Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Tim O’Reilly, former member of the Salve Regina Board of Trustees

Interviewer: Isabelle Gillibrand

Gillibrand: I am Isabelle Gillibrand. I am interviewing Tim O’Reilly on September 12, 2019 for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. He is a former member of the Salve Regina Board of Trustees. So to kick this off, what was your Salve connection?

O’Reilly: I was born and raised in Newport. I was aware of Salve from its beginning… but it really came to my attention when I was graduating from high school. I went to De La Salle.[[1]](#footnote-1) A lot of the girls I knew were [from] St. Catherine’s[[2]](#footnote-2) and Rogers[[3]](#footnote-3) [and] were going to Salve. Basically, they were going because they couldn’t have afforded to go away and paid room and board and so forth. It really struck me at that point, as a senior in high school… that this is quite an asset to this community. These girls would not have been able to go to college without it. I knew a number who were in that class, class of [1961] which was my class from college. I look at the alumni now and I see [some] of their names, although there are… fewer of us each year. So anyhow, that was my knowledge. I left town for college and I never returned until ‘74 with my wife and children. I was running a local company and got involved with various Salve activities and finally was asked to go on the Board in… I was on the Board for 24 years, so that would’ve been roughly ‘95… I could be off by a year or two. From that point on I was very involved as a Board member until just resigning… on June 30th.

Gillibrand: Great. Before we go into the Salve Board stories and everything, do you mind sharing your backstory and career? You mentioned you went away to college and stuff like that.

O’Reilly: I was born and raised here. I went to Notre Dame for undergraduate. I then, those were the days of the draft, went into the Navy. I was a naval officer on destroyers for… three and a half years. I was married at that time, had children, went to graduate school at Dartmouth Tuck School [and] got an MBA. I graduated in ‘67 [then] took a job down in Washington D.C. with a consulting firm. I did that until ‘74 when my family’s business [needed me]. My grandfather who had started to run the business [I eventually took over] passed away and my parents and a couple aunts and uncles were getting on in years and didn’t really want to run it, and they asked me to come back and run it. It wasn’t the thing I really wanted to do, but the family asked so I did. I ran a company which was lumber building materials, fuel oil and so forth. [I] gradually changed it to now. It’s the Newport Harbor Corporation and Newport Restaurant Group. It runs 15 restaurants. I retired 14 years ago, but one of our sons now runs it. One of the really great things about it is we turned it from a family company into an employee owned company. It’s now 100% owned by the employees. So that’s my backstory.

Gillibrand: Great. Now transitioning to the Board, what were some of your responsibilities, roles and duties throughout your twenty-something years on this Salve Board?

O’Reilly: Oversight of the administration is the primary duty of a board, and selection and monitoring of a president and so forth, those are the general board duties. Then they had committees, and a lot of Salve Board work is done by committee. I served on various committees at various times, but the one I was on for most of the time was the finance committee. I worked closely with Bill Hall,[[4]](#footnote-4) the Chief Financial Officer and Vice President of Administration. I chaired that for the last eight years of my time in office (on the Board I should say). I was on the mission committee, I was on the investment committee. I was, for a brief time, on the development committee, but I was never any good at asking people for money so I didn’t stay on that… I think I was on a couple of others, but it changes over time so I don’t remember it all.

Gillibrand: What would you say are some of the most memorable projects that you were a part of and involved in? I can imagine there were a lot, but what comes to mind?

O’Reilly: Perhaps the most important one, and it’s still memorable, was the search committee for Kelli [Armstrong].[[5]](#footnote-5) We were at a real crossroads at the school. It was the first non Sister of Mercy selection, and it was a very time consuming and thorough search. We worked with a consulting firm that was excellent that did initial screening. We wound up interviewing, as a committee, about a dozen of the ones they screened out of seventy some applicants they had. We selected down to I think it was four finalists, met further and eventually chose Kelli. It was not easy. We had, of the four finalists, three of them were really excellent. Making the decision was not easy, but Kelli stood out for a variety of reasons. Hopefully, as the first non Sister of Mercy, she’s going to adopt and become part of the Mercy mission. I personally think she’ll be a wonderful president. That probably was the most memorable, important thing I did on the Board.

Gillibrand: As you said, it’s a huge step for Salve because out of the now [eight][[6]](#footnote-6) presidents I think there were this is the first that hasn’t come from the… Sisters of Mercy, the order. It’ll be a change for sure. We will return to the presidents later on. From what you remember, what was the state of Salve when you first joined the Board?

O’Reilly: Sister Therese[[7]](#footnote-7) had just taken over as president from Sister Lucille.[[8]](#footnote-8) Sister Lucille had brought the university from a very difficult financial squeeze, and Sister Therese had a large part of it with her fundraising. That was her primary responsibility before she became president. In fact, I was on the search committee for Sister Therese. Even though I hadn’t yet been appointed [to] the Board I was to be on the search committee. She really brought a sense of organization and discipline and financial management to the organization that was needed. She brought in some top-level staff, some like Bill Hall and Michael Semenza[[9]](#footnote-9) [who] are still here with us… Sister Therese really put the University on a very solid financial footing and really began to get Salve moving forward as an organization. I worked on the Board then, and I was pleased and impressed with what Sister Therese did. She inherited a challenging situation and she did a good job with it.

Gillibrand: That leads into the next question of what are some of the challenges that you faced on the Board throughout the years that you were on there?

O’Reilly: There was always the financial challenge. This is a tuition-driven university with a minimal endowment, and having adequate enrollment and tuition revenue and living within that is the challenge year after year. During the Great Recession[[10]](#footnote-10) in 2009-2010 we had an enrollment shortfall, as a lot of schools did. That was a pretty significant squeeze. Finance committee worked very hard on it. Bill Hall and his staff did an excellent job in managing with the senior officers, the president’s cabinet as they call it, in living with a budget that was affordable. Those years, about three years there, were very challenging just because it was starting to become apparent that a number of colleges [that were] smaller liberal arts especially, and some of them Catholic, were going under around the country. It took a lot of hard work and a lot of discipline by the administration and the staff and the faculty to get through those times, but they did. They did a good job.

Gillibrand: That leads to the next part which is the opposite side of that [which is] what are some of the major success stories that you remember, or periods of growth that come to mind?

O’Reilly: When I first came on the Board, the big success story was how Sister Therese had taken over from Sister Lucille and really gotten the University financially stabilized in the first couple of three years and brought in some very top administrators. Some of the people that had served with Sister Lucille were getting on in years and it was time for them to retire and they did with [the] change in administrations. That was a big challenge, but it was a very positive result. The other, I think, significant one was [that] Sister Jane[[11]](#footnote-11) brought a whole different temperament to the presidency. She focused on academics and upgrading the academic program, very successfully I think. She also focused on student life and student engagement. Prior to her time, this campus sort of emptied out on weekends. People went home, and so forth. There just wasn’t a lot to do here, and she really focused on that. Of course, the addition of the Rodgers Recreation Center[[12]](#footnote-12) helped. They developed a lot of weekend activities, and students felt much more like this was a place where they could stay and didn’t have to look for a place to go every weekend. I think that really helped the campus culture. That, I think, was a big success too. Now we’re trying to build the additional student residences. That has run into a lot of local opposition. It would, I think, be a definite advantage to have all students in their first three years on campus if possible, but time will tell.

Gillibrand: Exactly. It seems like Salve is doing what they can, but, as you mentioned, it’s a lot of outside [opposition].

O’Reilly: A lot of opposition from the abutters and so forth. Who knows.

Gillibrand: … One of the biggest parts of [Sister Jane’s] legacy is the completion of the renovation [and] upgrade of the O’Hare building.[[13]](#footnote-13)

O’Reilly: Biggest project the campus has ever had. I was involved in that from the beginning. It was impressive. It took what was a very out-of-date, 1950s, yellow brick building [that] looked like every other Catholic school you ever saw at that time and really changed it into a very contemporary college facility and learning facility. It was a good job [and] a lot of work.

Gillibrand: What were some of the things [that] you were involved with? I remember talking to Sister Jane[[14]](#footnote-14) and she said… the process was lengthy in the sense that you had to do the big-scale things [and] everything down to the minuscule [details such as] what color are the tiles.

O’Reilly: I tried to not to get too involved in that. My wife will tell you that my aesthetic taste does not… She’s an artist, and she would’ve been better to do it than I. I was heavily involved in the financing of it. The bond issues, making sure what we presented to the Board for approval was financially responsible and stable.

Gillibrand: Excellent. That kind of all transitions into the point, and that’s talking about the presidents that you’ve come across throughout the years. You said you came in towards the end of Sister Lucille when Sister Therese was taking over, which means you would’ve been here throughout her [administration] then Sister Jane’s then retired when Sister Jane retired. What was your experience working with them and your impressions of them throughout your time working on the Board?

O’Reilly: That’s a good question… They each were three very different people. Sister Lucille navigated a very difficult financial crunch for the University. I had a personal friend, Frank Maguire[[15]](#footnote-15) now deceased, who was a professor here for years in the Religious Studies department. We were friendly. When we moved back to town, we found [that] his wife had been a classmate of my wife at Newton College of the Sacred Heart up in Newton, Massachusetts which went out of business. Frank was a faculty member there, and he wound up being hired here. He always told me a story which I always remembered of his first faculty meeting. Sister Lucille had hired a new financial manager, a man who came out of private industry who was an excellent manager, but he imposed a variety of financial controls and would not let the administration, the administrators and the faculty spend money without authorization. They were tight. There was a faculty meeting not long after he put in a lot of these controls where they were very upset. Frank said, “I was listening on these people who were talking about ‘Why can’t I spend money on stuff for my class and trips to conferences?’ and so forth…” Frank finally said, “I decided I wanted to say something.” He said “I raised my hand, stood up and said you don’t know me, many of you. I’m new, but I just came from a school where we didn’t get paychecks for weeks at a time at the end. As long as there’s a paycheck in my bank account every week at Salve, they can restrict the money on spending on pencils and paper and trips and so forth all they want.” He said, “Faculty members looked at me and said, ‘What do you mean? You didn’t get paid?’” He said, “No! We went sometimes a month or more behind on getting it. Then they finally closed with no particular notice and said we’re not going to be in business…” He said that was hard for them to understand, but Sister Lucille… they saved the University. It was really tight. I always had a lot of respect for her. Sister Therese, as I said, took over after it had been stabilized, and she really started building financial stability long-term and hired some really good administrators that I mentioned, some of whom are no longer here, and put Salve on a future course that made it an attractive university. The quality of the students started to increase, the whole academic program started to come up and all. She started the Pell Center,[[16]](#footnote-16) stuff like that. When she retired, Sister Jane came in and, as I mentioned, [had] a different personality and decided she wanted to focus on academics and student life. She made a few changes in administration, every president does, and, I think, by-in-large she succeeded. She ruffled some feathers in the process. Sister Jane was a kind person, and she was unwilling to pass judgement on people quickly. Some of her administrators were not really… stepping up and doing the job… I ran a big organization and I know what it’s like. She took longer than she might’ve to finally realize she had the wrong person, but it was because she had a good heart. I always respected that. I think she left a school that is really prepared now to deal with this really existential crisis in higher education and the survival of small schools. I think Kelli has been handed an organization that is ready for that, but change has got to come.

Gillibrand: Right. Obviously we don’t know yet because we just started, but how do you think Kelli… will fit into our past presidents? Does she fit the mold of one of the three, or do you think she’s someone completely different to really bring a fresh take or personality to the school?

O’Reilly: I think she’s got a very warm personality like Sister Jane. Sister Therese was not necessarily a warm person. She’s a likeable person, but she’s all business at times. Sister Lucille, she was somewhat all business also. I didn’t know her enough to really be able to say that much, but from what I could see. I think Kelli has got the personal warmth and sincerity and genuineness that are important. She’s going to have to make changes. The curriculum needs to be changed. We’re offering a lot of courses that have very minimal enrollment, and we’re not offering a lot of courses that students are looking for these days as they apply to colleges. I think that’s going to change. I think we got an excellent provost in Nancy Schreiber.[[17]](#footnote-17) I’ve seen four [or] five provosts on my time on the Board and Nancy is by far the best I’ve seen. I really think she and Kelli are on the same page and are going to make a difference. I think Kelli will be a combination of Sister Jane’s warmth and sincerity and personal likeableness and Sister Therese’s decisiveness and intellectual acuity. Kelli is a data person. She came up through Boston College in the research and data kind of work, and I think she has a handle on the finances in the future of Catholic [institutions] in higher education. She’ll be a good combination.

Gillibrand: Excellent. Overall, how have you seen Salve change throughout the years because its definitely, especially during Sister Therese’s administration, grew in size. I can imagine there’s been a change in student type, generational differences, what students are looking for and such. So just from your perspective, how has it changed?

O’Reilly: It was only shortly before I came on the Board that it went co-ed. I think it was perceived in the local and the regional community before that as another one of those small, Catholic, girls schools. I think that when it went co-ed that it increased enrollment and it began to have growing visibility. I think Sister Therese in particular made an effort to become visible in a larger Rhode Island community, as well as the local community, and brought more recognition of Salve. I think that’s been positive. I think it went through a period of time, in the local community in particular, where Salve was sort of, along with the Preservation Society and so forth as these big institutions that were non real estate tax paying and taking up valuable land that should be paying more for their community services and so forth. I think a lot of that has gone by the board because Salve has shown that it is paying its own way. It’s actually offering a lot to the community. The students do. I think it’s more respected now and more recognized as a valuable local and statewide institution.

Gillibrand: Great. From your perspective, even though you’re not on the Board anymore, what do you see for Salve’s future? You kind of touched on it a little bit how higher education is always changing and such, so what are you predicting?

O’Reilly: The challenge is going to be enrollment because the demographics are changing so rapidly for college age. Over the next decade there are going to be fewer and fewer college-aged applicants and more and more schools are going to be struggling. These days, every few weeks or months you see another school announcing that it’s closing or failed to get its enrollment. Salve has kept up on enrollment. They had a burp a couple of years ago, but that seems to be over now. It’s going to be a challenge. I really think the biggest issue is that they’ve got to refine the curriculum. The curriculum wasn’t changing under the prior two provosts, but Nancy, I think, understands what needs to be done. I think you’ll want to keep your liberal arts heritage, but you want to incorporate, as well, some of the pre-professional training that a lot of students are looking for. I was a liberal arts graduate at Notre Dame, Great Books program, and I’m a strong believer in liberal arts [as a] foundation for life, but you also need to get ready to deal with the technical changes in the world and all of that. Some of the liberal arts colleges that failed to recognize that are the ones that lost enrollment… When parents or students are looking, and I’ve got three grandsons, two in college and one graduated, and when they were looking they wanted to see what they were going to be able to get. I don’t believe in choosing a college to prepare yourself immediately to come out and take a job; I think you want liberal arts background. I think that that’s going to be the challenge for Salve. To figure out how to maintain the liberal arts heritage, but also incorporate life skills and knowledge that are going to be needed in this economy.

Gillibrand: Exactly. Do you feel, as of now, that the University is in good standing? You’ve talked about… when you got here it was shaky and then good and then there was the recession and all that, so current standing.

O’Reilly: I think it’s definitely stabilized. I think the challenge, as I said, as a tuition-dependent university is going to be maintaining enrollment. We can’t really grow enrollment because we don’t have the facilities and the size is about maxed out, but you’ve got to keep enrollment up. If that’s done and the curriculum changes and the marketing of it is critical to that, I think they’re going to find a future. If they don’t make those changes, I mentioned earlier, we have a number of courses in a few majors that just don’t have much enrollment. It’s hard to look at it and say we can’t afford it, but we can. What’s going to be done about that? I don’t know. [Those are] very difficult decisions.

Gillibrand: We’ve talked a little bit about the challenges for Salve, like changing the curriculum and enrollment and such, but do you believe that there are new opportunities arising that Salve can take advantage of that maybe weren’t there in the past? Whether it be from technology or better visibility and recognition…

O’Reilly: I don’t know of any magic bullet or any quick, simple solution. I think it’s deciding what you want to be, developing a curriculum that is true to that vision and that goal and that image, and then marketing yourself, and today selling yourself to students is a marketing program. Doing it intelligently and knowledgeably. It’s not the same ball game it was even five years ago. I think it’s there and I think we’ve got now a president who appreciates that. We’ll see how it goes.

Gillibrand: Great. So it looks like those were the questions that I had for you, were there any additional stories or last comments or anything you think that we missed that you want to share?

O’Reilly: … I always felt really good about coming to Salve meetings, Board and committee meetings and some of the social events. They’re a really good group of people here. Good group on the Board, people are very sincere, dedicated people. Faculty members that I got to know I just had a lot of appreciation for. Administrators, some of whom are no longer here, that I really got to appreciate and respect. It’s a good place. It isn’t a place with a lot of career-driven people that really are focused on themselves rather than the students. There’s a pretty sincere focus on the students and what we’re trying to do here: take young adolescents in and turn them into knowledgeable, confident adults four years later. That’s not always successful, but by-and-large I think we do a pretty good job at that.

1. Referencing La Salle Academy in Providence, Rhode Island. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Referencing St. Catherines Academy in Newport, Rhode Island. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Referencing Rogers High School in Newport, Rhode Island. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. William Hall is the Vice President of Administration and Chief Financial Officer of Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 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-5)
6. Error made in the original recording here. Recording states nine presidents, but the transcript is corrected to eight. [↑](#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 Lucille McKillop was the president of Salve Regina from 1973 to 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Michael Semenza is the Vice President for University Relations and Advancement at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Great Recession was an economic crisis that occurred in the mid to late 2000s. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sister Jane Gerety served as president of Salve Regina University from 2009-2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rodgers was completed in 2000, and continues to serve as Salve’s gym, fitness center, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. O’Hare is one of the larger academic buildings at Salve Regina. It holds a lot of the science departments, along with classes for all majors. A large renovation was completed on the building in early 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sister Jane Gerety participated in the Salve Regina Oral History Project before her retirement in 2019. The three interviews are available through the Salve Regina Archives and Digital Commons. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Frank Maguire was an undergraduate and graduate professor in religious studies who specialized in biomedical ethics at Salve Regina from 1971 to 2003. Maguire passed away in 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Referring to the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at the Young Building. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dr. Nancy Schreiber currently serves as the provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)