

The Voices of SJC:

*Making
Connections
and Discovering Place
With Oral Histories*



The Voices of SJC is an oral history project curated by McEntegart Hall Library Archives in collaboration with the honors program at St. Joseph's College (SJC) in Brooklyn, New York. In 2015, Sister Susan Wilcox, C.S.J., then the director of campus ministries, approached the librarians at McEntegart Library with the idea of capturing the Sisters of St. Joseph's oral histories. The project was inaugurated in spring 2017 as a part of commemorative projects to celebrate the centennial of the college's founding in 1916.

Moderated by library faculty members (and co-authors) Mayumi Miyaoka and Lauren Kehoe, students engage with the college's archive (brooklyn.sjcny.libguides.com/archives) and conduct research to develop a deeper understanding of the history of SJC (sjcny.edu/about/history). After their research activities, students work collaboratively in teams to develop a set of questions to inform their approach to capturing the oral history. Initially, students were paired with a Sister of St. Joseph who had graduated from the college and had served in an academic or administrative capacity for many years. After a few semesters, the interviews grew to include former administrators,



After a few semesters, the interviews grew to include former administrators, long-standing faculty, and alumni.

Doing their interview research in McEntegart Hall Library Archives in fall 2017, from left to right, Sashoy Milton ('20), Valentina Velez Valencia ('20), and Hailey Scott ('21)

long-standing faculty, and alumni. In addition to conducting research, developing interview questions, and working collaboratively, students discuss the theoretical implications of capturing histories orally and gain skills for conducting interviews.

In 2015's *Doing Oral History*, author Donald Ritchie explains, "Oral History collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives."

Over the course of the semester, students are invited into the archives to conduct research on the college's history and on their assigned interviewee, using the primary source collections in the archives and secondary sources like books and articles available through McEntegart Hall Library and the Brooklyn Public Library. Students work both independently and in small groups of three to five as interview teams to construct a set of questions based on their research. Each student is asked to come up with a set of questions on their own, and then they decide as a team which questions are included in the final interview.

The research process and interview preparation take approximately 4–5 hours prior to the interview session, and an interview session usually runs for about 45–90 minutes. Throughout the process, library faculty moderators are working with the students to keep them on task and engaged with the project. After the interviews are complete, the librarians oversee the oral histories' preservation, archiving, transcribing, and publishing to the college website.

Preparing by Researching

The McEntegart Hall Library Archives was established in 2008 and is located in the Brooklyn campus library building. The students conduct research in the archives using the SJC publications and photographs from 1916 to the present that are available in the collection; these include the Brooklyn campus yearbooks (*Footprints*), newsletters—such as the *President's Reports* and *St. Joseph's College Magazines*—and SJC course catalogs. Students also consult newspaper article clippings about the college, dating from the early 20th century.

While most of these items have been digitized and are accessible online, the faculty moderators make sure that students primarily interact with the physical materials in the archives. Students have commented that they enjoy the visit to the archives. They've said they prefer going through print materials and feeling the paper, and they claim that by flipping through the materials, they come across things they did not expect to find.

For the initial archive visit, students are not given specific questions from the moderators and are encouraged to browse through the items they are interested in viewing. The archive is rather small, so students are able to easily engage with the materials in an intimate setting. Quite frequently, the *Footprints* yearbooks quickly stimulate their curiosity about their predecessors and social life in the early 20th century, as they find differences and things that have remained the same.

One of the public newsletters, *Two Forty Five*, published from 1963 to 1999, provided an overview of the major happenings at SJC. Findings from those newsletters led students to develop a hypothesis of the reasons for the pivotal changes that happened on campus. For example, upon learning that SJC became coed in 1969, students became curious about why this change was put in place and what kinds of internal and external factors existed on campus—and in the world—to bring it about. After further research, students discovered that there were several contributing factors, such as the establishment of the City University of New York (CUNY) system in 1961 and that a neighboring, all-male academic institution—St. Francis College—went coed in 1969. This created competition among higher education institutions in the metropolitan New York area. To understand SJC's history contextually, students need to also explore what was happening in the world at large.

After completing their initial research, librarian mentors provide student teams with brief biographies on their assigned interviewees, but they're encouraged to conduct further research to learn more about the interviewee. Based on the bio and the institutional history, each student constructs their interview questions for their assigned interviewees, and then their team decides which set of questions to ask. Moderators emphasize to the students that when constructing their questions, they should ensure contextualization and plan to pose them in a way that demonstrates their research.

Conducting the Interviews

In the first round of interviews, Sister Mary Florence Burns, who is from the class of 1946 and a long-standing member of the SJC faculty and administration, shared her insights about her college life in the 1940s, as well as her experiences teaching and serving as an administrator at SJC.

Interview Excerpt

Susan Reyes (class of 2019): “How do you feel about the diminishing number of nuns at St. Joseph's College?”

Sister Mary Florence Burns: “New York state tended to be anti-Catholic. I don't think it really is now; we are much too diverse. But it was anti-Catholic in its origins and in its attitudes. And while the graduates of the academy of St. Joseph in Brentwood were welcome—were academically qualified to go to Barnard College—they were not welcomed socially. And so, the sisters decided that they needed to establish a college that would welcome the graduates of their academies. And so, St. Joseph's College was put in place—was developed with full support from the congregation, both financially and in terms of personnel.”

The excerpt above offers some context for SJC's origin story. It is an important part of the college's history and provided interesting insight at a time when we were celebrating the 100th anniversary of the its founding.

For later interviews, the office of alumni relations and the office of institutional advancement assisted in connecting the moderators with alumni who might be interested in participating in the project, such as Mary Goodwin-Oquendo, class of 2006.

Interview Excerpt

Anesa Hanif (class of 2023): “What would your advice be for women who may face discrimination at job?”

Mary Goodwin-Oquendo: “As an attorney, I face age discrimination; you walk into a room and you are the youngest person there, people are so dismissive of you. I face gender discrimination. ... I face race

Capturing Oral Histories Breathes Life Into the Past

“After completing the interview with Sister Mary Florence, I realized this oral history project is just one piece in the puzzle that will help future generations better understand and connect with not only hardcore facts but personal stories, mementos, and experiences of past generations and how they can be related to today’s societies.”

—Madison Acosta ('21), in an excerpt from a spring 2018 project reflection paper



From left to right, co-authors Mayumi Miyaoka and Lauren Kehoe, Amarfi Collado ('20), Sister Mary Florence Burns, and Susan Reyes ('19) in spring 2017

discrimination. ... One example is I remember walking into the federal courthouse, downtown Brooklyn. I'm walking through with my colleagues, who are all older and white and a combination of men and women. When you are an attorney, you don't have to check your phone. So I'm going through with them, and they go through and they stop me, 'You know you cannot bring your phone with you.' [laughter] ... You can get mad about it, but it's better to prepare yourself and to call them out on it in an effective way. If you face discrimination at work regardless of where you are working and regardless of what the discrimination is—whether it's on your religion, or your age, gender, national origin, and sex, and so on—keep a journal of what happened and file a complaint with EEOC [Equal

Employment Opportunity Commission] as soon as possible so that you are able to preserve your rights.”

The account shared by Goodwin-Oquendo astonished the students, and it was a powerful reminder to them to be aware of these challenges as they prepare for their professional endeavors after graduation.

Project Goals and Objectives

The main goals for the Voices of SJC oral history project are to make sure that it is student-led and academically meaningful. Its objectives were constructed based on the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy), published by a joint task force of ACRL's Rare Books and

Manuscripts Section and the Society of American Archivists Council. The focus is on two main areas: connected learning and creative placemaking.

With regard to connected learning, the objectives are to create opportunities for students to contribute to the scholarly conversation; participate in a “peer-supported learning experience” through creative processes; engage in in-person discourse to fill a gap in written history; and build competencies in research, critical thinking, communication, group work, problem solving, and interviewing techniques.

As for creative placemaking, the objectives are that students engage in public discourse, discover “authentic sense of place” and a feeling of belonging to the community, foster “curiosity about the past and appreciation for historical sources and actors,” and contribute to the historical record of their college community.

Technical Requirements

Conducting the interviews requires basic computer-literacy skills as well as minimal technical, human, and physical resources.

Setup Requirements

- A handheld audio recorder (H4n Pro)
- SD cards
- A small, quiet room
- A camera for still photos
(nice to have, but not required)
- One or two project moderators

After the interviews are completed, recordings are saved as .wav files. The audio and image files, if taken, are uploaded to the Internet Archive (archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22St.+Joseph%27s+College%2C+New+York%22&and%5B%5D=mediatype%3A%22audio%22), so that they are available on the web. The Internet Archive is a free platform, and you can create your own collection page and upload audio, video, or photographs. It is a great alternative if your institution does not have a repository or CMS. The recordings, transcripts, and photos are also made available on the library’s libguides page (brooklyn.sjcnj.libguides.com/VoicesofSJC) for ease of access and content management. The best preservation practice is to have two copies of the files saved in at least two different locations, which could be in local server space or cloud storage space.

Challenges and Tips

If you would like to emulate our work—and we encourage you to give it a try—here are a few challenges our moderators observed that you will want to minimize. Scheduling can be difficult, so get started as early as possible on securing dates, locations, and other logistics. Unexpected technology challenges cannot be avoided when equipment is involved in carrying out the project. However, they can be reduced through preparation and testing ahead of time and having

a plan B. Availability of resources—both physical and personal—should be taken into consideration when deciding on the scale and scope of the project. Additionally, sustainability is a key to the project’s continuation. Are resources available for you to sustain it? Also, ethical and privacy concerns are at the core of our project. We advise you to have a thorough consent release agreement form in place prior to launching your initiative. Considering the personal nature of oral history interviews, it is important to keep the release agreement flexible and provide a takedown or editing policy that’s open to the participants’ discretion.

Conclusion

The Voices of SJC was a consistently popular academic concentration, and there were several students who participated more than once. As of spring 2019, the project is offered as a one-credit seminar course for honors students, and the individuals interviewed include faculty members and alumni, in addition to the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Students have overwhelmingly responded in favor of participating in this project. It has made a lasting and meaningful impact on their time at SJC, and they have also contributed to its history. Despite some challenges, the project is achievable with preparation and commitment. Feel free to reach out to the moderators for additional information: tinyurl.com/VoicesofSJC.

Note: This article is based on a presentation at ALA’s 2020 Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia on Jan. 26, 2020.

A Brief History of St. Joseph’s College

St. Joseph’s College (SJC) in New York is a small liberal arts college established by the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1916 with 12 female students enrolled in the Clinton Hill district of Brooklyn. SJC is an institution based on Catholic tradition and originally served an all-women college. SJC is known for offering one of the oldest and most reputable child study programs on the East Coast, which was founded in 1934. The college became coed in 1969 and expanded to Long Island in 1978.

Lauren Kehoe is the undergraduate instruction and outreach librarian at New York University (NYU), where she works with partners throughout NYU and New York City to provide unique and diverse library services to undergraduates. Additionally, Kehoe works with the students to introduce them to the innumerable ways the library can support their work. Previously, she was the associate director of McEntegart Library at St. Joseph’s College in Brooklyn, where she worked for 9 years.

Mayumi Miyaoka (pronounced my-you-me) was born and raised in Japan. She is a librarian and archivist at St. Joseph’s College in Brooklyn. Miyaoka received an M.A. in library and information science from San Jose State University and a librarian certificate from Meiji University in Tokyo in 2010.