Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Sister Sheila O’Brien, former Dean of Women (1967-1973), former Salve Regina archivist (1996-2006)

Interviewer: Isabelle Gillibrand

***This interview took place at a Panera Restaurant. Audio recording does have some background noise.***

Gillibrand: My name is Isabelle Gillibrand. I am interviewing Sister Sheila O’Brien on November 1, 2018 for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. She was Dean of Women at Salve, along with working as the archivist in the 1990s. So to start us off, what brought you to Salve Regina?

O’Brien: At the time that I came to Salve Regina in 1967, we were assigned. We didn’t have any choice in our ministry… so I was assigned to go to Salve Regina by the Provincial of the Sisters of Mercy. I wasn’t asked, it was just, this is where you would go [and] this is what you would do.

Gillibrand: And what year did you go to Salve?

O’Brien: 1967.

Gillibrand: 1967. Would you mind telling me a bit about being part of the Sisters of Mercy community?

O’Brien: Of course, in those days, it was a very different world. I had had the Sisters of Mercy through grammar school, and through high school. The choices for women, at that time, were very limited, so when I entered the Sisters of Mercy, sixty-six years ago, things were very different. It’s difficult, I think, for young people to understand what the world was like then. My parents were good Catholics, but there was never any pressure on me from them to become a religious. It was something I felt that I would like to do, so I thought, “Why not try it. If I don’t like it, I can always come home.” And here I am sixty-six years later, still here!

Gillibrand: Awesome! So Dr. Quinn had mentioned to me that part of being a Sister of Mercy was a name change at one point, and yours was Sister Mary Donald.

O’Brien: No.

Gillibrand: No?

O’Brien: I think he had me confused with my predecessor [who] was Sister Mary Donald…[[1]](#footnote-1) Yes, we did take another name, and it was kind of the idea of you’re leaving what you knew to enter into religious life… You could submit some names that you wanted, and I did submit. One of the names I submitted was Sister Thomas Aquinas… I took it for my father who was [named] Thomas… For legal purposes, we had to keep our own name. For example, when you went to vote, it would be as Sheila O’Brien. As a result of some of the changes of Vatican II, the community decided that you could have a choice; you could either go back to your own name, or keep the name that you had in religion. I did go back to my own name, Sheila O’Brien.

Gillibrand: Great! So when you first got to Salve you were Dean of Women. Would you mind describing that experience with that position a bit?

O’Brien: It was right at a time, [1967] when there was a great deal of upheaval. It was, politically, a time [of] demonstrations on campus, protesting. Politically, you had the Chicago Democratic Convention.[[2]](#footnote-2) There was also upheaval in the Church. It was post Vatican II.[[3]](#footnote-3) Many changes had taken place that impacted the community of the Sisters of Mercy. Nationally, that upheaval, that change, is going to translate into what these young people were experiencing, what they were reading, what they were seeing. So there [were] protests … they wanted… boys in the dorms, wanted much more freedom, and it was difficult, in some ways, for the older sisters to be able to accept that idea of student protests. There were marches and there were sit-ins. It wasn’t easy. But I will say that, and I have said it to the young women who were there at the time, I personally always found them, as much as they sometimes could be not happy, they were always polite and well-mannered. They never did anything personal to me, and I’m sure that they probably would’ve liked to, but they didn’t. It wasn’t easy because you were trying to keep a balance… You couldn’t just all of a sudden overnight change everything. You were trying to get a balance, trying to please people, and trying to have it well done and successful…

Gillibrand: Awesome. And you kind of alluded to this already and kind of answered this, [but] like you said this was a time of protest. There was Vietnam, there [were] protests all over the place…

O’Brien: All over the place! There were sit-ins on college campuses, sitting in on the president’s office, marches. We had some of that. I don’t know if they ever sat in on the president’s office [at Salve], but they had a sit-in at the Great Hall just prior to a Christmas break; the Holly Dinner that year was cancelled. They had marches. They had a newspaper, which is probably in the archives. At least when I was there, there were some issues of it. The Thorn,[[4]](#footnote-4) alluding to that they were going to be a thorn in your side. You could get a lot of information from that.

Gillibrand: Yes! And you kind of mentioned this already, did you feel like this did make your position more of a challenge during this time because of…

O’Brien: Oh absolutely! You’re trying to walk a fine line, so yes, it was difficult.

Gillibrand: And how long did you hold this position?

O’Brien: From [1967]-73

Gillibrand: [1973]. So you were at Salve during what they considered the financial crisis at the University?

O’Brien: I was.

Gillibrand: Would you mind describing a bit?

O’Brien: Very difficult. I think some of the upheaval certainly affected enrollment… so financially it was difficult. There were times when it was uncertain whether… they would be able to meet the payroll… Yes, it was very difficult. Some of the faculty, naturally, were also involved in the protests and unrest.

Gillibrand: And you left before it was officially a thing, but I can imagine you had a little bit of experience with the movement to wanting to integrate males onto campus.

O’Brien: Yes because Sister Lucille[[5]](#footnote-5) came in [1973] or ‘74… It was amusing in a sense because, for a number of years, men… came to class at night, and many of the Newport policemen or firemen took class at night. So, when Sister Lucille came to visit the campus, as part of her interview for president, she just assumed that it was co-ed. When she was asked a question about it going co-ed, her response, was (I’m paraphrasing), “What do you mean? It is co-ed!” There was discussion, even before I left, about going co-ed… When Sister Lucille became President, they did integrate and did [go] co-ed because, for all practical purposes, it was. Some of the policemen were concerned because they took classes at night. They could take classes at night but not during the day, their concern was, “Well, we work at night. Why can’t we take classes during the day?” It was that whole back and forth thing which prompted the decision to go co-ed.

Gillibrand: So you mentioned that Sister Lucille came around like [1973]...

O’Brien: ‘73, ‘74…

Gillibrand: So did you ever work with her directly?

O’Brien: No, I didn’t. Well, I did in a sense that I was on the Board of Trustees after I had left. I was on the Board of Trustees in the 80s, so I did work with her in that sense, but not on campus per se.

Gillibrand: Yeah. When you were on campus it was mainly Sister Christopher, right?

O’Brien: When I first came it was Sister Mary Emily,[[6]](#footnote-6) and then Sister Mary Christopher[[7]](#footnote-7) took her place.

Gillibrand: So what was it like working with Sister Christopher? What was she like?

O’Brien: Well, she was in a very difficult position. As I said… the times were very difficult. Naturally, as the president, the students were going to focus on her… With the people with whom she worked, she was fine. She was an extremely kind woman. She was in a very difficult position. Very difficult.

Gillibrand: I can only imagine. And you said you kind of worked with… Sister Lucille as a trustee. What was your experience like with her? How would you describe…

O’Brien: Excellent! I mean, she really… When she came, as we said, financially it was [in] great trouble and she turned it all around and made it very successful. She did a great job!

Gillibrand: Excellent. So… I know that you left Salve and then came back, [so] what year did you officially come back?

O’Brien: I came back in 1996.

Gillibrand: And what position did you return with?

O’Brien: Librarian and archivist. I worked at the circulation desk and archives.

Gillibrand: So both simultaneously?

O’Brien: Yes.

Gillibrand: Great. And how were the archives when you first arrived?

O’Brien: They were in excellent condition because, I’m not sure what year, Sister Mary Smith[[8]](#footnote-8) really began to try to cull everything because people realized, that material was scattered all over the campus. Sister began trying to bring it together and sort it out. Sister Eleanor Little[[9]](#footnote-9) became archivist; she did a fantastic job. When I became archivist, the archives were in excellent condition.

Gillibrand: Great. Do you remember some of… the large concerns and challenges were at the time?

O’Brien: I think, at the time, it was this idea of going digital… I believe they began with pictures of the early Sisters of Mercy… and it was a major [project] to do it digitally, and who was going to do it. That was not my cup of tea… That was the big challenge at the time.

Gillibrand: And that’s the rise of technology…

O’Brien: Exactly!... It was all paper… you had newspapers, many pictures of founders, administrators, faculty, students, buildings. There was also much written work, correspondence,

minutes of meetings, etc. They began doing some of the pictures, as I said, of the early founders [digitally] so it would be on a computer. That was Olga Verbeek,[[10]](#footnote-10) she’s retired now, [but] she started doing that. She was talented in that area.

Gillibrand: So… I know that digitization must have been a big one. Do you have any other memorable projects that you remember?

O’Brien: Well, I remember they began, as I said, early… with pictures that they decided to get the pictures of the Sisters for whom maybe a department or building was named, [including] Sister Mary Brenda[[11]](#footnote-11) with biology, Sister Philemon,[[12]](#footnote-12) Sister Constance[[13]](#footnote-13) with chemistry. Mother Hilda’s[[14]](#footnote-14) picture was in Miley, [and] Sister Mary Jane’s[[15]](#footnote-15) in O’Hare because, very often people… have no clue who these [people] were, and these were the really matriarchs of the early days. [I was] working with Sister Leona,[[16]](#footnote-16) I don’t know if you knew Sister Leona. She died last October, two years ago I guess it is now. She kind of took that project on… and I think she has a plaque in, it might be, the chapel area, with the names of all the Sisters of Mercy who had been at Salve.[[17]](#footnote-17) [I was] working with her to get these pictures [together], to get them digitized, to get them put up… to put in the various places. That was a big project that we did when I was there.

Gillibrand: Awesome! And how long did you work as the archivist at Salve?

O’Brien: Ten years.

Gillibrand: Ten years.

O’Brien: And one of the big things [was] I lived in Providence, so it was a long commute, especially in the wintertime. So I just thought, “It’s time.” It’s time to stay close to home.

Gillibrand: And I’m assuming from what you mentioned throughout this that even after you left Salve you’ve continued with the Sisters of Mercy?

O’Brien: Yes.

Gillibrand: Do you still have any involvement at the University itself?

O’Brien: Not at the University itself. The Sister with whom I live is on the Board [of Trustees] at Salve, so I do sometimes go to various functions. In fact, that’s when I met Dr. Quinn.[[18]](#footnote-18) We were there when Dr. Jayme Hennessy[[19]](#footnote-19) and Dr. Gibbons[[20]](#footnote-20) did a presentation of their sabbatical. Dr. Quinn was there, and he said, “Oh, I’ve been thinking about you!” He asked if I would be willing to be involved in this project.

Gillibrand: What would you say are, like, some of your most memorable experiences at Salve?

O’Brien: Well… when they used to have it… Holly Dinner, just before Christmas break.

Gillibrand: I think they might.

O’Brien: That was always interesting. When I worked in archives, there would be people who might be doing research on different architects of the past or doing research on some of the buildings, so working with them, getting the material out for them. And even working with the students who had no clue, as I said, of the early days. They thought it just landed, and here it is, just the way [it is]... It started with one building. When I was there first, as Dean of Women, the Sisters lived in the dorms with the students. They didn't have RAs.[[21]](#footnote-21) There would be house mothers assigned to the dorms, but they were there from Monday to Friday. The Sisters, who lived in the dorms, had the duty on Saturday and Sunday night. At that time, the girls had a 12 o’clock curfew… Then maybe about the second or third year I was there, we began the RA system. That was interesting, interviewing the girls, getting them set-up, training them to what it involved to be an RA… Some of the interesting projects.

Gillibrand: So, in your opinion, how do you think Salve changed from when you were there as Dean of Women to… when you came back as the archivist and working at the circulation desk?

O’Brien: It has just grown tremendously! First of all with the boys being on campus, the number of students has increased. The campus has also become more centralized. When I was there, we had dorms on Bellevue Avenue. Queen Hall and St. Joseph’s Hall were on Bellevue Avenue. They sold those when I was there and bought Wakehurst. Mrs. Brugiere[[22]](#footnote-22) had died, and Wakehurst was on the market. Although people looked at it, nobody was interested in purchasing

it. Even the expansion of programs. The Master’s program, the Ph.D. program, which, when I was there, were not there at all. It’s wonderful thing to see how it has grown. The student body has grown and we don’t have the great money problems we did many years back.

Gillibrand: Awesome. You mentioned the purchasing of Wakehurst, so, out of curiosity, did Salve have it already, had they bought it already while you were there?[[23]](#footnote-23)

O’Brien: No. During my first experience at Salve, Mrs. Brugiere died. She was one of the grand dames [and] did not appreciate Salve being so close to her property. There was a very high wall around her property, and when the students were walking up from Mercy Hall,[[24]](#footnote-24)... if they walked on the grass on the street side of the wall, she would call the police and say they were trespassing on her property. She didn’t like being encroached upon. When she died and the family put it on the market, I think it was on the market for a couple of years; it was not sold and Salve bought it. We bought it at the time I was there as Dean of Women.

Gillibrand: Awesome. Yeah, I had done a little bit [of research] on Wakehurst, and I know she was not a fan.

O’Brien: No, not at all… And she had very strict rules. She was the last to have her butlers in full livery. When she had a dinner party at her home, the cars would line up to be sure the guests were on time because, if you weren’t on time, it didn’t matter what dinner course was being served, if you were late, you received the course that was being served. And, you were never invited back again! Mrs. Firestone’s,[[25]](#footnote-25) property was on the corner of Annandale and Narragansett [Avenue]. One day the telephone company man came into my office to do some work, and he said, “So, where are my white socks?” I said, “Excuse me?” He had a grin on his face, and he said, “Where are my white socks?” He had just done work at Mrs. Firestone’s and they had to put white socks on over their shoes because you weren’t going to walk on her floors

with dirty shoes.

Gillibrand: She seems like an interesting lady.

O’Brien: Yes… They were interesting to say the least.

Gillibrand: And I asked about Sister Christopher and Sister Lucille. When you were at the library did you work with Sister Therese at all? Cause she was president…

O’Brien: Yes. She was president….

Gillibrand: What was she like?

O’Brien: … I had lived and taught with Sister Therese at Bishop Feehan High School, so I knew her quite well. Oh, she was tops… Great planner, wonderful mind, very, very successful woman.

Gillibrand: Excellent. So those were the questions I had for you, did you have any final comments, or stories that you wanted to share that we didn’t touch upon?

O’Brien: I think we… certainly talked about the difference in the campus, and difference from when everything was at Ochre Court, then I think they went to Mercy Hall, then Moore Hall. To watch that, building after building, and to look at Ochre Lodge. They were hoping that they might get Ochre Lodge… It was just interesting to watch it grow and to grow successfully, and to see it go from single sex to co-ed, and to see the expansion of programs to… the Ph.D. program, and to see people come from other countries… It’s just very gratifying to see that, and I’m sure the early Sisters of Mercy, who started it, would be very pleased… For a number of years, they wanted to start a college, but Mother Hilda, whom we called the provincial at the time, knew what she wanted and she was going to wait until she got what she wanted. And she did. Ochre Court was first offered to the UN in 1945, and they didn’t want [it] so, through the negotiations of Cornelius Moore, a prominent Newport attorney, and the Bishop of Providence, Francis Keough, Salve acquired it… When they acquired it in March [1947] it had been boarded up, nobody had used it for a number of years. The Sisters acquired it in March, and it was ready to open the following September. In fact, the day the first students arrived, the Sisters were upstairs making beds and they got the word the girls were there, so they put themselves together, went downstairs, and welcomed the students. We’ve come a long way baby, as they say!

1. Sister Mary Donald Egan taught English at Salve Regina, and then became Dean of Women. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Referring to 1968 Democratic Convention that was held in Chicago, Illinois. Throughout this convention there were demonstrations and protests on a number of issues, including Vietnam. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Referring to the Second Vatican Council that took place from 1962-1965, which created dramatic changes in the Catholic Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This was the name of the student, underground newspaper at Salve Regina that expressed the, often critical, views of the students on the issues of the time, both on and off campus. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sister Lucille McKillop was the president of Salve Regina from 1973 to 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sister Mary Emily Shanley served as the president of Salve Regina College from 1964-1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sister Christopher O’Rourke was the president of Salve Regina College from 1968-1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sister Mary Smith was the archivist at Salve Regina from 1975 until 1989. She was also known as Sister Mary Othilda. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sister Eleanor Little was appointed to archivist in 1989, and left Salve to become the archivist of the Sisters of Mercy, Province of Providence. When the Sisters of Mercy became Sisters of Mercy, Northeast, the archives were re-located to New Hampshire. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Olga Verbeek was a systems librarian at Salve Regina University. She started at the University in 1999, and retired in 2017 as the Associate Director for Information Systems and Collections Services. She still teaches at the University as an adjunct professor. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sister Mary Brenda Sullivan. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sister Philemon Banigan [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sister Mary Constance Landrigan was one of the first faculty members at Salve where she taught chemistry. She was also the first Dean of Women in 1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sister Mary Hilda Miley, RSM was one of the founding members of Salve Regina, and became the second president of the University in 1948. What is now known as Miley Hall is named in her honor. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sister O’Hare was an early Dean of Academics. She died in 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Sister Leona Misto was a professor, a director in the graduate program, and the Vice President of Mission Integration at Salve. She died in 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is in the vestibule of the chapel. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Referencing Dr. John Quinn, a history professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Dr. Jayme Hennessy is a professor in the Theology and Religious Studies Department. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Dr. Carol Gibbons is a math professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Referring to resident advisors [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Mrs. Brugiere was the owner of the Wakehurst estate, and died in 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Salve Regina purchased Wakehurst in 1972 for $250,000. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Now referred to as the Antone Center. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The Firestones lived at what was called Ocean Lawn, which they purchased in 1952. Mrs. Firestone died in 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)