Salve Regina Oral History Project

Date of interview: July 12th, 2019

Date of final transcription: August 28th, 2019

Interviewee: Dr. Mary Montminy-Danna, Professor of Social Work- 1988-present

Interviewer: Anna Paradis

Anna Paradis: Okay, I am Anna Paradis and I am here interviewing Dr. Mary Montminy-Danna who is our Professor in the Social Work Department. It is July 12th and I am doing this for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. So to start us off, what brought you to Salve Regina?

Dr. Mary Montminy-Danna: Ah, well I’m going into my thirty-second year here and I had the good fortune thirty-two years ago to be working in Portsmouth at an agency called Portsmouth Action for Youth and … there was another part of it called Stopover Services, and we needed a consultant for our program. -It was a program that … was like an alternative foster care program kind of… Not a formal one for the state but one through the community and we needed a consultant so somebody said, “Call the Social Work Department at Salve Regina.” So that’s what I did and the head of Social Work turned out to be Katie Ostrander -who established the Social Work Program here I should say- and then was our consultant and very shortly after that she said, “Would you come in and teach a class?” …Then that evolved into working here full time.

Paradis: Wonderful. That’s a great story! It sounds like a great organization, too.

Montminy-Danna: Yes!

Paradis: Okay, so how has Salve changed from the time of Sister Lucille McKillop[[1]](#footnote-1)? So [are there] any changes you’ve noticed around here?

Montminy-Danna: Oh my goodness! Well, geographically…it’s just become a bigger campus, that’s for sure. It seems to be [that] over the years… It went from a college to a university in the time that I was here and I think it has a bigger footprint. I think a lot of people now will say, “Oh, Salve! I know Salve.” –and of course after being seventy years old, now we have children of children [coming to Salve]. So that’s one thing… I just think growth because of time and I also think that one of the changes that I have seen [is] when I started here there was a lot more religious faculty and now, as you probably know that’s not the case and so there’s always been a… really strong effort to make sure that the non-religious faculty truly understand the mission of the Sisters of Mercy and really live that mission and teach that mission… So I have seen over time that become a very important part of my work here and [an] important part of my colleagues’ work to make sure the idea that, “Well, the Sisters of Mercy will take care of that.” That’s not the way it is. We’re all part of the Salve community and so over time I’ve seen that the mission is really embraced by …all the stakeholders and that to me is a beautiful statement.

Paradis: Well, thank you. Beautifully said. So do you mind talking about the service trips you’ve been on? You [had] mentioned Jamaica and Appalachia. Do you mind discussing those?

Montminy-Danna: Oh sure! Well I’ll start with Appalachia because that was many, many years ago… We did an alternative spring break and we were asked –so it wasn’t the Social Work Department, it was students that were interested- it happened to be another Social Work faculty member that was one of the chaperones and we went to the community was called Pocahontas.

Paradis: Oh! Okay.

Montminy-Danna: Yeah!... What it was, was a community that really had become economically- very desperate after the closing of so many coal mines… So what was happening is that the unemployment was very, very high and if there was employment it was in the coal mines that weren’t closed at that point, but you probably know that that’s a very dangerous profession and so we were going down to help rebuild some of the houses [because] one of the things that had happened in this community is that because of the …poverty –because of unemployment people were not able to maintain their homes very well. …There were a lot of homes that actually had caught fire and people were not able to rebuild so our job was to go down and really be at their service. If people said, “Jeez, we could really use sheet rock here.” That’s what we did. If somebody said, “…Can you help us rewire this house?” –and it was lovely. It was lovely because …I always tell this story because I think in my mind it’s so poignant. There was a woman –an older woman- who was a woman from the area and part of service, of course, is always making sure that everybody there is involved and feels [like a] part of [it]- not you’re just going and doing something for somebody, but everybody feels something and feels like they have something to contribute. –And I remember as we got there and we were all sitting around saying, “Well… Who can do this? Who can do that? Who wants to learn this?”- and there was an older woman from the community she… raised her hand and said, “I can make the Kool Aid.”

Paradis: I love that!

Montminy-Danna: To me -it still just gives me goosebumps today, because …that was an important part of the trip. It was hot [and] she had something to keep us from being thirsty and to me it just says that everybody has a gift: everybody has something to contribute and …it’s all valuable. So that was that trip, and as I said that just sticks in my mind because …I just thought it was great… Then the most recent trip was an interesting one. So the Community Service Office and John Rok from Religious Studies have been doing a trip –and I don’t know how many years they’ve been doing this- but to Nicaragua and it’s to an organization called Mustard Seed that works … primarily with people with disabilities, but from [age] zero to whatever age –in their thirties, fifties, what have you- and the structure in the country doesn’t provide enough for people with disabilities. So Mustard Seed steps in and they really help and there’s no limit on the amount of time that somebody can be a client or a resident… It’s sort of like, “If we take care of you: we take care of you.” So there’s a lot of civil strife right now in Nicaragua so we could not go this year.

Paradis: Okay.

Montminy-Danna: And Mustard Seeds also has a community in Jamaica, so that’s how we ended up in Jamaica.

Paradis: Okay.

Montminy-Danna: …The students haven’t been there yet; they will do a full-fledged trip in January.

Paradis: Okay.

Montminy-Danna: So our trip was sort of a [scouting trip]. We were going down to meet the players, to meet some of the kids, to meet some of the coordinators –so that we would be able to come back and say to the students and the faculty who will chaperone, “Here’s what things look like.” And, “Here’s where you can work.” And, “Here’s the kind of things that you can… do to really make a dent when you’re down there.” So that’s what that trip was about. So it was short but you know, always impactful.

Paradis: Yeah, that seems like a really awesome opportunity to get out and explore communities different than our own and make a really huge impact…

Montminy-Danna: Yeah. You know, I’m always struck by –sometimes you go to a community that- in my work as a Social Worker I do this a lot whether it’s a service program or not, but go to communities that really… don’t on the surface seem to have the kind of resources, and you can feel very bad... [because] you want people to have resources, but sometimes you recognize that people have resources that we don’t have. They have incredible spirit –like when we were in Jamaica we stopped at one site and all the kids were in various [conditions] –some were in cribs; some were in wheelchairs- they were all in some kind of [transportation] depending on what their disability was, and part of the day is [that] everybody sings and all the kids sang… They go around the room and so it would be, “Okay, Anna! Okay, Mary! Okay!”- and you would just… see these kids and some of them were non-verbal but there would be a twinkle in those eyes when they heard their name or their toes would start and so …kind of a spirit of… hope.

Paradis: Yeah.

Montminy-Danna: So you might be lacking in some other kinds of resources but certainly not in faith and hope and so it’s always very fulfilling for me to be around that and to be reminded that, that is just as important.

Paradis: That’s really beautiful. Thank you for sharing that!

Montminy-Danna: Sure!

Paradis: So, Dr. Quinn had mentioned to me beforehand that you completed your PhD at Boston College while teaching full time.

Montminy-Danna: Yes!

Paradis: Do you mind talking about that experience?

Montminy-Danna: Well, I have to credit Salve for allowing me to do that. So when I went to Boston College, I went part time.

Paradis: Okay.

Montminy-Danna: …When you –as you probably know- do a doctorate sometimes you just immerse yourself in it and that’s your full time job and that wasn’t how I wanted to do the program and I had a lot of colleagues there in the cohort [that] were in the same situation. They were teaching or they were in a job that they didn’t want to leave completely: they felt that the doctoral work really complemented [their jobs] and that [their] work really complemented their doctoral work. So I went up to Boston College once a week for three years and did my coursework and then started the writing process and my area of interest [has] always been in really looking at policy and looking at how to keep families safe.

Paradis: Very interesting.

Montminy-Danna: Yeah. So …what I specifically looked at –I did a study of services for domestic violence around the country: so I talked to people in every state -and that’s what I looked at but since then I’ve really cast a wider net of what it means to be a safe family. That’s one identified population. –But anyways, …that’s what I did.

Paradis: Fascinating! Oh my gosh I can’t even imagine. Good for you!

Montminy-Danna: Thank you!

Paradis: Wow. So do you have any specific memories of different students that you’d like to talk about?

Montminy-Danna: Oh my gosh, I love my students. … You know what?- I’m inspired by our students: I really am. …And I think, “You know, when people talk about, “Ah, I’ve got to go to work.”… I have to say –and I’m not saying this because you’re recording me- but I love coming to work. I love the energy the students –like look at your smile right now- that is what I walk into in the classroom. So when you think about that and you think about- particularly for me in Social Work- students that have dedicated their life to the service of other people?

Paradis: Yes.

Montminy-Danna: How could you not love that?

Paradis: Yes.

Montminy-Danna: …And so I get excited for the kinds of things that they’re thinking about doing. …I get excited to think that …they’re doing all kinds of things: so I have students that work –former students: they stay in touch which I love!

Paradis: Yes.

Montminy-Danna: So they’re working in child welfare, they’re working in prisons; they’re working in corporations; they’re working in family services; they’re working for the Red Cross…they’re doing stuff overseas; they’re doing things domestically… A bunch of my students –former students- were at the march on Washington.

Paradis: Wow!

Montminy-Danna: So they’d send me pictures and they’d say, “Here we are. We knew you’d be happy!” –And so it’s like living vicariously if you will, because their work is so good and I know that every bit of it is making the world a better place. –So talking about particular students? I would say that …everybody has strengths, everybody has a gift, so I love that… Right now as I’m sitting here all these faces of students are going through my head… So I can’t say any particular [student] because I think they’re all amazing.

Paradis: Yeah, you’re in a really great program that really gets in [and helps] with the community, so I can imagine that you have a wealth of amazing students.

Montminy-Danna: Yeah! And you know, I think …what I love –and I’ll say this kind of in a general way- is [that] I love that they develop leadership and so whatever it is: whether it’s leadership in the community, whether it’s being a leader here on campus, whether it’s going into an agency and being a leader- what they’re able to do is …get other people excited about change.

Paradis: That’s wonderful.

Montminy-Danna: I hope that answers it!

Paradis: Yes! That was beautiful, thank you. Alright, and to finish us off, do you mind talking about the colleagues you’ve worked with in the past? For example, Sister Johnelle Luciani and Dr. Barbara Sylvia from the Social Work Department?

Montminy-Danna: Sure!

Paradis: Thank you.

Montminy-Danna: …And what I’ll do is I’ll start with who I first started with because then I will end it with Sister Johnelle and Dr. Sylvia [who] retired last year.

Paradis: Okay.

Montminy-Danna: But up until that point I started out by saying that Katie Ostrander was the foundress of the program.

Paradis: Okay.

Montminy-Danna: So she was just- she actually passed away this year in her nineties- and she to this day –former students will say, “Oh my gosh. Katie!” They just loved her. They loved her because she was very hard in terms of: you needed to know how to write- you needed to know how to write well, you needed to embrace the values of the Social Work profession, you needed to get out there, you needed to do things, to be active… And she was a wonderful- not only did she start the program here, but just a wonderful, professional role model… and not just for students but for people like myself… She just had a way of showing how you can be a teacher, you can be a service to your community, you can have a family, you can do all those kinds of things –so she was a wonderful mentor. Then I worked with a woman by the name of Stephanie Muri who was also a chair of the department.

Paradis: Okay.

Montminy-Danna: And she too was [a] very wonderful role model and really a lot of the students –one wonders, “How do you balance things in life? How do you balance… just getting your work done? Or having a family? Or taking care of yourself?”- and she was a wonderful model in how you can do all those kinds of things. Then my longest tenure was with working with Sister Johnelle[[2]](#footnote-2) who was the next chair of the department and Dr. Sylvia and so the three of us worked together for twenty-five years.

Paradis: Okay, wow…

Montminy-Danna: Yeah, so …it’s like when you work with somebody for twenty-five years –the three of us- …you just work together, you have the same goals for the department… We enjoyed sharing our insights about the students and our perceptions about the students and also really the three of us –because we were in for the long-term, “Where did we see the department going?” –and so many changes were made in those twenty-five years in terms of –just the change in the world- that for…most of those twenty-five years I was the field coordinator, so I put the students in their field agencies.

Paradis: Oh, okay!

Montminy-Danna: And over twenty-five years you start to see, “Wow, we maybe need to expand the kinds of agencies. Is it safe for students to be there? What about the schools now? Is it safe for students to be…Social Workers in schools?” So the three of us tried to capture: what are the changes in the environment and how do we as a department respond them in a proactive way? So that was …for twenty-five years working together, it was amazing.

Paradis: That’s awesome. Thank you for sharing that story.

Montminy-Danna: Yeah!

Paradis: …Is there anything else you’d like to add?

Montminy-Danna: Well, I could say that I’ve enjoyed –and I do enjoy- my colleagues from other departments which is always –for me… no department is isolated and to me it’s very exciting to have students that are from History, students that are from Religious Studies, Nursing students… I like to have my colleagues from other departments –I’m very interested in how they see things and how they see their service to the University and I really appreciate –one of the things that we talk to the students about is [that], “You will always work on a multidisciplinary team. You’ll work with people from various walks of life and from various educational backgrounds.” So it’s nice to be in a community where that can happen. We’re a small program, but we’re in a community where we really depend on one another: we interact a lot of other departments. So I like that –and what a beautiful place to work. I come to work every day and I walk on the Cliff Walk, I get my work done and I say, “How blessed am I?”

Paradis: Beautifully said. Well, thank you so much for sitting down with me. I really appreciate it.

Montminy-Danna: You are very welcome! Thanks for asking.

1. Sister Lucille McKillop was President of Salve Regina from 1973 to 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Sister Johnelle is a Sister of Mercy and the Social Work Department benefitted greatly from her leadership because it was imbued with the Mercy mission and charism.” ~Dr. Montminy-Danna [↑](#footnote-ref-2)