

Irene Nunnari interviews Sister. Ann Sakac, March 2008

I: The Announcement of your retirement after 31 years as president is, if not a loss to MSMC, will certainly be a change. So we must begin by congratulating you on your remarkable achievements and by wishing you the very best, and we're delighted to have this opportunity to converse with you.

I wanted to start by asking you, as you reflect on your years here...What first brought you not only to MSMC, but to Mount Saint Mary, itself?

A: Well, first, I am a Dominican sister. And I had been educated by the Dominican sisters of New Jersey. And when I thought about entering a convent years and years ago, I naturally gravitated toward the Dominican Sisters of Newburgh, having had them as teachers through most of my elementary and high school years. So it was natural that I enter Newburgh and that I teach in Newburgh Dominican schools, and ultimately I ended up at MSMC.

I: I do recall that the Newburgh Dominican Sisters staffed and built many of the elementary and high schools in NJ in those years.

A: Oh, yes, NJ, and then of course I taught for a few years at Lourdes High School in Poughkeepsie. I taught English there. I broke ground there because we were a new school and I was part of the new faculty.

I: Before your administrative career here, you were known as a very effective teacher, I do recall that!

A: Thank you.

I: We do so much at MSMC in cultivating the philosophy of education among our students and I was wondering what's central to your own philosophy of education?

A: I suppose my philosophy, if one could call it that, is based on the whole Dominican concept of the human person. I believe that each student, first of all, is a human being, and a unique human being. Each student has to be treated in light of that "personalism" as Thomas Aquinas would identify it.

So that we—in the Dominican philosophy of education, we focus on the uniqueness of the person, and the willingness of that person to learn and to seek. To seek and to learn, actually, the eternal verities, truth and beauty and wisdom and so on.

And that's a long way of saying that my philosophy, I suppose, is nothing more than a respect for the uniqueness of the person.

I: Very inspiring. In your discipline of English, have you thought about the changes that have occurred in the teaching of English over the years, the impact of technology, or are there elements that abide in your discipline?

A: Well, I haven't been in the classroom in about five years now, and change is so rapid in our society now, that I'm sure haven't experienced ALL the changes that have occurred having to do with technology. One of the concerns I have with teaching, whether it's English or any other area, is the wealth of information that is at one's fingertips now. I think that the teacher, whether it's English or any other subject, has to sift through just masses of information and focus on what is significant and important. It seems to me, and I'm not talking about Powerpoint in the classroom now, I'm not talking about HOW one teaches, but just how one handles information. If you ask what changes have occurred, I think that's one of them, just the wealth of information that's out there and how the the teacher focuses the minds of the students on what is significant.

I: That's so true. And what is significant, do you think, in terms of writers? I know that you've had some wonderful favorites—are there writers whose works have been maintained through all of this mass of information?

A: You mean personal authors? Well, one of my favorites is a poet, Robert Browning, because I focused on his dramatic monologues when I was first doing my master's work in English. But, I favor 19th century writers, and as far as modern writers go, I don't want to get into my favorites there because I don't think they have yet come up to the 19th century novelist, particularly British novelists, whether it's George Elliot or Nathaniel Hawthorne—well, Hawthorne, of course, was American and not British—but they developed the novel to such an extent that the 20th century people have had masters to copy from.

I: We share an alma mater, Villanova University Do you recall your days there as a time when you were inspired by these writers?

A: Oh yes, yes. Now, when I went to Villanova, I was going part time. All my English work was done as an undergraduate at Villanova. I had some wonderful, wonderful professors. That's where I developed a taste for the 19th century British novel because I had two wonderful courses, one on the beginning, the pre-Victorian, and then the Victorian novels afterward.

What happened there to me is what I hope happens to students (here), and that is I was inspired there by a Dr. McGrath—I don't know if you had him—but Dr. McGrath inspired me to study British fiction.

I : Oh, that's wonderful and that is what you hope you would experience on a college campus.

A: And of course, when you and I went to Villanova, they were not then playing NCAA basketball, which they are doing today!

I: They are so well known for that! And so many of their programs have developed. It was a beautiful campus...

A: Yes

I: And it still is.

A: You were doing theatre?

I: Yes. And that's where I first met the Dominican sisters, because they were studying there in the summer when I arrived there in the early 60s. And then you did your doctoral work at the Catholic University.

A: I did my master's and my doctorate at Catholic U.

I: In higher education?

A: The master's was in English, the doctorate was in higher education and English. I had to do half of my work in English.

I: So that certainly prepared you for the days ahead..

A: Indeed.

I: You watched Mount Saint Mary grow from an enrollment of 877 in 1977 to over 2600 men and women. What stands out in your mind as you reflect on that remarkable growth?

A: Well, for one thing, when I came to Mount Saint Mary, I came as director of residents back in 1969 and I lived among the students and I got to know them, particularly that entering class in '69 which became the class of '73. In getting to know them I saw what I saw as a typical MSMC student. I don't think that has changed. I think our students are still of the caliber and the personality and the interest that I saw when I first came to MSMC. We are still recruiting very earnest young people. And that thrills me.

We didn't have the diversity when I first came and certainly when I first became president. And by that I don't mean only racial diversity, I mean the male/female... we have more males on campus now. But I think that we are still blessed in the type of student who attends MSMC, whether that is the traditional-age student or the adult. These students come to MSMC for a reason. They come because we offer an education that is highly respected, they come because we give a personal education to these students, and we have a faculty that takes an interest in students. And in that way whether it's 877 or 2600, I think the number of students has changed but not the type of students, and I hope that we'll be blessed in that way for many years to come. Although recruitment of students has become much more competitive now than it had been.

I: Well, I couldn't agree with you more having served with you over these years... Your word earnestness is just perfect. Because I agree, they haven't changed in their hearts or in their determination to serve the community and to master their discipline.

A: And it's interesting that when I'm in the community, that so many people whether they're business people or educators or nursing administrators, how highly the public speaks of our graduates. And that should make us all feel very good. Including the students.

I: It is wonderful. We've also seen many different programs added during your tenure: accounting, business management and administration, science, communication arts, as well as graduate programs in education, business, nursing. It's amazing. So how about your reflection on that progress, the addition of all of those programs?

A: A lot of that I think Sr. Agnes Boyle, our former Dean of the College, has to take credit for. When we applied back in the late 70s for Title III federal funds to help us as a developing institution, those funds were able to give us the support we needed to develop many of those majors—not all, but many, including communication arts, and business and accounting. And I think it was Sr. Agnes' s foresight in pushing to get many of those programs developed that we now have the array of courses that we didn't have when I first came to the Mount in 1969. And certainly when you began. That's given us a breadth of programs and of course it's given us an opportunity to appeal to the breadth of interests in prospective students as well.

I: I certainly was a direct beneficiary of that. I was able to take an academic leave and finish my studies so that I could come back into the communication arts to develop that major, and she certainly was part of that..

A: All of those Title III grants that were funded by federal money helped us in the 1980s. I hate to see in federal programs that type of money drying up. I can't say enough about the influence of Title III on MSMC.

I: And then there is the expansive building and renovation program: new academic, residence and recreational space. It's remarkable. And your thoughts on that?

A: We couldn't do without that, Irene. Had I had my druthers (which I didn't have, we HAD to improve our facilities) I would have focused, I supposed, more on academic growth. But in order to recruit students, we must have the facilities to accommodate them. If we don't have the facilities in a competitive market, we're not able to recruit students.

So our priority had to be to get our campus beyond Aquinas Hall, which it was, as you know! Aquinas Hall was the college. And over the years we took over the Villa, which had been a freshman residence hall, and Whittaker Hall, and Hudson Hall and Kaplan. All of these things were needed to put us in a competitive market for the recruitment of students. Now I think we're at a point where we're competitive. And now, for example, when we have open houses we have parents and prospective students and we hear "We haven't seen anything like the breadth of MSMC." It's small, but it certainly has the accommodations that young men and women are looking for now. So it was needed, absolutely needed. 16:00

I: That's wonderful, to be able to point to that. And as we sit here in the Villa this morning we can reflect that this was also the college, in those early years. The entire college was right here in this beautiful house.

A: Absolutely.

I: I wanted to ask: in all of that, the renovations, the building, the enrollment, the programs...is there one achievement or accomplishment that stands out in your mind as the most important?

A: No, I don't think so, Irene; I think that a college is a dynamic thing, a dynamic organism. It moves and it changes, sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly, but I don't think there's anything that stands out as the most significant. There are many significant events—the opening, the dedication of the Villa, the dedication of Kaplan, the beginning of new programs—but I think that's all part of the growth of an institution, and no one thing stands out as more significant than another. Because we're so young, because we're not yet 50 years old, everything here is important! I used to say in the early days of my presidency that because MSMC was so young, and MSMC at that time was so small, we had to work harder at everything we did in order to make a significant accomplishment come about. So that every single thing in the growth of this institution was significant and is significant, even as we look back today. No one thing more than another. Except of course, that you remain at MSMC...

I: Oh, that's very charming! (Laughing) Thank you for that...Are there goals that you hope will be yet achieved at MSMC?

A: Well, I think there are two or three things that I think we have to focus on. I mentioned the academic development of the institution. I think that we have to focus a great deal on the academic programs. I mentioned before that change is so rapid now in our society that we have to keep up with those changes in our teaching, in the presentation of ideas and the pursuit of ideas. That can be difficult and we have to continue to educate our faculty for change, because change is just now—we accept change as so much a part of our lives that we don't even know it's happening, but it's there. Think of years ago before we had computers and copy machines...

I: Seems like yesterday...

A: It does seem like yesterday. And yet, that change is so rapid that in the classroom all of this change has to be accommodated. So, academic growth in the institution, and I don't mean in the ability of students, but in the teaching of those students, we have to focus on their academic growth and what we're giving them in the classroom, whether it's the development of majors or new majors, I'm not sure, but just that we focus on the fact that we are an academic institution first and that must be our focus. We have the facilities now, we will continue to improve our facilities, we can't stop. There are other needs, but we have to focus on the academic.

Secondly, because we are so young, we don't have the endowment we need to continue into the future. And we have to be sure we have the financial resources to do what we want to do. Tuition can't do it; tuition doesn't even cover the cost of educating one student. So we have to rely on our alumni, we have to rely on the community to give us the financial support to underwrite—and that's what an endowment does, it underwrites—the development of the future of the college. When the Yales and the Harvards first began, they didn't have the billions in endowment that they have today. But they can now do the things they want to do. We have to be there. We have to get there. And so endowment is going to be a very important part of this institution.

So those two things, the academic growth and the financial growth. We have the resources for the day-to-day, and we've certainly managed our funds well, but I am concerned because as one hears about...let's say the year 2015-2016 where the lower elementary school population, and that population is declining now, reaches the high schools and the senior high schools, and then the colleges. We have to be prepared for that decline. Now some people say the decline in population will be made up by adult students, but I'm not so sure of that. And so we have to be prepared for that. So I leave these words for the incoming president because these are things he has to focus on.

I: Wonderful analysis, Sr. Ann, inspiring but very practical at the same time. It's also quite amazing that in addition to these academic and administrative dimensions, you've had a long and illustrious career serving the community. You've been recognized on many occasions for distinguished service. What inspired you or energized you to also work so vigorously in the community?

A: MSMC, because it's new—and I sound like a broken record here—because we are young, we have not yet found our niche in the community. Not so much now, but let's say 10 or 15 years ago, people didn't even know that MSMC was in Newburgh, and people would be thinking MSMC was a girls' school and indeed it wasn't; it'd been co-ed for 10 or 15 years before that. So it was important that MSMC be known in the community and there are so many wonderful not-for-profit groups in Newburgh and in the surrounding area in Orange County that we had to be a part of so that our name was out there and associated with higher education in New York State. It was important that we join these organizations, and I think it's been good for the college.

I: Absolutely and I know the community has given you so much praise and gratitude for all of those...

A: Undeserved. Undeserved because they serve us, and if there's something MSMC can do for them, I'm grateful for the opportunity.

I: You've also worked as president of the Associated Colleges of the Mid-Hudson, Pattern for Progress, and you had years as a trustee at St. Luke's Cornwall Hospital, and the Commission of Independent Colleges and Universities. Again, a remarkable achievement in that administrative realm.

I was going to ask what you thought constituted the ideal president for MSMC at this juncture in her history, but I think you've articulated that beautifully.

A: Well, we have a president.

I: Yes, the Rev. Kevin Mackin, a Franciscan, who's going to be assuming this role. It will be a hard act to follow..

A: July 1.

I: I wanted also to ask if you wanted to see anything retained from those early decades. In a way you've addressed that, but are there other dimensions as we move forward at this juncture...

A: I think, and you know this as well as I, as a faculty member, that one of the hallmarks of a Mount education is close association between faculty and students. And I think we have had many faculty members who have inspired students over the years. That's one thing I want to be sure we keep, that relationship between faculty and students, and the inspiration that I think is very important in the teaching process. That has to continue. That's magic. I think we have to look for that in faculty, that magic, because that's the one thing that turns students on to lifelong learning. And isn't it important as we look back on our own careers—and I mentioned Dr. McGrath—that we ask ourselves, "Who were the people who influenced us?" I want MSMC to keep that closeness, both inside and outside the classroom. I think we need faculty that are well-prepared for the classroom. Well-educated, but also inspiring. That's key.

We're not going to grow much more, Irene... if we reach 3,000 over the next 10 years, I think that's as far as we can go, given the size of the campus and that we want to be considered a small liberal arts college. We don't want to grow beyond that, but I do think we need to maintain our enrollment. So that we keep the intimacy there. I think the development of a true institution founded by members of a Dominican order...if we can keep that influence alive, that recognition of the uniqueness of each person on this campus—every student, every faculty member, every administrator—as unique and important, I don't think we can lose.

I: Beautiful. We couldn't ask for anything more, it's true. Well, you and I have had many conversations over the years, and you've always inspired me and you inspire all of us.

A: Thank you.

I: I suppose the only abiding question remains, what does the future hold in store for Sr. Ann Sakac?

A: That's going to remain an abiding question, Irene, since I have no plans for the future beyond seeing that President Mackin is comfortable in his new position, and I move on

and the Mount continues. But as far as personal plans, at this point I have none. Other than to sit and read all summer.

I: It's delightful to hear you say that we won't expand too much beyond 3,000 because when I came here over 40 years ago, that was the goal of the founding sisters and the congregation then, that we achieve that. It's wonderful to see that being maintained.

Well, Sister, you have all our best wishes for all of God's blessings, and we thank you for 31 years as president and for the vital role you've played in its success.

A: Thank you. It's been a blessing for me certainly, a personal blessing and it's been just a wonderful 31 years.

I: Well, you've been a blessing to us.

A: Thank you.