Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Deborah Herz, class of 1980, *Report From Newport* editor

Interviewer: Isabelle Gillibrand

Gillibrand: I am Isabelle Gillibrand. I am interviewing Deborah Herz on October 8, 2019 for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. Deb is a Salve Regina alum and worked for the university for over twenty years. So, to start us off, talking about your experience as a student, what brought you to Salve?

Herz: I was not planning to come to college because I really wanted to work and be independent. I didn’t want to go to school, but I applied to Temple University for their social work program and I also applied here at Salve. Then I decided college was not for me, and then my dad [in] his infinite wisdom said, “Oh no, you’re going to college!” Then I came to Salve in 1976. It was about this time of year, it was October. I had missed about a month of classes and that was it. I ended up staying for four years and then coming back after being out in the workforce for a while, coming back to work. It’s been about thirty years of my life that I’ve been here.

Gillibrand: Nice! What did you study while you were here? What was your major?

Herz: My intended major was social work, which, at the time, Salve didn’t offer. I switched over to sociology, decided I didn’t really like that and ended up majoring in philosophy with a minor in English. A lot of my years were spent also in theater, so I… had two minors, more or less.

Gillibrand: Did you live on or off campus?

Herz: Both… I lived at Narragansett Hall and I lived at Miley and then I lived out in Middletown for the last year that I was here while I was working.

Gillibrand: Great. So, starting with the on-campus experience, what was the atmosphere and environment like at that time? Because that was still during the time where there were a lot of commuter students… at Salve…

Herz: It was a highly unusual environment. In one sense… we didn’t have the luxury of having co-ed dorms, we were held under very strict standards. Visitors had to leave at a certain hour, we had to sign visitors in, guys, sign visitors out. But on the other hand, we had a pub on campus… that was usually open until two or three in the morning on weekends. At that time, you could drink wine and beer, and I think the intention was to keep us here on campus rather than have us stumbling all around town, but I don’t think that necessarily worked for everybody. In the one sense it was very liberal. We don’t have a pub today. But on the other hand, it was strict. It was kind of like we were in between generations. We were in between in the 1970s.

Gillibrand: What were you involved with on campus, extracurricular wise? You mentioned theater.

Herz: Theater was my main extracurricular activity. I had several different roles, did some playwriting. That was time consuming enough. I didn’t really get involved in any other activities other than that which took us into nights and weekends.

Gillibrand: Huge time commitment with that… As a whole, what was the environment like at Salve when you were a student?

Herz: Well, back in those days it was very common to hang out with your professors at pubs; it was okay to go to a professor’s house for cookouts, dinner. It was a much different kind of environment then. Faculty and students, there was much more camaraderie than there is today. Today, there’s a real separation in terms of roles. Back then it was not like that at all. It was very common to spend the weekend hanging out with faculty, which you would not be able to do today. It would be frowned on. I think that was the main difference. Why I say that, why it was significant, was that I think it also affected learning and the process of learning. I think it made you more amenable to asking questions. There was a closeness there and an [equality] that you don’t have [today].

Gillibrand: While you were here… were there still a lot of nuns as professors, do you remember?

Herz: Yes, there were. We famously had the Tobin twins.[[1]](#footnote-1) I’m sure you’ve heard a lot about [them]. They were almost impossible to tell apart. We had sisters like Sister Prudence Croke,[[2]](#footnote-2) we had Dr. Lois Eveleth[[3]](#footnote-3) who is now in the philosophy department [but] was a sister then, and one of the best teachers I’ve ever had was Sister Ann Nelson.[[4]](#footnote-4) We ended up being dear friends after I graduated until she passed away a few years ago. She was tough, but fair. They were all, in their way, just wonderful at being able to help you focus on what was important and what wasn’t.

Gillibrand: Excellent. So what are some of your most memorable experiences with being a student at Salve?

Herz: [I didn’t feel like I fit in] because I was Jewish [and] almost everyone here was Irish Catholic, for the most part. I also didn’t want to go to school, I didn’t want to do the whole learning thing. After two years, I started just getting straight As mostly because of the influence of the two professors I became really close to: Dr. Joan David,[[5]](#footnote-5) who headed the theater department and Sister Ann Nelson... I don’t know how they did it, but they were able to sort of steer me in the direction where I enjoyed learning. I think I might’ve had difficulty in the classroom all my life, and so I think being in a small school they were able to recognize that this person has talent and [they challenged me to stay] and not run away… It was a great experience to come here.

Gillibrand: Transitioning to now, you worked at Salve for about twenty years and just recently retired, right?

Herz: That’s right.

Gillibrand: Great! What year did you start?

Herz: I started working here in 1996 part time running a newspaper for the campus. It was a bi-weekly. I got to do whatever I wanted to. I…named [the newspaper] *The Navigator* and I had a student newsroom, which was so much fun. We had five or six students that worked on the paper. We were here all hours pulling that thing together, and then we would take the proofs over to *The Newport Daily News* for printing and every two weeks we’d have a newspaper on campus. We had a wonderful time. We just had a blast. That turned into a full-time job about a year and a half later.

Gillibrand: How did you begin that opportunity with, you said the paper was called *The* *Navigator*?

Herz: I had a friend who was also a graduate here. Her name is Martha Young.Martha is now a [strategic] communications specialist at a company in Johnston Rhode Island.[[6]](#footnote-6) Through networking with her, I was offered a part-time job here as a writer [and] editor. [Thanks to her, it became a full-time career.]

Gillibrand: Where were you in your career before coming to Salve? Because you said there was some time between when you graduated to when you come back to work for the university?

Herz: I used to wait on tables when I was a college student. After I did that I went to Trinity Rep Conservatory[[7]](#footnote-7) for a year, where I studied theater and acting. While I was doing that I was offered a scholarship to attend and stay at the conservatory, but I made the decision to take a job working in an office. At that time, my salary was $16,000 a year, which is nothing now but then seemed like a lot of money. It was the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation. It was through my professor Joan David, her brother was the executive director. Again, it was networking. I stayed there for ten years. Then I left there, I was laid off, and I went and worked for the Rhode Island Conservation Corporation running the Rhode Island Envirothon, which is an environmental fair for high school students studying [everything from water and air quality to wildlife and forestry.] It was just a great project, a statewide and national outdoor fair that we did every year. Then I came here. I really had two [careers] before I finally landed here.

Gillibrand: You touched upon where you had started off at Salve with that paper being part time and going to full time, so what have been your roles, responsibilities and everything? Because that’s where you started, but then jumping ahead you would work on *Report From Newport*. So just describe your career a little bit at Salve.

Herz: I also taught here for eleven years in the Business department. I taught business communications, which I thoroughly loved, completely loved. Average class was about 36 students. Some I would do back to back. The focus of that was, mostly, resumes, business communications. It was more or less a training camp, like a boot camp for students who… didn’t necessarily even want to deal with writing, but had to learn business etiquette, certain formatting types. This was right on the cusp of Twitter and Facebook before those became popular. I was teaching those basic skills and it was a two-hundred level class. While I was working on *Report From Newport*, which came out four times a year, I was also teaching at night. I had a great time. I loved both jobs tremendously.

Gillibrand: How was it being a professor and working with the students in that capacity? What were some of the things you loved about it, what were some of the challenges because you said it was right on the cusp of social media, so maybe cell phones didn’t have as much prominence yet.

Herz: Well, I think one of the greatest challenges was trying to keep the audience engaged all the time, students engaged. We would do group projects which is sort of a teacher’s way of taking some of the pressure off, but what I loved about it was that my classrooms were collaborative and that I encouraged everybody to throw in their two cents. That was the thing that I loved most about teaching was that everybody had to have a voice… The problem with that is that sometimes you didn’t always like the answer. You know… there might’ve been one case where I had to ask a student to leave because they were so disruptive, which for me is really a rare thing to have to ask somebody to leave. I don’t ask people to leave, but a parent had come into the classroom for an open house or something and the student I think was, in that case, being disruptive because there was an audience there. I’ve always been very, very lucky in terms of the kind of students that are here. I think we've been so lucky to draw the kind of students that we do [at Salve]. I really do. I was one of them at one time… I could’ve been a real troublemaker. I was always drawn to the student that was the biggest troublemaker, that had the biggest problem that was right on the verge of getting kicked out. Those were the students I’d take under my wing and try to help.

Gillibrand: Because it was something you could relate to, like I’ve been there.

Herz: Yes, I’ve been there.

Gillibrand: Transitioning to your experience with the publishing aspect and *Report From Newport* and the paper and everything, what has that experience been like?

Herz: It’s been really interesting because print, as a form of media, is really teetering on the brink of destruction now, but when it comes to alumni magazines the research shows that readers still want to be able to hold something in their hand. I was very lucky in a sense that I was able to pick something in my career that is not going to go away, and as long as we pay attention to the research, I think we’ll be okay. It was just a wonderful experience to be able to coordinate all the different talent that went into getting it done. Photographers, freelance writers, illustrators, which we never had enough of as far as I was concerned, and to be able to put that vision into something that you could smell, see, touch, feel and then share. I think that it was just a wonderful, absolutely wonderful opportunity. I think…some of the best years of my life were spent putting that together.

Gillibrand: What were some of your favorite stories or projects or things along those lines that you worked on with *Report From Newport*? Because I know like one of the big things, before my time, but the Dalai Lama came to campus. What are some of your big moments?

Herz: Well, that was hard to top, the Dalai Lama coming to campus. That was a wonderful story that I got to do. In fact, I was just going through some of my things and I saw the cover story that I’d written on the Dalai Lama. I had put it into my recycling bin and a little voice said, “No, you want to keep that.” That was one of the highlights of Salve’s history to have to Dalai Lama come here. But I think for the most part it was being able to work with such wonderfully talented people to get things done and to… always challenge myself to do a better job every time. What you learn in the process is you learn what your limitations are. Sometimes those are imposed on you from outside and sometimes those limitations are limitations that you can overcome yourself and sometimes they’re not. They’re just there and you have to work around them, accept that you have them. We all do.

Gillibrand: What have some of your most memorable experiences as a Salve employee been? Whether this be with working on the magazine or in the classroom or just in general with coworkers. What have been some of your best memories?

Herz: I think the camaraderie that we share. I think in a lot of respects being an employee here has made me a better person not only because of the mission that Salve has, which I really believe in, but I came in every day determined to be cheerful and happy because I wanted to share that with everybody, to know how fortunate we all are to be here. That was easy to practice here. It’s not so easy to do necessarily all the time. You don’t always wake up cheerful, you don’t always wake up happy, but there’s always been that spiritual aspect to campus life that I’ve felt very much connected with and a part of. We’re very lucky to have that. Not every school has that.

Gillibrand: Excellent. So throughout your time here, both as a student and then even throughout your time working here, there have been quite a few presidents that have gone through the university so far. What are your thoughts on the different Salve presidents that you’ve encountered with throughout the years?

Herz: Nothing right now feels the same without Sister Jane[[8]](#footnote-8) here. She was extraordinary and very approachable. She was sort of like a spiritual companion for many, many people: faculty, students and staff. Sister Therese[[9]](#footnote-9) was also wonderful. She was also very intuitive. Sister Therese always had a way of showing up at the right time. Don’t know how she knew, but she did. Sister Lucille[[10]](#footnote-10) I wasn’t that connected with because, as a student, I was a little bit intimidated. I was very shy. I would see her and probably go the other way. All of them I think just struck me as really inspirational. You also have to be careful to not put them on a pedestal, which is not fair to do with anybody no matter how wonderful they are, because you set yourself up for disappointment. It’s really not fair, but in their case it was hard not to. You know, they always seemed to be there when I needed them. I do miss Sister Jane dearly, even when I come to campus now. Dr. Armstrong,[[11]](#footnote-11) I understand though, is doing a wonderful job. Everybody seems to really love her.

Gillibrand: That was going to be my next question. Even though you’re retired, you still live in the community and as a former Salve employee and an alumna of the university, what are your thoughts on the change because she is the first layperson president, which is huge in Salve’s history from always having a Sister of Mercy in that position. Do you think it’ll affect the Mercy mission in any way?

Herz: No, I don’t think it’s going to affect the Mercy mission in any way because that is enduring regardless of who is at the helm. It’s part of our culture. Fortunately, we still have Sister Therese here as Chancellor. Gradually, I think you’ll see more and more sisters leaving because they’re older. I recently became a Mercy associate and that seems to be the wave of the future for the order. You can make the commitment to uphold all the values of being a Mercy sister without necessarily taking the vows that go along with that. I think that’s sort of the future for the order itself. As far as Salve goes, I think it’s going to be great to have someone at the helm who doesn’t have to worry that their ties to the Catholic Church are going to affect their ability to make some forward-thinking policy changes. Where they have the freedom to say, “No, we’re not going to. We can’t go that route anymore. That’s not working anymore.” I don’t know whether or not that’ll change. Salve’s Catholic identity is very much part of its appeal. We’ll have to see. We’ll have to see where it goes… down the road. We’ll probably get another Sister of Mercy as president in another ten years. I wouldn’t be surprised at all… wouldn’t be surprised to see that.

Gillibrand: Just as like a side thing… you had mentioned a little bit about what it means to be a Mercy associate, so what does that mean? You had mentioned it’s a bit different from being fully dedicated as a sister, but still upholding the values. What are some of the things that you do?

Herz: There’s an orphanage in Honduras that’s run by the Sisters of Mercy for children with AIDS and HIV who’ve been abandoned by their parents or their parents have died. One of our sisters who’s a graduate, Sister Eva Lallo,[[12]](#footnote-12) does the fundraising for that, so I’m helping her. I’m trying to help her with that, get the word out and do as much as we can to help the orphanage. I still have connection with the sisters, they issue a magazine six times a year and I do some writing for them as well, feature articles, which is fun. I hope I always keep that connection.

Gillibrand: That’s excellent. Aside from the presidents, who else, and you mentioned this with the different professors like Sister Ann Nelson and everything, but who do you feel has made a significant impact on your time here at Salve?

Herz: The students made the greatest impact. Going back to what I told you earlier, that coming here [has] made me want to be a better person, and I think interacting, having that opportunity to be around the students and that wonderful energy and that vitality and that curiosity really just brought out the best in me. I have so many wonderful memories. We still keep in touch. I made great friends with many of the students here, and I hope that continues for a long time.

Gillibrand: Are you still in touch with people that you went to school here with? Still friends with [people] from your graduating class?

Herz: Yes. I still see them occasionally. More importantly, though, is that I still keep in touch with some of the students I spent time with, and I still hear from them. They’ll give me a shout out on Facebook or something like that, which is nice.

Gillibrand: Excellent! Throughout your whole time here at Salve, between being a student and then your career, how have you seen Salve change throughout the years?

Herz: I think in some ways it’s become more refined, but you also have to remember that… I’m on the outside looking in. That means I don’t really have a totally clear sense now of where Salve really is. I can get a sense from different professors, professors like Dr. Quinn[[13]](#footnote-13) who are just fabulous, and really help students accomplish wonderful things. I think that it’s going to really hold on in the future and that Salve is going to survive the storms. Many different colleges are closing now, but I don’t see Salve closing. I don’t see that happening as long as it keeps great faculty, as long as it takes care of its faculty. It has the best quality faculty [which] will draw the best students. I think that’s probably, if I were a financial planner, I would say that’s where you need to invest… That would be my advice if you want to stay open and stay afloat, you’ve got to get yourself more great teachers. Top of the line.

Gillibrand: Exactly, because that’s what students, especially in this climate now, are looking for. You had kind of addressed this, and it’s now a little bit different outside looking in, but if you had to predict… a sense from how things were when you left, what do you see for Salve’s future?

Herz: I think that Salve has to resist becoming just average. I think Salve has to avoid the temptation to be just mediocre. I think Salve has to have more courage in terms of making waves [and taking risks]. I’m not saying be more liberal, I’m not suggesting that, but… there’s going to come a point where the competition is going to get more heated and I think there has to be a point where Salve says, “No, we’re not just going to be your average liberal arts university. We’re going to have to make a splash.” I don’t know how that’s going to happen, but I think that, as a whole, Salve has to be open to that, to knowing when the opportunity comes along and taking advantage of it.

Gillibrand: This is kind of an additional question that I thought of after hearing how much the mission has meant to you when you were a student and throughout your career and how that’s still such a prominent thing today. That’s one of the first things as a new student that you’re taught is the mission statement. From your perspective and maybe even what you’ve gotten through students that you’ve stayed in touch with and had that relationship with, how do you think the impact of the Salve mission of creating a world that is harmonious, just and merciful affects everybody here and how much do you think people here take that to heart?

Herz: I think everybody, for the most part, would like to take it to heart, though I’m not sure how well it works in practice. I think if you’re going to do it you have to do it 150 percent. You can’t just recite it, you actually have to do it wholeheartedly. Sometimes you have to be brave in order to do that. I do think that we could probably do a better job taking it one step further and making sure when students graduate they look for and find careers that allow them to continue working towards the mission. It’s one thing to say, “Okay, it’s graduation, God bless you, go with God, Godspeed, bye,” but it’s another thing to take that to the next level and say, “Maybe we could do a better job in terms of placement, getting people placed in careers.” Maybe I’m wrong. It’s quite possible that we are doing a great job already with internships. I don’t think it should end after year four. I think that we have to… continue being there for our graduates long after they’re gone.

Gillibrand: Absolutely. Those were the questions that I had for you today. Were there any other stories, comments, anything along those lines that you think that we missed that you want to add?

Herz: No, I just think that it’s wonderful that you’re doing this…

1. 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-1)
2. Sister Prudence Croke, RSM, was a longtime professor of Religious Studies at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dr. Lois Eveleth is a professor and chairperson of the philosophy department at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sister Ann Nelson was a professor for history, political science, and later American studies from 1963-2002. She passed away in 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dr. Joan David taught English and Theater for almost fifty years and died in 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The company she was referencing was FM Global Insurance. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Trinity Repertory Conservatory is based in Providence, Rhode Island. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sister Jane Gerety served as president of Salve Regina University from 2009-2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dr. M. Therese Antone, RSM served as president of the university from 1994-2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sister Lucille McKillop was the president of Salve Regina from 1973 to 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dr. Kelli Armstrong is the eighth president of Salve Regina University. She is the first layperson to serve as the president of the University. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sister Eva Lallo ’63, an artist, is director of development for Casa Corazon de la Misericordia, the Heart of Mercy House Orphanage in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dr. John Quinn is a history professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)