

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ursuline Sisters Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 286

SISTER ELIZABETH KERRIGAN

Interviewed

by

Donna DeBlasio

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: Sister Elizabeth Kerrigan
INTERVIEWER: Donna DeBlasio
SUBJECT: Convent life, teaching, Ursuline and Mooney schools.
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D: This is an interview with Sister Elizabeth Kerrigan for the Youngstown State University History Program on the Ursuline Sisters by Donna DeBlasio on March 19, 1975, at 1:50 p.m.

Sister Elizabeth Kerrigan could you tell us something about your family background and your educational background?

K: Certainly, I was born and raised on the east side of Youngstown. My entire life was spent at 178 Lincoln Park Drive, which was across from that historic big rock that is well known. As children we used to play there and we sincerely believed that the Indians had their council there. I think since that time there has been a plaque put on the rock. I grew up in Lincoln Park and spent much of my life there. My parents were Irish immigrants. My father was a foreman for United States Steel. They were very providing parents who worked very hard.

He believed in good education, and there was quite a bit of travel for us. We used to spend our summers at Geneva on Lake Erie traveling different places in the United States. All of us, the children in our family--there were four of us and I was the youngest--went to Sacred Heart Grade School and Ursuline High School. One of my brothers has since died. There are two remaining members besides myself. My brother is a foreman now for United States Steel. My sister's husband is a metallurgist at United States Steel. My brother, before he died, ran for politics in Youngstown and was secretary of treasury for Snyder-Bentley in Youngstown.

My own education after graduating from Ursuline High School was St. Elizabeth Hospital School of Nursing for awhile. Then I entered the Ursulines. My undergraduate work was done at Youngstown University and St. John College in Cleveland. I received my masters from the University of Notre Dame. I did graduate work on my masters at Kent State, Catholic University, University of Iowa, Erie College in Florida. I have 30 hours beyond my masters degree. My area of concentration was in guidance and counseling. In 1970 and 1971, I spent the year as the assistant to the head of the psychology department at St. Thomas College in St. Paul, Minnesota. I have personal assistants in traveling throughout the United States doing programs on interpersonal relationships. It is a program that offers us interest. Then, also I did an internship in family counseling.

D: What influenced you to enter a religious life?

K: Well, probably I would say the idea of service came from the stability of my own family life. I think if you read Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs," there is a statement that people entering a service organization, in order to be successful they have to have had the basic interests met in their childhood. I think that my father's concern that we have this base of physical affection probably had something to do with my desire to also share that with other people. They were religious people, not particularly pious and neither was I. It was more or less a faith type of thing that I felt towards God, about his concern for us and his concern for our neighbors. I think at Ursuline High School that the teachers there spent so much time with us and provided so many things for us, that I suppose that I also had an interest in providing that for other people. It wasn't any great hope for saving the world, or that I was called to anything so terribly, terribly great; it was more of less an interest really in helping other people, I think.

D: What influenced you to join the Ursuline Sisters in particular?

K: I think because I had never thought of entering into the religious life until I was a senior in high school. The interest in becoming a sister came from them and from our principal, who I think is well known by a lot of people in Youngstown. He was killed in an automobile accident in, I think, about 1948 or so. I think their influence and the activities that I was involved with probably influenced me to join the Ursuline Sisters.

D: Could you describe a typical day when you first entered the Ursuline Order?

K: When I first entered the Ursuline Order, of course, there were just a few of us in my class and so we didn't have the fine program that I think they started even a very few years after I had entered. At Logan Avenue, that is where I spent my novitiate. One of our biggest chores was to do cooking. One of the typical days for me would have to do with cooking with all of us who were all around 18 or 20 years old and who knew something about cooking for a whole house full of sisters. My family used to tease me because we would wear these habits with the veils and bird sleeves. We wore the old habits. My brother used to say that he could see a weeks' men u because I had spilled so much on my habit.

It was just very difficult to get used to that sort of thing. You know, I think the separation from the family was more colorful at that time. You didn't go home like postulates do now. I think separation from my family and friends was a little more difficult. Visiting days and things like that were very important to us. There was a greater and quicker separation, which we no longer have.

D: What have your duties been as a nun?

K: I have taught in the elementary school. I was working with student teachers in the elementary school. I taught at Cardinal Mooney High School for twelve years. At Cardinal Mooney I put on shows. I was in charge of dramatics. I was head of the English department and taught theology. Then for the last five years that I was there, I was director of guidance and counseling. We had a rather extensive guidance program there. I also served as senior class advisor on the activities that the senior class was involved in. In dramatics, of course, we became rather well known for productions at Cardinal Mooney, in which we would try to have as many students who were interested in being in a show, involved in Christmas shows and Thanksgiving shows, senior plays, and musicals. I was quite active in that.

Presently I have a new position of Associate Vicar for Religious. That name implies working with sisters of all orders in the dioceses, having programs for them, certain ways that they can serve the church, interpreting their needs and helping them grow with the changes of the times. I am also director of the house of prayer, which the dioceses have opened to deepen the prayer life of sisters. It has a sort of semi-contemporary aspect to it. I think it's in tune with the times as far as the desire of the sisters to have a deeper and stronger prayer life. I also, since 1971, have been greatly involved with lay people, with families, with giving programs on having

more effective family communication in the households and the families.

D: What do you remember about any of the convents that you have lived in?

K: I guess I lived at the Rayen Avenue Convent. I remember that as an old place, but one in which the sisters were very close. At those convents where we all got to know each other very well, everybody went out to teach at a different school and we came home at night at the Rayen Avenue Convent, which is a little different now. For example, the sister teaches at St. Rose where she lives in a convent of St. Rose at Girard. When I lived on Rayen Avenue, many of us taught elsewhere. I taught at Cardinal Mooney High School and my home was at Rayen Avenue. There was a large family kind of feeling that we did many things together and we had quite enjoyable times. I spent my novitiate in Logan Avenue Convent. Then I moved to the new convent on Shields Road, which, of course, was large, which was good for us because we had grown into a need for something like that. We had adequate facilities, a swimming pool. We liked that too.

D: How were special occasions celebrated, like Christmas and Easter?

K: Are you speaking of now or then?

D: Then.

K: I think there is a big difference in that. One of the things that my sister and sister-in-law and family miss is the old kind of celebrating that we did together when my nieces and nephews were small. All the families of the sisters would kind of visit together and my nieces and nephews, who were only about two or three years old, just loved to come to the convent because they would see all these other children and nieces and nephews of the sisters. They would run in the big halls and up and down the stairs and fall and cry and fight. There are those sisters that claim that it is because of my nieces and nephews that the rule was changed that we were allowed to go home for the vacation. Since that time, now we more ordinarily spend time with our families over the holidays. The holiday itself is celebrated with a family dinner in whatever local community a person lives. Often times they have big dinners, a mass or a litany, a gift exchange at Christmas. We celebrate things in a rather festive way, I would say. Then the next day we would usually go home and celebrate as part of our family celebration. That is sort of a free choice. A person can spend time with their family or stay if she wishes.

More sisters more and more prefer to go home and spend a little time with their family after the immediate day itself.

D: What do you remember about Ursuline High School?

K: I went to Ursuline High School, I never taught at Ursuline High School. I went to Ursuline High School and loved every minute of it. I think that we had lots of fun. It was a very vital place. I was an officer of my class when I graduated from high school. We sponsored lots of dances and parties. I was involved in plays and things like that. I think that there was quite a bit of interest in academic excellence at Ursuline High School. I think that it was especially inviting to us because we made friends with people from all over town. My closest friend is somebody that went to Ursuline High School in the ninth grade. She was from the north side and I was from the east side and we became friends. I still belong to a club of girls, we formed a club when we were juniors at Ursuline High School. I think it is a place that enters into a person's life and remains with somebody for their remaining years.

D: Could you describe the school when you went there?

K: When I was there Father Joe Gallagher was the principal. The teachers were mostly Ursuline Sisters. We probably didn't get as many lay teachers at that time. That main hall that is right up from the auditorium there, that was kind of the gathering place where we would meet every morning. The school was very much the same except that it didn't have the addition that is on to it. That was later added to it, after I had graduated from there. Of course, we went downtown after school and Strouss was a hangout. Some of the restuarants down there we frequented regularly. We would meet in town in the morning and then go to school. Then everybody would meet each other in town after school. We used to use school tickets and we would have to go down before five o'clock. My mother tried to understand about that and when I was a senior, she didn't want me to use school tickets anymore. She felt that they better go buy me a pass so that I wouldn't have to meet that five o'clock deadline, because too often I just didn't make it.

D: What sisters stand out in your memory and why?

K: Probably the one who stands out most in my memory is Sister Beatrice, who was my first principal. I began teaching at St. Rose in Girard and I was really quite young and I had the sixth grade. I believed in a very well-rounded education for my children, which I felt strongly included

square dancing and lots of projects and parties and baseball at recess. I am quite sure that my class was probably the most extroverted in the building, without a doubt. Sister Beatrice was an older person and she always used to say, "Oh, she will learn." She was quite patient with me really and all these new ideas that I was always wanting to put in. I think I was much more innovated and creative than I was practical about many things, but she always encouraged that in me. I think that was a very important thing in my life.

Mother Blanche was the Superior at that time and she too, I think there were a lot of us young nuns, and she allowed us to do quite a few things because we just always wanted to be involved in new ideas and things. She tolerated that really quite well, I would say.

My high school teachers, of course, were Sister Kathleen and Sister Rosemary and Sister Margaret, who has since died. Those were some of the teachers that were at Ursuline when I was there, that stand out. My first grade teacher, Sister Anna Marie, I think all the first grade kids had her. Then, of course, I made close sister friends, who have since left the community, who were very dear to me. Sister Jude and Patricia, they were very close friends of mine who have since chosen other walks of life.

D: What years of your own religious life stand out?

K: Probably the ones that I am in presently stand out quite a bit because I think I am into something that is almost the future for religious life. Other than the present ones, the ones that stand out the most I think are the years that I spent at Cardinal Mooney High School. It was a new school, it was a very active and vital school. It was in direct competition with Ursuline High school; therefore, you have that competitive attitude that I suppose was engendered more by the faculty than by the students because many had graduated from Ursuline High School.

We had five different orders of sisters teaching there. We had laymen from all walks of life. I think putting on shows for students, we had maybe 250 students in a Christmas show. To see them develop in their own social graces and their own talents, I think that was very interesting and exciting. Those were probably the years, but the work I am doing right now is an extremely interesting work and I think it is very important for the future of those of religious life and the place of sisters in the world today.

D: What do you think you remember about the Mother Superiors that you served under?

K: Well, Mother Blanche, as I was saying, certainly was very good with us as young people. She allowed us a great deal of freedom in pursuing our own educational interests. Any interest that you might have in graduate work, it was just taken for granted that that was good and that was to be done. I think she encouraged us a great deal on that, to become very professionally excellent.

Mother Marie, of course, I think I rememberr most because at that moment we needed very much to have a new Mother House. The effort she put forth in getting that up I think is a credit that goes to her and to the community and really to the people of Youngstown because that was such a need.

D: What changes have you noticed in the order from when you first started until now?

K: Well, any religious community in the present time, everybody went through a struggle. You know after Vatican II, when the communities were told to renew themselves, what we hadn't thought of is needing renewing. We suddenly realized that we were living and working and not having to come to grips with this. When you start looking at the fact that although I think we were very involved in the times before Vatican II, many of our life styles were not keeping up with that, you know, our clothes and our schedules. I think there has been a new change in that. The most recent change that I think has happened now is this, I think sisters see themselves in a role of real service to the world individually. They see themselves as very comtemplative people and want to deepen their prayer life. In that deepened prayer life they wish to share with the world. Their vows they see now as not so much as something that they keep in themselves, for example, poverty or celibacy are allowed for freedom of work in the world and to help people. I think there is a great interest in that and I think there is a great interest in prayer.

D: Do you approve of these changes?

K: I strongly approve of them. I think they are very, very good. I think that religious life is stronger and better than it has ever been before. When you are talking about this Superior, I think the presence of Superiors has done a great deal toward keeping this movement going and strengthening the individual sister and her commitment. I think that the community has to increase somewhat in numbers because of people leaving. That, of course, had to do with that time, and I think that is true of anything.

When you reevaluate I think what has come out of it is a very realistic kind of part of the world, helping the world, liking the world, but being of Christ, and I think that is very important.

D: How do you think the image of the sister has changed among the people outside as well as inside the community?

K: Well, that would be hard to say because I think it has changed as well as there are kinds of people. You know there are so many different kinds of sisters. You know, before people used to be able to say, sisters say this or sisters do this, now there is as much variety among the sisters as there are among other people. So some people think that it would be better if the sisters were the sisters that we were in the past. Some people, I was just at a party recently and some people were talking about the new sisters' ways. They were calling them the sisters of the present day. They feel that the sisters of the present day are doing so much for lay people and helping people in a very positive, good way. I think that as time goes on and because of things like this, people would have a greater understanding of really what a life of a sister is. I think at one time it was all mystery and then all of a sudden it was all public and seemed to be chaotic. Now we are leveling off into a new thing where it is no longer a mystery, but it is understood and understood more realistically.

D: Why do you think it is difficult to get modern women to enter the religious life?

K: Well, I think it is difficult in our world today for anybody to commit themselves to anything for life. I don't think that is just in religious life. I think that college students are finding it kind of hard to commit themselves to a lifelong job. I think college students kind of find it hard to commit themselves in a lifelong marriage. I think our society is kind of at that point, so I think that we would decide that that goes along with the permanency of a whole lifetime. It seems like a long time. Just recently I was talking with a girl that has graduated from college who has made plans to enter a religious community. She said, a couple of years ago when she and I were talking, "I was really for holding off for a year or two." That was two years ago. I think things have changed. I think two years ago we were still trying to reevaluate the religious life. I think in 1975, there are going to be a lot of people entering the religious life from now on. Not the same numbers that there were in the 1940's maybe, but religious life is again seen as a vital form of life. I think that the changes now allow for a girl to live a

religious life in a 1975 or 1980 world and lead it well. I don't really feel it is going to be as difficult now as I did even two years ago. I think things have changed that much in the last two years. I think she can be her own person. I think she can develop more individuality and serve as a religious woman just as well as she had ten years ago.

D: What do you think is the future direction of the Ursuline Order?

K: The future direction of the Ursuline Order, I think, hopefully, is going to just keep changing as the needs of the time change. The development of a sister will take direction so that she is within herself, not dependent so much on structure, but upon her own freedom of person to go out and meet the needs of the people. The reason we had a speaker is that today a sister is called to be present in an affective way, that is in a feeling way with the needs of the times and with her own call from God to serve. I think that the sister is going to be more on her own to do it and yet within a strong community of support, but not so much structure. I think she is going to be doing all kinds of things. I hope the sisters are going to spend some time on helping in family life. I also think that in education, particularly in the field of Catholic education, because I think that any system, a two kind of education is better, you know, a public and a parochial. They just help each other, sisters on the university level and sisters in adult education, sisters in communication arts, you know, the media, TV, and radio. Sisters are presently in that and I think they will continue to be. Sisters are in houses of prayer like we have here. This is a new idea, the whole aspect of the sister spending her whole life in helping people pray. That wasn't so fifty years ago. Her work was mostly teaching them to read and write. Now I think that the whole ministry of prayer is important. These are all ways that I see sisters of the future serving, but I also think there are unknown ways that they are going to serve. The same as Youngstown College students, the university students see themselves serving and doing things now that fifteen years from now they will have grown from that into something else. I think that Ursuline sisters will be doing the same thing.

D: Do you have any other comments that you would like to make?

K: No, I just think that I have spent my whole life in Youngstown and I think this is good opportunity for us to be able to share our way of life with you and your interest with us. I think it is really important for all of us.