

Salve Regina Oral History Project
Date of Interview: July 22, 2020
Date of Completed Transcript:
Narrator: Jeanne Knox, '70
Interviewer: Lindsay Wright, '21

The following interview was conducted for the Salve Oral History Project on July 22, 2020 over Zoom Video Communications. The narrator is Jeanne Knox, Class of 1970. The interviewer is Lindsay Wright, Class of 2021.

Wright: Thank you Jeanne for being my first Zoom interview. So to start off, where are you from?

Knox: I am originally from Dumont, New Jersey... and being from Dumont kind of led me to Salve. But I currently live in Naples, Florida.

Wright: You do, okay. So why did you choose Salve in the first place?

Knox: Well... this has to have some historical perspective. When you were in high school in the early sixties, or mid sixties, the advice that you were always given was to choose a career where you always had a job and that you could have that job for the rest of your life. And the two things that were really open for women then were nursing and education, and a vast majority of the learning tracks headed towards being a teacher or being a nurse. The feminist movement had started but it wasn't yet to the point where a high school junior or a high school senior saw themselves as female and wanting to go into advertising, or law, or any of the fields...business, for that matter...any of the fields that women are all a part of now. And so my parents agreed with my thought that I would be a better nurse than a teacher. I didn't really want to be a teacher and I liked science. So I looked at schools of nursing. All of those I looked at, at that time were run by Catholic schools [and] were associated [with] men's colleges, except for Salve. And my parents took one look at me and one look men's colleges- Georgetown, [Boston College], Villanova, all of those schools- and strongly encouraged me to go to Salve. So I think that was part of my decision. My brother had gone to college four years before and he went to Providence [College] so I kind of knew the area. Salve was very pretty, it was far enough away from New Jersey, it had the curriculum I needed so it was kind of a good fit.

Wright: Great. So it sounds like you were happy at Salve?

Knox: No, I wouldn't say that. I think there were a lot of things at Salve that were good for me. There were a lot of things that probably weren't that good for me. I was happy. Looking back at it now, I probably never loved nursing as much as I should have. But I was very persistent so I stuck with it and stuck with it and stuck with it. I liked learning, I loved Newport. I fell in love with Newport the day I got off the Newport ferry which

was... I was there before the bridge¹. And I loved it there. And I think that that kept me happy enough.

Wright: Alrighty, so because you were from New Jersey, I assume that you lived on campus in one of the residences?

Knox: I did.

Wright: Which residence did you live in?

Knox: So everyone as a freshman started out if they were on campus, everyone started out at Miley, except for a few students who ended up over in Mercy Hall.² I don't even know if it still exists. But it was kind of around the corner from Miley. So essentially, all the freshman lived in Miley.

Wright: Okay and it was a new renovation at that time correct?

Knox: It was a relatively new building and... I honestly don't know how old it was but it was the newest building on campus when I arrived there.

Wright: Right. Did you like living there?

Knox: I didn't dislike living there. I think that our class, I certainly didn't like the structure that we were living under. It was a highly structuralized experience. It was the sixties. We had really early curfews. We had dress codes. We could go to breakfast at certain times, lunch at certain times, dinner at certain times. There was a lot of structure. And I think that as a freshman and as sophomores...most of the sophomores lived there too... the dorm was fine, the structure maybe not so much.

Wright: Fair enough. And what activities or campus clubs were you involved in?

Knox: Very few to be very honest with you. And the reason for that was because I was a nursing major. I don't know what the nursing major is like now but, back in the day as a nursing major, you started working in the hospital second semester of your freshman year. And your classes were compressed into an all day of classes, one after the other, on the days that you were on campus. The amount of hours that we spent off campus working in hospitals wherever it was, was enormous. It was way harder to be really, really involved with the routine clubs and activities and whatever. The only thing we were really involved with, I was really involved with, was the social life on weekends.

¹The Newport Pell bridge began construction in April 1966 and opened to traffic on June 28, 1969.

²Mercy Hall underwent a name change in 2007. It is now known as Antone Academic Center.

Wright: And what hospitals were you at for your clinicals?

Knox: That was a part of the problem, I would say. We primarily were bused from Newport to Providence, to all the hospitals in Providence. So on a hospital day, we were on the bus at 545a to go to Providence to work [from] 7 to 3:30 to get back to campus just around 6 o'clock to eat dinner and do your school work.

Wright: So that's like a 12 hour day.

Knox: And that was typical. And sophomore, junior, and senior year, it was three days a week. So interestingly enough, I don't know if they still do it but the junior year, when I was in nursing, we went...I call it my 'junior year abroad'...we moved to Providence and we lived in Providence. We bused down to campus two days a week in order to go to school (class).

Wright: Wow so it was like a reverse commute almost.

Knox: It was absolutely. But that limited a lot of our involvement in what I would call routine school activities.

Wright: Oh, I'm sure... What was campus life like when you were there?

Knox: It was interesting. It was kind of... it was two ways. Monday to Friday, Salve had an influx of day students on campus so there was a lot of activity. There was a lot of people hanging out and classes and whatever. On weekends, not only were the day students not there, but a lot of the Rhode Island kids who were my classmates went home for the weekend. And for that matter, Southern Massachusetts. So it was a very small insular group of whatever year you were...freshman, sophomore, whatever... that were hanging out together. They were primarily kids from Connecticut, New York and New Jersey and as far away as Washington who lived on campus. We did a lot of off campus activities and we hung out a lot in the Miley Hall dining room, which was the central area that everyone was in. There was actually, below the dining room...I don't even know what to call it... a lounge room that had sold French fries and burgers called the Haven. That was really a big hangout.

Wright: Alright. And was the Cave In in operation when...

Knox: Haven

Wright: Haven, okay...Was there ever the greenhouse type of pub on campus you were there?

Knox: Nope.

Wright: Okay, and how about downtown Newport? What was that like?

Knox: Oh downtown Newport was awesome but it looked nothing like what you know downtown Newport to be. Downtown Newport was a very small, kind of gone-to-seed New England fishing resort that had a huge influx, thanks to the Vietnam War, of sailors and Navy men strolling along the avenues. It was a college student's dream, downtown Newport. There weren't a lot of fancy restaurants or anything like that. It was primarily... I mean The Black Pearl³ opened up while I was there and that was the highest end thing that anyone had ever seen in Newport, Rhode Island. And to walk through that neighborhood, you had to go along Thames Street which was the big "no no" because it was "dangerous". As I look back on it now, it's kind of funny.

Wright: Wow, that is...

Knox: But it was great! We loved it... We explored and spent... it was walkable, none of us had cars. It was so walkable. It was so easy and that's where we spent our weekends. We had wonderful times.

Wright: Oh, I bet! And so you mentioned a little bit, when you were living in Miley, it was a bit strict. What do you mean by that? Were there nuns in the buildings?

Knox: No, but we had a house mother who truly enjoyed being a terror. You kind of had to work with her and get on her good side or else she was going to be your worst enemy. A bit strict would be to say the least. All had changed while our class was there but that would be a story that's very specific to the 1970's. When I got there, the curfew during the week was, I believe... 10:30. No, maybe 10:15. You had to be in your dorm. And... on weekends it would be 11:15 for freshmen. So, we're really talking about hours that most of us weren't that comfortable keeping. But, believe you me, if you were one minute late, that house mother was sitting there, and the door was locked, and you had to knock on the door, and you got disciplined. You got 'campused' for the next weekend where you couldn't leave the campus. And that was absolutely routine.

Wright: Oh my gosh, wow, okay...[both laughing] that is very hard as a college student, I get it!

Knox: I know! It's amazing. Now I had to tell you that our class...love them to death... did not take that structure as well as some of the classes before us, so that by the time we were sophomores, we had already pushed the school into dropping the dress code. We

³The Black Pearl is a popular restaurant and tourist destination located on Bannister's Wharf, Newport.

had to wear skirts to class when I was a freshman. And by mid-sophomore year we were in jeans... [because] the rest of the world was in jeans by then. And by our junior year, the curfews were 12:30 during the week and 2:30 during the weekends. And you could sign yourself out of the dorm rooms at any time and just leave and do whatever you wanted to do. So it liberalized during the time that we were there. I think that was... our class pushed hard. We pushed the school hard during the time that we were there.

Wright: Right. And that brings me to my next questions. So you graduated in 1970 which was such a tumultuous time, to be fair. What was campus society like with Vietnam, Civil Rights...?

Knox: It was pretty interesting. I've been thinking about this a lot, primarily because of the message that we sent to this years graduating seniors for the class. I think we came into school somewhat a fractured group of people. I don't think our class was ever as cohesive as many of the classes that came before us. I think there was so much social change going on out there. The Civil Rights Movement and all that that entailed, feminism, Betty Friedan's book was a like a bomb dropped on women and some began thinking "I don't want to be a mother" and "I do want a job."⁴ So we had all of that going on. We had all the issues of (the)Vietnam (War) and on top of that, we were a Navy town. We actually knew people in the military... so think about that. We had every type of discussion that you could imagine within our class. Not so much in our classes but with each other. And there were groups that were very politically committed and there were groups that were very socially committed and there were groups of kids that [weren't] feminists and then there were groups of kids that were just there in school to get an education and move on in their life. So... we were kind of fractured, I think.

Wright: Right. So when you say not in the classes were you taught about this, was it mostly an out of class discussion?

Knox: Yeah. It was mostly in the places where we would gather. And you gravitate when you went to those places... towards your group of friends who tended to be either very politically active, or very interested in... there was no such thing as community service then that I think might have unified us. But that didn't exist back in the day at universities. So but it was a discussion that was ongoing in the dorm rooms, everywhere. Because it was hard not to talk about the news, if you knew about the news. And there were people that didn't follow it and there were people who were adamantly listening and reading newspapers everyday. We didn't have TVs so... there wasn't any internet... You had to read the newspaper to know what was going on.

⁴This is a reference to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, released in 1963 that is known for sparking the second women's movement in the United States.

Wright: And so what about the President, Sister Christopher? Was she as unpopular with the students as I've read about?

Knox: ... As I remember, I don't think we had strong feelings one way or another about Sister Christopher. That may have come after us. We essentially were the bane of Sister Mary Donald's existence.⁵ She was the Dean of Students I guess. And we were just the troublemakers that she had to deal with on a daily basis. And I would say that she was less than popular with most of us.

Wright: Right. So was there any talk of switching to coeducation at this time?

Knox: God that would have been really something. No, there wasn't. What there was talk of was a realization that Salve was not going to survive economically unless they started making some changes. And [during] my senior year, I actually had classes... I had rousing 2 electives in four years at Salve... and one of my electives was an American Constitutional Law class where there were two local police officers. They started to include the police, who were interested in getting degrees, into some of their evening class as a source of financial boost to the university. It wasn't too far after we graduated... that all Catholic schools starting looking at... going Co-ed for the future.

Wright: Right. So you were aware as a student of the fiscal challenges that Salve was facing?

Knox: I am not really sure we were. I would say probably not but we were aware of the changing world, and I think that some of us were very aware of the changing world and I think that that's more where that thinking came from.

Wright: Okay and so how did your Salve education impact you later in life?

Knox: I always say that being a Catholic schoolgirl in general is a great armament for the rest of your life because you learn how to get around anything. And, if you don't like the rules, you learn how to change them. If you don't want to do something you learn how to kind of fight it. And, as I joke with my friends who also went to Catholic schools and for that matter Catholic women's colleges, we say the same thing... I was prepared for anything that life threw at me because I knew how to get around anything that I wanted to get around. And it's kind of a funny way of looking at things but I think the ability was there, and I think the challenge to make yourself happy was there, and those things are important skills to learn as you go through life.

Wright: Definitely! And after you finished graduation, what did you do after that?

⁵Sister Mary Donald Egan resigned as Salve's Dean of Women in June 1969.

Knox: I was a nursing major so obviously I had been working pretty hard in a pretty structured environment so I felt like I escaped. I moved up to Boston and I started working in Boston with several of my Salve classmates. We all got entry-level RN jobs at hospitals in Boston. It took me about two years to figure out that I really didn't like entry level so I immediately went back to school and got my masters at Boston College. And that afforded me the credential to go more into leadership positions which [was] where I wanted to be, perhaps, because I was a Catholic schoolgirl and I needed to get around those stupid rules. One of the things that Salve's nursing department did phenomenally well for me in those early years was build up my confidence that we were well educated, well prepared, and that we were agents of change...that it was our job to go out there and open our mouths and make things better and not be afraid of the controversy that we caused. And... that was me in...in a nutshell, going out there. And when I realized that they didn't really care that I had a bachelors degree and that I needed something more, I immediately got a masters which was pretty funny! But I did!.

Wright: Yeah, that's very impressive! So after your masters, what did you do at the hospitals after that?

Knox: Well I worked for a year in Boston but then I moved to New York City. I mostly... had enough of Boston. It was time to go closer to where I was really from and whatever. So I went down to New York City. And I worked primarily in administration. My masters was in maternal child health and I (had) worked in obstetric and neonatology, neonatal nursing, usually as an administrator or a supervisor. I ended up as... I don't know...the Assistant Director of Nursing at Columbia Presbyterian. If you got a masters in 1974, you were one of five people... you and your classmates were the only people walking around with those degrees. So you could go far fast.

Wright: Yeah, and did you enjoy it once you got up there at that high level?

Knox: I liked administration. I probably would have been a heck of a good business major and, as I look back at it, I don't really think I was a very good nurse. I was a way better administrator than I was a nurse. And... I liked what I did. As I look back at it now, I was already... kind of straining at the leash in the years after I had graduated from Salve...the late seventies and early eighties. (By then) I was looking at what my next degree was going to be. And it's funny because... I look back at it now, if I hadn't gotten married and had kids, I'd now have a Ph.D. in public health, which is what I had picked out to do. But that didn't quite work because I got married and started having kids. But... I think Salve did a great job in preparing me for what the real world was like and what was out there for me. And it was a great foundation for me to build on so that I felt like I had the building blocks in place to be where I needed to be.

Wright: For sure. So as the Class of 1970, you did not have a very typical graduation as others before you...

Knox: ... Well, we had a kind-of graduation. It was strange. You have to think back to 1970. Actually you have to start at 1968 which was our sophomore year. I mean we had Martin Luther King[’s assassination], we had Bobby Kennedy[’s assassination], we had [the] Democratic convention and all the student unrest. Students all over the country by then were really, really engaged in the whole anti, the moratorium as they called it, against the Vietnam War. We wanted to be out of Vietnam. We wanted to be out now. So in 1970, that was a highly political year. We were going to moratorium rallies... we did the big march in Boston that one hundred thousand students showed up to, believe me we were all there. All that kind of stuff. And then Kent State happened.⁶ And everything... had been so stirred up for so many years-. That’s why I kind of look at what’s going on now and say ‘wait until you see what’s going to happen from here because I’ve been through one of these stirrups and they’re big’, you know? So Kent State happened and just about every university in the country closed down, got their student’s off campus, got them home and, on a whole, cancelled their graduation. Salve followed suit... a day or so later but they only sent the underclassmen home and they kept the seniors on campus for the last three weeks of school. Some of our most legendary stories and memories are from those last three weeks, believe me. We actually had a senior week, of sorts I would say, and we actually had a baccalaureate service and we had a commencement. I believe very strongly that the decision was made to do that because our speaker, our commencement speaker was Margaret Mead. And yeah, oh wow. That was a very big deal for a school like Salve Regina. And every drop of good press at that point in time mattered greatly to every Catholic women’s college and they couldn’t afford not to get onto the front page of the New York Times, which they did for holding graduation and having Margaret Mead⁷ as the speaker. And so we did have a graduation but what we didn’t have was a normal end to everything. Classes were just over one day, the hospital experience was just over one day, we didn’t have any exams. As my roommate reminds me now, my roommate from Boston who was a Salve graduate who was one of my friends then... she reminds me now that what they required us all to do was to take the GREs which was a requirement for graduation. We were like, “we don’t even have to take the GREs! This is the greatest thing that’s ever happened!” And they required us to do it so we all take the GREs and some of us went to graduate school with those scores. So I feel very fortunate that they did that. But other than that, we essentially were done for three weeks, playing bridge, going to the beach and... no curfew so we had really a lovely time. I’m not really sure we were into protesting but I think we were savoring our Salve experience. But it was pretty neat. And we did have that amazing speaker! And one of my classmates actually found a press release but I’m not aware that not anyone has found a text of her speech.

⁶The Kent State shootings, a massacre that occurred on May 4, 1970 towards unarmed students protesting the Vietnam War.

⁷Margaret Mead was a world-famous cultural anthropologist and social activist.

Wright: Really? Okay, I'll have to do some digging!

Knox: Yeah, that would be... amazing. And I think every member of my class would love to see that again!

Wright: Okay, yeah!

Knox: Because it was a very, very impressive moment.

Wright: I bet! So your experience in 1970 kind of mirrors what's happening today in 2020. Any thoughts on the seniors right now who didn't get a graduation?

Knox: ... I actually look back on that and think that's not the worst thing that's ever going to happen to these seniors. It wasn't the worse thing that was ever going to happen to us. And the opportunity to evaluate this experience and the opportunity to change and to move forward for yourself in this whole experience, the flexibility to pivot and just say okay, 'I can live without a prom' and okay I am going to do this now. That's a great gift and I really think it will make... everyone stronger, more carefully thought out, it will define their goals more, nothing wrong with that in the long run! It's kind of awful... that they didn't (experience commencement), but... we had a commencement ball and I don't remember it really very much (at all). I remember the ceremony but those aren't the things I took away from Salve and I don't think those are the things that the senior classes will take away either.

Wright: That's a remarkable insight actually. And do you have anything else to add before we conclude our interview?

Knox: Do I have anything else to add? ...I think that as a class, I always look back and say I was in the right class. You know at Salve there were people like me and we accomplished a lot in our time there. I think we left a footprint on the school. Sister Donald probably didn't love it at the time but I think it was a good footprint. I am proud of our years there. That part of it was pretty terrific!