

Robert Seelhorst Jr.
History 650
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Index

Narrator: Eugene "Gene" Colucci

Interviewer: Robert Seelhorst Jr.

Time/Date: 3/18/13 2:30pm-3:30 pm & 3/20/13 2:34-3:52 pm

Location: Room B105 of Buena Regional High School, Atlantic County, New Jersey

Abstract

Mr. Eugene Colucci is a Spanish teacher at Buena Regional High School in Atlantic County, New Jersey. This is his twentieth year as an educator at BRHS in the New Jersey public school system. Before this, Mr. Colucci spent nineteen years teaching in the Catholic school system of Philadelphia (St. Peter's Elementary, Bishop Neumann High School, and St. Maria Goretti High School). He has a unique perspective because he spent so much time in both the public and private school environments. He describes his youth in the Catholic school system of Philadelphia and describes growing up in a predominantly Italian-American neighborhood in South Philadelphia. Mr. Colucci earned a BA in Liberal Arts from Millersville University in 1970 and a MA in Bi-Lingual Bi-Cultural studies from LaSalle in 1991. He continued his studies in education by earning Supervisor Certificates from Rowan University in Spanish, Elementary Education, Bi-Lingual studies, and ESL (English as a Second Language). Before his professional career began Mr. Colucci served in the Army National Guard in 1970. During his time in the service he was a company clerk and befriended an Army photographer who taught him how to operate a camera. This knowledge of photography helped him get a job at St. Maria Goretti because they had a dark room but no educator who could operate it. Mr. Colucci eventually purchases a local camera studio, "Castileana Studios", through which he operated his own photography business that catered to weddings and special events. This interview documents Mr. Colucci's life, cultural heritage, military service, and how LaSalle helped him transfer into a career in public education.

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- 00:01 Introductions: Interviewer's name, narrator's name, time, date (inadvertently stumbled over the date – correct date of the interview was in the year 2013 not 1913), location where the interview is being conducted and permission to record the interview.

Background

- 00:34 Interview begins with his date of Birth, 2/18/47 (65 years old), born in Philadelphia PA. Discussion about his grandparents and their backgrounds. All of his grandparents came to America from Italy, from the area around Naples. His father's parents were Donato Colucci and Rosa Ragona. His mother's parents were Vincenzo Masturzo and Felecia Amato. He describes some of the family stories about their lives.

- 05:30 Description of his personal interaction with his grandparents. His grandfather Colucci passed away in 1945 (2 years before Gene's birth), grandfather Masturzo lived until 1968 (83 y/o), and both grandmother's passed away in 1994. In the descriptions of these people he regards his grandmother Colucci as the "patriarch" because she was such a dominant personality in the family. He also describes his daily contact with his grandmother Masturzo. "*My grandmother Masturzo was at the house everyday, every day.*" Mr. Colucci gives an account of these individual's personalities and habits as well as his remembrances of family summertime gatherings at the Masturzo's Brigantine (NJ) shore house. He talked about staying down the shore most summers during his early teen years. The conversation goes on to give insight into how they influenced him and how those interactions shaped the man he is today.

Parents

- 10:49 Discussion on the topic of his father, Daniel Colucci: Born 4/20/1907, His lack of education and or financial backing led him to a factory position with Fischer and Porter of Warminster PA. He etched the glass on test tubes and other instruments making sure that their calibrations were correct before sale. Description of the character of Mr. Colucci's father. He grew up in a rough Italian neighborhood where he is described as a leader of the local gang in his youth but never sought a professional life of organized crime. Concetta Masturzo, Gene's mother, was born in 6/16/1911, she began working in clerical positions at 16 yrs old and continued to work her entire adult life in "*banking*". Although she wanted to be a teacher she was denied an education past the 8th grade because of her sex. Her

personality was the complete opposite of her husband's. She is remembered as refined while her husband is remembered as "*rough*" in his demeanor and physical nature.

- 16:36 The Story of Mr. Colucci's parent's relationship. Gene describes the stories he was told of their courting process as "*hysterical*". His parents were neighbors but his mother was not interested in his father and cared more for another boy in the area. She would be denied permission to date the individual she was truly interested in because he was not Italian and the family would not allow it. Gene remembers his father explaining to him why he pursued his mother, "*I saw what type of women she was, and I knew that she would be, just a good mother, and a good wife and she was everything that I am not. If anybody was going to be a role model for my children, I want her to be the role model.*" Gene goes on to explain that his mother's mother had serious reservations about his father's lack of education and street thug mentality. The story goes that his father showed up at the Masturzo's door on a Sunday morning, ignores Felecia's objections with a brush off insult and asks her husband for his daughter's hand in marriage. The father replies, "*If you want her, she is all yours*" and that was the beginning of a 53 year marriage.

Story of Youth

- 19:53 Gene remembers his upbringing being based on Catholic teachings and the necessity of showing due respect to those around him. The importance of education was drilled into him with the threats from his father, "*If you want to drop out of school, you can always come work with me in the factory*". This kept his brother's and his head in the books. Gene describes life with his father as rough, "*My father never hit you with an open hand*". In some way he lived in fear of his father as Gene remembered him often saying, "*I don't care if you love me or not, you obey what I say*". He also makes a point to show respect for his father's work ethic and the fact that he provided for the family without fail.
- 23:28 "*I wanted to be a civil engineer, I wanted to go to Drexel*". Gene explains that he could not chase his dream of studying engineering because his brother was already attending classes at LaSalle University and money was extremely tight so he had to take a more practical course of action to secure a promising future. He decided to take classes at the Community College of Philadelphia. This would help him gain a deferment from the Draft (Vietnam), accumulate liberal arts credits, and bide the time until his brother graduated and his family could offer more assistance to go on to a larger university.

- 25:30 Description of the house that he grew up in on 2308 South Lambert Street, Philadelphia PA. He describes the layout of the home and an account of the neighborhood that he grew up in (Saint Monica's Parish). Proud of the place he grew up and felt that it had a good reputation for being upper-middle class and producing intelligent young people. Gene went to Bishop Neumann High School and graduated with the Spanish award and he realized that "*Languages seemed to be my thing*". He excelled at Spanish, Italian and French. Gene describes the importance of singing in the church choir at a time when that demanded an understanding of Latin. He continued to describe how he was taught (from second grade on) what the words meant and not just how to pronounce them.
- 28:00 Life as a child in his neighborhood: Gene recollects how there were dozens of kids to play with and a wide variety of games that were played. In depth explanations of, "Half-ball", "Dink", and "Nickle-ball". Gene looks back fondly to his childhood. Although he knows that he was not wealthy, he was very happy and adjusted well to his surroundings.

Education

- 32:58 States that he enjoyed school from St. Monica Elementary through to Bishop Neumann High School. Considered himself a, "*Good B student*". Here Gene goes on to describe the classes he enjoyed, the fact that he entered school early and it's affect on his chances to play sports, and his love for the social aspects of those years. The conversation turned to why he chose to go to LaSalle and the degrees he has earned: BA in liberal Arts from Millersville University, 1970; Masters in Bi-Lingual Bi-Cultural Studies from LaSalle University in 1991; Supervisor Certificates from Rowan University for Spanish, Elementary Education, Bi-Lingual, and ESL (English as a second language).
- 36:06 Why he chose LaSalle. His brother went LaSalle and he considered that a challenge. He also comments on an advertising campaign that LaSalle had been in the newspaper. The ad specifically discussed a degree in Bi-Lingual education and that caught his attention, "*I should have a degree in Bi-Lingual education, it made sense*". Gene discusses his interview with Dr. Brownstein at LaSalle.
- 38:26 Comments on inspirational teacher. Dr. Ruiz, "*My mentor*", at Millersville University. He speaks at length on her impact on him: including the type of person she was, her dedication to her students, and her teaching technique.

43:59 Memories of his time at LaSalle. Thirty credits in a year and a half, Gene describes that time as, “*very intense*”. Comments on completing school at night, raising a child (7 y/o), working full time as a teacher and running a photography business all at the same time. He goes on to include the stress of a failed marriage and the loss of his parents at the same time. He no longer feels a connection to the campus since most of the relationships that he built have dissolved over time. Includes reminiscing over times watching LaSalle basketball with his brother in connection with the 2013 selection of LaSalle into the NCAA tournament.

46:33 Review of how his upbringing and education have affected his worldview: Influences of Father and Mother, the purpose of his studies and how he came to teaching as a profession.

Military Career

49:56 Discussion about Mr. Colucci’s military career. Entered the Army National Guard in August of 1970 to avoid being drafted in Vietnam. No ROTC experience. Review of military history in the family reveals that Gene was named after his uncle who died fighting the Japanese on Peleliu in 1944. Army life was not a difficult transition. Review of Basic training: This included his first experiences, tearing ligaments in his foot during a volleyball game and how that pushed him out of basic training and into the position of company clerk.

54:53 Description of rank: Private First Class (left the military with an E6 rank of a sergeant), benefits of the position of company clerk, locations of service: Fort Ord, CA.. Gene explained that, “*The Vietnam War was winding down*” and he was shipped home.

57:41 Impact of his service in the National Guard, “*I saw a part of war that I didn’t want to see*”. Being in a hospital (hurt foot) with men who were dealing with serious wounds from the battlefield. He has no regrets about his service in the Army. Mr. Colucci does note that he had one hundred and seventy nine days in and he could have earned the G.I. Bill (assistance for his educational goals) if he had one hundred and eighty.

59:13 Closing comments for first interview. Thanking Mr. Colucci for his time.

59:31 End of first recording.

Photography career

- 00:01 Introductions: Name of interviewer, date: 3/20/13, location: Buena Regional High School, permission from Mr. Colluci to record his voice.
- 00:58 Comments on where he received his photography training. As a company clerk he had access to many people and he became friends with a photographer (Ray). He would assist this friend and learned a great deal from him. When Ray was sent on assignment, Mr. Colucci was asked if he could shoot some pictures for the Colonel. Detailed story of how he shot pictures of the camouflage protecting the artillery pieces on the base from a helicopter. Includes the uses of different lenses and settings in the discussion.
- 06:11 How he learned to develop film. Teaching at St. Maria Goretti (all girl Catholic school) there was a dark room and he was charged with teaching photography to the students. Discussion about a young male teacher being in a dark room with twenty girls. Explains how he was able to teach himself with the assistance of Sterlingcraft, organize a photography club for the school, and purchase high tech equipment of his own for personal use.
- 09:10 Inspiration for starting a business: The influence of the Sterlingcraft staff (photographic equipment supplier) encouraging him to become a professional. Mr. Colucci's memory of a particular snowstorm that he captured on film as he walked through south Philadelphia, being propositioned by a local artist (Maida) who owned the framing store to allow him to paint one of his photographs, and how the interaction with Mr. Maida gave him more confidence to pursue photography as a professional. Mr. Maida told Gene, "*your good, you're the one who caught the picture*".
- 14:15 Sterlingcraft recommends Mr. Colucci to a local professional photographer who was willing to train him as a wedding photographer (1977). By 1979 he owned the Castileana Studio and was running his own business. He made the decision to buy the name as well as the business in a deal with Mr. Castileana. Discussion of his business plan and the built in clientele of former students who would need photography work in the future.
- 18:19 One of his students was bitten by a dog. He was hired by a lawyer to take pictures of a young girls leg to be used in a court case. His photo evidence was the deciding factor in forcing a settlement out of court.

19:21 Being hired by a bus driver to take photographs of an accident. *"I had a bus driver, came running into my house, he was, very excited to say the least and he said I just had an accident, I know my supervisor is not going to believe how it happened..."* continued description of the accident and the work he did to help preserve the bus drivers job.

21:35 He closed the studio in 1992. Description of how he continued to help others with photography needs when he came to Buena Regional High School and now does all the photography work for his Tai Chi master's studio.

Professional Teaching Career

25:48 Decision to become a teacher: discussion of changing his mindset from looking for a job as an interpreter or translator to educator. He was employed in a banking position when a friend offers him an opportunity to teach at St. Peter's elementary school. (1971)

27:12 Teaching in an elementary level allowed him to put his ability with language to good use but as an elementary school teacher he was also teaching history, science, math, physical education, and Spanish. Recall of the memory of how he was embraced by the Spanish speaking families and the administration for his ability to translate concerns between these two groups.

29:13 After leaving St. Peter's because of a philosophical difference with the new Principal, he receives a letter from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia offering him a number of positions teaching Spanish in the city. He chooses to go back to his High School at Bishop Neumann and teach Spanish (1971). Due to a reduction in force at Bishop Neumann he had to move to St. Maria Goretti (1973).

31:14 Discusses how his knowledge of photography and his ability to play (coach) tennis impressed the Principal at St. Maria Goretti. He explains that the principal said, *"we have a dark room upstairs that's not being use"*. Teaching Spanish 1, 2, & 3. (1974-1993) It was not considered difficult to get tenure in the Private school system. Discussion of the types of observations that were required to gain tenure.

Differences between teaching in Private and Public Schools

33:36 Statements of the similarities in dealing with teenagers in either system. First noticeable difference is the ability of private institutions to, *"bounce the kid out of school, truly, throwing him out of school... you*

don't have to come here... you do things our way". Explanation of the demerit system used with students.

- 35:55 No Corporal Punishment allowed by the Archdiocese. Discusses the differences between certain ethnic groups and their beliefs on punishment. Included a connection to a generation gap between how children were once raised and how they are today.
- 37:56 How the bureaucracy's function in each system (public/private). *"I honestly think the parochial system was a lot more effective."* Laments the amount of politics in the public school system, *"It's a lot of top down here."* He explains that it is difficult for the teachers to enter the decision making process. He felt the union in the private school was far more effective in this regard. Gene explains the differences in the pay (and benefits) between private and public school and the justification for this.
- 40:19 He describes that when he switched to the Buena Regional School District he made a lateral move on the pay scale because of his 16 years in education. He explains the deliberations between Mr. Anderson, President of the School Board, and Dr. Schnoor, Super Intendant, on Mr. Colucci's salary. At this time Gene was recently married and left Philadelphia for Glassboro, New Jersey.
- 42:44 Discusses how children have changed over time. He first discusses the growing apathy he sees in the classroom, disrespect in the classroom, and parent's lack of concern for their children's education. He uses the word, *"negligence"* to describe many parents of public school students. *"In the Archdiocese, the students were a bit more motivated"*, he concedes when comparing the private and public school systems.
- 44:23 Discusses the issue of "special education" offered in the public schools. Private schools did not offer special treatment for individual students like the 504 plans and IED's (Individualized Education Program) offered in NJ public schools. *"I had one class last year with about four 504's right across the front of the room (504's often demand preferential seating at the front of the room) at least 5 others with an I.E.P."* Details of the special accommodations offered to NJ public school students including: Extra Time for tests/quizzes, 60% passing allowance instead of the 70%, teacher prepared notes. He makes critical remarks about the process of "mainstreaming".
- 46:13 Begins to address the generational gap he has seen during his career. The first topic he is concerned with deals with technology. The use of cell phones, the interconnection between the students lives outside the school, and their presence in cyberspace. He declares that there is,

“a tremendous amount of communication” going on between teenagers today.

- 47:50 The conversation turns to technology in the classroom. He stresses the importance of having working equipment and the failure of the school district to support the equipment with proper maintenance.
- 48:37 Discussion of the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). He feels that it is more demanding on the teacher to align their plans to the standards. Further explanation is given to the fact that teachers were doing those things already and now must adjust to the state rubric for good education. He feels that these standards do force more planning and should have a positive impact on the quality of the education.
- 49:54 Discussion of the role of state and federal government in public school education. He details the influence of politics on education, the impact of the economy, the affects of hurricane Sandy. Special blame is directed at former NJ Governor Whitman for being the first to break precedent and dip into the teacher’s pensions (once a separate account that Trenton could not touch). The conversation turns to the influence of the federal government and no child left behind. He had a negative impression of the No Child Left Behind directives. He talks passionately about the need to solve the problems of the urban schools and that will have a ripple affect across the country.
- 55:28 The most fulfilling aspect of his work and the most frustrating. Enjoying the moments of teaching that have a positive impact on the students. Memories of students he has taught in the past and those who still contact him today. The apathy displayed by students in his classroom is the most frustrating, *“I don’t know if they truly don’t care, I don’t think they have an idea what they are going to do with it.”* He believes that language is taught the wrong way, *“we need to concentrate on the spoken language”*. He is frustrated with the importance of the written word and worksheets in the curriculum.
- 1:00:26 The importance of leadership at the Principal level. He discusses the influence of a principal who has a high profile in the school. He is critical of those who keep hidden behind their office door. He feels that both the Soboloski and the White administrations at Buena Regional High School operate in a similar fashion. One principal at St. Maria Goretti is offered as an example of an exemplary leader. Memories of working with the photography club. Expression of gratitude for the critical support from the principal that made it possible.

Travel

- 1:04:49 Discussion of the places he has traveled to. He provides a timeline of travel: 1974 Mexico, 1975 Spain, 1976 Italy (for the Canonization of St. John Neumann, this actually occurred in 1977), 1987 Yucatan in Mexico, Puerto Rico 1991 (Honeymoon), Purchases a timeshare in Puerto Rico in 1995 or 1996, and has made several trips (5) out to Arizona.
- This discussion of travel brings forth a memory of his first marriage that he had not discussed earlier. He blames their break up on the infidelity of his ex-wife. He also discusses his in-laws refused to accept him because of his Italian background. They are divorced in 1987 and he meets his future wife Donna, in 1990.
- 1:09:22 In the summer of 2007 he travels to China to perform martial arts (Tai Chi). As a first-degree black belt he had an opportunity to travel to China with his master (Master Lee) and participate in a competition. He discusses the food, the culture, the lifestyle of the people he meets, as well as their disposition. He comments on the air pollution, "*air pollution, horrible, horrible*". The trip lasted three weeks and they took 5 flights inside of China during their stay. Stops included: Beijing, Shanghai, Hang Zhou, Xian (Terra Cotta soldiers).
- 1:13:12 How the experiences he has had in his life affects the way he teaches in the classroom. The kids will say, "*With Colucci there is always a story to tell*". He describes how he is able to bring in his trip to China in his Spanish classroom. Having the authority of personal experience to break down stereotypes that his students may hold.
- 1:15:42 Discussion of his work ethic. Gene credits his father for instilling in him the importance of hard work. He, "took public transportation for twenty seven years. Rain, shine, sleet, snow, sick, fever, he had to go to work." He continues to explain that as a child he was sent to school when he was under the weather because he was not permitted to take days off.
- 1:17:12 Closing comments. Thanking Mr. Colucci for his time.

