

The Thomas More College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Marilyn Foley

Interviewer: Lisa Betty

Transcribed by: Emma Quinn

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Abstract

Marilyn Foley came to Fordham because they were looking for the best possible students to fill their first class of women. She remembered that the women were treated well, although the school wasn't entirely prepared for many of the needs women would have, like sports teams. Foley was a justice on the United Student Government court, and had to come to a verdict on a case involving students protesting Vietnam, an indicator of the activism on campus at the time.

She commuted for three years from the Yonkers-Bronx line, and lived off campus during her senior years. Foley remains in contact with more than twenty friends from Fordham, but never became particularly close with any professors while at Fordham. Her junior year, she rented out a storefront with some friends and opened a coffeehouse for other students, which became a hotbed of musicians and activists. Most of Foley's memories of the Bronx at the time revolved around eating on Arthur Avenue and other forms of commercial transactions. During her junior year, she switched her major from math to philosophy, but never told IBM, where she worked after graduation for twenty-five years until retirement. After retiring, she retrained and continued to work at IBM while simultaneously receiving her pension. After this interview, she was excited to go babysit her grandson while her daughter leaves to do National Guard duty.

Keywords

Bronx, Irish American, College Decision, Commuting, Off campus, First days on campus, Student Government, Vietnam, Politics, Fordham's impact, Career, Children, Philosophy, Math, Patricia Plante, Dr. (Guillermo) Owen, coffee house, Susan Devin, Arthur Ave.

Transcription

Lisa Betty (LB): This is Lisa Betty for the TMC Oral History project. The date is June 2nd, 2018. Miss Marilyn, can you please introduce yourself?

Marilyn Foley (MF): Hi, my name is Marilyn Foley, I'm a graduate of Thomas More College, class of '68, and we were the first female college on the Fordham University campus. This was the Rose Hill campus, but we're still the first female anything on that campus, as an entity to itself. And it was the best of times, and sometimes the worst of times.

LB: So why did you come to TMC?

MF: Three thousand guys.

LB: Oh! The ratio was good.

MF: Well, the other choices... when you're probably a Catholic girl, perhaps being Catholic schooled all the way through, and I had nuns from the time I was born until I, you know, went through high school. So, there was an expectation that you were going to the crème de la crème

school for women. So pick one. It could be Mount St. Vincent, Good Counsel, Marymount, Manhattanville, you know, that's where you're gonna go. And they were all out there with money. But Fordham was out there with money because they said, "Let's get the best and the brightest and we'll snatch them away from everybody else. And if you look at who their first admission was, Joan (Porosky) was the best and the brightest of this whole crop of people. She was 4-H Club, and academic, and sports, well-rounded, and snatched from the arms of Mount St. Vincent or something. So, I was here because it was gonna be different, and it was.

LB: And how were the first couple weeks on campus?

MF: Who knew? It was a blur. You had to find your way around, you had to get books, you had to think about studying, you had to think about all those guys, 'cause they were all looking at all those girls. So, it was interesting.

LB: And then, what was the experience with – were the males on campus, were they receptive? Were the faculty okay, receptive? Were the administrators, were they welcoming, or was it kind of, you know?

MF: Everyone was receptive. The guys, in particular. The administrators, sure. We were an experiment, and, you know, they wanted it to succeed. So we were, I don't want to say kid gloved, but we were certainly treated well. And they had to learn, what do you do with women on campus? So we could speak our piece. And our assistant dean, Dr. Patricia Plante, was a very independent woman, and she listened to her girls. She loved us. And when the dean left after two years--she became the dean of her girls, and she stayed for our class to graduate, the first graduating class, she stayed to see us through--and then she left and went to Dumbarton Oaks College. And, off the record, she married Father Lewis, who was, Dean of the Graduate School. (Editor: she married Joseph Mulligan, SJ, former dean of the Graduate School.)

LB: How were the extracurricular activities on campus, especially for women? This was before Title IX, so there's kind of like....

MF: There wasn't, there kind of wasn't a lot. Most of the extracurriculars had to do with guys, or dances, partying, stuff like that. I don't think there were a lot of women's teams ready to roll out yet, and there probably weren't women's teams ready to play yet, either, although maybe the other lady colleges had stuff.... But the focus... they weren't ready for some aspects here yet, and sports was probably one of them.

LB: What about activism on campus? This is the middle of the women's rights movement Vietnam, civil rights.

MF: Yes, yes. I was on the first United Student Government court, I was a justice, I think I was one of five judges, and we had to try, I believe, a case with Vietnam protestors blocking the entrance, blocking access to the cafeteria. In their protests, they were not allowing other students their rights to access the cafeteria while they were exercising their right for free speech.

And I believe we had to try that. And we were very torn up on what to do, because these were also our peers. And we're torn up about this whole environment, the political environment with the war. So that, women's activism, no doubt. We were here; there was nothing to deal with there, just watch it happen. I forget what else you....

LB: No, and we can move on. Did you live on campus, or were you a commuter?

MF: And the third choice was off campus, because people lived off campus. I commuted for the first three years, and I lived off campus in my senior year. People had... there was a residence up on Grand Concourse called Susan Devin, Susan Devin Home for Young Women. And the first year that the girls came in who needed a place to live... since there was no dorm here, they went up to Susan Devin, which was run by, for, and of nuns. It was... they didn't have a great

time; they survived it. Then people started getting off campus apartments. The guys, the girls, the guys and the girls... so, by senior year, when I had a fight with my father over the string beans, and I said I'm moving out, I went into an off campus apartment.

LB: And when you were commuting, where did you live?

MF: I lived on the Yonkers-Bronx line. It was just the #4 bus coming down until... until I took my car with me too, when I moved over the string beans.

LB: And was your family supportive of you going to Fordham?

MF: Sure, it was Catholic. And I, I'm Irish, I'm from the Bronx, and what you learn... And first of all, women had to get liberated, women should get jobs, and my family was for that. But in my parish, my church, town, you learned you're gonna go work for the IBM, the AT&T or the Con Ed. That's the Irish. (Inaudible) And so, we had preordained that I was gonna work for the IBM, and so when I got down here, I majored in math; I got a summer job at the IBM; and when I switched my major, I didn't bother telling the IBM. I just stayed on with the IBM and continued with the IBM.

LB: What about life after Fordham?

MF: I know it happened. I married, divorced. I have two kids, I have a lot of great memories. I hooked up with people after fifty years last night, rocked around the clock. So...

LB: Are there, are there any friends that you've, you know, that you always kept on after Fordham.

MF: Yeah, probably about twenty.

LB: Twenty!

MF: Yeah, we meet. One of them, Kathleen Simon, whom you may have interviewed, Kathy lives in Europe now, and Kathy would come in and the group of us in the two nearby apartments off campus, we'd get together, and then some of the guys used to trail along. So, easily we'd be in touch, have phone numbers. Everybody's here, texting "I'm here! Want to go lunch?"

"Yeah. Whatever."

LB: So, other than Patricia Plante, were there any faculty members or administrators that were very supportive? And kind of pushed you along or kept you going?

MF: I don't know. They were all busy, and I think they were trying to be fair to everyone. I can't... there were a couple of guys in the math area. They could have pushed us along. I think it's because math is such a weird discipline that they wanted friends; they wanted students to be friends with them, and friendly, so I know one guy had us over to his house. The other guy was sponsor of the coffee house. But it was more important that the students learn about their professors than the professors learn about being supportive for their students.

LB: And then tell me about the coffee house. That seems interesting.

MF: So we were probably this rebellious group of juniors, I believe, who somehow rented a storefront. We could not have alcohol, so we had coffee and we had hot cider. It was a place to go, I think, you know, between four until ten or eleven, because we had to staff it and we were in school. Dr. (Guillermo) Owen was our senior advisor. Our parents came down, unless I already said this, our parents came down, at least mine and Gail's. And they came in, saw the coffee house, dropped five bucks in the kitty and said, "We're not coming back."

So it wasn't a parental place; it was a kid's hangout. And I do remember that Paul Simon of Simon and Garfunkel, his brother Eddy Simon, who was up and coming... he came up; he did some guitar gigs with us. We had some... Gail remembers this... we had some Vietnam war activists come and give speeches in the coffee house. It served a purpose for a year or so, until we all had moved on to something else or it had more health requirements to meet or

something. And yet Bob, who was sitting next to me this morning at breakfast said, "What coffee house?" But all the girls knew about it. And Bill Richards, the guy with the motorcycle and the boots.

LB: So, was it hard to, kind of, put that together? Cause I can't imagine students right now renting anything. You know, I think it could be done, but....

MF: Well, Bill Richards was over 21, and the rest of us weren't, so he may have had a sense of... he may have directed us. I mean, he was very... certainly charismatic as well as good looking, and I think when he left here, in whatever, I believe he went to work for a newspaper in Yonkers. I believe he lived in Yonkers, too. And I mean he was knowledgeable and had drive, so I think between him and Dr. Owen... they were able to help get us directed to get it done, you know, 'Cause I don't think, we didn't... we were very smart, but I don't think we were smart enough to pull that off without some guidance from some older people.

LB: And then what about the immediate Bronx. So you guys, Marilyn specifically, you're from the Bronx Yonkers border, but this is a very different part of the Bronx.

MF: That's true.

LB: Was it, was there, you know, any type of resistance? Or how did the community relate to TMC students, to Fordham students, in that day?

MF: You mean the external community?

LB: Yeah, the external community, the Arthur Avenue- Did you go to Arthur Avenue?

MF: I don't think, I don't.... Yeah, I did. They like your money, I mean, Arthur Avenue's a great place to eat; it's a great thing to experience, but I don't think the surrounding community here... my interaction wasn't with it. I was on campus or in my friends' places off campus. I... there was no interaction per se, unless it might have been commercial, you know, like going to White Castle, or going to, going to Arthur Avenue, and drinking along Webster Avenue. And that's still commercial. I probably didn't travel alone at night, just because it's not a smart thing to do anyway. But there was – life on campus. There was very much life on campus, you know.

LB: So, is there anything that I have not asked that you would like to add for our record?

MF: Not for your record! (laughter)

LB: What about – but what about like life, I mean you spoke very briefly about life after Fordham, but as, you know, someone with a math degree, how was that going to....

MF: Now I didn't say I got a math degree.

LB: Oh, you didn't, you majored in math?

MF: I did, and then I decided that I was over my head, so I switched majors in, in the last semester of junior year.

LB: Oh, and didn't tell IBM that you switched.

MF: That's correct. And at Fordham you had to take eighteen credits of philosophy to graduate, and I had three semesters left, and you only needed thirty credits of philosophy for a major. I already had thirty credits shot on math, so I wasn't getting those electives back.

So I said, "All right! I've got to pick up four classes and I'm out of here with a B.A. I'm going to go work for IBM; they don't know the difference." And so I immersed myself in the very heavy classes that were created for us: philosophy of art, philosophy of music, writing a journal paper of your experiences – that was with the dean of the boy's college. And I forget what the other exotic class was. And I learned to drip paint like Jackson Pollock, in a loft, in a loft across the street. I have a copy of Bob's movie that he sent me.

I said, "When was this?"

He said, "We did this in Father Netter's class!"

I said, "How come I'm not in the picture?"

He said, "You were producing it with me!"

I said, "Oh!" So, yeah that stuff is okay for the record. (laughter)

LB: And then after IBM?

MF: Oh, thank God it was after IBM. IBM was a big disappointment, but it was a growing experience. I was there in the tumultuous times, when they took it out of it being a family business with respect for the individual, and a number of other principles, and turned it into a business-business, which was okay. But they lost respect for the individual, so they didn't treat their people well. Therefore, the people weren't going all out for them. I wasn't doing 24 by 7 "hold down the fort in a snowstorm." That was all gone. All the loyalty was gone.

So I found a package, a window to get me out at twenty-five years, so I was retired at 46-47. Right? I was retired from IBM at 47.

LB: And then after the early retirement what?

MF: I took retraining that they did in the mid-Hudson Valley because so many IBM had lost their jobs and their housing market was falling apart. So I took this retraining program. I had been a programmer, I retrained in a product called Lotus Notes, which IBM then went and bought. And IBM didn't have enough skilled people in Lotus Notes to run the company, so I went back to IBM as a contractor, and I was there for ten years, rubbing their noses in it every minute, because I was eventually collecting my pension. I was being paid by Keane; I had a choice of my medical plans; and I was putting money in my 401K. And I was getting a divorce. But he didn't know that. June 2nd!

And I have two great kids in their thirties. And I've had a wonderful time here, and this afternoon I'm going up to Vermont to be a grandma after being an adult last night, to mind my eight-year-old grandson, because one of my proud daughters is heading off to Fort Drum to do three weeks of National Guard duty, and somebody's gotta put Jack on the bus and tuck him in.

LB: Wonderful! Well, thank you Miss Marilyn! This has been a wonderful experience.

MF: I hope so! (laughter)

LB: and your contribution to our archives is very important.

MF: Well, this is from the ladies at the coffee table. Like, oh... and don't forget the coffee house and Bill Richards, and oh we forgot about.... Yeah, so.

LB: Please, please please, but thank you for everything. We appreciate this.

MF: You're welcome! Okay.