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Interpretive Essay

Marianne Gauss: Lasallian Trailblazer

This semester I had the opportunity to interview Marianne Gauss about her 36-year relationship with La Salle University. As a student, alumna, professor, and member of the Christian Brothers organization, Marianne has experienced La Salle's history from many different vantage points. On two separate occasions this semester, I sat down with Marianne, traced her relationship to La Salle from her childhood in Fox Chase to the present, and challenged her to reflect on her experiences at La Salle. As the interview progressed, several themes evolved as well as possibilities for future scholarship on La Salle's history.

Interview Approach

In the late 1960s, a trend began in Catholic higher education for all-male colleges to open their doors to women. Like the other major Catholic colleges in Philadelphia, La Salle admitted its first class of undergraduate women in the fall of 1970. This landmark decision changed the institution as much or more than any other event in its history. In the future, I hope to chronicle this change, examine how La Salle implemented this policy, and analyze its impact on the institution. Since Marianne Gauss was one of the first women to attend La Salle as an undergraduate day student and has maintained strong ties to the University ever since, she seemed like an obvious choice for my first oral history interview.

Throughout the semester, we struggled as a class to determine whether we wanted to record narrators' history in terms of their relationship to La Salle specifically or capture narrators' life stories. Like many of my classmates, I felt that my narrator's background was important to capture for this project. As more of these interviews are

collected and demographic statistics examined, students' backgrounds will help tell La Salle's story. Students breathe life into the campus and shape the institution as much as they are shaped by it, so I made the decision to spend a significant portion of the first interview exploring Marianne's background before focusing on her experiences as a student at La Salle College.

I must confess that I was not thoroughly prepared for my first interview with Marianne. Brother Joe Grabenstein, La Salle's Archivist, had given me a thick dossier on her, but besides a half-page curriculum vitae, there was very little about Marianne's background. Except for an engaging Day ONE presentation that I observed my first summer at La Salle, I had never interacted with Marianne prior to our first interview. I had scheduled our first interview early in the semester out of fear that time would get away from us otherwise, but it left me without much ammunition going into the interview. With these limitations in mind, I reflected on my experiences in La Salle's Graduate Counseling program in a course called "Intentional Interviewing" and focused on setting a relaxed atmosphere, establishing a positive rapport, and utilizing reflective listening strategies. I also came armed with several questions from Paul Thompson's chapter, "A Life-Story Interview Guide."¹ In hindsight, it may have been helpful to consult a general history of Philadelphia, mainly the years from 1950 to 1975, and *Explorer* yearbooks from 1971 to 1975. Valerie Yow's suggestion of a preliminary meeting may have provided further leads before the interview, and since I work at La Salle, it would not have been difficult to orchestrate this².

Fortunately, I followed Donald Richie's advice when setting up my interviews with Marianne. Since "longer sessions often have a "narcotic" effect on the interviewee" and

¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 309-323.

² Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. 2nd Ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 92-95.

interviewer, I proposed that we meet for two one-hour interviews instead³. (Richie, 88) I also let her pick the setting of the interview based on her own comfort level, and the conference room she chose in the School of Business proved to be an ideal setting. In our e-mail exchange prior to the first interview, I previewed that the first hour would be devoted to Marianne's background and career as a student at La Salle, and the second hour would focus on tying up loose ends from the first interview and examining her various roles at La Salle to the present. This proved fortuitous because it gave me a month in between the first and second interview to improve my preparation, correct errors I made during the interview, and round out the first interview with pertinent follow-up questions the next time.

Throughout each interview, I secretly hoped to live up to Studs Terkel's model. As Richie notes, "interviews are partly performance. Not only do interviewers want to handle themselves well, but interviewees often feel nervous about their ability to recall and describe events long past; they also want to do well."⁴ Though relaxed and comfortable, my questioning style created a meandering conversation in our first interview, and my attempt at becoming the Larry King of La Salle left something to be desired. The questions I had written down from Thompson did not match the direction of our conversation, and I began improvising from the beginning. This sounds like verbal fumbling on the recording, but thankfully, Marianne rolled with it and gave brilliant testimony about her fascinating experiences growing up, attending Cardinal Dougherty High School, and navigating La Salle during the turbulent 1970s.

After I transcribed our first conversation, I e-mailed it to Marianne and previewed follow-up questions to supplement the first interview. I shared the transcript with her because I took Richie's exhortation to heart that "oral history is a joint product, shared by

³ Donald Richie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 88.

⁴ *Ibid*, 84.

both parties.”⁵ In addition to sending typed responses to all my questions, Marianne also wrote the following:

“I’ve read through the notes, and made corrections to the spelling of personal names, etc. I didn’t make any correction to the appalling way I speak, the poor use of grammar or the general inarticulate use of the language...I wish I could, but you own the tape.”⁶

When transcribing the interview, I went through the painstaking process of typing word-for-word what Marianne had said because I thought the transcript should be as authentic as possible. The process proved so tedious that I did not even read over it before sending it to her for review and feedback. I thought I had really offended her after reading this e-mail. Then, I went back to Thompson’s advice on transcription, and a quote from Michael Frisch jumped out at me: “The more completely we strive to make the voice audible on the page, the more we risk making it illegible.”⁷ I replied to her that I wanted this transcript to be a “co-authorship,” and I revised the transcript based on Thompson’s suggestion of a “much neater, condensed transcript, cutting out pauses and distracting hesitations or false starts in the interests of readability.”⁸ Marianne responded in a follow-up e-mail that she did not want me to do anything disingenuous and that she would approach her second interview differently. I reassured her that I would follow academic standards and represent her words as truthfully as possible. This exchange made me question Frisch’s perspective in *A Shared Authority* because even though our exchange ended amicably and was mild compared to cases brought up by him and other authors, I wonder how feasible it is to honor history and the narrator’s feelings simultaneously after the narrative has been recorded.

During the hiatus between interviews, I consulted yearbooks, reread Marianne’s dossier, and composed 50 open-ended questions that I forced myself to

⁵ Richie, 30.

⁶ Marianne Gauss, e-mail to author, Philadelphia, PA, April 3, 2006.

⁷ Thompson, 260.

⁸ *Ibid*, 259.

follow during the second interview. This required me to read from my typed notes and came off stiffly on playback. As promised, Marianne also approached the interview more cautiously. She measured her words more carefully and appeared more businesslike. Despite this rigid start to the interview, we both slowly relaxed. I made sure to stay on-track with my questions, but I also ad-libbed where appropriate. By the end of the interview, I felt I had moderated the rigid interview guide format espoused by Yow and the free-flowing approach favored by Alessandro Portelli and George Ewart Evans⁹. We laughed often, and Marianne shared powerful memories and reflections on her Lasallian experience.

Overall, I am pleased with the final product. I made up for my lack of preparation in the first interview with solid questions and reflective listening. Scheduling a second interview from the beginning ensured that I could learn from mistakes, improve my research, and incorporate the narrator more in the process. After reviewing the transcript several times, I do not feel that anything significant went unaddressed. I believe this will stand as a valuable artifact for future historians.

Interpretation

When interpreting this interview, I will follow Yow's recommendation to "look for recurring themes, symbols, imagery, myths, and rhetorical devices" and "discern the roles the individual played."¹⁰ Although I heard reports from my classmates regarding their interviews with other Lasallians, I will limit my interpretation strictly to Marianne Gauss's narrative during our interview. Without access to those interview recordings and transcripts, any overarching analysis would be hollow at best.

Several times throughout the interview, Marianne described her life as a string of fortunate accidents. Her grade school and high school were two blocks away. La Salle

⁹ Yow, 71-74; Thompson, 227.

¹⁰ Yow, 282-283.

opened the door to girls the year she graduated from high school. She "tripped" into teaching because a professor went on maternity leave. This theme may be interchangeable with her fear of being found out as an "impostor." Sitting through graduation wondering whether someone was going to call her out of line, having nightmares the night before teaching a course she never took in college, or wondering whether her name will be pulled from the Lindback Award list, all of these anecdotes reinforce these themes.

Without becoming psychoanalytical or overdramatic, these two themes may be self-perpetuated myths to mask two characteristics that appear over and over again: humility and determination. Marianne Gauss has won practically every single award the University gives, and even though she is grateful for the accolades, she only expressed a sense of strong satisfaction about the Lindback Award. Otherwise, she feels the University has given her more than she could ever give to it. If anything, the Lindback pushes her to work harder so that she can live up to it every day in the classroom. This is a tribute to her determination. Despite a nun in high school telling her that she should not go to college, little active support from home regarding higher education, working several jobs in college, and struggling with the course material each and every semester, Marianne Gauss refused to fail. She stubbornly pursued her goals at each stage in her life. After struggling so vigorously to overcome difficult gender and class obstacles, her apparent success seems difficult for her to appreciate. The underdog in her requires a challenge to keep her striving for excellence.

Marianne's narrative reinforces the theme that women changed La Salle for the better. Playing down instances of discrimination perpetrated by male professors and students, women persevered fearlessly during their first year at La Salle. Graduating at the top of their high school classes, they raised the bar for men and challenged them to perform at a higher level. She plays down current approaches to integration and states

that they would not have worked then because women truly needed to integrate with men and learn how to survive in a male-dominated world. Over the course of her career, women slowly became part of the campus fabric and outnumber men on campus today.

It will take several interviews and review of the archival sources to determine whether Marianne's theme is myth or reality. It sounds politically correct to state that women changed La Salle for the better, but records will have to be examined to see if they performed on par with men, the attrition rate was as low as Marianne remembers, and they preferred the University's hands-off approach to integration. In terms of the University's stance on integrating female students, it will be interesting to see whether administrators from that era agree with Marianne's assessment of the situation. Her experience as a commuter student may have differed significantly from women who lived on campus.

Lasallian charism also features heavily throughout the interview. It is not only discussed in terms of the institution and the Christian Brothers. Marianne also references the charism in terms of her own teaching and tries to share it daily with students, colleagues, and the wider Lasallian community. She references it specifically as a guide to life and believes LLI brought the charism home more effectively than any other medium throughout her career at La Salle. One overarching concern she had throughout the interview was how the charism will survive once Brothers' numbers dwindle more and more. In effect, the charism has become a symbol for Marianne to consult and live by each day, and her memories of influential Christian Brothers, her work within the Lasallian organization, and the teachings of St. Jean Baptiste de la Salle reinforce that.

Other La Salle-related themes arose throughout the interview. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw drastic changes in college students across the U.S. La Salle was no different. Marianne paints a picture of a turbulent time in the history of the school.

Students, faculty, and staff debated everything from Viet Nam and civil rights to gay and women's rights. Although she claims she was more of a listener than a speaker during these conversations, she attributes this tension with helping her grow and pushing her to question the status quo as an adult. More research may portray this as La Salle's most dynamic time of growth and student activism.

Marianne is just one of many faculty members who went to La Salle as an undergraduate and returned to teach at the University. Many more of these people need to be interviewed to assess how their presence has impacted La Salle. Marianne examined this phenomenon in great detail and believes that in the right circumstances, returning alumni positively impact the campus.

Living through one of the most tumultuous periods in women's history, Marianne saw her role as a woman change drastically throughout her life. As one of five girls, she grew up assuming gender roles typical of earlier eras. She bore responsibility for her brother s and sisters, took charge of household chores, and pursued her school studies diligently. Although she went to an all-girls high school, she slowly shed the traditional gender roles. Despite being pushed to excel in the humanities versus the sciences, Marianne performed brilliantly in subjects that were thought to be men's domain solely. Even though her mother challenged her on it, Marianne pushed vigorously to attend college and became the first in her family to do so. Upon graduation, Mariannè also became engaged to her husband, Fred. Her mother awarded her a set of Tupperware, symbolizing her role as a future homemaker and mother, but Marianne wanted nothing to do with that. She continued to work in the corporate banking world even after her first daughter was born, one of the first female employees to return to work at PNC after a maternity leave. After her second child was born, she managed as a stay-at-home mom, but she never felt it really suited her. This brought her back to La Salle for an

MBA and led her to become Assistant Professor in the School of Business. Her remarkable journey makes her a trailblazer in every sense of the word.

In addition to assessing the criteria Yow mentioned above, Thompson recommends that all interviews be evaluated "in three ways: as texts, as types of content, and as evidence."¹¹ Beginning with the transcript, editing it into a more readable document made it more comprehensible for future generations. Marianne has a true gift for the anecdote. Even though she berates herself for not having a sharp memory, she vividly remembered numerous experiences and talked about them in an engaging manner. Her anecdotes about discriminatory behavior by faculty, heated exchanges with an ROTC student about Viet Nam, and Mrs. Burns' comment to Fred about his role as "first husband" of the President of the Alumni Board are great examples of her storytelling ability. She packs significant meaning into a concise package. My choice to organize the interview into a linear narrative lends itself to future research because scholars will be able to easily reference her comments on different stages of her life.

Admittedly, there are some aspects of the interviews, especially towards the end of the second one, where the content becomes more philosophical and less historical. Overall, I tried to avoid those types of questions as much as possible. These responses were to questions that were more reflective of the narrator's feelings about La Salle in the past, present and future. This particular testimony will only be valuable for feel-good narratives about the University.

Although I believe I challenged Marianne to comment on positive and negative aspects of her experience, her various roles within the University and love for La Salle make it difficult to assess her responses without other interviews from fellow alumni. One issue in particular makes her interview hard to evaluate when examining the first

¹¹ Thompson, 272.

class of women at La Salle. Since she has become one of the main spokeswomen for that class, she has been interviewed about the experience before. Over time, she has admittedly forgotten details and does not speak with the same indignation in her voice when recounting discrimination by male students and teachers during that era. She almost excuses them for their behavior and has forgiven the teachers and students who offended her during those years. More interviews from other members of that era may not be as forgiving.

Participating in this project and interviewing Marianne Gauss have been wonderful experiences for me. It required me to put the course content to work, to wrestle with the debates firsthand, and to learn more about La Salle and its mission. Even though my recording and transcript have some flaws due to my inexperience, I believe that they will prove useful to future historians, and I feel proud of my contribution to La Salle's oral history archive.

Bibliography

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