and learned. Today, the Learning Unlimited Program continues. It meets Thursday night. They do some absolutely amazing things! I’m no longer the director. The director is Michele Banks, who happened to be a student of mine back when I first came here, and who happened to be a student in Learning Unlimited. She went on into the field, and was hired back to direct the program, probably… [close] to ten years ago. She’s been doing an absolutely fabulous job. Most recently, this past year, the folks who participated in Learning Unlimited put together a poetry book. They’d been working with poets across the state, and learning to write poetry… Traditional Salve students and the non-traditional community members who came into Learning Unlimited were involved in creating wonderful poetry. They published a book, and they did a poetry reading which was attended by probably… We filled Bazarsky, [so] probably over 300 people last spring. So that’s Learning Unlimited!

Gillibrand: Excellent. So you mentioned the poetry… that they did last semester, what other types of events and activities did… they regularly do in Learning Unlimited?

Rok: So the idea is that it’s driven by the participants on an individual basis. If a participant is interested in learning more about documentary filmmaking, then that participant and their Salve partner, learning partner, will study documentary filmmaking. Or if they are interested in reading, and learning to read better, then they will do activities around reading. The gambit of activities runs broadly. A lot of people are working on things like money skills and budgeting [which] are some of the common interests that people have. Cooking… people seem to like that a lot… There are also groups of workshops that are held that people can join, and… that’s what the poetry was, a workshop that people could participate in. They’re also done things around, like I mentioned, the money and the economics, … developing technology skills, writing skills, and they’ve done mindfulness and meditation workshops, they’ve done empowerment workshops. In fact, I think the theme this year is Empowerment, so they’ll be a lot of different workshops around just what it means to be a self-advocate, and to be empowered… The partners will be able to join those workshops if they choose to do so. Or [they can] go in another direction.

Gillibrand: Excellent. And you mentioned, this is just a clarifying question, that this year’s theme is Empowerment. Is there… a different theme to work, or a different theme to focus on each year?

Rok: … Yes, that’s pretty much how it’s panned out, but with the idea that the individual gets to decide. If they want to go with that theme, or if they’d like to do something else. Usually the workshops are so exciting and dynamic that people love to participate in them, so… most people do choose to do some things around the theme at some point during the year.

Gillibrand: Great! And then you had also mentioned [that] you’re the faculty advisor for Best Buddies on campus. Do you mind telling me a little bit about your experience with that?

Rok: Sure! Well, where Learning Unlimited… focus is to provide an opportunity for people to learn in a normalized setting, like adults come to [a] university campus and learn. So the focus tends to be more in terms of learning academically. So Best Buddies answers the need… that people have to have friends. It’s an international organization, it’s a spin-off of Special Olympics. It was started by one of Eunice Kennedy’s sons.[[5]](#footnote-5) We have a chapter here at Salve. Our students started [it], they run it. To be quite honest I sign papers that I need to sign, and I go to events, but very light lifting on my part because the students do so much of the work. Adults from the community are matched up with an individual at Salve, a student at Salve, and… the program helps nurture a friendship between the two. They… might talk on the phone, or email each other, and every month the Best Buddies program runs an event. It could be, coming up, they’ll do the Halloween dance. Then in November they’ll do a Thanksgiving dinner. They’ll do something around the holidays in terms of the winter celebrations… One month they’ll go to a Salve women’s volleyball game, and they’ll get together for that. Usually, the partnerships continue for two, three, or four years. I know in some situations that friendship has formed [and] become so tight it continues beyond the Salve student’s graduation. There was a… Best Buddy, a woman from the community, that had a partner here and they got to be such tight friends that when the Salve graduate got married out West, her Best Buddy went out to the wedding. That was several years after… they didn’t see each other regularly and went through the Best Buddies program. It’s enduring friendships, and people with disabilities often say that… the number one need in their lives is to have more friends.

Gillibrand: Excellent. And Dr. Quinn[[6]](#footnote-6) had kind of mentioned beforehand that you used to be involved in a program called March Into Reading, right?

Rok: Dr. Quinn used to bring his children all the time!

Gillibrand: What was that program? Because it is no longer at Salve, right?

Rok: Right. Well, it might come back again someday in some form. So, this is going back probably fifteen years ago. A group of teachers and school librarians on the island had been at a conference, and started talking about how great it would be if Aquidneck Island had a celebration of children’s literature, and had a festival of books, children’s books. They said, “Well, maybe Salve’s Education Department would like to be involved in this.”... The organization called ACE, Aquidneck Collaborative for Education, at that point… was a unique partnership of educational institutions pre-K through university that was spearheaded by Salve’s Education Department, and it was coordinated by Salve’s Education Department. So this group of teachers and school librarians who had this dream came to the Education Department through the organization ACE, and said, “Are you interested? Could we do this?” and it became one of the premiere events of the Education Department. The way this goes is, and the way March Into Reading worked, Salve students, education majors, would work through their coursework in developing learning activities around certain authors, children’s book authors, book themes. While the Salve students were developing these learning activities and these learning centers, teachers in elementary and middle schools throughout Aquidneck Island were introducing their students to the featured authors, the March Into Reading featured authors, and to those books. We had a culminating event here on campus in March, thus March Into Reading. On a Saturday in March, our students would transform O’Hare Academic Center into a festival of children’s books. They would take rooms and recreate an environment around a theme. [For example] Ancient Egypt, and you could go to different rooms, go into these different centers in Ancient Egypt. Children could do crafts, they would do experiments, educational experiments, and be involved in other hands-on activities that would help them explore the theme around the children’s books. We also had book sales and we also had the authors, and this was really very unique, so the featured authors would come to… Aquidneck Island on Friday before the festival, and they would go out to all the schools and talk to the children. The children had been studying these books all along, so they were really excited. They’d meet the authors. Then on Saturday, the children brought their parents to meet the authors. They’d have their books signed, there were book signings, and we’d have special events… There were 600 [people] easy on a Saturday… One time I think we got to 900 people in and out the doors. It was a very exciting time, and really fun! Our students worked a lot on it. What else was I going to tell you about March Into Reading? It took a lot of work and a lot of effort that went for a whole year. Lissa Fernandez[[7]](#footnote-7), an instructor [and] professor in the Early Childhood Program in the Education Department, and I were most involved in that because we had our students involved in it. It was a really wonderful community wide celebration of children’s books. The Salve education majors got to showcase their discipline and their talents at these workshops and these centers that they would set-up for the children. So how’s that sound?

Gillibrand: Excellent! I’m glad that we got to talk about that! With being at Salve for a long span of time, how have you seen a change throughout the years?

Rok: There’s more buildings. It’s grown in different ways. The student population, the undergraduate population, has been pretty steady, but the physical plant has changed dramatically. I was actually telling my students the other day that there used to be a pub on campus, and they were shocked! Did anyone ever tell you that?

Gillibrand: The Boathouse, yes!

Rok: I won’t go on about the Boathouse. In fact, you mentioned the Special Olympics. The Special Olympics, which are now held on an off-campus site, typically at Gaudet Middle School[[8]](#footnote-8) where our football players and… women’s field hockey [and] lacrosse, oftentimes play there, that’s where… the Special Olympics have been recently, but it used to be on-campus. We had a track, an outdoor track around an apple orchard that is now where Rodgers Recreation Center is, did you hear that? Did somebody tell you that already?

Gillibrand: I heard that there was a track and field, but I didn’t know about the apple orchard.

Rok: I think it was an apple orchard, and there was a track around it. That’s where we had Special Olympics. So the physical plant has certainly grown and kept up with the times, and there’s so many more programs and opportunities for students. When I first came, the largest programs would’ve been things like nursing and education, and now the largest programs are things like business. That reflects our society I suppose… From our curriculum, and the teacher education program over the years, we’ve increased the field experience, the practical experience that students receive, both the amount and the quality of… that field experience… Those are a few things that have changed.

Gillibrand: Alright! So those were the questions I had for you, do you have any final thoughts or comments or stories that you want to share?

Rok: Well, I did mention Sister Katherine Murphy. A few names from the past I should also mention when I first came here [include]... Brother Victor Hickey[[9]](#footnote-9) who ran the elementary program, Sister Katherine ran the special education program, and… Oh, there’s so many people over the years! I don’t know… I think that’s good!

Gillibrand: Alright. Excellent, well thank you!

1. Correction: Official title is Senior Lecturer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Referencing Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Rok is a professor in the Religious Studies Department. He participated in the Salve Regina Oral History project, and his interview is available through the Salve Regina Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Paul Cardoza was a part of the Physical Education department. He still works at Salve Regina running the bike loan program at the University. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Best Buddies was founded in 1989 by Anthony Shriver. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Referencing Dr. John Quinn, a history professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lissa Fernandez is a senior lecturer in the Education Department at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A middle school in Middletown, Rhode Island. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brother Victor Hickey was Chairman of the Education Department and ran the Master’s program in Education. He was at Salve from 1977-1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)