

Sister Deborah Troillett
First Person Plural
Tape Summary
18 and 22 September 2020

Tape 1- 18 September 2020

Intro – Acadia Roher interviewing Deborah Troillett for First Person Plural via video conference on 18 September 2020.

AR Birth, parents?

DT Born in Little Rock at St. Vincent’s Infirmary to Mary Jean and Raymond Troillett
February birthday, third of six children
Classic middle child role
One brother, four sisters

AR Where did parents meet?

DT First met at a birthday party
Mother invited by family friend, Dorothy Paladino
Father was there with another date
Met again on the steps of Our Lady of Holy Souls Catholic Church

AR Both Catholic?

DT Yes

AR Families in the area for a while?

DT Yes
Father in shoe repair business
Grandfather had a shoe shop in Conway
Different pronunciation of Troillett in Conway
Conway business burned when father was in 1st grade, family moved to Little Rock
Started Dan’s Shoe Shop in Hillcrest, legacy
Father and his brother took over the shop
Grandfather on mother’s side worked for Union Pacific [Railway]
Mother’s parents died young, didn’t know them well
Mother’s maiden name was Dearasaugh, French Canadian

5 mins

DT Father’s parents also died young

AR Extended family?

DT Quite an extended family, always family around
Grew up with cousins like siblings, particularly Dad's younger brother's children
They had seven kids, we had six and they were neck and neck
Youngest sister was a surprise, then aunt had twins
Uncle Kank (Clarence) and Dad had the shoe shop until Dad retired in 1991 or 1992

AR Where was Dan's Shoe Shop?

DT On Kavanaugh, in building where Persian rugs and Hillcrest Interiors now
Grandfather built that building in 1948
Mother now owns those buildings
Dad passed away 3 years ago
My three sisters own Hillcrest Interiors, call them my Designing Sisters
Hillcrest is the anchor for our family
Dad could tell you anything you wanted about Hillcrest
Dad had a dream that he was in a documentary about Hillcrest, loved it so much

AR Any stories that stood out about neighborhood?

DT Would talk about the vibrant merchant community in Hillcrest
Corner where Rhea Drug Store is now was a movie theater
On Saturdays, kids would ride their bikes to the movies
Dad and friends would borrow the bikes while others were at the movies

AR Dad grew up in Hillcrest?

DT Yes on 707 North Van Buren Street, first home I remember living in
Mom and Dad lived there after grandparents passed away

10 mins

DT First home was where Kroger is now on Beechwood, called Beech Street then
Lived there when very young, have no memory
Moved to house on Van Buren, then moved to Monroe Street in 3rd grade
Mother realized she was pregnant again and laid down the law, needed more space

AR Relationship with siblings?

DT Close to them all
Donna oldest sister, then Marsha
Parents married in 1946, celebrated 71 years before Dad died
Dad developed tuberculosis after second sister born, went to the sanatorium at Booneville
Mom moved in with her parents while he was away, had a hard time
Received one report that Dad may not be able to father any more children
Five years later, I come along

Feeling that I was a blessing
Then brother and sisters came along
Six-year gap between second youngest sister and youngest sister, Bonnie
Role of representing blessing for the family

AR Interesting because middle child, but miracle

DT Miracle, and started a whole other family
Birth order changes depending on how your family grows

15 mins

DT One brother
Tomboyish, felt Dad was ready for a son
Hung out with brother a lot
Neighborhood was full of children, Dad called it “rabbit hill”
Other Catholic families nearby with many children
Grew up in parochial school setting, Holy Souls, Mount St. Mary
Brother went to Catholic High
Free range children, ran the whole neighborhood
St. Mary’s bell rang three times a day, 6am, noon, and 6pm for religious symbolism and prayer
Two rules: don’t go inside friends’ houses, come home when you hear the St. Mary’s bell
Would go to the variety store, Allsopp Park, didn’t know boundaries
Cousin was close, grew up like sisters
Decided to go downtown on the bus and see a movie, didn’t have enough bus fare for the return so walked home from downtown to Hillcrest, age 8 or 10
Felt free and safe, created own games and activities, not many scheduled activities

AR Any particular games you remember?

DT Tag games, football
I would play ball with all the neighborhood boys on an open lot behind St. Mary’s
Climbed over the fence and one of the sisters told her young ladies didn’t climb fences

20 mins

DT Baseball, football, tag, imaginary games

AR Other messages about what girls should or shouldn’t do?

DT No one in the family questioned it
On Easter, all the girls would get permanent hair treatments

AR Was Holy Souls segregated by gender?

DR No

AR Mount St. Mary?

DR Yes, all girls.

Spent years there as teacher, Principal, then President

Wasn't questioned at the time, if you were Catholic you sent your kids to Catholic schools

Rare for a Catholic student not to continue on to parochial high schools, though was starting to change in the late 1960s

AR Why changing?

DT Desegregation of public schools led to private schools opening, white flight

Largest enrollments Mount St. Mary ever had were in the 1960s and 1970s

Look back now and not happy to have been part of that, but wasn't aware at the time

Two African American Catholic parishes, Saint Bartholomew in Little Rock and Saint Augustine in North Little Rock, young women from those churches attended St. Mary

25 mins

DT Buffered from a lot of the tensions around race, but in more recent years look back and think differently about it

AR Catholic schools segregated officially?

DT Not officially

Reality is that there are not very many Black Catholics

Arkansas was 2% Catholic at the time, now closer to 5% with recent growth in immigrants from Latin American

President of Mount St. Mary in 2001, celebrated 150 years of continuous operation as the oldest school in Arkansas

Approached by a group from UALR who offered their services to research the school's history, opportunity for a different view

Looked back on 1957 and what happened then, no strong voice for civil rights within the Catholic Church or the Sisters of Mercy

Carol-Ann Blow was first African American graduate of Mount St. Mary in 1966

Not a time we look back on with pride, systemic racism was being reinforced

30 mins

AR Messages about race as a kid?

DT Mother rarely had domestic help, maybe not unusual, couldn't afford it

Two African American women, both were very kind

Have to think more about that

Message I got without knowing it was that domestic labor is African American work

AR Non-Catholic kids at school?

DT Not at the time

AT Changed in the 70s?

DT Homogenous at the time, most diversity was in the variety of student needs
Cuban Missile Crisis [October 1962], students from Cuba came to school, so different to have someone for another country at school

AR Hate groups targeting Catholics?

DT Buffered from that
Friends and family were all Catholic, circles of protection that reinforced themselves
Did not experience it in early years
Vatican II changed the way the church engaged in the world and opened itself up, began experimenting with liturgy and other things that seemed unchangeable
Moving into teens, social justice and activism was seeping into the Catholic consciousness

35 mins

DT Vietnam War, 60s turmoil, political assassinations
Experience of growing up Catholic became in the best way “catholic,” opened my senses to my role in the world and the change I could make
Several sisters had a profound impact, were very smart, broke stereotypes, challenged young women to be leaders and make a difference
Their community life was changing, going from legislated and defined to much more loose
Call to service became more than the traditional health care and education
Religious women could now lead and respond to human needs in a variety of ways
Religious women routinely led schools, hospitals, got away with it because they were sisters, in leadership long before other women were able to be in these positions
All-girls environment meant that school elections and other leadership opportunities were not in competition with boys, no expectation to hold yourself back
Grew up not thinking I had limitations

AR Sisters who had an impact?

40 mins

DT Sister Norma Lipsmeyer, taught math and freshman religion, “a Vatican II sister”

During sophomore year [1971-1972], took us to Highland Court [public housing complex formerly located 12th Street, also known as Highland Park] to work with children, helped me cross a boundary and see a different reality in a place not far from my neighborhood
Hung out in Sister Norma's classroom
She was tuned into the war and racism
First sister who caused me to question: could I be like that?
Planted a seed
Junior year, taught religion by young sister who was a dynamic teacher, Sister Jane
First day of class, asked "do you want to know Jesus Christ?"
That day was the first time I seriously grappled with the question about my relationship to Jesus Christ

45 mins

DT Took us to a different level of thinking about our faith life, faith in terms of relationship and how that relationship would call us
Kept the idea of becoming a sister to myself
End of junior year, ran for student body President and won
Sister who moderated student council was transferred, Sister Jane was new moderator
Sister Jane was very direct, which made me shy away
Senior year, began thinking about the future and college
January 12th, 1973 student council was planning a Christmas present to the faculty
Old gothic building that eventually had to be torn down, idea was to paint the faculty lounge
While showing Sister Jane the paint chips, she looked at me and asked, "have you ever thought about being a Sister of Mercy?"
Her seeing that potential in me that helped me see it

50 mins

DT That day I knew it was real
Wanted to go to University of Dallas, but was more expensive than family could afford
Developed backup plan, then got letter from University of Dallas with scholarship
Struggle of figuring out college plans, wondered if God was saying to become a sister right after high school
When God invites, God invites, and opens doors, but you have a choice
Attended University of Dallas for one year
Applied to join the Sisters of Mercy
Parents were shocked
Tense summer before going to study in Saint Louis at the mother house
Mother attended Little Rock High School because family could not afford parochial school, sad that she did not get to attend Mount St. Mary
Did not grow up around sisters in the same way that I did, remembered them as good teachers and kind people, but nothing near what I experienced in high school

55 mins

DT Mother's calling was so clearly to be a mom, had a hard time understanding
Having a sister in the family is a badge of honor in many Catholic families
Dad supported whatever would make me happy, Mom didn't understand how that could
make me happy, could only see what I was giving up
Before leaving for Saint Louis, we ended up sitting on the bed in her room crying,
humbling moment

AR Stereotype of nuns?

DT Carrying rulers to beat up on children, stern, mean, unattractive
Distorted pictures
Elementary school teachers were Benedictine sisters, fully habited, sense of separation,
seemed closer to God than human
In high school, saw the human side of the sisters

AR Lay teachers?

DT Was starting to change, both at elementary and high school levels
With Vatican II and renewal that was called for in religious life, the Great Exodus,
thousands of young women realized it wasn't truly their calling and left the community

60 mins

DT Vatican II stressed the "universal call to holiness" for all people
Ministry for lay men and women in the church opened wide
Before that, only sisters and priests ministered in the church
Currently serve on Mercy System of the Americas Board, similar to a school board, 54
schools in 6 different countries, now only 1 or 2 sisters teaching and leading the schools,
now mostly lay leaders

AR Expanded the possibilities, but consequences

DT Used to be critical mass of sisters in hospitals and schools, their presence and witness was
strong
Sisters are not as visible now in part because habits are optional
Sisters also went into direct service, non-profit ministries
Dispersion of sisters

AR University of Dallas is Catholic school?

DT Yes

AR What did you want to study?

DT Special education

Sisters of Notre Dame had a Special School near campus, volunteered there

AR Imagined teaching in what setting?

65 mins

DT Secondary level
First teaching experience was in elementary for one year
UD drew students from all over the country, broad student body
Wanted to do semester in Rome in sophomore year, but left UD after one year
Got around the world in another way
“Join the convent, see the world.”

AR Application process like for Sisters of Mercy? Consider other orders?

DT Considered Notre Dame Sisters
Often asked, how did you decide, how did you know?
Charism is a special gift that a community is founded for
Something resonated with me about the Sisters of Mercy
Mercy and compassion, also strong sense of social justice, advocacy
Apostolic, not cloistered or monastic
Apostolic means “sent” or “out”
Traditional vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, but add service
Important evolution for Catholic religious women because sisters were traditionally enclosed, Benedictine style
Carmelite ministry devoted to contemplative prayer
1700s and 1800s gave rise to apostolic life for sisters
Catherine McAuley founded the order in Ireland in 1827
She inherited an estate, opened a shelter for women in the heart of elite Dublin neighborhood

70 mins

DT Called “walking sisters” or “walking nuns,” terms were not complimentary
Idea that sisters should be in cloisters
Ministered to poor, sick, uneducated
McAuley created a religious order to ensure longevity
Built in the fourth vow of service
Reported to Rome, not the local bishop
Grew like wildfire in Ireland
Still the largest order of religious women in the church today
Came to the United States with Irish immigrants to the east coast
First bishop of the new diocese of Little Rock was an Irishman ordained in New York, Bishop Byrne
Bishop went to Dublin to invite Sisters of Mercy to join him in Little Rock, found nine willing sisters in Naas, Ireland

Boarded a boat on 30 November 1850, arrived in January via New Orleans
300 Catholic families also on board, most stayed in Irish Channel in New Orleans
Came up the river, arrived in Little Rock on 4 February
Priest charged with securing housing had passed away
Stayed in a house at 7th and Louisiana

75 mins

DT Started a school, not limited to Catholics
At school's 150th anniversary a teacher found a set of newspapers from 1851 on eBay
with a profile of St. Mary's, an early advertisement
Local buyer donated that copy of the Arkansas Whig newspaper to the school
Ad states that teachers offer astronomy, French, Latin, Italian
Assures no undue pressure for religious education
One of only four schools founded directly by sisters from Ireland

AR Where sisters from during your tenure?

DT Initially they were Irish
American-born women started to join before long
Sisters established the school downtown, then moved to Pulaski Heights in 1908
Became all-girls boarding school
Originally was elementary school

80 mins

Established St. Anne's in Fort Smith and a school for planters' daughters in Helena
Tough times during the Civil War, closed Helena school
Hospital in Brinkley
Still have Mercy hospitals in Rogers, Fort Smith
Hot Springs hospital became a CHI-St. Vincent's hospital
Warner Brown Hospital in El Dorado
Many elementary schools all over the state
Sisters made great contributions to healthcare and schools in Arkansas

AR Women leading this work mostly Arkansans over time?

DT Yes

AR Usually assigned near where you are from?

DT In those days, yes
By the time I entered, organized differently
Entered in St. Louis, which became primary Mother House
Sisters from seven state area went to St. Louis for training, then were reassigned
anywhere in the region

Was only Sister of Mercy native to Arkansas to serve in highest level of leadership of the Institute

Served six years on a team of sisters responsible for being canonical heads of the Americas

AR Application to join?

DT Paper application, local sisters in Little Rock wrote letters of recommendation, home visit with parents

Home visit wasn't easy for them

1974

Health examination, psychological examination

85 mins

DT Mutual discernment process, "are you being called?"

Two years of candidacy

Second year sent out for ministry experience in the Missouri bootheel, Portageville

Taught 7th grade English and 4th grade religion

Never lived in a small, rural community before

Two young men lived next door that helped the sisters, little community

Shaped my understanding of being a presence in a faith community

One sister did pastoral ministry in nearby towns

Went with her, visited elderly and families, those were sick

Youth ministry with teenagers

Tiny but rich world

Kept up with college friends, my reality was very different from most peers

AR No one else you knew on same path?

DT Not that I knew

When got to St. Louis, two other young women my age, 19

There were no longer big numbers of young women entering religious life

As a group of three, traveled the path of formation all the way to final vows

Took first vows for 3 years, renewed for 2

Could have renewed again for 3 more but asked to make perpetual commitment

Finished degree at St. Louis University, English and Theology double major

Because of education focus, strong commitment to provide education for the sisters

90 mins

DT Graduated January 1980

First assignment at co-ed high school, Mount St. Mary, in Oklahoma City

Taught there for 9 and a half years

Sister Jane was the Principal

AR Request you?

DT No, didn't work that way
Got sea legs for teaching, first years of teaching are not easy
Co-ed school, own little culture, south side of Oklahoma City, different from my experience
Found I had capacity for administration
1987, 1988, University of Dayton during the summer for Catholic School Administrator Master's
Got the opportunity to return to Mount St. Mary in Little Rock as administrative intern
Taught and administrative intern for two years
1991 became Principal for six years

AR Oklahoma daily life, rituals and traditions?

DT 1905 building
History was similar to Little Rock's Mount St. Mary, all-girls boarding school
Magnificent building, like a castle, now on the National Register
Up to second floor was the school
1950s, built another wing to change to co-ed
26 sisters lived there, many born and bred Oklahomans

95 mins

DT Young woman from outside coming in
Mass every morning, morning prayer, evening prayer as a community
Breakfast after mass, sisters' dining room was in the basement, students would pass by before school
Not very many boundaries
Lived on the third floor, stairwells were open, kids would try to sneak up there
Trying to have a life that wasn't totally consumed by the ministry, some kind of balance
Teaching, grading, going to sports games
Largest group of sisters I've lived with, more age diversity than Portageville experience
Set communal times during the day
Even at beginning of order's founding, tension between elements of ministry and community

AR What did balance look like?

DT "I was the "jogging nun."
Community of faculty and staff were wonderful, friendships, relaxing together
The Oaks- getaway house on property in north Oklahoma City

100 mins

DT Sisters at Mercy hospital on north side of Oklahoma City maintained it

- AR Tensions here, too. Colleague with a former teacher?
- DT Took a while to become that colleague
 Could see potential in us, invited and encouraged to grow
 Gained confidence as a teacher
 Asked to join administrative team, invited to be campus minister, encouraged to become principal
 Needing confirmation to come from another place outside of me, communal sense
- AR Eight years in Oklahoma City?
- DT Nine
- AR Feelings about going back to Little Rock? Connection with family?
- DT Would go home for Christmas, summer vacation, only 5- or 6-hour drive
 Family could come to see me
 Thrilled, ready to come back
 Parents were in the 60s, nice to be closer
 Siblings were married with children, could be more part of their lives
 22 years at Mount St. Mary

105 mins

- DT Role in the school evolved, privilege to be able to serve, had such great help
 Discovered visionary style of leadership beyond managerial style
 “I’ve been thinking about something.” “Oh no.”
 Had people who trusted and were willing to take a risk, try some new things
 Creative dimension to ministry
 “All these grey hairs, I can put names on them.”
 Complexity of issues young people face in today’s world
- AR High points? Ideas to fruition?
- DT Naïve as a new principal, took a lot to enable change across the institution
 Veterans educators are skeptical about new things
 Changed to block scheduling from “industrial model”
 Slowing down, deeper level of engagement beyond lecture and rote memorization
 First year, talked about it
 Then tried a block schedule with 90-minute classes two days each month

110 mins

- DT Started with small steps, focused on the kind of learning they wanted to promote
 Math and foreign language teachers had hardest time because need daily reinforcement

Art, science labs, home economics loved it
Problem of clubs meeting at same time
Included an activity block in the block schedule so kids could participate in multiple clubs more regularly, which caused more clubs and activities
Been on block schedule since 1992
90-minute block created time for service learning alongside learning about Catholic social teaching in junior year
Run into kids for whom junior service was hugely influential

115 mins

- DT Mercy school in Argentina
Mercy school in Detroit had Mercy Ambassadors Program
Picked it up at Mount St. Mary
Exchange program with Argentinian students during each school's summer break
Student from Mount St. Mary and Argentinian student remained friends, sisters
Helping kids see possibilities
Moved into President role to help add upgraded facilities
Jesuits' President and Principal Model
Mount St. Mary one of first Mercy schools to go that way
- AR President vs. Principal roles?
- DT President role is external face in the community, promotes the mission and long-range plan, works with Board and other constituencies, promotes sustainability
Increases school profile in the community

120 mins

- DT Started community assemblies to think together about improving secondary education
Early 1990s
Small group discussions, which generated new names for next discussion
Monthly discussions continued for a year, then called everyone back as a large group
Shared learning in a big luncheon, presented plan, asked for support
Made contacts that year that supported the school for my whole tenure
Leadership Greater Little Rock
Arkansas Interfaith Conference, led by Mimi Dortch
Racial and Cultural Diversity Commission for City of Little Rock
President role allowed wider engagement that led to other engagement
Could be out in the community without taking away from day-to-day running of the school like a Principal would be
- AR Principal role more than full time
- DT Active Board also important

AR Time check, option for a follow up interview

DT Yes

AR Oral history can open many doors, length not an issue

DT Surprised where some of the conversation went
Let me know when

AR Thank you

Tape 2- 22 September 2020

Intro – Acadia Roher interviewing Deborah Troillett on 22 September 2020. Follow up interview.

AR Vatican II, changes to religious life, difference between your experience and prior?

DT Entered 1974
Major General Chapter in 1968 or 1969, adoption of constitution called Mercy Covenant
Legislative tone, more descriptive and aspirational
Opportunities for sisters to live in smaller home-like settings rather than large convents
Sisters playing different roles in the community, not all working at the same place
Remained committed to praying The Office, but acknowledgment of apostolic, not monastic life
Morning prayer and evening prayer in tune with liturgical calendar
Adopted new, shorter Office

5 mins

DT Commitment to social justice became more articulated
Looking at systemic change
Sisters became more of a voice for those who didn't have a voice
Not required to wear a religious habit by the time I entered
Wore two symbols, silver ring and Mercy cross
Dress was left up to each sister, some debate and tension remained
Grew up with sisters wearing full habit and those in simple dress with ring and cross
Appropriate dress for your ministry since the order's early days
McCauley provided shelter and education, attracted socialite women as volunteers
Simple dress very important, not to dress above the people we're serving
"Vow of poverty is a vow of sharing what we have."

10 mins

DT Living a simpler lifestyle in order to be available to serve, resources more available

AR Traditional Sisters of Mercy habit?

DT Original was full black habit with white bib, leather cincture belt, large rosary
Modified after Vatican II to cowl collar navy dress with simple cincture belt, just below knee, hair could show, small veil, humanized everyone
Vows and ministry were core of Sisters of Mercy, dress was less important
Tremendous social change of the 1960s and 1970s, reconsideration of sisters' work
"What is the prophetic role of the religious?"
How different lay or married person?

AR Personal choice of dress? Change over time?

DT Never wore the habit, wore simple dress

15 mins

DT Thought it was important to represent our community in an appropriate way
Wore navy blue suits for the first 30 years as teacher and administrator
No veil or traditional habit

AR Significance of the ring?

DT Similar to married couple, means commitment, mutual covenant between God and you
Ring is circular, represents eternal commitment
Don't receive until make final commitment

AR Any significance to silver?

DT Catherine [McAuley] made that decision, simple band
Each sister can engrave a motto inside
Mine is from John 15, "Jesus said, 'Live on in my love.'"

AR Why that one?

DT When accepted as a candidate, first prayer service was John 15 and the phrase jumped out

AR Timeline?

DT Entered in 1974, didn't profess final vows until 1982

AR Common to take a while?

DT Yes, church allows up to 9 years
Many religious communities have initial period called candidacy or postulancy
When brand new, trying to get a feel for what this life means

Next step is a novitiate, period of engagement

20 mins

DT Many communities have two years at this stage, one a year to study the vows, theology, history of the community, church history, time to intensify your understanding
Second year assigned a ministry
After that can make a first commitment, usually three years
I renewed after that for two, then decided was ready to ask for final vows

AR Know you were ready?

DT Hard because there's a mystery about it
I felt called, like it was the right fit in terms of values, grew as a person
The community affirms, too
Nobody is perfect, but by that point everybody knows your strengths and weaknesses
Commitment to community life is not the easiest, invitation to be merciful to one another

AR Any doubt, struggles?

DT Midlife crisis, challenge and time of pause
Dear friend who was a trusted advisor during transition to Principal

25 mins

DT His wife died suddenly, expressed interest in pursuing a relationship
Tough time, had been working hard for 20 years and it was an attractive option
You never stop seeing the beauty of married life and commitment to another person
Took time out to consider calling, community created space for discernment
6-8 months that year in a major time of discernment
"God doesn't shut doors, he opens doors... it wouldn't change God's love for me."

AR Idea that calling can change over time?

DT Knew sisters who to my surprise left the community, it wasn't out of the ordinary
Sorted through it, had support on both sides
Growthful time
Still dear friend of mine, he got remarried to another woman

30 mins

DT "This life has to be about loving people, but you give up certain aspects of how you get to love people. But it's not about not loving people deeply."

AR After Vatican II, relationship of Sisters of Mercy to Bishop and other men in leadership?

DT Struggle for us as Sisters of Mercy
Committed to supporting women in their full dignity
Struggle with power structures that do not allow women full leadership in the church
Want to be in right relationship with local bishops
Catherine [McAuley] went through painful experiences regarding the hierarchy
Catholic Church still has a ways to go in terms of recognizing the gifts women can bring
Pope Francis has signaled he wants more women involved in Rome
Church is very polarized right now, difficult and slow progress

AR Relationships on the ground?

DT Had a good relationship with Bishop McDonald

35 mins

DT He loved Mount St. Mary, had a sister that was a Sister of Mercy
At 150th anniversary, President of the Institute was coming, I was working on the mass
and he was going to preside
Asked to allow Sister Marie Chin to read the gospel, that crossed a line, couldn't do it
He would go so far, but only to a point
Feminist theologians would say that Mary proclaimed the good news first, "apostle to the
apostles," can reinterpret in terms of feminist theology
Bigger issue came up in 1992 when Bill Clinton was elected
Webb Hubbell's daughter attended Mount S.t Mary and was on newspaper staff
She interviewed Hillary Clinton for the school newspaper
She was going to be graduating that spring, Vince Foster's daughter had also been a
student
Came up with idea to invite Hillary to be graduation speaker
Bill [Clinton] had been a graduation speaker when he was Governor

40 mins

Hadn't sent invitation
On Ash Wednesday, Bishop came for mass, pulled me aside and said he would not attend
graduation if Hillary Clinton was there

AR Reasoning?

DT She's done tremendous things for the state in terms of children and education
He assigned to her one issue: abortion
Hard moments when you realize there is no room for dialogue
Had not officially extended an invitation yet, but he'd heard
There are folks who despise her, as we saw in 2016
Catholic identity of the school is key to the mission, can't always do everything you want
Want to have good relationship, because when there is a time of crisis, we want to be able
to say we've worked things out before

AR Diocese control of Mount St. Mary?

DT Boils down to local bishop, who is ultimately responsible to Catholic education
Canonical standing in the church as a pontifical order, as Catherine [McAuley] set up
As opposed to being a diocesan order
Have recourse in Rome if there was a real unjust situation locally
Have legitimacy to run Catholic schools, but local bishop could refuse to allow operation
as an official Catholic school

45 mins

AR Funding for Mount St. Mary?

DT No funds come from the diocese
Funded by tuition

AR Tuition covers operations?

DT Not really, have to fundraise and manage endowments
Avoided raising tuition because of who it would exclude
Teacher salaries are highest cost
Wanted to include as many students as possible, offer scholarships
When I went to school there, teachers were mostly sisters and salary was minimal
Sisters subsidized the cost of education because of how they lived
In so many religious communities, sisters now need to make a salary because
demographics have changed
Large groups of elderly sisters that must be provided for

AR Any local priests or brothers who were allies?

DT Absolutely, not always adversarial
Arkansas has always been a mission church because of small numbers of Catholics
Spirit of support among the religious and the priests
Priests I remember were wonderful

AR Anybody in particular?

DT Father Joe Pallo was in youth ministry when I was in high school
Involved in teen SEARCH program, part of team that helped with retreats

50 mins

DT Had a beautiful manner, how he said the eucharist, how he included us
Like a banquet, all about community

AR At Holy Souls?

DT Lived at Saint John's, didn't have a parish
Was at Good Counsel at one point
Monsignor John O'Donnell, passed away in 2019, fabulous homilist, charismatic
Helped me through some things as an ally
Knew the ropes better than I did
He was turning 80, said he wanted to do something for Mount St. Mary
Big dinner at Saint Andrew's Cathedral hall, proceeds went toward a scholarship
When he passed away, asked that memorial funds be sent to Mount St. Mary

AR Something to do with you?

DT Had some moments where I knew he had my back
Battle of the Sexes between Catholic High and Mount St. Mary, competitive edge
Idea that we had to work harder, prove ourselves

AR Living situation change when came to Arkansas?

55 mins

DT More modernized than Oklahoma City because had to replace 1908 building
Built another convent in the 1980s, looks like a house
25 sisters moved into that house in 1982, and when I moved in there were 12-14 sisters
Most were on the verge of needing more care
Only lived there two years before sisters of Arkansas had to make a decision about
retirement and elder care near a Mercy hospital
Mercy Crest built in Fort Smith
8 or 9 sisters left for Fort Smith, community of 8 or 9 remained
Asked for a few years to live by myself off campus
Worked and lived on campus, work life was growing with planning and fundraising
Lived for three years two blocks from the school, but it was a little bit of space
At the convent, could not get any separation from community life and ministry
Other sisters saw I was exhausted, not able to relax
Convenient on one hand, but boundaries not strong
Learned a lot living alone
Then moved in with one other sister for a few years
Flexibility in community, supportive

60 mins

AR Theme of community support, nurturing

DT At our best, we are
Integrity through caring for each other in addition to ministry
Community of support

Sometimes that support is not in your immediate community, sisters you keep up with from other places
Different generations formed as sisters under different theologies, church structures
Desire among younger sisters to assert their experience
Still have young women coming into Sisters of Mercy, but not in the numbers of the 40s and 50s
Peer support needed

AR Involvement in organizations within wider community?

DT Initiative that taught and challenged me the most was in 1994
Theme from listening sessions about population of young women that could be served without coming to Mount St. Mary

65 mins

DT Teen pregnancy was skyrocketing in the 1990s
Sisters of Mercy Health Systems offered Catherine's Legacy grant opportunity, up to a million dollars for initiatives with a health basis
Brainstorming session on what was needed locally
Catherine's House would provide early childhood education for children of high school students, job training, tutoring, supporting teenage moms so they could stay in school
Got the grant, renovated a building
Ministry lasted 10 years
Located on Chester Street across from Philander Smith
I was naïve that I could manage two ministries at the same time

70 mins

DT Sustainability issues after receiving the grant
Became Family Development Center at Catherine's House under Brenda Hill
Moved to 12th Street when the original building had to close after 10 years
Brenda got what Catherine McAuley was trying to do in empowering young women
Put me in circles in the community I had never been in and Mount St. Mary had never shown up in before
Realized how white and privileged I was and didn't really get it, painful wakeup call
I represented the chasm between two worlds
Racial and Cultural Diversity Commission to listen and learn, realized my ignorance
I grew up here, but was insulated from systemic racism that has been unmasked by COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter
Rich years because of increasing engagement and connection to the community
Arkansas Interfaith Conference, religious diversity, served for 6 years

75 mins

DT Met faith leaders from all kinds of traditions

Yearly conference, prayer events to share interfaith service
Mimi Dortch was the leader, when she passed away I felt her loss so deeply
Almost like a mystic, could build bridges with all kinds of people of faith

AR Faith tradition?

DT Grew up Episcopalian, became Catholic
Kept her ties all over the community, Dortch family had its own aura

AR Experiences with other religions before?

DT 1985 life changing opportunity to participate in 8-week Youth Seminar on World Religions
Traveled with 150 participants from all over the world, all 25-30 years old
Represented every possible religion
Hutchinson Smith wrote classic world religions book, was on the tour
New York, Israel, Istanbul, Rome, India, Thailand, Hong Kong, China, Korea
Roommate was a Buddhist nun from Nepal
Goal was to study world religions in their places of origin

80 mins

DT 1990 applied for a Fulbright seminar for teachers to India
Knew I had to go back to India
7 weeks in India, traveled all through the country
India: Dynamics of Change, studied from every angle—social, political, religious
Met with Vice President of India in New Delhi
Met Mother Teresa in Calcutta
Presented gift to Mother Teresa, very formal, said a few words and handed her a contribution for children's home
Traveled to Kalighat, Sister Teresa's first ministry, a home for people to die with dignity
The feeling was not horror, the energy in the room was so full of love and peace
Only nun in the program, tour guide asked if she wanted to see the chapel
Also in Calcutta at Mother Teresa's home, tour guide asked if she wanted to see the chapel
While coming around the corner, spotted by an Indian sister who told me to sit down, Mother Teresa comes and grabs my hand, totally unexpected, invited to go to mass with the community
Next morning, went back to convent with roommate to attend mass

85 mins

AR Kept in touch with roommate from first trip?

DT Yes, wrote to each other for first 5 years

Second trip to India went to the place where the Buddha gave his first sermon, now a Buddhist school

Anoja was there studying at the same time, had a reunion at the temple

Got harder and harder to keep up the correspondence, no internet

AR Interfaith experiences that changed your perspective?

DT Prayer practice now is more meditative and contemplative, silent prayer
Serving as Executive Director for Arkansas House of Prayer, interfaith haven dedicated to silent prayer and meditation

Roommate with Anoja for 6 weeks

Trip was exhausting with time changes, new foods, activities

In the morning, Anoja would be sitting up on her bed in perfect meditative state

Had to understand her practice, made me want to understand those practices in my own tradition

Began to explore centering prayer

John Main's writings, book called Word into Silence about repeating a mantra

90 mins

DT From his work and several retreats based on his work, migrated to centering prayer

Been practicing for 30 years now

Got involved in Interfaith Conference in 2005, had an event at Temple B'nai Israel with Father Keating of the centering prayer movement, also spoke at Trinity Cathedral, Mount St. Mary

Elected from the floor in 2011 to serve at our Institute

Silver Spring, Maryland east coast experience, also worked across the Americas

Was eligible for a second term of six years

Mom and Dad needed help, moved back to Little Rock

Dad passed away six months after that

Susan Sims Smith asked for centering prayer retreat at Arkansas House of Prayer

Was going to be on the Board, first meeting was January of 2018, missed because of Dad's funeral

In meeting minutes saw they were looking for a part time Executive Director

"A way opened."

95 mins

AR What is Institute?

DT Organizational structure for the Sisters of Mercy in western hemisphere

Nine Institutes of Mercy, mostly in English-speaking countries

Sisters of Mercy of the U.S. did mission work in other countries, founded communities elsewhere

1991 combined 25 regional entities into the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

Governance structure is President with four counselors

Broken down into six sub-regions
As the five, job was to call together leadership of the whole, 30-40 sisters
Met as a leadership institute twice a year for a week at a time
International and multicultural unity, fighting against dominant United States perspective

100 mins

DT Multilingual meetings

AR Your role?

DT Each person had different liaison areas
Mine was Mercy Secondary Education, created Mercy Education System of the Americas with 54 schools, 20,000 students
Most schools now are lay run, but have a Catholic identity
Liaison to Communications, Archives
Archives of Sisters of Mercy is a huge place in Belmont, North Carolina
Largest archives of any sisters in the world
Grant program developed with some major funders interested in leadership development for younger religious women
Developed the program for Mercy sisters, then became leadership collaborative of many different religious congregations
Hilton Foundation, Conrad Hilton very interested Catholic sisters' work
Justice and advocacy work in Washington, D.C.
Doing things I had never done in my life, showing up at rallies, speaking on behalf of the Earth or women
Catholic Day on Immigration, Bishop Taylor in Little Rock is strong on immigration, wrote a message that I delivered
Opportunities for travel, relationships with sisters from across the world

105 mins

DT Represent Mother Superior, treated with respect
Painful experiences within community around LGBTQ discrimination because of how the church views marriage

AR Mount St. Mary controversy?

DT When I was in Silver Spring
Very difficult time, one of several situations across the country
I knew Tippi [McCullough], loved Tippi, hired Tippi
So painful, that's our world.

AR Younger or prospective sisters you mentored?

DT Taught senior religion class called Adult Faith, built around students' faith questions

Some of those students thought about joining Sisters of Mercy
One young woman I taught entered the community for a while, left after 3 years, still
keep up with each other

110 mins

Part of role [at Institute] is to support formation for younger sisters
Met with younger women at least once a year for dialogue
Most women joining now are in mid-to-late 20s and 30s, come with career experience
Challenging to make a big adjustment at that stage of your life

AR Thank you

DT Thank you
Mercurial, but hidden wholeness

AR Different people will listen and take different things away