Vincent Wisniewski  
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Interview with Dr. Francis J. Ryan, Interview 1  
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Interviewer: Vincent R Wisniewski  
Transcriber: Vincent R Wisniewski  
Begin Disc 1

Wisniewski: Today is Wednesday; March 15, 2006. My name is Vince Wisniewski and I will be interviewing the founding director and professor of American Studies at La Salle University. Can you please state your name and current position at La Salle University?

Ryan: My name is Francis J Ryan. I am a tenured full professor and the founding director for American Studies at La Salle University in Philadelphia.

Wisniewski: Dr. Ryan, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Ryan: Yes you do.

Wisniewski: How long have you been in the field of education?

Ryan: [Tree branch rubbing against window] Well, education broadly conceived I guess goes back to my first year at Northeast Catholic High School, which was September 1969. I just graduated from La Salle University then La Salle College and I began teaching officially during the September of ‘69. I did some earlier tutoring when I was an undergraduate at La Salle in French and in mathematics believe it or not. Looking back I have to smile at that because I wasn’t that great in math when I was here. But it gave me some pocket money but that was not actual formal teaching, it was just tutoring. So my formal educational career began in September 1969.

Wisniewski: Were you ever involved in any other field besides education?

Ryan: When I was an undergraduate I helped defray the cost of my tuition by involving myself in several jobs. I was a shipper/receiver at Carson Zipper Tape Company at the corner of Jasper and Orleans. It was housed in what is today the Lomax rug mill and it was at that time as well. And I did this I believe it was for two summers and my job was to unload and load trucks primarily in the zipper tape industry in Philadelphia, which was part of the larger textile industry in Philadelphia. I got that job because my father was a truck driver for Lueithland Dye Corporation and he got me this job, which actually was one of his stops on his rounds.

After that I worked for two years starting actually it was during I think my junior or senior year at La Salle starting in march part time and then full time during the summers. I worked at Gulf Oil Corporation at City Line Avenue the expressway. And there I was a tour guide consultant where people wanted to go throughout the country. We, all the other students
Ryan: continued
from St. Joe’s and I think there was a guy from Penn there was a contingent of us and we had to
memorize all the major roads in America and we would make these particular map routes for
people. And then finally I worked for the Department of Recreation in the city of Philadelphia.
Again this was all part time stuff. I was a summer play leader at Camp Happy Days for two
summers. That was in fact I think it was one year at Gulf Oil and then two years at the
Department of Recreation.

But that in some ways got me working with kids who were probably junior high school
aged kids eighth graders. And I knew early on that I wanted to be a teacher. Initially, when I
started at La Salle I was a pre law major. I flirted with the idea of becoming an attorney, but I
quickly decided that I wanted to be a teacher. I wasn’t sure what level. I always had some idea I
wanted to be a university professor, but I really enjoyed my years teaching high school and it
wasn’t until later I decided to actually move forward and get a doctorate and try to get a job in a
university.

Wisniewski: When were you born?

Ryan: I was born in Philadelphia January the nineteenth, 1947. I share a birthday with Robert E.
Lee and Edgar Allen Poe and I never really knew what that meant [chuckles]. But it’s something
that kinda connects me to literature and to history in one way or another. As I said I was born in
Anderson hospital which no longer exists in Philadelphia. I was the first born child of Francis
“Hun” Ryan H-u-n Ryan—that’s a nickname my father got playing soccer. And Claire Margaret
Widmeier W-i-d-m-e-i-e-r. So my heritage is Irish with some German.

Wisniewski: Were you the only child?

Ryan: No. I have a sister Elizabeth Ryan who is currently married to Frank Coyle. They
currently live in Harrogate which is in kind of a northern part of Kensington. We just refer to it
as Kensington. But it’s a little outside the domain of Kensington. And she lives currently in the
house where she and I were raised as kids. And my grandfather Thomas Patrick Ryan who
emigrated from Ireland actually had the house built when he came here and married Elizabeth
Barr. The house next door to us was the house where my paternal grandmother lived as a child
which still exists. I was born 1117 East Tioga Street and this was 1119 East Tioga Street. But I
never met my paternal grandparents. Both of them died before I was born. But yes, I have one
sibling Elizabeth Ryan Coyle.

Wisniewski: Now you said your father was a truck driver. Did your mother ever work?

Ryan: Yeah. My mother worked part time during the war. She worked in a pharmaceutical
company in north Philadelphia. My father was a truck driver pretty much his whole life. He was
an outstanding athlete in Philadelphia. He played for the Yankees farm team in baseball and he
also [brief pause] he’s more popularly known for his exploits in soccer. He was on the Olympics
twice in 1928 in Amsterdam for the American team and 1936 at the Berlin Olympics as well. He
was the captain of that team. He was on the World Cup team. And in the 1961 I believe was
inducted into the Soccer Hall of Fame up in New York state. A lot of articles written about him
Ryan: continued
who also when he went to Frankford High School he'd by the way my father never graduated from high school which is funny.

When he was at Frankford he won the gold medal for wrestling when he was a junior. And he also competed for the gold medal in boxing where he was knocked unconscious [laughing] so he [laughing] did not win that medal but he was very very athletic. When he came back from the Olympics he was given several scholarships to Colgate to Haverford to play soccer. They were going to give him some remedial course work because he never actually had a high school diploma. But he turned it down because he did not want a white collar job or he did not see a need for a higher education at that time. He was happy being a truck driver. He was always his own man and did that until he retired when he was 65 and then passed away at age 69 of a massive coronary in the house that he was living in at that time with my sister and my mother. 1977 that was.

Wisniewski: Now you said you lived on Tioga Street?

Ryan: Correct.

Wisniewski: How long did you live there?

Ryan: [Tree branch rubbing against window] I lived there my whole well actually that’s not true. When my father came back from the war, he was born he was he was married in 1942 and was sent over seas. He came back in 45. He fought in the European Theater. He and my mother decided that they were going to kind of buy out the house that my grandfather built. Because obviously my father had two siblings and they all had claims on this house. So he bought out the house. Bought them out so to speak. So he refurbished the house, painted it, and everything after he came back from the war. But technically I was born as I said in Anderson hospital. But I lived in my grandparent’s house down in St. Edwards’s parish on 7th and York Streets. My grandparents had a huge three-story brick house. And my parents lived there while he was fixing up the house from Tioga Street. And then as soon as it was fixed up I guess I was probably six months old then they technically moved in. But I lived in that house from that time forward until I left to get married in [thinking] December of 1960 [thinking] nine. That’s when I was married.

Wisniewski: And that area is considered Kensington?

Ryan: Well, yeah. It’s Kensington generically, but the people in the local community usually call it Harrogate because it’s right down the street from Harrogate Park. So you know if I were out someplace outside of Philly and somebody said “where you from?” I’d say “I’m from Kensington” cause they don’t know Harrogate. But people from Northeast Philadelphia know that Harrogate is kind of a distinctive little quadrant tucked away in the northern boundaries of Kensington. Harrogate is between Kensington and Frankford technically, and I guess Richmond.

Wisniewski: What was the racial/ethnic makeup of that neighborhood at the time that you were growing up?
Ryan: When I grew up I went to St. Joan of Arc Elementary School which was basically Irish with some Italian and Polish kids. The neighborhood where I grew up specifically was a mixture of Catholics and Protestants. Most of the Protestants were Lutherans, they were German. The Catholic kids in the neighborhood were either Italian or Irish, mostly Irish. That’s the ethnic composition. I had very little contact with blacks growing up. Had a bit of contact with Jews because a lot of the Jewish families along Kensington Avenue owned the grocery stores. They owned the pharmacy in fact when I was in high school I worked for two years as a fountain technician otherwise known as a “soda jerk” at Russock’s Pharmacy at the corner of Tioga and Kensington. That was run by Russock. Mr. Russock was Jewish and so there was some intersection in my life between myself and Jewish families but no Asians and no Blacks.

Wisniewski: Was its economic makeup predominately blue collar/working class?

Ryan: Yes. It was almost exclusively blue collar. Most of the kids I grew up with their parents, their fathers almost universally worked in factories. The women at that time did not work outside the home. My memory is very clear about that. It was the separation of spheres that you find at this time in history. The men worked outside their home and almost exclusively in factories.

Wisniewski: Was it a tough neighborhood to grow up in?

Ryan: It was tough [reflecting, looking up] in one respect that you know part of the culture was kind of a “rough and tumble” thing you know you’d see kids fist fighting on the playground, things like that. But it wasn’t a dangerous place. It wasn’t a place where [unfinished thought]. Even in high school I can remember walking around the neighborhood. There were two groups of kids I hung out with, one group at Scanlon playground and they were kids who were from Ascension Parish and from Joan of Arc. But I would also hang out with the Joan of “Arc’ers” over on Frankford Avenue, Frankford and Tioga.

And I would go over there and you know hang on the corner come back twelve o’clock in the morning having absolutely no fear walking through the neighborhood. I can remember when I was in high school dating this one girl who lived over at D and Allegheny, which was Ascension. And I would walk over there and take her home and take her on the “El” or the subway and then take her back home and then walk back to my house crossing through various neighborhoods. Kids on the corner that I knew from North Catholic or from Frankford and there was no sense of fear as you might find today. But at the same time, you know there were kids who would fight, myself included you know at Scanlon Rec. Center. If you were playing basketball and somebody “low bridged” you or something and you thought it was intentional. you’d wind up you know fighting with the kids. But afterwards you know, that was it. You didn’t hold grudges. That’s just the way we were growing up in that part of the world.

Wisniewski: So St. Joan of Arc served as both your school and your parish?

Ryan: Yes.

Wisniewski: Is that still around today, functioning?
Ryan: No. St. Joan of Arc Parish is functioning [brief pause] very small attendance. My sister belongs to that parish. The school has closed. It’s been closed for two years, unfortunately.

Wisniewski: Were your parents open for you to go to public school at all?

Ryan: No. That was never considered. My mother went to St. Edwards Elementary School. There’s a story that is told in our family which is kind of bizarre [hesitant] and I don’t know how true this is. The story is that well it is a fact that my father and his two siblings all went to public school. They did not go to Catholic school and the rumor or the story in the family was that apparently the church had asked my grandfather for some money which he gave them and then he was told that he was going to be reassigned to this new parish which was St. Joan of Arc.

He had initially been at Ascension. He was married in Ascension in fact in 1900. Allegedly, he was one of the first, was the first person married in the other church when the other church was finished in 1900. And out of a sense of irritation, he sent all of his kids to public school. Although, they were practicing Catholics, all of them I mean you know all my aunts and my uncle and my grandparents as well. But I don’t know whether that’s true cause it doesn’t seem to square with when St. Joan of Arc was actually built and when my father would have been in school. So, I don’t know what the deal is there. But there was absolutely no consideration at any time that I would go to public school. No.

Wisniewski: Were most of your friends when you were a child, did they go to Catholic School as well? Or did you have friends [unfinished sentence]

Ryan: Yeah I had friends who went to public school and I had friends who were protestant, yeah.

Wisniewski: How much influence did your parents have on your education in elementary school or did they simply leave that up to your teachers at the school?

Ryan: No. It was the culture of my family and this goes [unfinished thought]. My mother came from a very large Irish Catholic/German family. She had twelve siblings and it was understood that the parents, especially the mother in the family would help the children with their homework. And my mother was very active in the parish. She was a member of the sodality and from the get go. But she also had two sisters who were nuns and she knew from stories from them how successful kids would do well if parents participated in the educational process. So my mother would help my sister and myself help us with our homework if we needed help and certainly make sure we did it.

My father pretty much left the educating to my mother. He was a bright guy, read a great deal, especially history. But never really took it upon himself to check my homework. Occasionally he would check it, make sure I did it. But it was kind of this tacit signing of the paper. He actually never [laughing] really looked to see whether [laughing] the math was correct or the geography was correct. But yeah, tremendous support mechanism from my parents, yeah.

Wisniewski: Did you excel in grade school or have… (Ryan answers)
Ryan: Yeah I did well. I did very very well, yeah. When I graduated from St. Joan of Arc I was second in the class. I was also given the American Legion Award for character and I forget all the actual [laughing] adjectives that went with that but it’s funny you should say this. I just found this the other day in my basement. I kept it all these years and I decided to frame it so its in my study along with my diplomas from La Salle, Villanova, and Temple, and some other, my North Catholic Diploma which I’m very proud of. But I did well in elementary school. I was an altar boy. I was a member of the Boy Scouts. I was “senior patrol leader” and [unfinished thought]. At that time in my life I think all these things were totally integrated—my performance in school, my performance in the Boy Scouts, my performance as an altar boy. I remember learning the Latin mass when I was in second grade. Looking back on it, it’s amazing. I had no idea what I was saying. I was just parroting all these [laughing] Latin phrases. But these things all came together when I was at St. Joan of Arc. I really enjoyed my experiences there. And as I said these things all were integrated into like one whole cloth [thinking, looking up].

Wisniewski: Did you have a rapport with your teachers or at that time [pause]?

Ryan: Yeah. I had all nuns. At no time did I ever have a lay person. And except for one nun who didn’t like me and I never knew why I had a pretty good rapport. I was the dependable kid I guess looking back and certainly my role in the Boy Scouts showed that. And you know they would have me do different kinds of things. I can remember actually going when I was in eighth grade, going in town, in Chinatown to pick up parcels of reams of paper with another kid. But I mean I was given the key, so I was in charge. The other kid was just helping me you know carrying the stuff, but yeah I had good rapport with the nuns and the priests as well. I can remember priests having me shovel out their cars in snowstorms [laughing] and things like that which I did. I wasn’t a big kid. I was a little skinny kid. When I was a sophomore at North Catholic I was four foot eleven and I grew to the tremendous height of five foot eight, a hundred and fifty pounds but after I [laughing] was in college [unfinished thought] but anyway.

Wisniewski: What year did you graduate Joan of Arc?

Ryan: I graduated in ’61 in June of 1961 and then I continued on to Northeast Catholic High School. At that time there was one kid from our graduating class who went to La Salle High School. No one went on to either St. Joe’s Prep or Holy Ghost. We all went to North and we were basically encouraged by the eighth grade nun to go to North Catholic. I think that she was very sensitive to class and she felt that some of the prep. schools were dominated by kids who were from a different class. Looking back she was wrong about that. But I wanted to go to North. You know the whole notion of the Oblate tradition was legendary throughout the neighborhood and I didn’t want to go to La Salle or St. Joe’s Prep. or to Holy Ghost Prep. I wanted to go to North Catholic.

Wisniewski: Is this the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales correct?

Ryan: That is correct, yeah.

Wisniewski: Did you have a positive experience at North?
Ryan: Yeah, yeah. North Catholic was an excellent school for me at that time in my life. The Oblates were very good at training and educating boys and I would contest that they still are. The classes were big. Each particular classroom was filled to capacity; you know we had forty-some kids in a room all four years there. They were very nurturing, the Oblates. I thought they were good teachers. Looking back I don’t know how well educated some of the reverend misters were at that time. I mean they had guys teaching English, later on I found out they had degrees in Mathematics but we had a very tight curriculum.

I did very well in English and in History and in foreign language. Mathematics and science were not my forte. At that time, Reverend Father John Dennis was the chair of the English department and he ran the entire English program in a in a very tightfisted way. When I look back at the assignments that we had [unfinished sentence]. We had a book in English class every two weeks from freshmen year to senior year which was absolutely amazing. We read constantly. And I actually had Father John Dennis when I was a senior at North Catholic and he taught me to write. He was the person who taught me how to write. He taught me to love language. I can remember the first couple months of my senior year we did nothing but vocabulary and writing and he talked about having ya know the appropriate word in a sentence and how we would struggle with this. We all had to buy dictionaries and the thesaurus and all this other business.

But when I came here at La Salle, I know I’m kind of ahead of myself. I did well my freshman year. I was not in the honors program [coughs] but I was recommended by all of my teachers, my professors here at La Salle to be elevated into the honors program. And I had an interview with Brother Patrick Ellis who was, that time, the director of the honors program. And after he interviewed me, I think he was impressed with me, he said to me “I have one last question did you have John Dennis at Northeast Catholic High School” and I said “yes” and he said “congratulations you’re in the honors program”. So that was something that I didn’t realize that Father Dennis’ reputation was so regional, but I was certainly glad to have him. He was a taskmaster beyond belief and some days I was actually terrified to go in his class because he asked so much of us but we all did. We all elevated to his expectations. But anyway, yes my experiences at North Catholic with the Oblates, very good. I ran track when I was in high school. I never played soccer [hitting chair] because I was intimidated by my father’s expertise. I played basketball. I was a gym rat but I never played for North. I played at Scanlon on many different teams. I was a guard obviously. Loved basketball and occasionally still do. I haven’t shot hoops in about a year but occasionally I’ll sneak out, grab my ball, put on my New Balance sneakers, and go up to Mayfair and shoot some baskets, but anyway.

Wisniewski: So Father Dennis was the most influential teacher?

Ryan: Father Dennis, yeah, was very influential on my life. I would say that Father John Tye was also Father Tye that’s T-y-e an Oblate taught me French for two years and a very no nonsense instructor. One of my colleagues said a few years back that he actually scared the French into you. I wasn’t afraid of Tye, he just expected you, you had to have your homework done and if you didn’t he ya know he’d put you “on the rack”. But I didn’t, I had my homework done and I mastered French very very well. I had additional two years of French here at La Salle, and I was imminently prepared to do French and [unfinished sentence] French, English, and History, these were my three academic areas that I excelled in throughout my life.
Wisniewski: So I kind of see a pattern from when you were at elementary school. You said your eighth grade teacher wanted students to go to North?

Ryan: Yeah!

Wisniewski: Now, was there any kind of connection from North Catholic Oblates wanting students to pursue a Catholic university?

Ryan: Well, it wasn’t just at North Catholic. It was pretty much the policy of the Archdiocese. A lot of people don’t know this, but up until I believe it was nineteen sixty—three, you had to have special permission from the Archdiocesan office to have your transcript released to a non-Catholic college. My brother-in-law who went to Penn State had to get permission from, I don’t know, the chancellery office to have North Catholic release his transcript to go to Penn State. I don’t know whether this was actually followed in all the other diocesan high schools, but I know at North Catholic, excuse me [thinking, looking up] Yeah at North you were encouraged. However by the time I graduated in sixty five, a lot of kids were going to Temple. I applied to Temple myself. I applied to St. Joe’s and I applied to La Salle. Those were the only three. At no time did I ever think about going afar. Looking back on it I probably lacked the guidance to go other places but that is no way an apology for what I learned at La Salle because I learned a great deal at La Salle University.

Wisniewski: When did you first express an interest to go to college?

Ryan: I knew when I was a freshman at North Catholic I was gonna go to college. I was pretty much [unfinished thought]. I guess that there were probably two men in my life personally who influenced me, one was my father obviously. I knew from when I was a little kid that he had been an Olympian and he was very precise about the way he did things in his own life and I always took that as a kind of a model for me on a personal level.

But my Uncle Jack, he was the youngest of my mother’s siblings. He was the only person in the family who went to college and went to Villanova. He was in the Augustinians for a while and then dropped out then took his degree from Villanova in English. And I guess I was probably in high school when he kind of took me under his wing academically—took me to the Art Museum, took me shopping, clothes shopping. Said “look ya know you wanna buy Ivy League clothes”. Took me to Jacob Reed’s, got me my first suit. Wasn’t my father that did this, this my Uncle Jack. I was in fifth grade and he got me an Edith Piaf record, French Cabaret [laughing] singer and he sat me done and said “look we’re going to listen to the disc and we’re gonna look on the back and we’re gonna read the lyrics and this is what French sounds like Francis”. He taught me my Latin, by the way, when I was in second grade in terms of the Latin mass. So my Uncle Jack Widmeier was a strong influence on me in terms of encouraging me to go to college. In fact, he was the one that suggested that I be pre-law because he felt it something that I would be good at in terms of being an attorney.

But yeah, from the time I was in high school, a freshman in high school, I pretty much knew I wanted to go to college. I didn’t know whether I was smart enough because I didn’t know what college meant to be honest with you. I was a fourteen year old kid from Harrogate and ya know you talk about college its four years a ways it’s like going to the moon. But by the time I was a junior, certainly I knew that college was something that was in my future.
Wisniewski: Was price a factor?

Ryan: Yeah, price was a factor. Because at that time, my father who was involved in the textile industry had some major problems because the textile industry in the late fifties in Philadelphia fell apart. Many of the main producers of textiles went to North Carolina/South Carolina and this is when you had the closing of factories. I mean Philadelphia was a strong textile town and when the factories closed because my father was involved in the dye house, in other words they dyed the textiles. There was no longer a need.

For some time they had military contracts you know dying cloth for the military for uniforms and things like that. But in the fifties, Korea was over. Those contracts pretty much dissolved and he was working three days a week. I can remember my father walking in cause I came home for lunch from St. Joan of Arc’s sitting having a ham sandwich and a glass of Bosco chocolate milk and he’d walk in and look at my mother and they had this look on their eyes and he’d said “yeah the bottom fell out again”. So he was working three days a week. So my father actually got a second job working at the Philadelphia Inquirer on Saturday night stuffing the Sunday papers, which apparently was pretty lucrative. He never told me how much he made but apparently it was enough to keep the wolf away from the door.

So when I was in high school it’s one of the reasons I was encouraged to get jobs. You know I worked at Ruscock’s pharmacy. I also worked in Jones’s grocery. I got my first job in fifth grade delivering circulars. I got a dollar a week for that. But from the time on up from when I was a sophomore in high school on, I bought all my own clothes. My parents never bought my clothes. High school was free. There was no tuition for North Catholic so there wasn’t any problem there. But we were concerned about college which is why I applied to Temple—Temple being cheaper than La Salle and St. Joe’s. Temple also at that time just became a state affiliated school. Temple before that, before sixty four was a private school. They became affiliated as did Pitt with the state and it became a much cheaper tuition. So Temple was probably my first choice but not really I didn’t want to go to Temple I wanted to come to La Salle. You want to talk about this?


Ryan: Yeah? Yes.

Wisniewski: Yes. Why?

Ryan: There were two reasons. I was a senior at North Catholic and Brother Patrick Ellis who was then the head of the honors program was also involved in admissions and he came to North Catholic. I’ll never forget this. This was in October of my senior year. And he gave a fifteen minute spiel about La Salle College that was so phenomenal that I immediately went home to my mom and I said “mom is there anyway I can go to La Salle”? And she said “well, we have to talk about this”. But Brother Patrick Ellis was so convincing about the curriculum, about the Christian Brothers, that I immediately jettisoned any intention of going to St. Joe’s and also Temple.
Ryan: continued
And at this time my future brother-in-law Jim McAvoy was a sophomore-English major here at La Salle and I always respected Jim. He lived up the street from me—Jim McAvoy. And I remember I stopped him three or four times when he was walking back cause we all went by public transportation then, none of us had cars you know, when we went to college and he was getting off the Frankford El and I remember he showed me the Norton Anthology of English Lit. It was a huge book. It was over nine hundred pages long. [tree rubbing against window] And I said “what’s this”? He said “this is what we’re reading” and was telling me about his English training at La Salle.

And Jim McAvoy was a very impressive speaker—the way he spoke. He subsequently went on and became a lieutenant in Vietnam and worked for army intelligence. And I knew why they picked Jim for that, because he was such an incredibly powerful speaker. He was a leader. He was a born leader and there was something about the way he spoke. Everybody in the McAvoy family spoke like this [laughing] including my wife [laughing] before I married her. I was incredibly [laughing] impressed with the way she commanded the language. I mean she just would tell you to do things and you believed her, which I found very appealing as a human being. But anyway, it was primarily because of Brother Patrick Ellis and my future brother-in-law, Jim McAvoy, that got me here to La Salle. And then of course I came for open house in my senior year and just fell in love with the place, so.

Wisniewski: What was there any one thing that he said that you liked particularly?

Ryan: No. [cut off]

Wisniewski: Or just the whole [unfinished sentence]?

Ryan: I think looking back, it was Patrick Ellis. Patrick Ellis was La Salle [with emphasis, hitting finger on chair]. He could of talked about how to make you know hot dogs and I probably would have been deeply impressed. It was his whole demeanor, his personal confidence and it wasn’t just me. When we left, when he left, when we were walking out of North I remember that we went to our lockers and we were all bustering on this one kid who hadn’t changed his mind and wanted to continue to go to Temple. And we said “what’s wrong with you”? If you go to La Salle [laughing] you’ll be like this guy [laughing] but it was just his whole presence—the way he fielded questions, his sense of humor, his sense of irony was just overwhelming, so.

Wisniewski: Did you have a choice in living on campus at the time or commuting [answers quickly].

Ryan: Never crossed my mind. Never crossed my mind [with emphasis]. Nobody that I knew of who had gone to the local Catholic schools in the region lived on campus. Campus was ya know for kids who lived in Maryland, kids who lived in Delaware. I didn’t know of anybody locally. You went on public transportation and it was this huge mass of kids from ya know from Judge and Dougherty and North and other high schools that flooded Broad and Olney. You literally walked down from 20th from the Broad and Olney down ya know 20th Street to the campus.

And later on, I guess I was probably [brief pause] no it was freshman year—my father let me use his car and we would car pool it. There two or three other guys who would take turns
Ryan: continued
driving in the morning and they were all North kids and it was neat because we all
accommodated each others schedules. So, if I were going in at eleven o’clock I would still drive
in for eight because my buddy needed a ride and I’d just sit and study, but that’s the way we did
it but it wasn’t just me, a lot of us did this.

Wisniewski: And this was in 1965 freshman year?

Ryan: This was freshman year sixty five, yeah.

Wisniewski: And I see that you made Dean’s List three years at La Salle?

Ryan: Yeah. I was on the Dean’s List from sophomore year on. Was it sophomore year? [talking
to himself] You know I forget. I don’t remember when [unfinished sentence]. I was I remember
I was crushed because you needed a 3.4 and I had like a 3.39 and a 3.39 and I was like oh damn
can’t I get it over the top to be on the Dean’s List. But I was in the Honors Program and this was
certainly before the grade inflation. And I remember I think I graduated Cum Laude but I think
my English G.P.A. was like a 3.6, you know I don’t remember. But I do remember that even
though my G.P.A. [brief pauses] it was within the [brief pause] it was in the [brief pause] the
domain of Cum Laude, so it wasn’t a 3.6 but I believe I graduated in the top twenty of the class.
Which when you look back, the top twenty of the class today at La Salle or any school
would be—the G.P.A.’s would be a lot higher. But it was very difficult to get A’s and there were
no A minuses or excuse me, there were no pluses or minuses. You just got the flat grade and I
can remember one time I turned in a paper a half hour late and I did not inform the professor it
would be late. I had all A’s and I got a B for the course and I remember the professor saying to
me “Mr. Ryan you’re not professional” I said “I know” so I can’t imagine that happening
[laughing] today. But at any rate, yeah, that’s where my G.P.A. fell into that those parameters,
yeah.

Wisniewski: So you adapted easily to the college life? The rigor of academia?

Ryan: Yeah, I did. And I think that’s why I was successful because I was used to working hard
at North Catholic. I always had the ability to kind of, what’s the term?—to defer immediate
gratification. And I would stay in and study because I wanted to do well and I did that. I lived a
balanced life. I had a social life. I had a girlfriend. I played basketball religiously if not at
Scanlon Rec. Center when I came home certainly here at La Salle. We would go over and play
basketball in what is now where the bookstore is. That was a gym and it was open to the kids it
wasn’t just the b-ball team although obviously you couldn’t go there when they practiced but
yeah we went in. We had an intramural league that I belonged to here and I played ball over
there. But yeah, I lived a balanced life [hallway noise].

Wisniewski: Was your major always a major in English?

Ryan: Yeah. I was always an English major. I flirted with history for a long time and I actually
for one week, I think I was gonna major in economics [laughing] which I quickly banished from
Ryan: continued
my thoughts. But I was always a History/English guy. But yeah, my major is in English, yeah
[indistinct talking in hallway].

Wisniewski: And you wanted to teach afterwards?

Ryan: Yeah. When I graduated from La Salle in ‘69, I applied to the Archdiocese. I was not a
certified teacher because I did not take any [unfinished sentence]. I took one ed. course in ed.
psych. because I thought maybe down the road I might need it if I wanted to get certified. I was
hired to teach French at Archbishop Ryan High School. That was my assignment and it was two
weeks before Labor Day. I got a call from the principal at North Catholic, Father Bill Guerin and
when I was a senior at La Salle, I was asked to come to North Catholic during an evening
presentation where we were talking about college to the kids who were in high school. And there
was a guy named Fred Ciao, who at that time was the guidance director. He’s now the president
of Archbishop Wood I believe. But Fred Ciao [unfinished thought].

Fred Ciao taught at North when I was there, but I never had him but we knew each other
and he asked me whether I would come and talk I said “sure”. So I was on a panel and Father
Bill Guerin who at that time was the vice principle was in the back of the room and apparently
was impressed with me. So when he saw that a position became available in English he asked
whether I would give up my French job at Archbishop Ryan and come to North. And of course
there was you know it took me about thirty seconds to make the decision. And there’s a little
irony here because when I left Ryan to come to North, George Todt who had graduated from St.
Joe’s College and played soccer he took the slot that I had, to teach French and he became
[unfinished thought]. That was the beginning of the soccer dynasty at Archbishop Ryan because
Todt got there and became the coach in soccer. Had I not made that decision that would have
never happened. So you see how these domino effects change the entire complexion of a whole
community.

So, I was hired to teach English at North, which I began. And I also started graduate
school at Temple and it was a very difficult life the first semester because I was getting married
in December. In September of my first year teaching, my wife’s sister was killed in a car crash.
She was a St. Joe nun. They were driving down to Cape May and she was killed and it was
tremendous stress for my wife, my fiancé at that time as well as for me at the time. Cause you
know I was a first-year teacher, never did any student-teaching so I was going into this cold. And
I taught all track four except one section of track three which was a challenge and I was starting
grad. school at Temple the same time, but I survived.

Wisniewski: Looking at back at La Salle while you were there, how influential were the
Christian Brothers? Were they similar to the Oblates while you were at North?

Ryan: Yeah, I would think so. Now obviously I had more Oblates at North Catholic than I had
Brothers. The Brothers presence certainly was here but it wasn’t as pervasive as the influence of
the Oblates. I had Brother Patrick Ellis in many English classes. I had Brothers for my Theology
classes. I had some Brothers in pysch. So yeah, I certainly was influenced by the Brothers there’s
no doubt about that. I did not have the kind of affection that some of my colleagues did who
went to La Salle High School like Bernie Krimm and Joe Hetherington these are some of my
friends, Brother Mike McGinniss another one of my friends. I mean they all went to La Salle
Ryan: continued
High and they identified more exclusively with the Brothers and they saw themselves as
"Brothers’ boys" I had always saw myself as an "Oblate gentleman", not as a "Brothers’ boy",
although certainly I was strongly influenced by the Brothers when I was here. There’s certainly
no doubt about that, yeah.

Wisniewski: I actually obtained a picture of your college year book.

Ryan: [Laughing, somewhat caught off guard] Ahh yeah.

Wisniewski: I see that you were wearing a shirt, tie, and blazer. Was this mandatory?

Ryan: [sighs] No. You had to wear a tie and a blazer if you were in a Theology class run by a
Brother. Or let me rephrase it. There were certain brothers who required the tie and a sport
jacket. Brother G. Francis, who taught me when I was a freshman, I had him for the Scriptures.
We had, we read the Bible. It was a great course he was also an English teacher. Where Brother
G. Francis made you wear a sport jacket to get into his class. And I can remember that there were
three or four guys that had who were dorm students who had sport jackets and as they were
leaving they would just kind of give them to like the next guys coming in and that these were
[unfinished thought] It was a scene out of out of Saturday Night Live. I can remember going in
there one day [laughing] by default, wearing a size forty five long pastel blue sports jacket
[laughing] so I could get into class. It was it was really funny.

But there were times when I would wear a sports jacket to La Salle only because I felt
comfortable wearing a sports jacket not cause it was required. But there were a few days of the
week where even if I were not in Brother G. Francis’ class and I didn’t have to wear my you
know this trade off jacket that I would wear my blue blazer, that was the uniform for Francis
Ryan. I loved blue blazers. I bought them at Strawbridge’s downtown and that’s my Jacob
Reed’s tie [pointing to his graduation photograph in the ’69 yearbook] that I have here. I can
remember buying that when I was in high school, in fact I was a senior in high school. But at any
way and ahh [incomplete thought].

Wisniewski: Do you remember any of those students on that page?

Ryan: Sure, yeah [responding quickly]. Joe Ryan ran track and he taught in the diocese for some
time. And I used to see Joe running through Wissahickon he used to do a lot of running through
the Wissahickon area right by the Valley Green and I would see him a lot. Tom Shearer, he was
an English major but these are some of the only guys I can remember on this particular page that
I went to school with. But yeah, Joe Ryan in fact I think Joe was an administrator for years in the
diocese but I lost track of him. I’m not sure what he’s doing right now.

Wisniewski: Do you keep in touch with any of your fellow alumni?

Ryan: Oh yeah sure.

Wisniewski: To this day?
Ryan: Yeah, absolutely yeah. Joe Hetherington, Joe is an attorney. He lives out in Chicago, went to Harvard Law School. There's a good friend of mine, Bernie Krimm, we've kind of fallen out. I haven't seen Bernie in several years but he actually came here and worked for a short time at La Salle. Of course Brother Mike McGinnis and I were class mates and I have a special relationship with Mike. I can remember when I won the Lindback Prize for distinguished teaching in the year 2000. I walked up onto the stage to receive the prize from Mike and he shook my hand and we turned to the camera to have our picture taken and as he was giving it to me he said "hey Frank can you imagine us when we were kids thinking we would be here at this moment in time, you know me as president and you winning the Lindback"? I said "no, I can't, can't remember that at all [laughing].

Wisniewski: I believe I might have a picture of that.

Ryan: [laughing] You're kidding? Yeah. That was the first graduation that was indoors. It was raining. It was a nightmare. And I remember my son Sean graduated that day as well, the day that I won the Lindback. But that was a great experience for me and I remember Mike [unfinished thought, showing Dr. Ryan the photograph].

Ohh geez, yeah that's exactly what he was saying to me. That's exactly what he's saying! And I can remember later on there were some people on campus that said to me "what did Brother Michael say to you"? And I said "oh he just congratulated me for you know being a good teacher". But he wasn't saying that at all! We were talking, we were going down memory lane in about thirty seconds worth of time. But there are also other people that I'm still friendly with— a lot of the guys that from North who came here. Frank Smith, one of my best friends, the class of '70. He graduated with me but he took a year out to work full time to get together some money cause he was you know didn't have the money to do it, but anyway.

Wisniewski: Was there female students?

Ryan: No, [brief pause] with a footnote. Females were permitted in the evening division [brief pause] in the late sixties. I want to say in my sophomore year there were some. I remember I was in Philosophy class and there were some girls from Chestnut Hill who were able to take courses on an exchange basis, very far and few between. I remember one time sitting in on an English class in the evening. There was a professor who died tragically here at La Salle. His name was Brother [corrects himself] Mr. Edward Gibbons and he taught English. And Gibbons really inspired me as well. He wasn't a brother, but I had him for sophomore's the Survey of British Literature from the Romantics up to the twentieth century. And I remember that he said he was covering something in the evening. And myself and three or four other guys sat in on the evening class and we were surprised to see three girls, [corrects himself] three women in the class as well. And it was somewhat of a shock. Looking back on this, there were very few female professors on campus at this time; there were a handful of them. It was mostly men teaching men, yeah.

Wisniewski: Were these females from Chestnut Hill involved with the Nursing Program?

Ryan: No. No. They may have been. I don't recall that. But I do remember that there was one girl in particular who was in our philosophy class. Her name was Kathy Artz, A-r-t-z. And she
Ryan: continued
was from Chestnut Hill. And she was pretty good. And it was really funny because with this male culture [tree rubbing against window] there was this kind of tacit competition that you would have with women. And I can remember guys like who wouldn’t say anything the entire semester; all of a sudden they’re fighting with Kathy Artz about Aristotle. I didn’t even know that they were even reading Aristotle. But it was on a very limited basis and I think it was after I graduated in ’69 that women were admitted, ya know.

Wisniewski: Yeah, I believe it was 1970.

Ryan: Yeah, right [agreeing].

Wisniewski: So there was really [pause] no real interest in making La Salle co-ed to your classmates? Did you... [Dr. Ryan attempts to answer]

Ryan: Not as...[Wisniewski clarifies question]

Wisniewski: Like some high schools today...

Ryan: Yeah [following question].

Wisniewski: [sentence continued] that are all boys, they kind of take offense when girls enter their schools. Was there any type of [unfinished sentence]?

Ryan: You know it’s funny you raise that. I don’t recall any kind of a discussion on campus to have girls here, nor necessarily to keep them out. It was just the status quo. It was a Christian Brothers college at this time [cough]. At the time, Villanova and St. Joe’s were also all male. In fact Princeton didn’t go co-ed until I think sixty-eight or sixty-nine [pause]. So across the country, you had a lot of all-male institutions. And I don’t know whether or not [unfinished sentence]. I’m trying to recall this—whether anybody ever felt that we would be constrained in discussions in classes. But there wasn’t anything that I can think of that would be compromised by having a woman there. In hindsight, I think that we were probably at a deficit because of the lack of the female point of view.

I can remember going to graduate school at Temple and having my first female professor which wasn’t until my second year—Dr. Marilyn Gaul who directed my master’s qualifying essay. She was one of the most brilliant women [corrects himself] teachers’ excuse me [apologizes] I ever had in my life. And I actually told her that in an email last year. She was flattered but anyway. I can remember coming home and saying to my wife I said “my God I had this class with this woman, she’s brilliant”. And my wife said “yeeaaahh”? And of course my wife [laughing] who went through Temple as an undergrad. in history had women all the time. And for me to say this, she was like put off by this. And I said “you have to realize that I’m coming at an incredible social deficit by not having women as teachers nor as women in my classes. But I made the adjustment very quickly to grad school at Temple. Getting back to your question about La Salle, I think that we all have profited over the years by having women in classes with us, of course.
Wisniewski: I understand that at some point in time there were beanies freshman would wear called “dinks”?

Ryan: Yes. It’s interesting you raised this because my class, the class of sixty-nine, was the first class not to be required to wear “dinks”, but to wear ties. We had a freshmen tie. It was blue and gold stripped. And you would wear this, required to wear to your first week or so. And then at the end of that week you’d have a dance, a freshmen dance where you kind of became officially a La Salle you know student. And looking back on it, I was somewhat irritated that we didn’t have “dinks” because the class before us didn’t and I don’t know whether the class after us did.

Sigma Phi Lambda was the spirit fraternity at that time. And they were in charge of providing for the kind of the freshman initiation activities. And there was a guy named Ray Brackus—I remember him. And he was a North kid. And he was a member of Sigma Phi Lambda. And what they did the very first week of school, that actually began the week before. You were required to come here all day Monday through Friday before the opening of school. And now school started after Labor Day during those days. And I think it was the second or third week of September. And you went through this kind of indoctrination session everyday.

You had to know who the members of student council were. You had to be able to memorize the school fight song which of course you know that’s probably the most famous fight song in the Big Five. They tried to make us memorize or to learn the alma mater you know eventually that came about to. But you were required to bring a pocket full of quarters. I think it was three dollars worth of quarters. And if you were seen walking across campus and you walked on a line, a cement line, they would fine you a quarter. If you walked on the grass they’d fine you a quarter. And they used all these quarters to subsidize the dance, the freshman dance.

There were girls invited from different local colleges and you were also invited to bring your girlfriend if you wanted you to do that. And then you would give your girlfriend your “dink” but you didn’t cause you didn’t have a “dink”. So, I [laughing] wound up giving my girlfriend my tie [continues laughing] which she gave back to me cause I wanted to wear it cause it was a La Salle tie, it was cool. But that’s how that worked. There were no “dinks” in the class of sixty-nine.

Wisniewski: Dr. Ryan this seems like hazing?

Ryan: Yeah ahh mm maybe it was. I don’t know it was...[cut off]

Wisniewski: Sponsored by the University?

Ryan: Yeah [admitting]. But it was all in good fun. And we knew this coming in. And I’ll tell you one thing it was a way [unfinished sentence]. Like, they would just stop you at random and say okay “what’s the name of that building?” “What’s the name of this building?” And a lot of the questions that first-year students ask today of faculty and ask of the administration that whole [unfinished thought]. All those issues were taken care of by Sigma Phi Lambda the first week. I mean you had to know this stuff. And they would ya know rough you up [laughing]. And I mean it in a pleasant way you know.

But it was guys were doing this to guys. I guess you can’t do it you know with women on campus. I don’t know I’m just throwing that out kind of [speculating, unfinished thought]. But this was part of the tradition. We knew it coming in. We knew this was expected of us. And we
Ryan: continued
were proud to participate in it. Because I guess it's like being in boot camp when you graduate
from the Marine infantry or something. I don't know. But that's what happened.

Wisniewski: So there were fraternities on campus?

Ryan: Oh yeah. Yeah. It's funny you should say that too because I remember being a senior at
North Catholic and coming here to La Salle and there were frats on campus and I remember
there was a discussion about why the college was not supporting fraternities to the degree that
they felt they should be supported. And I didn't understand what that meant. But there were
fraternity members on campus like giving out flyers and having placards for public view dealing
with the fact that frats were not given the recognition, maybe that's the word I want, by the
administration, that they felt that they deserved.

When I came here at La Salle I was never in [pause]. I did not join a frat. There were
some of my friends who did. I didn't feel a need to join a frat for some reason. I felt comfortable
here without joining a frat. I don't know, maybe if I were an out-of-towner or something and I
didn't have you know a whole lot of familiar faces with kids throughout the Archdiocese maybe
I would feel a need to join. But no, I did not join a frat.

Wisniewski: Are you aware of the fraternities here today?

Ryan: No [decisive]. I know nothing about frats today, nothing at all. If you asked me to give
you the name [unfinished thought]. I can remember when I was a student here, the most
prestigious frat was TKE. All the kids who joined TKE were in my mind, they were rich. They
you know they had cars. A lot of them were from La Salle High School, some other prep.
schools from around the area you know they were always going places. But I always felt that I
was too poor to belong to TKE. But I didn't regret it or anything because I had no interest in
joining a frat. But my knowledge of the fraternity/sorority system here at La Salle is miniscule
today.

Wisniewski: You were a member of an honorary society?

Ryan: Yes, I was a member of Lambda Iota Tau. Lambda Iota Tau [unfinished thought]. I was
the secretary of Lambda Iota Tau in fact. This was a literature honors society. You had to have a
3.4 minimum and I think a 3.5 in English at that time. I still have my L-I-T pin and I have the L-
I, the Lambda Iota Tau [unfinished sentence]. They gave you one of these frameable citations
which I have framed in a gold frame right over top of my computer in my study, yes. I've had it
in my office here for years. And my office just became so overwhelmed with books that I took
all my other citations [unfinished sentence]. I have them home, in my study at home. But yes I
was a member of L-I-T.

Wisniewski: As well as the Weber Society?

Ryan: Yes. I was a president of Weber Society. Weber Society was the English Department's
society. It was open to everyone. It was not necessarily restricted by G.P.A. Lambda Iota Tau
Ryan: continued
was an honors society. Weber society was not. At that time Mr. John Keenan, English professor, who later on became chair—he was the faculty moderator of the Weber Society.

The Weber Society actually sponsored something called a reading conference in our senior year. Actually we did it every year. But since I was the president, I was pretty much the point on this thing. And what we would do was we would on a Saturday hold an all day conference [hitting finger on chair] for high school kids throughout the area—Central, Girls High, the Catholic schools, public schools. And, we would have separate sessions. For instance, there’d be a session on Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughter House Five* or a session on Mark Twain. And each member of the Weber Society would conduct a lecture-discussion with the high school kids. It was a nice way also of recruiting at that time.

That was one of the few times we had girls on campus because then we had girls from Girls High that were seen here and girls from the Mount St. Joe’s Academy and Little Flower who came for that Saturday on campus. And one of the kids in the Weber Society was actually a playwright and he wrote a play which we put on in the Dan Rodden Theater in the afternoon. Brother Patrick Ellis again who was the director of the honors program—he gave the keynote welcome speech in the morning which was phenomenal. We showed the *Occurrence of Owl Creek Bridge*, the black and white half-hour film, which was based on the story by Ambrose Bierce, which we then discussed. But these were some of the activities that the Weber Society did, yep.

Wisniewski: Were La Salle athletics a big part of social life?

Ryan: Oh yeah, [excited] the Big 5. [hitting hand on desk] I never missed a Big 5 basketball game ever [emphatic]. Even when I was sick I used to go down there. And of course the class of ’69 was the super team. That was the team that was on probation and at the end of the year was listed right behind UCLA as the top team in the country.

Our biggest rival [pauses, unfinished thought]. Well, the Big 5 teams were all good. Temple was good that year, I think they went to the N.I.T. In 69, they had Clarence Brookins and John Baum, who also does the play by right now for Temple on radio. But the Villanova game was touted as the power game. And that was the super team when you had Larry Cannon and Kenny Durrett and Bernie Williams and Fatty Taylor, Fran Dunphy—was the backup guard who graduated a year after I did. But we went against Villanova for bragging rights in the East. They had Howard Porter and Wali Jones, Joe Crews. And I actually have a copy, a black and white tape of that game which I will not sell for any amount of money. It is the perfect tape perfect tape.

Ah, yes the games. Many of the games were on Friday night and I can remember going down to the Palestra and get on the El [swooshing noise] shoot down to the Palestra. It was packed. And it’s amazing because I can remember in some cases actually getting dressed up to go to the Palestra where I’d wear a tie. A little footnote to my earlier comments—to get in to a North Catholic basketball game up through 1965, you had to wear a tie. And everybody did and if you did not get there by half time of the J.V. game you did not get a seat in the “Pit”, same thing for football. But of course that changed. The Palestra was always packed—tremendous social night at the Palestra loved it!

Wisniewski: Was this the La Salle home games? Were they held there?
Ryan: Oh yeah. Yeah, the La Salle home games were always at the Palestra. We had no place to play. We had no gym, too small.

Wisniewski: And this was on Penn's campus?

Ryan: On Penn's Campus [agreeing]. Now at this time, when I was a student here, freshmen could not play NCAA varsity sports. They had freshman games. And we would have some freshman games in La Salle's—La Salle College gym which is now where the bookstore is. I can remember going out to see La Salle play Villanova at Villanova's field house. This is before they built DuPont [Villanova's current arena]. They have a field house that's also there right on Lancaster Avenue and this was a preview of the super game.

But this was when I was a freshman. We had our freshmen team, which again, by the time we were seniors were ranked nationally—number two in the country. But yes, also if you check our yearbook, La Salle for two years, I think it was two years, had a football club it was not a football [unfinished thought]. It wasn't sponsored by the University. It did not have funding. You might want to check with the administration on this or talk to Brother Ed Sheehy, he might know better than I. But it was my understanding that the football club was [pause] it was subsidized by the kids. I remember giving money to this. I don't think the University kicked in much money at all. In fact the coach of the football team was the assistant coach at Drexel who used to come up on the El and coach our guys. And I think for two years we actually played [thinking of teams]—we played Catholic U. I forget who else we played. But we played out here you know in McCarthy Stadium for two years and then it just fizzled because of lack of interest and money. And then of course it was resurrected later on, yeah.

Wisniewski: What do we say if we conclude...

Ryan: Ok

Wisniewski: ... right now?

Ryan: Ok, that's fine.

Wisniewski: Thank you.

Ryan: God, I can certainly talk can't I?

Both: [Laughing]

Ryan: I love... [end of recording].

End of Interview 1