

Spring 2015

Interview of Brian Henderson, F.S.C., M.A.

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FIELD NOTES

Interviewee: Brother Brian Henderson, F.S.C.
Interviewer: Rebecca Oviedo
Interview Date: March 10, 2015
Interview Location: La Salle University campus, Student Union Building, Room 217

The Interviewee:

Brother Brian Henderson was born in 1959 and grew up in Southwest Philadelphia. He graduated from West Catholic High School for Boys in 1977 and La Salle University with a B.A. in Religion and Psychology in 1981, and later earned a Masters Degree in Pastoral Studies in 1992. He has been a De La Salle Christian Brother since 1979, taking final vows in 1987. All of Brother Brian's apostolic assignments have placed him serving inner city youth. His first assignment was as a youth care worker and religion teacher at Saint Gabriel's Hall in Audubon, PA, a residential treatment facility for court referred teenagers. From 1984 to 1988, Brother Brian taught full time and moderated numerous programs at West Catholic High School, his alma mater. He then spent the next 10 years in Baltimore, Maryland, first as a religion teacher and Dean of Students, and then as Assistant Principal at Saint Frances Academy, the oldest African-American Catholic High School in the country. While in Baltimore, he earned a Masters of Education in Administration from Loyola College. In 1998, Brother Brian returned to Saint Gabriel's Hall as Residential Director and Assistant Director, and has recently completed twelve years as Director (2001-2013). He currently serves the Brothers of the Christian Schools within the District of Eastern North America (DENA) in providing accompaniment of Young Lasallian Professionals, hoping to form the next generation of forever Lasallians; both brothers and lay partners, committed to "making this world a more humane, respectful, and dignified place to live."

Brother Brian has also worked with the Lasallian Volunteer Program since 2001, facilitating their annual spring weekend debriefing retreat, and received their Brother John Johnston Faith Award in 2014 for his generous service and support. He has received awards for service from West Catholic, Saint Frances Academy, and the Knights of Columbus, and has served on numerous Catholic school boards throughout his professional career. He currently serves as a member of the Board of Trustees for La Salle University.

The Interviewer:

I, Rebecca (Heath) Oviedo, was born in 1981, and grew up in Havertown, PA. I earned a B.A. in American Studies and Art History/Fine Arts from the George Washington University in Washington, DC, and lived in Alexandria, VA since graduation in 2003 until moving back to the Philadelphia area in 2012. I have worked at the Historical Society of Washington, DC, the Folger Shakespeare Library, and for a time as an artist in a decorative painting company. I currently work at La Salle University Art Museum, initially as Museum Assistant, and now as Collections Manager/Registrar. I am enrolled in the university's M.A. in History with a concentration in Public History program.

Background:

I knew Brother Brian a bit through association with La Salle University Art Museum. He is on the Board of Trustees' Committee for the Arts, and I, as Museum Assistant, had taken meeting minutes at these meetings for the last two years (meets two to three times a year). I had also attended an Explorer Café (a weekly lecture/forum to promote discussion on various topics) in January 2013 at which Brother Brian gave a talk about Saint Gabriel's Hall, entitled "How Can We Help to Eliminate the Disposal of Children?" My acquaintance with Brother Brian gave me the impression that he was very open and outgoing, talkative, deeply committed to the Lasallian values of teaching and social justice, and perhaps had a fondness for analogies and metaphors. I immediately thought of him for the HIST 650/Oral History assignment to interview a Christian Brother or La Salle faculty/staff/alumni. I knew Brother Brian fit both categories and that he would likely have lots to say. I looked forward to the opportunity to get to know him better.

I sent Brother Brian an email in late January to explain the project and ask if he would be interested and willing to be interviewed. He enthusiastically agreed and offered to come to campus to discuss details and possible dates in person (Brother Brian lives nearby at Jeremy House, a Christian Brothers community residence in Mount Airy, Philadelphia). We exchanged a few more emails, and set a date between his travels and predicted snow. When Brother Brian arrived at the Art Museum that scheduled afternoon, we went to one of the galleries to sit down and talk. I suggested doing the interview in the museum, depending on when we could schedule it. Brother Brian observed that the gallery was rather echo-y, something that I had not noticed, but was certainly true when Brother Brian's strong voice filled the room. We chatted for about thirty minutes, and then went back to my shared office space to check our calendars. We passed two Art Museum student workers on our way, and each time Brother Brian stopped to introduce himself, to learn their names, and ask them about their studies. He greeted my co-worker, who joined us to chat and say hello, and our brief meeting turned into a very pleasant two and a half hour visit.

I had wanted to set up an interview date or dates for late March, but Brother Brian travels quite a lot lately with his current work, and would be busy with presentations, meetings, and the upcoming Easter holiday. We ended up scheduling one session for March 10, 2015. He sent me a copy of his 4-page resume and a one page biographical sketch which were very helpful in providing background information and topics for the interview. I gathered additional information from University Archivist Brother Joe Grabenstein, general internet searches, and La Salle's Digital Commons website, which had an article Brother had written for *La Salle Magazine* ("Good Kids Who Make Bad Decisions," Spring 2008). Other La Salle oral history interviews, especially those of Christian Brothers, and Paul Thompson's "A Life-Story Interview Guide" were particularly useful in formulating a questionnaire for the interview. I sent my questions to Dr. Barbara Allen for feedback, and then sent them to Brother Brian about a week before our interview, so he would have an idea of what to expect.

Description of the Interview:

Since I share an office, and wanted to be sure we would have no interruptions, I decided to reserve a room in the Student Union Building, at 2:30 p.m. I bought a bottle of water for Brother Brian, and arrived thirty minutes early to make sure the room was unlocked and unoccupied, which it was. Unfortunately, Room 217 that rainy day had pieces of ceiling exposed and fallen on the windowsill,

immediately evident when you walk into the sparse room. I went to the main office to inquire about using the beautiful McShain Board Room next door. After all, Brother Brian is a board member. There was an event scheduled for 6:00 p.m. that evening, and I was afraid of keeping to our scheduled end time, so I decided to stick with the original plan.

I waited for Brother in the lobby downstairs, and he arrived right on time. He was dressed casually, in a button-down shirt, slacks, and carrying a briefcase. He had previously asked if he should wear his Brother's robe, and I relayed that the interview would be an audio recording only, so he should wear what was most comfortable. He had mentioned (by email) when he needs to appear as a Brother, he tends to "go the whole nine yards and wear my religious habit." I made a note to discuss this in the interview, which we did.

We went into the room and joked about the leaking window, and of course Brother Brian didn't mind at all. He started talking about an article he had read recently, and it was a while until I could segue into starting the interview. Brother Brian took my lead and went off running. He had clearly read over my questions and given quite a bit of thought and reflection to what he wanted to say. He answered most of my early questions that I had planned to ask without much prompting. I was pleased that he was so forthright about his early experiences growing up in Philadelphia, and his unique perspective as an African-American Christian Brother.

The interview went longer than I expected. I had thought Brother Brian wanted to leave by 5:00, to get back to Jeremy House for evening prayer. But at 5:00 he didn't mind staying at all, and wanted to continue. After I stopped recording, we continued to talk, and as we walked out of the building together, we kept running into people who knew Brother Brian and wanted to say hello. Brother Brian had time for everyone. As I said at the conclusion of our interview, his passion and commitment to human relationships and Lasallian values is clear and evident. I think this interview will be useful to those interested in the history of Philadelphia neighborhoods, Catholic education and the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the vocation of De La Salle Christian Brothers, particularly how they have changed or compare to other religious orders in recent years (ca. 1965 to present day), and issues of race and human respect in general.

Note on recording:

I recorded the interview on two devices, just in case any problems occurred. I used the built-in voice memo app on my Apple iPhone 5c, and also a Sony DPC (Digital Pitch Control) IC Recorder IC-MS515 on battery power, which I had borrowed from a co-worker. I placed both devices on the table between us during the interview, and (surprisingly) the recording from my iPhone yielded a much clearer final result. The file from the Sony recorder was in .MSV (memory stick voice) format, unique to Sony products. I downloaded Sony Voice Editor from the Sony website, to convert the file to .mp3 format. I converted the file from my iPhone from .m4a to .wav through iTunes. The .wav file is much larger than the .mp3, and I think the converted .mp3 sounds especially muffled and distant. Even comparing the unconverted files, the one from the iPhone is louder and clearer. The .wav file is the final archival submission. I used the Sony Voice Editor software to slowly play back the recording while I transcribed for the log.

Editing the Log/Transcript:

I chose to:

- Place a time indicator at the left-hand margin next to each log entry, either at a change in subject, a new question/answer, or a particularly illustrative quote
- Provide additional information or explanation in footnotes or brackets []
- Also use brackets to indicate nonverbal sounds or visual and emotional cues
- Use quotation marks when directly transcribing from the interview
- Eliminate most repeated words, false starts, and crutch words, but to leave enough to indicate the narrator's speech and thought process
- Indicate pauses or hesitation with commas or an em dash—
- Also use an em dash to indicate an incomplete or hanging sentence, or parenthetical phrases