

Interview with Joseph Colistra

Date: March 6, 2008

BD: This is Bill Donohoe, we are in Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania with Mr. Joseph Colistra. Mr. Colistra, do I have permission to record?

JC: Yes.

BD: Thank you. Mr. Colistra, what's your birth date?

JC: June 5th, 1946.

BD: Where were you born?

JC: I was born here in Philadelphia, South Philadelphia. I believe it was Methodist Hospital I was delivered.

BD: What were your parents' names?

JC: Joseph and Mary Colistra.

BD: Were they from Philadelphia also?

JC: They were both from Philadelphia. They both lived most of their life in South Philadelphia and then moved to northeast.

BD: Okay, do you have any siblings?

JC: Yes, brother Anthony who's older than me and a deceased sister, Carol, who's also older than me.

BD: Okay so you were the youngest then?

JC: Yes.

BD: Okay, what occupations did your parents hold growing up or even before you were born. South Philly and then ended up in the northeast –

JC: Well my father was a master plumber and before he died at age 42, and my mother when she started to work after my father died became a seamstress at Botany 500 in Philadelphia. My mother then remarried a kind gentleman by the name of Joe Cotrard, and my stepfather, Joe was a truck driver for United Parcel.

BD: Okay, were those common occupations for the community? Was there similar in your community that you guys and your parents lived and were those people – what kind of occupations did they

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BD: hold? Was there a lot of similar – union people, plumbers, carpenters?

JC: That's hard for me to say. As far as my father's concerned, he advanced in his trade but many people in his family were also union plumbers, but he advanced beyond a mechanic into a construction foreman and super tenant. As far as my mother was concerned, her job as a seamstress was pretty typical in our neighborhood in south Philadelphia and among the people in her family, too.

BD: Okay, what was the neighborhood like? What'd the houses look like, what was the landscape of the neighborhood?

JC: Well, as I remember, my house in south Philadelphia – I actually only lived there for a few years because when my father died, I moved to Hershey, Pennsylvania at age 5. So I only have a sketchy remembrance of my house in south Philadelphia. It was on a narrow street, 1122 South Alder Street. You could just about get a car down the street, and when we moved to northeast Philadelphia, it was a broader, wider street – Charles Street near Robins Avenue. A tree lined, unlike our street in south Philadelphia – telephone poles. Most of my childhood memory was surrounding living on a farm in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

BD: What kind of things did you do on that farm in your childhood? What do you remember about that?

JC: Well I did farm chores as a young boy. I would just do chores around the house and help clean up the barn area when I was a little older. I actually engaged in actually milking cows and collecting eggs and cleaning the horses and the horses' stalls.

BD: Yeah, stalls. Wow. When you weren't doing chores and stuff like that, did you play any games, sports? stuff like that?

JC: Oh yeah, always.

BD: When did you start playing sports?

JC: Always. At Hershey, we played all kinds of ball games, including stick ball, baseball, basketball – rough touch football. When I came home from Hershey in – I guess I was in ninth grade and entered

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JC: La Salle High School, then I played the games in our neighborhood, namely basketball. I remember playing basketball down at Roosevelt playground incessantly.

BD: So you moved back from Hershey to go to – in eighth grade, going into ninth grade?

JC: Yes.

BD: Okay, what was school like in Hershey before you went to La Salle High School?

JC: School?

BD: Yes.

JC: Well, academically it was pretty much of a challenge for me but I was a good student. I was a good student because the people who supervised me in our home life insisted that as soon as we're finished with our farm chores and then ate dinner, there was no messing around in the evening. We were committed to a study period, and I was good at that. I liked that, and so I developed good study skills and good student skills early on. So school was a pleasure to me. When I moved back to Philadelphia and then started going to school with girls at St. Tim's –

BD: St. Tim's.

JC: It became more of fun rather than serious academics.

BD: Okay.

JC: And then at La Salle High School, school was mainly surrounding playing sports.

BD: So we're gonna get into La Salle. What are some of your fondest high school memories here? You mentioned sports as one of the central themes of your high school years, but what kind of things really stick out in your mind as –

JC: Well I had close friends from my neighborhood that I made immediately when I returned from Hershey and we drove to school together. We developed a close friendship there with five other

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JC: people, and as a matter of fact, remain friends to this day. Driving back and forth to school was one of my deepest memories. I guess the second memory that I had here at La Salle was a relationship that I had with my teachers. Mr. Diehl being one of them, and the brothers – they took me seriously and I learned to respect them for that and love them for that. So my other memory was in my development in my relationship with my teachers. Of course, sports – especially playing football here at La Salle and meeting Tex Flannery made an impression on me, and a lasting memory.

BD: Sure, sure. Well I'm gonna get back to Tex in a little bit but I just wanted to retract a little bit and get a couple questions. What year did you start at La Salle?

JC: 1960.

BD: 1960, retract another – I remember saying, moving back from Hershey, why was it La Salle that you picked for high school? What was it?

JC: Well when we decided – when my mother remarried and decided to bring me back home, so to speak and leave my brother, my older brother at Hershey because he was well into high school and didn't wanna disrupt that, we made a family decision that La Salle was probably a little more academically challenging and rather than going to the neighborhood schools. So we felt that La Salle was a cut above going to Father Judge or going to the public school which in those years would have been Lincoln.

So that's about all I can remember about that.

BD: Can you remember your first day here at La Salle? What was it like to come here?

JC: Yeah, I was scared to death, actually because that first day I had to take the bus and I got lost. So I was late for school and it was raining and as it turned out, I found sitting on the bus another young man who was as lost as I was and as it turns out, he was coming to La Salle too. We both got lost, we got the wrong connection.

BD: Oh boy, that's funny. So you already mentioned that you played sports. Did you play an instrument or sing or anything like that? Any other activities that you were involved in at La Salle?

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JC: Well, when I was in Hershey I played the trombone and I played that for a little bit here at La Salle. As a matter of fact, that's how I originally met my wife Pat, who also played the trombone at St. Hubert's. And we were at a common lesson. But I quickly stopped playing the trombone in high school. Here at La Salle, I also swam. I was a good swimmer my freshman year, and I was also on the track team. I thought I was gonna try out for crew but it didn't really – it just didn't interest me at the moment, so I more or less concentrated on football.

BD: You touched on a couple of things before, but some of your highlights as maybe a football player here at La Salle, or as a student? Some of the highlights? Maybe your achievements?

JC: Well I won a scholarship to Villanova, so I guess I consider that to be an achievement. I'm not sure how I did that, because I wasn't very tall but in those days, I was bigger than everybody else and I was probably the same size then as I am now, so which made me bigger than everybody else. And I was pretty physical player, but I didn't consider myself to be a very good athlete, so I was a little surprised I won that scholarship.

BD: So you were All Catholic?

JC: Yeah, I made All Catholic. My memories playing football actually have more to do with the friendships that I made and who are still my friends today and my relationship with Tex and Dave Diehl, who also coached me.

BD: Sure, sure. So you mentioned people like Dave Deal, people like Tex that made a major impact on your life here at La Salle. Any of your teachers in passing that made any funny quick story or anything or two?

JC: Well, I'm not sure about funny stories. But I remember Bernie McCabe as one of my teachers who was just an outstanding wit. And he – I guess he taught me to laugh at myself and not take myself too seriously.

BD: I must agree. I got to experience Bernie McCabe myself.

JC: Another one of my teachers was Brother Carl Clayton, who on the other hand sort of taught me to take myself a little bit more seriously. And so that was interesting. I also had a good

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JC: relationship with a brother by the name of William Whalen – Brother William Waylon, who actually had me convinced there for a little bit that I consider the brotherhood. I didn't do that obviously but he also had a strong influence on me in high school.

BD: How overall did the teachers at La Salle during your time here – how did they make the students behave? Were a lot of kids getting in trouble, was there a lot of – how was the environment like there?

JC: Yeah, no I can't remember kids getting in trouble. I mean, yeah we were rowdy and yeah we did the things that boys do but I think the teachers were – my teachers anyway were mature enough that you knew that you weren't going to be able to take advantage of anybody in the classroom. And there really wasn't any kind of inclination to do that. There were some smartasses, but I don't remember it ever getting out of hand. Large group settings like the cafeteria were always under control, even though we did the things that boys do. At that time, we were allowed to smoke so we were smoking in the pit. And there were fights, arguments – things, rowdiness but I remember that my teachers, Dave Diehl, Brother Edward Gallagher, the principal – you didn't mess with them because you just didn't. They had it together.

BD: Excellent. So you already mentioned you went to Villanova College after you were down at La Salle High School. Anything of any mention – football, anything else, other highlights of your college career that you wanna mention?

JC: Well my college career – I don't think I got really interested in academics until after I graduated from college, to tell you the truth and then went back to graduate school. My college career was kind of a blur because football was such an all-encompassing part of my life. I was constantly worried about staying in shape, developing my strength and my body and my skills. I was always worried about that. I was never really a self confident athlete. And so I can't say that I really had a relaxing or enjoying kind of college life. I went to class. I did okay. I did what I had to do to get by, but as I said, football sorta dominated my college years.

BD: What was your major as an undergrad?

JC: Sociology and English, but the thing that really interested me was my history courses. I actually audited more history courses than I

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JC: took on record. In fact, I got myself a little bit of trouble for that because I would spend more time going to the classes I didn't have to go to than going to the classes that I had to go to.

BD: Right, so after completing undergrad, what did you do right out of college?

JC: Well I got married right away. I graduated in May 15th and got married May 25th so my life was pretty well – the path was laid out for me and I already had been employed here at La Salle, I already had secured job here at La Salle as a teacher.

BD: And what year was that?

JC: That was in '68.

BD: In '68 you started here.

JC: Yeah, so I started teaching in the fall of 1968.

BD: What was your first class load, workload here as a teacher? What did you teach?

JC: I taught five classes of American History on the third floor, room 306 overlooking the grotto. Five classes of 33 students in each class. So that kept me busy, and then I immediately enrolled in graduate school. I immediately recognized that I wasn't going to survive as a teacher here at La Salle with the knowledge base that I had. I mean, as far as my presentation skills and as far as my control of the classroom, that was never an issue. But I knew that I was not gonna be able to continue teaching unless I went back to school. So I enrolled right away and graduate school at Villanova and got my Master's in History within the first two years.

BD: That's great. What – just stepping back a little bit first, you started working here in 1968, what made you wanna come back as a teacher? And how did you get back in here? How did it fall in line for you?

JC: Tex Flannery and Dave Diehl, again. I was in contact with them through my college career. They came and watched me play football and they stayed in touch with me. They'd support me and see how I was doing, and I just knew I wanted to come back here

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JC: and teach. I think by the time I was a junior in high school, I knew that I wanted to return here to teach because I had such a respect for and a love for my teachers, to tell you the truth. People who taught me really impressed me, so I wanted to come back here and teach and I was always sure that was the way it was going to happen.

BD: Funny you say that because it's just – this sounds all so familiar in my life. That's funny. So La Salle High School really prepared you for what you wanted to do later in your life, you feel that way?

JC: Yeah I'm not sure if it prepared me, it just put me in a mindset that that's what I wanted to do. I don't know how it prepared me, but it put me in a mindset.

BD: Another question I had here for you was what made you become an educator and a coach but I think it's apparent, apparent that Tex and Dave had influence on you. Is there anything else you wanna mention about that?

JC: Yeah, no I don't think so. I think it was pretty simple. I saw what they did and how well they did it and I thought – I think that's what I wanna do with my life and as I said, I was pretty sure that was what I wanted to do by the time I was a junior. So I didn't go through that period of "what am I gonna do with my life? Where am I gonna go to school?" That kind of thing. I just didn't. I was lucky.

BD: Excellent, so another question I had that I think you answered was at the time, did you see yourself spending your whole career teaching and coaching here at La Salle?

JC: Yeah, pretty much. I mean, I never just – once I started teaching here, I fell in love with the place. I was thoroughly impressed with the way that the teachers then, my colleagues, treated me. Took me seriously, as well as befriended me and I just never thought of myself moving on to another career or moving onto another school. I guess I always – I had the alternative, I might go to law school but I never had enough money to do that and probably

never had enough time because I was deeply involved with teaching, coaching, starting my family and going to school after I got my Master's in History, I immediately went back to get another Master's in education. So I was pretty well – I had my plate was

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JC: pretty full by then. So I just sorta put my nose to the grindstone and did what I did. I never thought of too many alternative paths for myself.

BD: In your first year or two here at La Salle, what was it like coming back and teaching at your alma mater with obviously some of the people that influenced you?

JC: Yeah, well it was totally comfortable. Those people who were my teachers, I was comfortable and confident around in that relationship. And when I started teaching here, they just welcomed me and befriended me and of course I had some of my own peers – Joe Turk for example, who was closer in age to me, he was teaching here already for one year when I was hired, so he and I were the same age and we sorta grew up together. Another young man by the name of Tom Braun, who has since died – he was also my age and played football at Villanova and also played football with me in high school, so I was pretty comfortable with people who were my age as well as – as I said, former teachers of mine who quickly became my friends.

BD: I mean, my experience was very similar when I came back here, too. What's your philosophy about work? About teaching – I know you touched a little bit about that, but your philosophy of teaching of history here at La Salle?

JC: That's a big question. I'm not sure if I have a philosophy – a philosophy of teaching history here at La Salle. Well I teach more economics than I teach history –

BD: Okay, or economics, either.

JC: Well they're different things. One of the things in teaching history that I repeat all the time and I don't know who I learned it from, but it has always impressed me and I think it's made a difference in the way my students think about the study of history. You gotta be compassionate when you teach history, because otherwise history becomes lies and those people who you're talking about, whether they're great men or just average people, they're not

around to defend themselves, and the stories often get – I can't imagine what they're thinking in the way that we explain their actions. Sometimes I think to myself, "I wonder if it really happened that way or how can we really know if it happened that

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JC: way?" So we have to be compassionate, meaning we gotta be pretty careful, 'cause people are gonna talk about us too when we die. Our history is gonna be – I hope – close to the truth. So that's one of the ways I think about teaching history. It's – there's many histories and you gotta be careful about which one you choose to believe. As far as teaching economics, it's more of a quantitative thing. I'm not a great mathematician, but I've learned that teaching and thinking about economics in a quantitative way is very different than the teaching of history. And I enjoy that, and I think my students – I love to see them with their calculators on the desk, figuring out a problem. Especially since I don't know the answer to it and they do. So I'm challenged and enjoy teaching economics for that reason.

BD: Okay.

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Continue on to the second half of this interview labeled Part III
