Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Dr. Katherine Lawber, Professor of French, 1985 to present.

Interviewer: Anna Paradis

Anna Paradis: I am Anna Paradis and I am interviewing Dr. Katherine Lawber who is our professor of French here at Salve. Today is July 10th and I am doing this for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. So to start us off Dr. Lawber, what brought you to Salve Regina?

Dr. Katherine Lawber: [It’s] kind of a loaded question. Actually… I’ve spent my entire career at Salve.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: I came to Salve right out of school and quite honestly I had never really heard of it [Salve].

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: …and I grew up in Boston. Actually, about ten miles south of Boston and I had gone to Stonehill [college] for undergraduate and even in my process of looking for an undergraduate school, I still had not heard of it. In spite of my peripatetic foot over a period of several years …a couple of years in Europe –in France really- but I got to travel all over Europe, and then in graduate school at Purdue [University] and at the University of Minnesota, my goal was always to come back to this area because it’s where my family was. My father was one of nine, so on that side of the family there are like forty cousins in my generation. My mother’s family was smaller; she was one of three. But there are fifteen cousins on that side. You know, as much as I traveled and I was away for a few years, (and I enjoyed all of that), in the back of my mind I was always thinking that eventually, when it came to settling down and finding a career and a spot somewhere, this area- somewhere in New England- is where I wanted to be… If it could be a commutable distance from where my parents were and my siblings and my cousins and everything were, all the better. The year after I had finished school and I was looking for a full-time, tenure-track position, I was teaching at Tufts. The department chair said to me, “Well, we’d love to have you stay for a few years but we won’t have anything on a tenure track position for at least three years.” I didn’t want to wait that long, so I kept looking…and I just happened to see an ad for Salve- I think it was in the MLA[[1]](#footnote-1)- and it was really kind of funny because a very good friend of my family, Father Drennan, who was a priest in our parish, had become friends with a priest here at Salve. Did you know Father Malone?

Paradis: I didn’t. I think my dad did, though.

Lawber: He was in the Psychology Department. He is retired now. …but he was in psychology. He had earned his PhD from BC and so knew many of the churches and clergy in the archdiocese of Boston. Once he came to Salve, Father Mike [Malone] would still go up on the weekends to help out with Masses at a parish in Needham, and he met our priest friend, and they became good friends. At one point, Father Drennan came down to Salve –I think it was for one of Atwood lectures—and he met some of the people here and didn’t Father Malone say to him one weekend when he was up in Boston, “You know, we have a visiting professorship opening up in French because the person who is in that position is going back to school to finish up his PhD, etc.” Father Drennan said, “Have I got a person for you!” And he literally called me up on the phone and said, “Meet Father Mike.” So I met Father Malone that first time on the phone. He set up an interview with the then president, Sister Lucille [McKillop]. I came down on a cold February day, met a few of the people, and the rest is history. I obviously took that one-year position and at the end of that year, they made it a tenure track- permanent position.

Paradis: That’s wonderful.

Lawber: And I was fifty-seven miles from home.

Paradis: Wow.

Lawber: So I was thrilled because in my field, I was concerned that I would end up –nothing wrong with Iowa- but I was concerned that I was going to end up moving God knows where in order to get a job… I really was afraid of living hundreds if not thousands of miles away from where I really wanted to be. So it really worked out well because I’ve been here now for 35 years and have loved it. [I’ve] worked with great people and as I say, fifty-seven miles from home is not a bad thing.

Paradis: That’s perfect.

Lawber: It was perfect, and I had it down to –when my parents were still alive- …slightly over an hour. There were days, though, when it was a little longer when I couldn’t go quite so fast! And Newport was close enough so they would come down, along with my brothers and sister and their families whenever they wanted. It was really the perfect solution to my life-long quest to find a permanent position some place where I could stay long-term and still be close to home. I didn’t want to be bouncing around from one school to another. I was probably- I would say mid-way through college when I decided I really wanted to teach at the college level, so I sort of had that focus in mind for a long time, and I had been working toward that. So when I ended up here… somebody said to me, “It’s like being picked up in the hand of God and put down where you’re supposed to be.” – I would not dispute that for a second!

Paradis: Wonderful.

Lawber: My husband says—being Irish—I cannot tell a story in short form...sorry that was so long.

Paradis: I like it… We’re very lucky to have you. Alright, so now do you mind talking about some of the highlights you’ve had teaching French over your time here? Do you have any favorite courses you’ve taught?

Lawber: My training was in language and literature–at least in my day- if you majored in a language, most of the time it was with a focus on literature. So I love the survey of lit courses, the civilization and culture course, the special topics courses I’ve had the chance to teach over the years. But I have to say that I’ve always liked teaching the full range of courses—from elementary through advanced—I still do.

Paradis: Wow.

Lawber: I had spent a year at the Universite de Nice pursuing a degree for the teaching of French in a foreign country, and I knew that I wanted to teach. So after I finished that and came back, I decided because I’d been studying other languages –I had done Spanish, German [and] Latin- along the way and I thought, “You know, this field being what it is, competitive and such, it might be a good idea to be able to work in some of these other areas because you’d be more marketable.” … And I loved literature, so I did a Master’s in Comparative Literature at Purdue [University] and I was able to work in all these different areas while teaching and maintaining a concentration in French. Then I did my PhD … in Comparative Literature as well: my dissertation was a study of language theory and representation in 17th century drama. The study had a focus on French theatre, but included Spanish, German and English –British- theatre as well. Salve is a smaller school, so the chance to teach a course in17th theatre doesn’t come around all that often, but I love the courses I have taught throughout the years.

Paradis: Yeah.

Lawber: If you were at UC Berkeley or someplace like that you have a much bigger student group to work with, but that was always okay with me because I love the elementary [French] as much as the advanced courses. I think it’s fun to introduce young students to a new language and another culture. There used to be a saying when I first started out, I think it was from ACTFL, which is the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and their …motto for several years was, “Learn another language, know another world.” And I always thought that was pretty appropriate… I also did a lot of work in French history, and in culture and civilization. Truthfully, I am not sure that I can pick one course that I like better than the others, because I think that they all have something that is fun. I have always said, “I’ll retire when it’s not fun anymore.” …But it’s still fun, so I’m still here.

Paradis: There you go! So Dr. Quinn[[2]](#footnote-2) had mentioned to me beforehand that you had a study abroad program in Paris. Can you speak on that please?

Lawber: We did! We actually started in 1998, and we did it bi-annually so we did ’98, 2000, and then were supposed to do it in 2002 but after September 11th [2001], a lot of people were nervous so we didn’t roster the next year. So we did 2003, [200]4, and [200]6- and that was a month long –almost a month long, it was like 28 days or something like that- that we did. We were based in the Loire Valley. The first two years we were at the University in Angers because Dr. Antone -George Antone[[3]](#footnote-3)- had come to Salve in, I think… ’97 and he took on the role of directing the new Study Abroad office. That was really the period when study abroad was becoming (had become really) more than just a language focus. Everybody now wants to study abroad, for very good reasons: they want the cultural experience, they want to travel, they want to see places, etc. But in my day if you studied abroad, most of the time it was because you were a language person. So we came up with the idea of doing a short-term program that was open to everyone regardless of major –it was Dr. Jim Hersh[[4]](#footnote-4) from Philosophy and Jay Lacouture from Art that first time in ’98, and we went to Angers because Dr. Antone had set up an articulation type of agreement with the University there. Angers is on the western side of the Loire Valley.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: By bus it took about two hours to get from Paris- by car or train it’s like an hour and fifteen to twenty minutes. And we got housing through the University. We had classroom space through the University as well. So I did a course in French (language) and then Dr. Hersh and Jay Lacouture did their “Philosophy of Beauty” course (which they had done for a number of years), but this was with a distinctly French perspective. Then in 2000 it was Barbara Shamblin (from the Art Department) who did the course with Dr. Hersh. We would have courses daily for two to three hours a day because the students were getting three credits for each course. A big component of the program was a lot of site visits. So we went from Angers to Chartres to visit one of the greatest gothic cathedrals in the world. …And that was just a day trip. We did an overnight trip to Normandy–My thought always was that if Americans, especially young Americans- are coming to France, maybe for the only time, they should go to Normandy [and] see the invasion beaches, see the American cemetery. We live the life we do because of the sacrifices a lot of those men and women made in the course of the Second World War. I always thought it was important to do that. We would make our way through Normandy, and we would start by visiting Bayeux–which is maybe four miles from the coast… but it also houses one of the most important artifacts of the medieval period, the Bayeux tapestry. We think of a tapestry as being a full wall hanging. This tapestry though is only about maybe two feet wide but it’s 270 feet long.

Paradis: Wow!

Lawber: And it’s telling the story of the invasion of England by Guillaume le Conquérant -William the Conqueror in the 11th century… He was Norman ––At that time France was not the France we know today; it was divided into different kingdoms and so he was the ruler of Normandy. …Since we were already in that area, I thought it was important for the students to see such an important artifact. We would go from Angers to Bayeux–it would take like three hours to get to Bayeux. The students had the chance to go into the museum, see the Tapestry and then have lunch. The afternoon we spent driving along the coast, visiting the invasion beaches and then the American cemetery at Omaha Beach. Finally, we would travel a little bit further west, and we would spend the night at a hotel in Normandy and the next morning we were about maybe thirty minutes from Mont Saint Michel. Do you know Mont-Saint Michel?

Paradis: (Shakes head no as she is asking question.)

Lawber: It looms out of the Atlantic. It’s just off the coast. Brittany and Normandy are still arguing over ownership! But this mass of land dominates the skyline and the town is built literally on a rock- and at the very top is the Cathedral that overlooks the whole Atlantic coast there. Absolutely stunning in terms of its architecture. …For many years it was one of those places that was cut off from the mainland part of the year because of the tides… Then in the 1960s they built a causeway so that you can [go there] by vehicle: bus, car, whatever –you can get out there any time of year. …and it is one of the most visited sights in France, if not the world.

Paradis: Wow.

Lawber: Mont Saint Michel is considered one of the seven modern wonders of the world. So I just felt we couldn’t leave there without seeing it. The first couple of years that we did that program we also did a couple of day trips to Paris because Dr. Hersh and Jay Lacouture were doing the art course –”Philosophy of Beauty” that I mentioned before… On two different visits, we would take the students to the Picasso museum and to the Musée d’Orsay- and they would have assignments to do in these different venues that tied into everything they were doing in the class. It was an awesome learning opportunity. We spent the last three days, two nights in Paris, so the students had an opportunity to get around and see a little bit of the city on their own. Twice we made Angers our home base for the trip, and then the last three times we went to a place called Pontlevoy. It’s a little, tiny town [that has] something like two-thousand people, but [it’s] almost in the center of the Loire Valley. An American [guy] from Michigan had been toodling through the Loire Valley at one point and he just happened to see this massive edifice. It’s walled, but there is this huge building inside and come to find out, it was an old abbey. It hadn’t really been used… Long story short is that he bought it!

Paradis: Oh! Okay.

Lawber: That’s what you do I guess, if you have that kind of money. …It’s called the Abbey of Pontlevoy, and Louis XIII’s minister, Cardinal Richelieu, was the abbot there in 1622-23.

Paradis: Wow.

Lawber: So it’s got some good pedigree and [it’s an] absolutely stunning building. The grounds are spectacular, and as I said it’s like a walled city, very private, very safe. So we went in 2003, ‘04, and ’06.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: My husband and I took our two kids there; they were probably eight and ten the first time. We had no worry whatsoever [about their safety], because they brought their baseballs, they brought a football, they were out there and they were just as safe as they could be, because the area is relatively remote …[and] it was gated, so nobody could get in and nobody could get out unless you had a key to get through the gate. Students absolutely loved the venue. After that trip, some of the prices, for things like the tour bus, for example, were getting very high, so it made continuing that program difficult.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: So I suggested to Dr. Antone that we do something in Paris during the January break. Dr. Bethune[[5]](#footnote-5) in Spanish had been doing a trip for a number of years over winter break to Oaxaca in Mexico. Doing something similar in Paris seemed like a natural choice. Over time a lot of students had asked about doing a Paris trip in May-June, but three weeks in Paris can get pricey. Ten days or so in January, however, that’s different.

Paradis: Yes.

Lawber: Dr. Antone thought it was a good idea, so I came up with a course called ‘Literary Paris’… and it was offered in English for obvious reasons- because I had students at the elementary and intermediate levels as well as majors. So if you were a major, you did all of the reading and the writing in French, if not, you read and wrote in English. We met every day from 8:00 to 10:30 or 11:00, depending on the day for class, right in the hotel –they gave us a little space. It was perfect: we found a great little hotel in the center of Paris, and we had classes there and stayed there. We did that program for eight years…and the students loved it.

The tape recorder was paused here. Please see next tape recording for the following transcription.

Paradis: So, do you mind telling me a little bit about the different colleagues that you’ve worked with in the past? For example, Sister Eugena Poulin of the French Department and Dr. Jane Bethune who just retired from Spanish?

Lawber: Of course; it would be a great pleasure. They were wonderful colleagues!

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: When I first came to Salve –the very first day I walked into O’Hare--it was either the last week in August or the beginning of September-- there is always an opening faculty meeting- and I knew no one! …I was young and brand new, and I walked into what is now Bazarsky.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: Because that is where we had that meeting. So I just sat down at the end of a row next to this young woman, and beside her was this older man… and so people are just chit chatting -and she introduced herself and she said, “I’m Jane Bethune. I teach Spanish.” And I said, “I’m in the same office as you!” It was she, and Sister Betty McAuliffe[[6]](#footnote-6) and myself who were in the office on the second floor office of O’Hare –the old O’Hare.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: You probably don’t even remember that, but it was as you go down the wing that goes towards the water on the second floor.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: And it was the last office on the left. Not a very big space, but there were three desks and three file cabinets and three chairs and then, three other chairs so that somebody could sit down. So we were … squished in there, but we still had fun! Dr. Bethune and Sister Betty (she was/is in the Education Department) were absolutely fabulous!

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: -After several years, Sister Betty left Salve [and] went to Saint Mary’s Academy- Bayview. [She was] president of Bayview for nineteen years I think, and now –two or three years ago she came back to Salve! She’s been a good friend all that time.

Paradis: Yes.

Lawber: Fabulous. We had more laughs in that office… It was great. So sitting beside Dr. Bethune that day in O’Hare was Dr. Heriberto Vasquez, the chair of the Spanish Department at the time. He retired –much against his will probably- but he was over eighty when he finally retired… He has subsequently died- but I will always remember him as the sweetest, most gentlemanly type of individual you would ever want to meet. [He] was from Cuba.

Paradis: Oh!

Lawber: His wife was also from Cuba, and they came and settled in this area. He started teaching Spanish and that’s what he did for the rest of his life. [He] loved the students. He was an absolute gem to work with, although at the time the two departments were separate.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: It was French and Spanish instead of Modern Languages, and so I didn’t work that much with him in terms of curriculum and such, because we were two separate departments- but absolutely two wonderful people to work with… Subsequently I worked with Dr. Bethune when the departments were merged. We went to conferences together, and she had two kids at that time –there were eleven years between her two children so when she came to Salve she had a one-year-old and a twelve-year-old! A few years later, when my husband came to Salve and we got married and then we had little kids, Jane and I would talk all the time about different aspects of raising children and such. So we were good friends and certainly very good colleagues. Sister Eugena… when I first came to Salve she was not here. She had been here.... She was probably around [her] early-to-mid fifties at that point and she –God love her- she was from Rhode Island, so you name any place- any town in Rhode Island and she knew somebody; she had taught somebody; she had lived there; she had been everywhere in Rhode Island. When she joined the Sisters of Mercy, she was young –I think she was like sixteen or seventeen. As a Sister, she became a teacher and taught in many of the Catholic schools in Rhode Island. Once she came to Salve, she decided that even if she was older than most of the other graduate students, if she was going to stay here, she needed to have a PhD just like most everybody else did. It was important for the institution, but it was important for Eugena herself, too. So she went to the University of Florida… I think she was probably gone about three or four years…so she was not here when I came. It was Sister Blanche Ouellette who was here, but she died a year after I came. She was older and if I remember correctly, she had not been at Salve all that long, but she was a delightful, delightful person: just as sweet as she could be. –But the next year when Sister Eugena came back, she and I started to work together, and I couldn’t have asked for a better colleague…because a lot of people would think, “Oh well she’s a Sister and she’s a little older and so she’s probably very conservative and she’s probably not open…” –Eugena was fabulous- she was forward thinking and she was modern thinking and she had a very strong French Canadian background of which she was very proud.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: Her family –Poulin- obviously is very French. Her family most [of them] had come through French Canada, so she had a real strong connection to that historical pathway… Her family was originally from Rouen in France, which is north and west of Paris. At one point, she traveled to Rouen to find her family home and spent a few weeks there. She was a very dedicated individual. She was Department Chair for a while, and she did a great job with that. So as I said between her and Dr. Bethune, I could not have asked for better people to work with… Because of my own interdisciplinary background, I also got involved [in] the VIA Program- I'm assuming that will be a question.

Paradis: Yes!... So can you tell me a little bit about the VIA program?

Lawber: It was a wonderful teaching experience- and here again it was very much a collaborative type of thing –I think our first class rostered in… the fall of 1996. It was really Dr. Jim Hersh who was instrumental in getting VIA off the ground. Did you ever meet him?

Paradis: I didn’t.

Lawber: He retired a couple of years ago as well. [I] just saw him the other day actually, he’s visiting from California. –but he and a little group of faculty were just thinking about what we could do to enhance the educational experience of our students because education changes as the world changes and as society changes and our expectations change and all of that- and so there was a big focus and emphasis at that point –pretty much across the board in education- on interdisciplinary learning and life-long learning… So, the long and short of it was, that out of a lot of these different conversations and very informal types of meetings this idea for VIA emerged- and Jim Hersh actually did the leg work for it. He was on Sabbatical at one point –like in the mid ‘90s- and because this was sort of in the back of people’s minds and we were looking to do something along those lines, he took it upon himself to do a little trip around different parts of the United States. He talked to CEOs; he talked to Deans and Provosts of different universities; he talked to different business types of people- entrepreneurs, for example, and asked them about what was important to them in terms of their own education. He also asked them, “What are the qualities and characteristics that you are looking for in someone you are going to hire?” –And from that, we came up with the ten principles –the ten commandments- of VIA. Things like: a sense of humor –and Jim Hersh used to say that one of the business people said to him, “I have to spend forty hours a week with you. I don’t want someone who is boring and crabby and has no ideas. I want somebody who’s funny and who’s going to be dynamic and all of those good things.” Don’t we all want that! So the long and short of it was, through those interviews, through all of our conversations, VIA was born…and the first class rostered as I said in the fall of 1996 and we graduated our first class in 2000. After about fifteen or so years, there were organizational issues that ultimately made it difficult to maintain the program, so it is no

longer in place, but for a long time, it was wonderful. The largest VIA group we graduated was in 2013, I think there were twenty-two in that [class].

Paradis: Wow.

Lawber: I think we graduated two classes after that, but they were smaller. Every person that you talk to who was part of a VIA group –whatever year it was- (and we still get emails from them) all say, “VIA was the best part of my undergraduate experience.” My own son says that.

Paradis: Wow.

Lawber: That’s because of the relationships they made, because the students took one course together each semester and by the time they got to be juniors and seniors, they were a group of friends, from many different disciplines at this point, who enjoyed the experience of learning together.

Paradis: Okay.

Lawber: They liked coming back from their different majors and minors to the VIA group and… one [class] was in Psychology, one was in History, one of the senior courses was a Literature course–we did ‘Contemporary Global Literature’ and they [the students] brought all kinds of different perspectives and experiences back into the classroom, and they had built such wonderful relationships with one another –so you could argue but be respectful. You could show that you had an opinion that was far different than somebody else’s, but you could do that in a very amicable and a very respectful way -not always the case in the professional environment- but that’s what VIA taught them, and the experience for all of them ended up [being] something like: I’m going to take all of these things that I have experienced in VIA—not just what I learned academically—but behavior wise, attitude wise, etc. and bring them with me into my career (and into my life), be it in business or in nursing or medicine or art or music or any other discipline… It doesn’t matter what it was, they all say that these are things they are still focused on. So I think VIA was one of the best parts of Salve, I really do, because it gave the students the opportunity to really find out who they were. -and we always said that VIA was about life design. You can’t just go through life and blindly say, “Oh hey, here I am…and not be aware. You’ve got to be aware, and so it was always that idea of, “How am I going to design the best life for myself? I want to be able to take into account all of these different aspects.” –and many of the students have written back to us over the years and say: “Had a VIA moment the other day.” It’s really quite amazing because that’s learning at its best. It truly is.

Paradis: Wow, that sounds like a really special program and a really beautiful note to end on.

Lawber: It was. It really was.

Paradis: Do you have anything you’d like to add?...

Lawber: I would just say that at this point, I’m going to start my thirty-fifth year at Salve in the fall. This is my fourth President; I’ve seen a lot of people—administrators, faculty, staff—come and go, for sure. But there is longevity here. I know that nobody’s perfect, no place is perfect, no experience is perfect –well very few are- but I think Salve has a very, very… almost indescribable ambiance and attitude at its core –and it’s very hard to describe, but it really is a very special place, and like anything else I suppose, it’s the people who make it. I have been truly blessed to have known and worked with some wonderful people. Just look at the fact that there are people here at Salve who have been here a very long time. You don’t stay somewhere if there isn’t something really special about it. So we still work at it, of course… and hope for the best in the future.

Paradis: Beautifully said. Thank you Dr. Lawber.

Lawber: You’re very welcome.

1. Modern Language Association [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dr. John Quinn is a History professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dr. George Antone served as Director of International Programs from July 1997-Present. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dr. Jim Hersh was a professor of Philosophy and Ms. Lacouture was a professor of Art as Salve [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dr. Jane Bethune was a professor of Spanish for thirty years, from 1983-2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dr. (Sister) Elizabeth McAuliffe teaches in the Education Department at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)