

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ursuline Sisters

Life in the Ursuline Community

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SISTER NANCY DAWSON

Interviewed

by

Donna DeBlasio

on

March 10, 1975

## SISTER NANCY DAWSON

Sister Nancy Dawson, of the Ursuline Community, was born on January 28, 1937 in Youngstown. She is the daughter of Hannah Curley and Francis Dawson. Sister Nancy attended Immaculate Conception Grade School and Ursuline High School. From there she went on to Youngstown University, where she majored first in pre-med and then received a Bachelor of Science in Education. She continued her education by attaining a master's degree in Communication from Notre Dame University and a Master of Science in Education from the Catholic University of America.

Sister Nancy joined the Ursuline order in the late 1950's. Until this fall, when she was made principal of St. Charles School, Sister Nancy was working with the Communications Office of the Diocese of Youngstown. Through this office she taped the Christian youth shows, "Movin' Out" and "Celebrate", the syndicated "Telespots", and the monthly "Thought For Today". Sister Nancy is also involved in the education of retarded children, teaching media methods to adults in the Diocese, and in communication workshops throughout the several counties in the Youngstown Diocese. Sister Nancy is active in the broader community as a member of the Citizens' Advisory Committee and the Mayor's Human Relations Committee.

By her participation in both community and religious affairs, Sister Nancy Dawson is representative of the modern nun's involvement in different aspects of the community.

DONNA DEBLASIO  
May 6, 1976

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INTERVIEWEE: SISTER NANCY DAWSON  
INTERVIEWER: Donna DeBlasio  
SUBJECT: Life in the Ursuline Community  
DATE: March 10, 1975

DD: This is an interview with Sister Nancy Dawson by Donna DeBlasio on the Ursuline Sisters Project at the Youngstown Chancery Office on March 10, 1975, at 1:10.p.m.

DD: Sister, would you like to tell us about your family background, your educational background?

ND: Well, my mother is Hannah Curley. I come from an Irish Catholic background on her side of the family. My father, Francis Dawson, comes from a Protestant background. He's not Catholic and has no practical religion, but he is a very Christian man. My father worked in the steel mills of Youngstown from the time he was sixteen years old until the present. He's now retired. Both he and my mom are retired and living on Avon Street on the East Side of Youngstown, where we lived most of our lives.

You asked for a little bit of my educational background. I attended elementary school with the Ursuline Sisters at Immaculate Conception School on the East Side of Youngstown, and to this day, it has remained my own parish. I go to Mass there on Sunday. After that I went to Ursuline High School. At that time, most of my friends were going to East High School. I had a very delightful Irish grandmother who spent her social security check every month paying my tuition for Ursuline High School. After that, I went to Youngstown State University and majored in pre-med. I attended the University for almost three years

and worked full time at Truscon Steel Company in Youngstown, Ohio, as a secretary. Then after that, I continued my pre-med work at Marquette University in Milwaukee at which time I changed my major to English. I then came back from Milwaukee and went to New York for a short time to live. After that, of course, I came back and joined the Ursuline Sisters, so I had had about three and a half years of college and was about twenty or twenty-one years old at the time.

After entering the Ursuline Convent, I continued my education at Youngstown State University where I received my bachelor's degree in education. I attended graduate school at Notre Dame University, in South Bend, an opportunity I am positive I never would have had if I hadn't been in the Ursuline Community. They provided this education for me and I'm very grateful.

At Notre Dame University I got a master's degree in communications, which is the field that I am very active in right now. After that, I received a master's degree in religious education at Catholic University of America, which I am just finishing up. I also took graduate courses at Marquette University in play direction and production and in acting, which has been very helpful in the area that I am in right now. I spent a summer living there and transferred those credits to Notre Dame. I've also taken graduate courses at Youngstown State University. That's pretty much the educational background. Most of my education, the most valuable part of it, has been through my own life experiences prior to and during my religious life. I'm continuing to be educated right now in that way.

DD: What influenced your decision to enter a religious life?

ND: Well, it didn't happen at any one moment, you know, when you kind of get zapped and realize that you belong in religious life. I think it's been a whole growth process that brought me to that decision and I continue, again, to grow in that decision every day. It's kind of a dynamic thing. Definitely, my own parents, who are very, very Christian people, had had a profound influence on me as a person and my choice to enter religious life and so have some of the Ursuline sisters that I met, many of whom taught me in the elementary and high schools.

The sisters are very kind, hospitable people. I can remember their inviting me over to the old Wick Avenue Ursuline convent there, not the one that is presently

there by the school. I don't know if you remember it. The sisters gave me lunch and helped me out at the old Wick Avenue convent. They had a basement room downstairs with some library books and some biology materials and I remember, at that time, I was very much interested in pre med. I remember being in the basement with Sister Regina, who was a beautiful person and very mission conscious. I used to work closely with her on a lot of projects.

DD: Why did you join the Ursulines?

ND: That's rather interesting. Well, when I got out of high school, as I said, I worked and stayed in contact with Sister Virginia McDermott who is presently one of the coordinators in our community. I can remember at one time thinking that I was going to go off to Africa and ride the camels and save the missions. At that time, I went down to Valley Park, Missouri, and stayed with the Maryknoll Sisters there for a weekend. I was thinking, of course, that I might want to be a missionary sister.

After that weekend I came back home and I went up and talked to a very dear friend of mine, who is a priest in Youngstown, Monsignor Breen Malone, who was the vocation director of the Diocese of Youngstown at that particular time. I can remember just in that little interview with him that I kind of came to the conclusion that maybe I really wanted to be an Ursuline sister,

I think it was that continual contact that I kept with the Ursulines even after I graduated from high school that influenced my decision to enter religious life. I can remember telling Sister Albert Marie Beil one day in a class that I was thinking about the missionaries. I can remember her saying, "Well, I'll get you their address and let you know who to talk to." In other words, I never felt pressured by the Ursulines to join the Ursulines. There was always that openness and the availability of the sisters that impressed me. Probably it was the openness and the availability that I wanted to continue in my own life style and therefore, came to the Ursuline sisters as a result of that.

DD: Could you describe a typical day when you first entered and then perhaps how it changed throughout your lifetime?

ND: Well, I'm thirty-eight and I find it difficult to go back to the early days and remember. I might say that

the one thing that's been consistent in life style and everyday work has been that I've always been busy. I have never been able to say that there's been one day in my religious life that I was bored, because each new day had something new and different to view in terms of relationships and in terms of schedule. Now, when I first entered, of course, we were out at the Logan Avenue mansion. The day began very early in the morning with the Divine Office and Mass at that time. A large portion of the day, at that time, was spent, for me personally, in doing housework for the reason that I had been to college and had finished a great deal of it. Therefore, most of my colleagues at that time were taking a lot of classes that I wasn't able to take. It seems we spent a lot of time in physical work really and also a great deal of time in prayer. There were a few classes that I was taking at the time.

Recreation, at that time, was much different than it is today. We spent a good deal of time together in the evening sewing. I was never very successful at mending clothes and putting on name tags. We did a lot of shows on special holidays and we would practice those. We spent a lot of time practicing the Office in Latin, Singing practice, I remember so well with Sister Veronica. I also was fortunate to have piano lessons, I had never taken a piano lesson in my life until I got into the convent. I was probably in my twenties when I took my first piano lesson. So I spent a good deal of time practicing every day. I used to practice one or two hours a day at that time. It doesn't sound very exciting today. However, the companionship of the sisters, in the evening, you know, sitting around and sharing the day was just fun. We did a lot outdoors there. The highlight of the day was taking a walk from the convent down to Logan Road and back with all of your companions. There were ten or fifteen of us taking that walk. When you went around the block, that was a real highlight of the day. That was back when I first entered the convent.

There was a lot of laughing at that time over very simple things that just happened in church. Someone would bend over saying the Office and hit their head on a prie dieu. Of course, if you did that, you started laughing, you know. I suppose it's simplicity, the very simplicity of the lifestyle at that time which kind of helped one to develop a deeper type of spirituality than you would have had if the lifestyle had

been a lot more complicated.

Now today, of course, there are some things that have not changed. The typical day would begin early in the morning. We have Office and we have the psalms and liturgy, meditation, and reading the scripture. However, after that, in my own lifestyle, today, for example I work with one hundred teenagers who teach the retarded on Saturday. I work with them an hour every morning four days a week and then on Saturdays we have classes with fifty retarded children. Then I take another class in the morning with a group of young people who work on "Movin' Out", which is a television broadcast weekly show that we do at WKBN. After that, I usually come down to the office here and I start working on scripts. I spend a lot of time during the day going to the studios getting additional materials that I need for the show and working with the directors both at WKBN and WFMJ-TV here in Youngstown

On Wednesday afternoons, I tape the "Movin' Out" show with the young people. It is a show totally produced by youth for youth. It plays every Saturday at two o'clock. On Wednesday evening I tape "Celebrate", which is the show that I do with a young couple, Dick and Kathy Baluch, who write their own scripts for the shows. That show is done in connection with "Christian Values Today" and it's a highly entertaining show. We tape that on Wednesday night. I spend a lot of time during the day at the studios, or working with people in the broader community, for example, people who want to be on the show. There are usually interview segments so therefore, we work with many of the agencies here in town. I think you're aware that there are about 1,029 agencies in Youngstown and many of them are happy to have some visibility in the media. They come and you see the church at work with the agencies in some of the programming that we do.

In the evenings I do adult education for the Diocese of Youngstown. Sometimes that's one night a week or two nights a week. I do a lot of talking to different organizations in town explaining to them what we're doing in the media today. As I mentioned before, I work with the retarded on Saturdays. On Sundays I usually have dinner with my family at twelve noon. That's pretty much the activity that would go on in a day. I have supper with the sisters every night and we have a vesper service. Again we say the psalms in the evening. Usually there is something going on at

night, either taping at the studio or a talk as I mentioned.

I could give you a typical day if I just looked at the calendar. It might give you some idea of what goes on. For example, a week ago, on February 25, I came from school in the morning to the office and had an appointment with Dave Musselman from the Chords, a young group of musicians who want to do a show next year with us. The next day I had a taping again at WKBN at eight o'clock in the evening and also a Citizens' Advisory Committee meeting. I've been on the mayor's Human Relations Committee and am now on the Citizen's Advisory Committee. It's a committee that's trying to see how they can best spend that \$3.6 million. So you see, I'm very active in the broader community, which I see as a whole future for us as religious women in terms of involvement in the Youngstown Community.

The next evening I had a class called "The Electric Bible" for adults. I had a meeting at the motherhouse. I've served on several commissions. Right now, we have a chapter committee that I'm working on. The next day I had on my schedule to take things to the stations. I had a staff meeting here with the people that I work with.

The following week I spent going out of town to the seven counties that were involved here in communications, doing communication workshops for the people in those different counties here in the Diocese of Youngstown. I showed them the programming that the communication department is doing and how we can best serve them. Another evening that week after coming back from one of those workshops we had to tape what we call "Thought for Today", which comes on once a month. We had it once a month, five days a week, during the "Today Show". Many of the sisters have been involved in that kind of taping. The program format includes reflections on social issues with some action orientation at the end of the "Thought for Today".

I've worked on "Telespots" that could be produced and syndicated at that time. Of course, "Godspell" is on the calendar; that must be the performance up at Kent State University. You can see the kind of recreation that we can get involved in. Those are just a few of the things that while glancing through the calendar here would give you some idea. Another meeting I see here is with a young man from Y.S.U. by the name of



Doctor Lou Zona. He does a T.V. program for us once a month called "Moving in on the Arts", in which we explore contemporary art and discuss the Christian values in that art. That's pretty much the kind of activity that I'm into professionally and hopefully religiously. I see my own service as being a very intricate part of my own faith experience and hopefully these are faith sharing experiences when I'm out working in the broader community.

DD: Could you describe special occasions like Christmas and Easter, how they were celebrated or anything that would happen special on those days?

ND: Well, I think the specialness of those days is two fold: one, I think they are moments of history when the sisters come together for a special service or a Mass and I think the beauty of those moments lies in the fact that they've kind of helped me to personally recall my own commitment to religious life and it's a very happy experience. It's kind of reevaluating where you're at in terms of your own spirituality, your own growth, and in your relationships with the sisters. I think it's those moments of sharing with the sisters when we're present in a group on that special occasion that makes it memorable.

Usually, the Mass is followed by a dinner, and then a little music at dinner. It's kind of a relaxing situation, but one of real community, I think. It's kind of a highlight where we're reminded that we're part of a whole and not just, you know, on our own. Also it causes you to reflect on the very meaning of the vows that we took at one time: poverty, chastity, and obedience. You kind of rethink them and you ask yourself on these special occasions, "Have I grown? What are my relationships to the community?" It's kind of a flashback on your whole life, each one of those special occasions.

The second part of holidays that I would mention as being highly significant is that those holidays are always spent not only with my religious community but with my family. They're very happy occasions. We actually have, as you know, a two-fold family sharing: our own family by birth and our religious family that we are a part of. So it makes them very happy occasions.

DD: What do you remember about Ursuline High School?

ND: Well, I have some very happy experiences that I remember at Ursuline High School and then I have some unhappy experiences too. I remember being put out of school two times, one time for skipping and another time I think it was for violation of the dress code. People say that we tend to remember the bad things as well as the happy memories and I do remember that.

My other experiences there I remember so well. I'm thinking particularly in terms of Sister Virginia whom I had worked with in terms of journalism and Mother Winifred, who's very sick right now. I remember working on the yearbook with her. You notice as I'm talking and as I'm reflecting, that it was people that made Ursuline High School. I spent a lot of time with Sister Regina, whom I had mentioned earlier, Sister Albert Marie, who taught me typing, and Sister Celine, who was in guidance at that time and whom I had had for class. She's still there today in that same capacity. Sister Ann Lynch, I had for algebra at that time. It's the people really that I remember well during those days at Ursuline and that actually made Ursuline High School.

DD: What unique things do you remember about any of the convents you have lived in?

ND: Well, my first teaching assignment was at St. Charles in Boardman. What was unique about that was moving into a motel. There were all little individual units outside and that was my first living experience after leaving the Logan Avenue mansion. It was a very different kind of physical set up to be a part of. It was an old motel prior to becoming a convent, as I said. I remember a little garden inside and spending time there, eating at the picnic tables. I suppose I remember because it had that physical structure that kind of stands out in my mind.

DD: What sisters stand out in your memories and why?

ND: Well, I think I mentioned many of the sisters from the high school experience. Also, if I would go back perhaps to the grade school experience, I think Sister Mary Alice stands out in my mind. Sister Mary Alice was my eighth grade teacher. Then when I entered the religious life she was the director of the novices for a period of time. I think what impressed me most about her was that she was a very kind person and was always quiet but very sensitive to how you felt. I recall, for example, on a Saturday night when I was a

novice saying to her, "Saturday night and everybody my age should be out on a date, and here I am in the convent studying on a Saturday night." I can remember her response was very warm, very understanding. I remember her laughing about it and talking to me about it. She was just an extremely kind, sensitive person.

Also, I remember at Immaculate Conception School, my first grade teacher was Sister Virginia, who is one of our coordinators, right now, today and a person who has helped me through some very difficult growing times in religious life. She's a person that was always available, that I could call, that I could go and see if I had particular things in mind. Like when I was going through a different phase of growth or transition in my life, I went to her.

I remember Sister Loretta. At that time, she taught music. Sister Damian, who's dead now, God rest her soul; she was there. I had Sister Damian for two years. One of my third grade teachers was Sister Gabriel and I can remember her and Sister Mary Joseph in the fourth grade. Of course, at that time, you know, the sisters would go from one room to the other room and you knew them so well. These are just a few of the sisters that stand out in my mind when I'm thinking back on the grade school years.

DD: How about the superiors you have had as a nun?

ND: You mean sisters that have been influential?

DD: That's right.

ND: Well, in terms of maybe the superiors that I've known, I think of Sister Edna Marie particularly. As I said, religious life is a growth experience; one goes through different stages of development. I can remember at one time in my religious life approaching her with a very personal problem that I had at that time and I just remember a very total understanding and, you know, acceptance of me and an understanding of the problem that I was having. It was just very beautiful spiritual guidance. It enabled me to change my physical job so I could work through some of the problems that I was having at that time. I remember her.

I remember Mother Blanche. I'm mentioning now some of the superiors whom I have been with in religious life.

I remember her particularly during the years of formation. She would come out to the novitiate and take us for a ride. I remember one time going down to Wellsville, Ohio and she asked everybody what they would like to have on their picnic. You can't imagine the conglomeration. Some wanted pickles. Some wanted chocolate frozen custard. I can remember her accomodating us at that time when taking us for an outing. I also remember her in terms of our own clothing, when we wore long habits. She would spend hours of her time out at the novitiate helping the sisters to sew and get their habits together at that particular time. Those were really the two superiors that I had in the past.

Then, of course, in the last few years, we have Sister Mary Conroy, with whom I studied for a little bit of time at Notre Dame University in the summertime. She is the person I would go to for an objective opinion when I was trying to make a decision. Those are the three that stand out in my mind.

DD: What years of your religious life stand out and why do they stand out?

ND: Well, they all stand out in terms of being happy years of my life. I've really enjoyed religious life. As I said before, I've never had a boring day. It has always allowed me to be creative and to do the things that I thought I had to do in the service of other people. It's always been supportive of me in that way. I think my early thirties in religious life were a difficult time as I think they are for most women, whether they're married or single. It doesn't matter what you're doing. I went through maybe three or four years of really reevaluating everything that I was doing and reevaluating my own relationships. Those growthful years really stand out and I think as a result of them I'm a little more sensitive to other people's needs.

DD: What changes have there been from when you first entered the order until now?

ND: Well, there have been quite a few changes in externals, obviously. The way I'm dressed today is not the way I dressed when I first entered religious life. Again this is an external thing; it's not an essential thing to religious life. It has nothing to do with the way we live out our vows today and the way we look at them. I must say that I've reinterpreted the vows,

but they are basically, essentially, what makes my religious life. There are two things really: the vows and then community life itself. These have not changed. I'm still living in community and I am still practicing or living out the vows.

Now, I think what has changed are the externals: the places we live, the kind of schedule that I mentioned, the way we dress. Essentially religious life, community life, and the vows are still there and our own interpretation of them has changed. I see community today in a much different sense than I did twenty years ago. I see growth in community as a very dynamic thing. I see the vows now much more dynamically than I did when I entered religious life.

Today I see personal poverty as a reminder that I should not succumb to the consumerism which I view on TV at night, consumerism which plagues our society today. I interpret my own vow of poverty as living on thirty dollars a month out of which I must purchase clothes, shoes and all personal drugstore items that are needed. I consider that as a witness value to poverty. Many years ago, you didn't have the thirty dollars a month and so therefore you didn't have to budget and be aware of where money's going and what the cost of things are today. Again, I think that poverty gives witness to the world; a person can be happy without having all of the items that we see on TV every day.

I reinterpret the vows everyday in terms of our own culture and our own times. Chastity I see in terms of availability. I also see it in terms of incompleteness; living a chaste or charitable life. There is, no doubt, a dimension missing, sexually in one's life as a religious nun, but hopefully, this says to the world, "Hey, we're all incomplete in some way." We never always have everything we want and hopefully this says something about the nature of our next life with Christ which I believe in as a Christian. I believe at that time, there will be a totality. There will be no more barriers in community; there will be a oneness, a unity that this world has never known. So chastity says this to me and hopefully it's saying this to the world.

I think today we still take the vow of obedience but more in terms of responsibility. We all have to take responsibility for the decisions that we make. I'm responsible to a whole group of women for the decisions

that I make because I reflect sometimes the lives of the other sisters. So I see the vows in terms of responsible decision making, realizing that it's affecting a lot of people in the world. Now, years ago, I would have interpreted it as obeying perhaps an authority figure. Actually, what I'm talking about is a reinterpretation.

This is how things have changed in the way we look at them. It's only natural. Our culture changes. The times have changed. The Ursuline sisters who have always responded to the needs of their times have adapted and changed. This has been the pattern. We have always done that. Our own foundress whom I've mentioned so many times, St. Angela of Merici, was a woman of her own times and she certainly adapted. I think the Ursulines have continued to follow her example through all of these years of service in the Youngstown community and in this whole Diocese of Youngstown.

DD: Do you feel that these changes are for the better?

ND: I think that most of the changes, I don't know about all the external changes, have been good. I definitely think our reinterpretation of life is good. The fact that changes came so quickly in some instances have caused us to reflect. I would say yes, if the changes cause us to be more reflective human beings and have caused us to reevaluate what we're doing in religious life. I think that the changes have done that. Now whether the external change was the best thing at the best moment in time doesn't seem to be the important point. The important point is whether or not the changes have caused us to be more deeply committed human beings. I think naturally when you're weighing whether it was good or bad, which you've done in terms of change, this type of reflection does take place. You kind of evaluate the changes and live according to that evaluation.

DD: Why do you think it's difficult to get modern women to enter religious life?

ND: Well again, today, I suppose it's because they have many alternative plans for service. You know, a person comes to religious life because they have these commitments to the person of Christ and to the service of their fellow human beings. Now today, when women get out of high school or college, they have all kinds of opportunities. I mentioned just earlier that there

are 1029 service agencies that they can go to. If they want to give a year or two of their time in the Peace Corps, they can do that.

Recently there was an article in the paper about the number of people who do volunteer work with church organizations. The service that I mentioned of a person's life today can be performed in many, many different ways. I don't think that they always had those options or lifestyles to choose from. That might be one reason why women today would have a difficult decision because they have more opportunities to choose from. That would be one thing, I would say, that has caused them to take on other alternatives, but I still believe that there are women today who are called to a very special life style in the community. I believe that young people will continue to come into religious life. You know, I think it's a very hopeful thing. I still believe there are dedicated persons who would want to serve with vows and within a community.

DD: What do you think is the future direction of the Ursuline Sisters?

ND: Well, I see the future primarily in terms of the past and the present. In the past, the sisters have always served and in the present, they continue to do that.

I see the future as being the same--that they will continue to serve the needs of the community whatever those needs might be. Now, those needs definitely have changed over the years.

Primarily we were a teaching order and still are a teaching order of sisters, but most of the time in the earlier years of my religious life were spent in a classroom. Then, as the needs began to change, we began to see that there was a need for adult education, for a kindergarten, and for a pre-school. We've fulfilled those needs,

I don't have the answers to the future, but I do see the needs of the broader social, civic community.

Perhaps in the future we will help and be more actively involved, let's say at council meetings where the sisters can exercise some of their leadership in the civic community. For example, we could perhaps build neighborhood councils where the sisters would help people in the neighborhoods to be able to better communicate their needs to their councilmen. In turn, the councilmen would get a little more pressure to

those who make changes or use money that they're getting in their wards for the betterment of people, for the poor.

I see the future for the sisters in terms of the need of the aged; perhaps there will be more active involvement in working with the people in homes for the aged and in the nursing homes. Already we are involved in hospital work. We've always been with the poor, I see it as an evolving thing. Whatever the need happens to be in the broader community at a particular point in history, I feel confident that the Ursuline Sisters will meet that need and meet it with quality education.

The difference between education in the past and the present and what it might be in the future is, again, a matter of interpretation. We educate in many ways, not necessarily in just a classroom situation although that is an integral part of education. From the cradle to the grave, I suppose that's what it means, and wherever people are, in their growth process from the cradle to the grave, that's where we're going to be. I hope.

DD: Are there any other comments that you would like to make concerning the Ursuline Sisters, the Ursuline order?

ND: Well, only that I am just very, very grateful that God has called me to this particular commitment in the Ursuline Sisters. I've been extremely happy in the many years that I've been in the community and I consider it a pure gift. I am very grateful not only for that call from God, but also from the sisters in the community who have been supportive of me and called me to growth; encouraged me as a person. They have been gifts. I see my whole religious life as one pure gift that I'm extremely grateful for.

END OF INTERVIEW