

Interview of Brother Richard Kestler, FSC.
By Alexandria Moraschi
La Salle University
March 27, 2019

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Ally: This is Ally Moraschi. Today is Wednesday, March 27, 2019 and it is 5:00 in the evening. I am interviewing for the first time Brother Richard Kestler. We are currently at La Salle University in Philadelphia. The interview is being conducted in his office in Anselm Hall. This interview is for the 650 Oral History class in the History Graduate Program. May I ask permission to interview you today, Brother Richard?

Br. Rich: Most definitely.

Ally: Alright. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

Br. Rich: I was born in the city of Philadelphia, actually in the hospital called Nazareth Hospital up in Northeast Philadelphia. I was born in 1942, to be exact January the 8th 1942 roughly a month after Pearl Harbor.

Ally: And who were your parents?

Br. Rich: My parents are John and Alice Kestler. They come from New York. One from Manhattan, that is my mom and my dad from the Catskill Mountains. Alright, where they met I don't know, but my dad was in the Navy so somehow they met, married and settled in Philadelphia because his ship was stationed outta here.

Ally: And can you tell me a little bit about them in regards to their occupation, maybe what they were like?

Br. Rich: Yeah, My dad was, uh, career he was eventually a lawyer right, but he begin out in the print business. His mother felt that she didn't trust college enough to be able to, she believed you had to work with your hands to get an income. So he first became a

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compositor in the union, alright, for the printing industry in New York. Eventually he went on to school, alright, to get his law degree and he worked in the print business here in Philadelphia. Mom was primarily a house wife until we were probably maybe in the seventh or eighth grade. At that time she went out to work, and I found out in later years she went out to work some..basically we could get a private education. And I went to La Salle College High School based on mom's work basically.

Ally: How many siblings did you have, if any and can you tell me about them?

Br. Rich: Yeah there's only two of us who are living right now, my sister and I. My sister is younger than I. She's two years younger than I. Alright, she lives further up in Philadelphia Area in the very very far Northeast part of the city in a little community called Somerton. She's married and a widow, alright, mother of four children. The youngest of whom passed away from cancer.

Ally: I'm sorry to hear that. And where did you grow up during your childhood?

Br. Rich: I grew up in an area up the city called Oxford Circle and there was a thriving community. Our parish was Martin of Tours, okay, one of the larger parishes of the city and it was fairly new at that time. Our school was extremely large. There were plenty of young people to play with on the street and then the playground and whatever you wanted, in the schoolyard even.

Ally: Did you ever move around or did you stay where you were?

Br. Rich: Well, until I really joined the brothers, I pretty much was a Philadelphian and after I joined the brothers, I, especially after I was a little bit older I had an opportunity to work with the brothers in different capacities. One time in Jersey City, where I was a brand new teacher and brother. Alright, I spent a period of eight years there, fell in love with Jersey City. At that time, Jersey City was a town that really welcomed immigrants to the community. So the students I had were primarily Italians and African American

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students there. After that I came to West Catholic High School in 1973 where I was gonna be given my first administrative post. It was an all boys school about seventeen-hundred and fifty guys and I worked there for the next six years. So I finished that work in 1979. After that, I was elected to a position in the community called the **provincial** and in that role I had to really travel a good bit of the East Coast and had opportunities to visit our brothers who worked in mission, worked primarily in Central America and then the Philippine Islands. So, some of my travel was, I really broadened down a whole lot when I was the Provincial.

Ally: And going back to your childhood neighborhood, what was that like economically, like the economic condition of it and how diverse was it?

Br. Rich: To be honest with you, our community was not very diverse, alright, and they were probably on the upper end of the middle class in that community. You know as I remember them, I don't remember and real minorities except that some of us were Italians, some of us were Irish, some of us were German. That was the extent of it, okay. So it was a pretty harmonious and homogenized group of people there at that time.

Ally: What was your home life like? Were your parents strict and did they instill certain values during your childhood?

Br. Rich: They did, okay. In his younger years, my dad was not a Catholic, but I found it interesting reflecting back on his life that he was the one who heard all our religion lessons. Alright, so we would line up in front of him and he would ask such questions as "Why did God make you?", and he would hear that repeated, repeated, repeated and I found, I realized later on that really my mom was doing her best to get my dad converted, okay, which he did eventually. But he has to do that until he was about sixty, sixty-three years of age although, he attended church will up through all those years. So, he was the guy who we stood in front of for spelling questions or for

geography lessons or whatever it happened to be, and mom was the person who did our

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mathematics work at the kitchen table. So we would go back and forth between those two people. So after dinner, we basically were doing our homework and then by about 7:30 we gave our reports in so that we as a family could sit down in the living room listening to the radio initially about eight o'clock at night, okay. And eventually you know we got our TV, alright, very small little TV, ten inches and a very big console cause that's how it was in those days okay, type of thing and I remember those things very very well. I remember where my spot was to watch the TV also. I always put my head on the bottom step of the steps going upstairs and that's where I rested my head and I could see the TV from there. So I laid on the floor basically.

Ally: Were you ever a troublemaker when you were young?

Br. Rich: I don't think I was a troublemaker, okay. The one thing I do remember in my younger days, there was a big fight that I had with the guy who was the bully in the neighborhood his name was Vernon. Vernon was by younger people basically feared, okay, for some reason I had enough of Vernon I guess being pushed around enough so I got the best of Vernon and became the local hero ever so briefly, but I became the hero as a result of that fight.

Ally: And what was the family dynamic like in your household growing up, so was your mom a stay-at-home mom during that time you were growing up? Was your dad, you know the usual family dynamic?

Br. Rich: Yeah, basically my mom was, I would say until about the seventh grade, alright, and we would come back and forth from school for lunch type of thing. So mom was always there and if mom was not there, she had a little note on the table indicating that she had gone out shopping and that we were to go to the next door neighbor who had lunch for us type of thing. And if you know, that lady was out, my mom would provide the lunch for that family too so it was one of those things. I lived in a neighborhood

where I never knew there was such a thing as a locked door. There were lots of us around, so there was always lots of people and different things, everybody running in

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and out of people's homes. I remember one time especially, I ran away from home, alright, and I put all my possessions in my wagon which I pulled around the neighborhood and I went out from early in the morning and till after dark, but I found out years later that my mother knew where I was every hour on the hour because the neighbor would call and say "he's on this corner here" or "it's lunch, I'm gonna call him in and give him lunch". I knew that after dark, I snuck back into the basement and just went upstairs to my room.

Ally: Were you religious growing up?

Br. Rich: I was, I think I was. You know, initially I remember this is the Lenten season and I recalled during Lent as I got older maybe in again seventh or eighth grade I made a commitment to myself that I was gonna go to Mass every day in Lent. I didn't quite fill it, okay, ever alright, but I made that commitment to do that and I'd wake up extra early in the morning. I was an altar server at the parish so sometimes I was assigned to be there, so I did try to do that and I was initially interested in being a priest, you know cause I knew I couldn't be a nun, so I was interested in being a priest.

Ally: How did it (religion) impact you growing up?

Rich: You mean the religion or what?

Ally: The religion, yeah.

Br. Rich: It was a time I lived in, everybody in my community was a believer, okay. Some people believed in the protestant church because there was a protestant church in that community also. As a matter of fact, my one neighbor next door, they were protestants, okay, and they used to say to us, alright, they knew whenever a Catholic was being buried. My mom would say, "Well how did you know that?" and she would say, "I heard

the bells toll" cause they would toll the bells when the body was being brought in or out of the church. So it was a very very religious community where I was raised. People in

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a nearby community to us, not too far, a couple of blocks away, we called that the "Kingdom" because that was the Jewish community of that area, and I went to the Jewish community around May and I would be one of the guys that would be stealing the flowers off the good Jewish people's property to put before the Blessed Mother on a May Day so I recall that very very well. But, I think everybody in my time respected everybody else and those who didn't have their faith, well that was no big deal. People just had a lot of good values and cooperated with one another in those days. Because we lived in a fairly tight knit community, I remember when I outgrew a pair of pants my mother would pass it down to a lady in the neighborhood because her kid was about a year younger than I was and type of thing.

End: 0:12:00 I have decided to switch from a transcript to a log due to time consumption.

Interviewee: Brother Richard Kestler, FSC.

Interviewer: Alexandria M. Moraschi

Date: March 27, 2019

Location: Anselm Hall, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA

Running Time: 0:55:55

Recording Equipment: iPhone XR using the app Voice Memos

Abstract:

Brother Richard Kestler, FSC. was born John Kestler on January 8, 1942 to John and Alice Kestler. He grew up in the Oxford Circle section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Brother Richard attended elementary school at his parish of St. Martin of Tours and went on to La Salle College High School, graduating in 1960. By this time, he made the decision to join the Christian Brothers and began this process for about a year before attending La Salle College. He graduated in 1965 with a Bachelor's in Mathematics and gained a Master's in Theology soon after. Brother Richard also has Master's degrees in Math from Fordham University and Education from Villanova University. He has been assigned to many high schools in the Philadelphia area as teachers and administrators including West Catholic High School, La Salle

College High School, St. Gabriel's Hall, and Archbishop Carroll. As a Christian Brother, Brother Richard has helped the growth and success of the Philadelphia community and major surrounding schools. In 2018, he was awarded a member of the Papal Household by the Pope himself for the education of students and his assistance and selflessness in the Philadelphia community. He is in active retirement today and lives in Anselm Hall at La Salle University.

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- 0:12:00** Shares that he had many friends in his neighborhood and would play games like bottle caps or pick-up games on the street or back alleyway. Says that his parish had a big gym where he would play basketball and on Friday nights it was turned into a roller rink and for ten cents, he would skate with his friends.
- 0:13:49** Most children that he grew up with went to the Catholic school and some went to the public school. He explains that he went to St. Martin of Tours which was the second largest school in Philadelphia and was an "up and coming community" at the time. During sports practice, he would run between floors of new houses being built and said that one day, he fell and broke his arm. When his little sister found him, she told his parents, "he'll be coming around the corner in a minute, he's crying like a bitch".
- 0:15:10** He explains that he did appreciate his education and enjoyed school. He considered himself an organized person and always had assignments done on time. Because of this, his mom wanted him to continue getting the best education he could therefore, she worked to pay for him to attend La Salle College High School. His sister attended Little Flower because she refused to go to a private high school. While attending, she became the captain of the basketball team her senior year.
- 0:16:16** His favorite and strongest subjects were math and science, but what he liked the least was english. He says that he was gifted in foreign languages, particularly in Latin and German, and he still remembers some Latin. When joining the brothers, he had to take courses in French which he was not fond of, but the Christian Brothers had French roots therefore, the language of the institute was French. He discusses that he had a couple of favorite teachers in both elementary and high school. In the fourth grade, Sister Mary Josephine was from South Philly and thought she was a wonderful person. In eighth grade, he enjoyed having a nun in class because of her discipline. In his freshman year, he met a Brother George William who was the first person who made Brother Richard cease thinking of becoming a Priest and switched his mindset to joining the brothers.

- 0:19:00** He enjoyed his high school days, but does look back at them as being a challenge due to have to adjust to new people. Many of his friends from grade school went to Father Judge for high school, however, the only boy who joined him at La Salle has been his friend since the third grade. He discusses that many private schools are one gender because of tradition and that it is the normalcy to have single-sex private schools. He said that he only knew of one co-ed school growing up called Mercy Vocational School that was for students who wanted to learn a trade.
- 0:21:40** As for sports, he was very active and although not a star athlete, he participated in football and rowing. He was never into being on stage in shows. He was able to play the piano, but disliked it because he was forced to learn it. When asked if he ever had a job in his early teenage years, he explains that he had his own business breeding a selling fish including betas to local pet stores to make money for his school's tuition. He kept tanks in his basement and sold new fish every Friday and still keeps fish to this day.
- 0:23:30** In his teenage years, Brother Richard spoke of the dates and dances he attended. On the weekends, date dances were held and he spent time working to earn an allowance. He did have girlfriends and went on dates although he mentioned that, "I don't think there were any girl's hearts broken when I joined the brothers". He also said that he never really gave any thought to the prospect of marriage. When he was growing up, men were marrying much younger, at ages nineteen and twenty, than they do now.
- 0:24:50** He explained that what drew him into the life of a Christian Brother was the collectivity, different personalities coming together, and a sense of comradery. The vocation of the Brothers was influential and they seemed to be genuinely happy in what they were doing. He also was interested in being an educator and the strong value of teaching was a dominant factor in his decision. His parents were not surprised and he explained that he heard his parents talking with a vocational leader about their son wanting to join. He stated that there was always a sense of communication and trust in his family.
- 0:27:54** He discusses that he did have second thought about becoming a brother, specifically in his first few weeks of being a novitiate. He said that if he wanted to, he could hop on the next train to Philadelphia and not look back. He did know many people who did decide it was not for them and the brothers respected their decisions because they were honest with themselves and their superiors about it not being the right fit. He noticed some men who were forced into becoming a brother and realizing that they were free to make their own path. Brother Richard kept pushing on because he enjoyed what he was doing, he was becoming responsible, and pursuing his passion to teach. The values that interested him

most included the sense of community, togetherness, and support. The sense of prayer was a prominent value that the brothers held and the work they were doing as teachers. He stated that as he grew older, he started to see the value in teaching and how students appreciated them.

0:30:59 He discusses that becoming a Christian Brother is a “lifetime process”. First for him, it was the principle of interest and observation from brothers that influenced him to join. He talked about the process of truly accepting the want to become a Christian Brother through his four years of high school. Thinking about college, he would be a second generation college student and he did have thoughts about joining the military, believing that his personality matched that of a soldier in many ways. However, it was the Christian Brothers that won him over. He explains that it was a challenge because of the routineness and as he grew, he asked himself if he made the right choice. He states that as he is currently in active retirement, he tries to keep a hand in many different activities. He explains that by the end of life, there is a reflection and a question that arises is, “Was my life worthwhile?”.

0:36:42 The vows Brother Richard had to take includes poverty, chastity, obedience, and serving the poor. He discusses that poverty is not to live without anything, but instead to live a simple life and not be greedy possessions. Chastity, stating that this one is a big issue in the church, it is human nature and nuns and priests should not be put on a pedestal above everyone else. It means to live an ordinary life and to appreciate and respect the opposite sex. Obedience means to honor the requests of the Superior who chooses one’s assignments. Brother Richard tells an anecdote about an assignment he was given in Jersey City where there were no Christian Brother’s schools out there and he had to adjust accordingly. As for serving the poor, it meant to serve students, those poor and working-class, and to provide them with support and education so they may live prospering lives. He taught at places of all demographics and stated that West Catholic High School was challenging because he was working with a poorer class, but he did what needed to be done in order for everyone to succeed.

0:42:13 In his early years as a Christian Brother, there were many men who impacted him including those only just older than him who helped him adjust at La Salle College during his scholasticate. At his first assignment, he looked to the Vice Principal of Hudson Catholic whose nickname was “Coolhand Luke” as he was just starting out as a teacher. He mentioned that he was meeting with him for dinner after this interview. It is customary to choose a new name when becoming a Christian Brother because when entering religious life, you become a new man. Brother Richard explained that he had to pick three names and the Superior would choose. The name Richard Emmett was chosen: Richard was the name of

a brother he had and Emmett was the name of an Irish alcoholic. His father thought the name Emmett was named after the famous clown and told Brother Richard that, "it suited him pretty well".

0:45:17 He explained that his major at La Salle College began as physics, but after several failing grades, he figured he may need to find a new field. The dean, who was also a brother, told him that since he was doing well in the math courses he was taking, he should become a math major and think started turning around. Since the brothers didn't interact frequently with the "lay people", Brother Richard played touch football and swimming with about one-hundred twenty brothers. He would also attend plays, but as for regular campus life, he went to class and then left. Clubs were not at the time a major aspect of campus that he knew of. He enjoyed his professors in his math and science classes, and although english was not his strong suit, he did well in one class and had an enjoyable professor. In an elective about the history of the American Circus, he favored the professor who taught such an interesting subject.

0:50:19 He discussed the major changes of La Salle since the sixties saying that the Wister building was once his high school and while he went to class. He stated that there are buildings from when he went to school that are still standing, some that were being constructed while he was on campus, and others that have been demolished since. The other side of campus and where the interview took place was a farm and North Dorms were being planned as more students were enrolling post World War II. La Salle had a great reputation in its athletics and pre-med program. He also mentioned that there was a noticeably strong Jewish presence. He explained how the campus climate during the sixties had, "a lot more awareness and desire for change to occur. He talked about the different movements that were taking place simultaneously and that more people were speaking out about the multiple injustices. He pointed out that even in fifty years, the world still has not distinctively changed.

0:55:54 **End of Session 1**

