Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Sr. Jane Gerety, Sister of Mercy, former Salve Regina Board of Trustee member, Salve Regina president (2009-2019)

Interviewer: Isabelle Gillibrand

Gillibrand: I am Isabelle Gillibrand. I am interviewing Sister Jane Gerety on March 7, 2019 for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. Sister Jane is a Sister of Mercy, former Board of Trustee member, and the current president of the University. So on the last interview we left off talking about the Board of Trustees experience, and it was here that you became involved with the presidential search after Sister Therese.[[1]](#footnote-1) Do you mind describing that experience a little bit?

Gerety: Yeah! It’s almost embarrassing. When Sister Therese said she was stepping down they formed a search committee, and I was on the search committee. At that point, I had been on the Board for a number of years, so the Board members knew me. They knew my background, at least my academic background and then my experience as an academic dean, and then they knew my executive experience in healthcare. They said to me, “Wouldn’t you consider it?” and I said “No, no, no!” I got off that train sixteen years ago in terms of working in a college or university. The search proceeded, and a number of candidates were surfaced. I read all of their materials, their cover letters and CVs and so forth. Then I was still just [saying] “Nope. Nope. Nope. We’re going to find the best person here.” Well, I think what actually happened in that search was as we got to the finalists, it was clear that there was no Sister of Mercy that was a finalist, or that was even in the search. One of the finalists was not a Catholic, so… members of the Board began to worry that something would be lost if we didn’t have a Sister. Now look where we are! I don’t think anything is going to be lost at this point, but back in ‘08-’09… some of them were really worried about that. That’s when the pressure mounted on me to think about it. I was laughing, in fact yesterday I was giving a little talk [and] it was in the Business Development Center. It was a class of business and marketing students, and I was telling the story of yeah, I wound up saying yes in a bar… I didn’t exactly say yes at that point, but we were at a hotel near the airport, and two [members], the chair of the Board and another very dedicated Board member stayed with me after the last meeting. They weren’t going to leave until I said, “Okay, I’ll go home and I will think about it!” I looked at, again, the qualities that they were looking for, and I could check almost all of them just in terms of experience that I had had, so I said, “Okay, I’ll go home [to] think about it, pray about it, and see what I think.” The way I did it was I took a couple of days off from work and I sat down and this is how I do it sometimes, I don’t know whether this works for you, Isabelle, but when I don’t know what I think or feel sometimes I will start writing about it. I’ll keep a journal, and then the feelings will surface or it’ll get clearer to me in the writing. I decided that what I’d do is I would write the cover letter for applying for this position. Now mind you, I’ve read about a hundred of these, but I promise I didn’t plagiarize at all. I wrote it from my heart and from my head, and as I wrote it I got more and more both peaceful and excited about it. Yeah, it was a huge step, and, at this talk yesterday, I said a theme in my life, and I think I might’ve mentioned this before, was “jumping into the deep end.” You know, doing some things that are fearful, but I’m just going to do it! I knew as soon as I pushed send that I think it was pretty well done. I still had to go through the interview process, but here was this search committee that I had been on. I knew all of them pretty well, and I also knew the questions that they were asking. At one point, I was answering the questions, and with enthusiasm, but it was getting towards the end of the interview and I said to one of them “Hey, you haven’t asked that question about shared governance yet!” Anyway, it was after that that I… was offered the position and I said yes. This is kind of a funny part of the story, too. I was staying at the Viking Hotel, and there was a big snow storm. It was in March. This was after the interview. There were probably a couple of days in between that and the Board meeting at which… the motion would be made to appoint me. They didn’t want me to be kind of seen on campus before any of that happened, so I’m hiding in the Viking Hotel. I remember knitting these little baby clothes, Madame Defarge, thinking. I mean, that was a stressful time, to tell you the truth, as I was thinking about what was coming. I have a sister who lives up on the South Shore of Boston, and it was the day that they were going to present me to the Board, and my sister, her name is Missy, came down and she said, “Let’s get out of here!” So we went out on the Ocean Drive… You know what it’s like in any weather, but here the snow was everywhere, but it was a sunny day. The ocean was sparkling. It was just incredible, and I thought “Oh yeah, yeah, this is okay.” So I left sort of the darkness of the hotel and I saw all that, and then when Sister Therese announced it to the Board, and, at this point, the Board was meeting over in Rodgers, so I was hiding out in one of the coach’s offices until it was time, and then it was thrilling when I went in because they all knew me, and that was good. Then I went to a community meeting where everyone was gathered, and I was able to say a few words to the community. But, again, because I knew the institution, I remember talking… when I was speaking to them about this image that I had of Salve that was so important to me.It was at a Board meeting that we had heard from Dr. Chace,[[2]](#footnote-2) and the whole notion of the environment, but it was a young woman in hip waders standing in the ocean testing the water. What it said to me was there was an academic, a scientific understanding, but then there was also action. There was also doing something that would be helpful to the environment, so it was that combination that… seemed to me so characteristic of Salve, therefore that image was important to me. That was the tale of my becoming the president.

Gillibrand: That’s very interesting!

Gerety: I know!

Gillibrand: Quite the process! When you became an official candidate… did you have to step down from the search committee formally?

Gerety: Yeah…

Gillibrand: And you explained how you knew all the questions coming up and everything. That must’ve been helpful but also strange…

Gerety: It was strange! And I couldn’t pretend like I didn’t! You know, that was the thing. The other thing, and I think the search firm was wise about this. They didn’t do this in the last search and I understand why, but in other searches the finalists come to campus and they make a presentation and they do a hundred interviews. The person who was working with the search committee from the search firm said if I were interested, he thought let’s not go through that charade if the committee really felt strongly that they had a qualified Sister of Mercy that she would have preference. To go through an interview process with other candidates when your mind was essentially made up wasn’t [needed], and I really agreed with that. So that’s how it happened.

Gillibrand: Excellent. So then fast forward, you are now the president. So what would you say are the major projects that you were involved with or that the University had during the first five years or so of your presidency?

Gerety: A really funny thing, Sister Therese kind of teases me about this because she did so much in terms of acquiring properties, adaptive reuse of properties, you know, really creating a campus here that was incredibly beautiful and also functional, I think, for the student body. From Rodgers Rec[[3]](#footnote-3) to the Young Building[[4]](#footnote-4)… and then the chapel… I remember saying to her “I am not going to be the building president.” My focus was really on what went on inside the buildings in terms of academics and student life, but as I thought about what we needed there, there was real modernization that we needed. The idea of redoing O’Hare… when I was on the Board it had been on the agenda for a while, but I finally said we [have] got to do this. You probably don’t remember the old O’Hare.

Gillibrand: Only very slightly because I think even when I came to Salve for Accepted Students Day, it was under construction.

Gerety: We were already doing it. That was my first major project, to make sure we had state-of-the-art learning space that fit in as well as it could with the campus. We went through the whole process of creating an addition. Actually, we kind of built it up from scratch, everything down to the studs we rebuilt. That was an exciting project. Before that, well this is really funny, when I look back on both O’Hare[[5]](#footnote-5) and Miley[[6]](#footnote-6) they both reminded me of sort of 1960s academic space and then cafeteria, and I said we got to modernize this. We also worked on Miley Dining Hall to make it much more modern with many more options and all of that, and then the lower level of that to have lounge space and Starbucks and all of that. My two focuses were really on the academic and student life. I used to say I want everything at Salve to be as beautiful as our buildings, so it was a matter then, on the academic side, looking at new programs. The emphasis on cybersecurity in some programs, trying to strengthen the Cultural and Historic Preservation program, maintaining a strong focus on the liberal arts but also wanting to do state-of-the-art things with the nursing program and so forth. My emphasis there was on continuing to create a vibrant faculty, and, over the ten years, I think we have probably turned over almost 40% of the faculty. Not that the older faculty weren’t doing great jobs, but when we hired new faculty, what I call early career faculty who are coming out of graduate school, and… many of them real scholars publishing in their field, but also teachers. The other thing I worked on, in that regard, was the adoption of Canvas, which is the learning management system… As usual, there was this committee that worked forever to decide on which learning management system, and there were two that were the finalists. One was named Blackboard, the other was Canvas. When I got the report, the committee was divided about it, and it was slightly in favor of Blackboard, but when I looked at who was interested or who supported Canvas, they were among our most creative faculty. What they talked about was how intuitive it was, all the things that you could do with [it]. I think it was a little bit more expensive… It wasn’t really exactly my call, but they kind of presented it to me as “We’re divided on this, and what are we going to do?” I said “Let’s go with Canvas.” I think that was, from what I’ve heard, I think that was the right choice.

Gillibrand: Awesome! So, as you’ve mentioned, one of the things that you focused on throughout your presidency has been the students and the faculty and the people here. One of the things that’s come to my attention was the advocacy for students scholarships, and grants, just in general giving back to Salve. Why was this something that was so important in your eyes, and what were some of the steps or things you did towards this?

Gerety: Well, Michael Semenza[[7]](#footnote-7) reminds me of a meeting I had with one of our, sadly he passed away, but one of our Board members who was a financial person, but also just kind of a Renaissance man in terms of his thinking. We were up in Boston at his home talking obviously about raising money. He and I were sitting in his living room, and we were talking about what’s more important; to have money to spend on scholarships, or to have money to spend on scholars, faculty and all the things that will enhance Salve’s reputation and also continue to make of it a truly excellent university. What we determined in that conversation, and Michael remembers it better than I do, was that we needed both. In order to build our institution academically, we needed scholars, but we also needed to make it available to highly qualified students who maybe didn’t have the economic resources to pay for it. That’s… when the start of the campaign of scholars and scholarships [began]. Actually, it was John McGinty,[[8]](#footnote-8) the person I was talking to after he died, he did the first. It was through his estate that we got a very major gift for bringing more scholars to campus. We’ve revised the program somewhat, but it’s [about] who are the thinkers in the fields that we want to listen to. Then, in terms of scholarships, what we’ve been doing is working with a lot of alums who are now in a position to make a significant gift. Some of them were teachers and nurses at the beginning, so they probably weren’t the Wall Street types… who made a fortunate, but they had such devotion to Salve that they could afford a $25,000 scholarship that we could then use the earnings. We could put it into the endowment and use the earnings. Our goal was 100 scholarships, and, I wish I had the figure now, but we’ve gone well beyond that goal. That’s something that will never stop.

Gillibrand: Awesome… The University itself, you can correct me if I’m wrong… the population of the campus has stayed pretty steady throughout the years [with] maybe a little bit of growth, but similar number. Have you been able to see with all these different programs and changes and stuff, have you been able to see for yourself the change in academic quality and attitudes… from the faculty and students and what not?

Gerety: I have! This goes back to my very early days on the Board when I think we were almost, I don’t want to say open admissions, but… the standards for academic quality were not what they are now. It’s been a slow process, but they are much higher now. This is really funny, sometimes we’ll be talking to alums who went here maybe back in the 1980s, and they’re usually guys and they’re really funny. They say things like “I couldn’t get in now!” There was this [man] Vinny Mallardi[[9]](#footnote-9) he’s such a character, but he’s an alum. His family and he developed this company that made makeup, but for all the Broadway shows. When he sold it he was a very wealthy man, so we approached him about doing something in O’Hare, naming some part of it or that kind of thing. He said “My classmates would laugh me out of the place if you ever put my name on an academic building.” What’s named for the Mallardis now, he wanted to name the rose garden near Wakehurst… the sunken rose garden there for his mother. That was a beautiful ceremony. He was one who said “I couldn’t have gotten in here. I’m lucky I got out.”

Gillibrand: That’s so fascinating, and great there’s been able to be that huge change and focus on the students! It looks like those are what I had for questions for you… Is there anything else that you think that we missed regarding your president candidacy or first five years that we didn’t touch upon?

Gerety: I don’t think so. We’ll probably talk about this in the next interview [but] I came at a time of incredible challenge because it was the depth of the recession.[[10]](#footnote-10) A lot of these ten years have been climbing out of that, but at the same time knowing that we had to keep growing. You can’t cut your way to prosperity, you need to keep investing. I think that’s what has characterized my presidency; to be realistic in terms of budgets and all the things that are presenting challenges in the broader country, but also to higher ed, but to make sure that we kept moving… We found creative ways to do it, and I think the faculty, that first year, nobody got raises… Those were just the facts, but they stuck with us, and I think now… we’re always trying to do better in a competitive market, but the idea is don’t stay still, keep moving, find a way.

1. Dr. M. Therese Antone, RSM served as president of the University from 1994-2009. She continues to serve as chancellor. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dr. Jameson Chace is a professor of Biology and Environmental Studies at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rodgers Recreation Center was completed in 2000, and continues to serve as Salve’s gym, fitness center, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Young Building serves as the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina along with being a sophomore housing option. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 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-5)
6. Miley Hall was named after Sister Mary Hilda Miley, one of the founders and the second president of Salve Regina. It is one of the first-year housing options for freshman, along with housing other services like the dining hall, health services and more. A large renovation on the building was completed in the early 2010s. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Michael Semenza is the Vice President for University Relations and Advancement at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John E. McGinty was a Board of Trustees member at Salve Regina. He contributed significantly to the University, including the McGinty fund for history students which goes towards efforts including lectures and research. He died in 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Referencing Vincent Mallardi III, class of 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Referencing the Great Recession which began around 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)