

2007

Interview of Michael Kerlin, Ph.D., M.B.A.

Michael Kerlin
La Salle University

Shelton Magee
La Salle University

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Narrator: Dr. Michael Kerlin

Interviewer: Shelton Magee

Date: March 20, 2007; 2:00 P.M.

Location: Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, Jonathan E. Rhoads Pavilion,
Room 6015

Language: English

Field Notes

Dr. Michael Kerlin has been a faculty member of the Philosophy department at La Salle University since 1966. He was the head of the Department for 28 years. Dr. Kerlin was first contacted by Dr. Barbara Allen by email to be interviewed by a member of her Graduate Oral History Class (History 650). I received from Dr. Allen a copy of that email and then contacted Dr Kerlin by email to set up a face to face meeting to learn more about him. I meet with him on February 22 in the Philosophy Department lounge at 3:30 P.M. We discussed his background and his involvement in the Christians Brothers. On the 13th of March I received a phone call from Dr. Allen that Dr. Kerlin was in the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania indefinitely for treatment of a relapse of Leukemia. I emailed Dr. Kerlin to see if he was still agreeable to being interviewed. He replied he was but he would like to be interviewed before the effects of Chemotherapy set in. I met with Brother Joe Grabenstien the La Salle archivist for which this interview is being conducted on March 15th at 9:00 P.M. He located several articles published in La Salle publications written by Dr Kerlin and provided some further background information. Brother Joe keeps a folder on everyone who has been or is a Christian Brother. He is also very protective of the materials in the Archive and handled everything in the folder. He chose not to let me look at several documents saying that they were personal, I later learned that these concerned Dr. Kerlin leaving the Brotherhood. I then wrote out a list of questions for Dr. Kerlin and submitted them to Dr. Allen who quickly responded saying they were fine and that I could proceed with the interview the following Tuesday March 20th.

The Rhoads Pavilion, the building in which the interview took place, is a modern state of the art facility used for long term patient care. Dr Kerlin's room, 6015, was clean consisted of a hospital bed, an IV rack, a lounge chair, a folded chair, a sink and had its own bathroom attached. The room had wooden floors; the door was propped open so nurses could come and go. The side of the room opposite the door consisted of a large window that over looked the University of Pennsylvania. There was no odor that one sometimes finds in hospitals. On the walls were pictures of his family members, including his grandchild. Also on the wall there were several get well cards and a St Patrick's Day card. On the ledge by the window were several magazines, newspapers and books, including a manual on how to learn Ancient Greek and a thick biography on Emmanuel Kant. When I arrived Dr Kerlin was just saying goodbye to his son who had come to visit him. I had to wash my hands with a disinfectant cream just after entering

the room. Dr. Kerlin explained to me the reason he was staying in the hospital was because chemotherapy weakens the immune system and makes the patient susceptible to infections. Also the blood does not clot as easily so internal bleeding is also a worry. By being in the hospital they can control his environment exposing him to fewer germs and also keep an eye out for other complications.

Dr. Kerlin was seated in a lounge chair next to the window, wearing a light blue short sleeve polo and grey slacks. He seemed to be in a good mood as he and his son explained to me why he was staying in the hospital. His son Mike asked me if he could have a copy of the interview in case his dad decided not to stick around. The jocular way this question was asked and Dr. Kerlin's reaction of cracking a smile showed that the question of his possible death was an openly discussed one. I sat in the folding chair and placed the recorder on the window ledge with the microphone pointed toward Dr. Kerlin. We tested the recorder to make sure his voice came across which it did.

Unfortunately doing the recording in the hospital led to several problems. First, there were frequent intercom messages; they do not drown out Dr Kerlin's voice but you can hear them. Also several nurse and nurse's assistants entered the room during the interview. Dr Kerlin was also hooked up to an antibiotic via an IV. The machine malfunctioned several times emitting a loud beep which forced me to stop the recording two times. Dr. Kerlin would often greet nurses as they entered the room interrupting the flow of the interview, but he explained to me that the nurses and nursing assistants would take care of him more so than any doctor. The teacher came out in him as he started to question one of the nurses about her background.

Before the interview I explained that the interview was intended for the La Salle archives and that I would ask him to sign a release at the end of the interview. He said that would not be a problem and that being in the hospital he was used to signing things.

Once the interview started Dr. Kerlin answered the questions with ease. I found it necessary to ask several follow up questions about issues that he brought up in his answers. Also letting him have a second or two after he finished his answer often led him to continue with his answer. However the draw back was that a couple of times I would start to ask my next question just as he continued his answer. I think he also may have taken these pauses as a chance to lead the interview in a new direction. He also often worked in things around the room, like the books on the window ledge or the pictures of his family on the wall.

Dr. Kerlin is really proud of being an intellectual, and throughout the whole interview he alluded to being more intellectual than others and it was being an intellectual that drove choices in his life. Dr. Kerlin compared learning New Testament Greek to other people doing crossword puzzles. Judging from the way that Kerlin interacts with the nurses and nursing assistants, he is well cared for and likes the attention that he receives.

Nothing about Dr. Kerlin's mannerisms, mood, or demeanor suggested that he was beginning to undergo chemotherapy. He never seemed to get tired or lose focus, and in fact when the interview was completed he was ready to exercise, not rest. He was serious, calm, relaxed and clearly enjoyed being involved in an intellectual activity. The only physical evidence of sickness was visible bruises on his arms around where the IVs were connected. They were maybe six or seven in total, the biggest of which was about 2 inches in diameter.

The interview roughly followed Dr. Kerlin's life chronologically. The interview started with a couple of quick background questions about his upbringing and early schooling. The interview continued with information pertaining to his being a student and a Brother at La Salle University. He then talked about his first Job which was at a high school in Arlington Virginia. He then moved on and discussed getting his Doctorial thesis at the Gregorian in Rome. Kerlin then spoke about what it was like returning to La Salle as a teaching Brother. The next part of the interview dealt with Dr. Kerlin's leaving of the brotherhood and the meeting of his future wife. This was followed by information about the Philosophy department of which Dr. Kerlin was the chair for 28 years. The rest of the interview dealt with some more information about La Salle, including what has changed and how much autonomy the school has, as well as areas of interest that Dr. Kerlin has published on, including: Pope John Paul II, Brother Azarias of the Cross, and the Catholic Modernist Crisis.

The interview ended with me thanking him for participating and we shook hands. I then turned off the recorder. When playing back the tape I realized I cut him off wishing me good luck on the project. He was anxious to start the rest of his day which included a walk; this may have affected his answer when I asked him at the end of the interview if there was anything else he wanted to talk about. Also he had to go to the bathroom after the interview was completed. I could not tell if this had led to any discomfort or terseness at the end of the interview. We had been seated for about two hours and twenty minutes. I then wrote some notes about the room and left to make the return journey to my car.

Due to the fact that the interview took place in a hospital room there were many distractions and interruptions during the recording. I was even forced to stop the recording twice when the IV machine malfunctioned. The intercom can be heard in the background throughout the interview but it is not that loud on the recording and never drowns out what Dr. Kerlin said. Here are the distractions listed in Chronological order:

The first nursing assistant walked in 26 minutes into the interview.

Phone rang at 43 minutes; he said just to ignore it.

At 52 minutes an argument in the hallway took place. Kerlin's voice is clearly heard on the recording over the argument but you can hear it in the background.

More back ground conversation at 59 minutes.

1:00 nurse assistant stops in to collect urine sample from bathroom and make sure he had eaten lunch and was drinking, she also flushed the toilet.

1:06 Nurse came in to give antibiotic she has a conversation with Kerlin for 20 seconds or so

1:08. 55 beeping from the IV malfunctioning caused me to pause the recording.

1:10 Beeping again caused me to stop the recording.

1:11 Two beeps can be heard before we shut it off. (The nurse's assistant showed us how.)

1:13 Two beeps again.

1:15 Two beeps.

1:16 nurse come back to fix IV and the phone rings.

1:18 Kerlin asks questions to nurse in conversation.

The only time a distraction affected Dr. Kerlin's narration was when after conversing with the nurse and he lost track of what he had been discussing. I decided against trying to get release forms from the nurse and the nurses' assistants whose voices are on the tape. The nurse Charlotte, with whom Dr. Kerlin engages in a prolonged conversation, was aware that the interview was being recorded and did not say anything that in my opinion might lead to legal action if placed in the archive. Dr. Kerlin on the other hand did sign a release form at the conclusion of the interview.

After the interview I discussed the interview several times in class one of which was a formal presentation of the interview. I also typed an index of the interview instead a transcript. I was careful to include all names and as many nouns as possible in the index. The reason I did this is to make the interview more accessible to search engines. I also typed out my field notes. After I completed a rough draft of the index I emailed Dr. Kerlin to check the spelling of several names. I found that Dr. Kerlin would name people in his interview by the name they go by and not by there listed name. For example he called Margurete Walsh, Mary Walsh and John Caputo, Jack Caputo. There may be others that I could not verify. I also typed out the list of questions I actually asked to go with those I had planed to ask. I did this because his answers often answered questions that I was going to ask later. Also some of his answers made my future questions irrelevant.

I believe that this interview will be useful for historians interested in La Salle, the Brotherhood, or Philosophy. It also could be used by members of other disciplines including Sociology, Philosophy, and Religion. For the Sociologist there are gender

issues involved both with the addition of women to La Salle and involving Dr. Kerlin's association with an all male organization for almost 20 years. He seems to think that the course of his life was influenced greatly by contact and lack of contact with members of the opposite sex. The interview could be used by people interested in Religion and Philosophy because Dr. Kerlin talked about the interaction between the two extensively during the interview.

At the time these field notes were completed on April 28, 2007 Dr. Kerlin was doing well in his battle against leukemia and according to Dr. Allen was in the process of returning home.