

# **Sister Mary Michel Boulus Oral History Interview**

Interview Conducted by  
Jennifer Greeson  
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**Title:** Sister Mary Michel Boulus oral history interview, 1993 June 28

**Description:** Sister Mary Michel Boulus recounts her life and her forty-five year career in Catholic education and administration. The daughter of Lebanese immigrants, Sister Boulus grew up in Concord and describes the challenges the Catholic community faced there, including some of the difficulties she personally encountered as a Catholic in a majority-Protestant community. She taught math at both public and Catholic schools before joining the Sisters of Mercy in 1949 and provides a summary of the order's history and how the Sisters became affiliated with Belmont Abbey. She shares some of her experiences working at Catholic high schools around the state and discusses her experiences as the president of Sacred Heart College. Sister Boulus also reflects on the challenges that faced Catholic educational institutions at that time, including the order's declining numbers, the popularity of pastoral ministry over education for newer sisters, and the resulting financial burdens placed on these institutions as they were forced to replace aging religious staff with lay people.

**Biography:** Sister Mary Michel Boulus was a 66-year-old woman at the time of interview, which took place in the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse in Belmont, North Carolina. She was born in China Grove, North Carolina in 1926. She was educated at UNC Greensboro and John Carroll University, and was employed as a high school teacher, and math instructor, treasurer, and president of Sacred Heart College.

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**Transcript Notes:** JG: Jennifer Greeson  
MB: Sister Mary Michel Boulus

## Sister Mary Michel Boulus Oral History Interview Transcript

MB: In North Carolina votes. So that we're immigration, migrants who come from the northern area to populate the state working with large-- (buzzing in background)

*Pause in Recording.*

MB: --music complexion of the, of the North Carolina priced Catholicism. My early recollection-- (buzzing in background)

*Pause in Recording.*

MB: And my parents were foreigners who had moved here. We have not always been the most tolerant people-- (buzzing in background)

*Pause in Recording.*

MB: --Catholics, too. Foreign Catholics, especially, I know. I remember suffering a tremendous amount of, I guess, prejudice to people who had lack of understanding. When I graduated from college in nineteen hundred and forty-seven, I went to University of North Carolina at, in Greensboro, which, and I graduated from Concord High School. I think I might--we've been trying to trace that. I think I am the first Catholic person who was hired in our public school system, to teach in North Carolina because of simply the prejudice and fears that people held against Catholics in North Carolina. That's hard to believe today after Vatican II, when everything was so ecumenical, but that is a true statement. I, I, my brother was a graduate of Notre Dame, and when I entered the college, the convent--he replaced me at Concord High but I, I was very honored to be hired back into my own hometown, my own school but I think that was a result of a lot of things, I had, I had a whole lot of exposure in college. I had--think I'd done very well, and people in the city knew me. But there was a fear of, so much fear of Catholicism at that time. We had a neighbor one time that actually believed that Catholics ate people. No, real, this is true. I know people don't believe that but this is a true statement. The priest would visit my mother if she was sick, and they would just leave, they were so frightened. And, to watch the church change in North Carolina and people begin to absorb the Catholics. And part of that, I'm sure, I'm sure was the, what concept people had of Catholics who thought that we thought we were the only people in the world who were ever going to be saved, you know that's probably an idea that people who lived in the South at that time could not conceive of, because the North is very Catholic populated. So to get that kind of a climate, people have that difficult to understand. So, I grew up in the public school system, and I taught two years in the public school system, with, with regular happiness and hopefully, success and, then I entered the Catholic school system, and people ask, "What is the difference?" I would have to observe, I would suspect, that the freedom of religion and our ability to exercise our religion is a major factor. But

because of the smallness of numbers, also a particular attention to detail be able to be given to students where each individual student could have the attention they need. The camaraderie that exists throughout the whole school. I can't say one was better than the other but I believe that in the days when we were young sisters and had to teach our lesson plans had to be so meticulous that we were well prepared when we went into the classroom so our kind, I think that kind of a discipline singularly a hallmark of a Catholic school even today when people look at disruption in school. I think the private school area, not just Catholic but the private schools that are growing up, I think they tend to speak to discipline more than they do to segregation even though segregation did bring about a number of the public [private] schools that are not religious affiliated. And, and the Sisters of Mercy of North Carolina came here, with the major mission to serve the sick in Wilmington. When the yellow fever epidemic broke out after the Civil War, that's how we got our roots in North Carolina. And then we were invited back to serve and to become a part of the diocese of North Carolina. Which at that time was a single diocese with the Belmont Abbey, we were invited to, the abbot of the abbey was also the bishop of North Carolina, so we were embraced. Now I am not very good at that history, the historical aspect of the development of the church, except to tell you that the Sisters of Mercy did come and successfully begin a school in Wilmington, and from Wilmington we have branched out to, come to Hickory, to move our Motherhouse, to become an independent community from the Charleston community, and to establish hospitals and schools in North Carolina. We do maintain and operate--I'm sure Sister Jerome probably told you that two general hospitals, Mercy Hospital and Saint Joseph's, we have a hospital we don't call a hospital, a nursery for brain-damaged children, Holy Angels. And on this campus in eighteen hundred, ninety-two, it was established. This is now known as our Motherhouse. We have just finished celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Sisters of Mercy in Belmont. We came here at the invitation of the priests, the Benedictine Fathers at Belmont Abbey, and founded Sacred Heart College and Academy. Sacred Heart College, it really began as a coll--as an academy which is more or less a finishing school and its original concept, became a junior college in nineteen hundred and thirty-five, and a senior college in nineteen hundred and sixty-six and unfortunately, we had to close our doors in nineteen hundred and eighty-seven. Lack of enrollment and finances. But education in North Carolina, the parochial school system has been a strong system. Still exists, even though a number of the schools find themselves now without sisters who, because of the declining numbers of sisters, but also because sisters seem to be seeking other types of ministries. Pastoral ministries and, in parishes, visiting the sick, serving in hospices, and a tremendous amount of social work. Which is just a great emphasis of, in our work today. We had a House of Mercy for the AIDS, terminally AIDS, ill AIDS patients. We have Holy Angels, a group home for brain damaged. And now, the YMCA is using the college buildings as a branch of the Gaston County YMCA and one of the dormitories is a, now a residence for homeless, women and children. Not battered but just homeless. And, so tremendous amounts of work, we have a counseling and retreat center on our campus, so--but as far as education is concerned, we've been heavily involved in Catholic education up, I would say, until the mid-80s. When the

Sisters of Mercy after Vatican II, the number of sisters exited from the order, universally not just here, for other reasons that you know. Identity, personal satisfaction, or whatever was the reason. But most churches today have within their own church much renewal. Many kinds of changes which is causing others, people to respond to the service of the Lord in different ways. And, which is perfectly wonderful but we're not all called. And I guess that changes. If you look at historical aspects of anything, perhaps everything goes through renewal and evolution or whatever. And we become a great big ecumenical community, and we work closely with many of the churches in, on our campus. And they, when the college was in operation, we had Baptist-Catholic dialogues or Lutheran dialogues or Lutheran renewal programs on our campus, which was a tremendous thing in ecumenical response. Our doors were open to all kinds of--the Jewish marriage encounters on our campus gave us tremendous appreciation for understanding of other kinds of religion, and a greater ability to work together for, in the service of the Lord. I'd like--perhaps you might like to ask me something? I'm not sure exactly what angle you're interested in my addressing. We--Catholics now I believe, in North Carolina, do not suffer any type of--even though I do believe there exists some bias, but I don't think we have some, any prejudice. Prejudice just comes from a lack of understanding. Not prejudice from any kind of hatred or mean. People just simply didn't understand them. And part of that's why we speak today that many sisters have chosen today to abandon the habit, the traditional habit, and the veil. People didn't understand it or to be able to move more freely among the, a secular society where they might understand us, not be so fearful of approaching. It's a questionable concept but try to make ourselves be of service to all God's people. And certainly, in this area, which I find a wonderful thing, most of the enrollments in our, certainly in our major enrollments in our, in our house, in our college, I can certainly say, were non-Catholics. Most of our day student population were not Catholics. There are no Catholics in that area. Most of the resident population was Catholic. But we serve the non-Catholic community in our area. There still exist a number of Catholic schools. I don't believe I--we, we really, I, we personally, have had to move out of the teaching almost in every area except Charlotte Catholic High, and one other school, for lack of vocations or, and lack of desire on the part of the sisters to serve in that kind of ministry today when other ministries have become more attractive to them. What else can I tell you? (laughs) I talk very fast.

JG: Okay. When you were growing up in Concord, you originally spoke about--I, I assume the family was always Catholic, and you were raised in the faith?

MB: I was, yes. My parents were Catholic.

JG: Did you have a priest in, in the Concord community who, who could--?

MB: We had a priest, a pastor, yes.

JG: You did?

MB: Yes, we had. In my early life, my, my younger days, we were called a mission church. A priest who came, who didn't live in Concord but who came originally to Belmont Abbey, which is right down the street from us here. They provided the priest for our church on Sundays' Mass. Would come from Belmont to--

JG: Um-hum.

MB: --Concord to say Mass on Sunday.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: And the Sisters of Mercy from the Charlotte area would come to Concord to teach us religious education. That's really how I made my contact with the Sisters of Mercy. So it was-- we were strictly a missionary parish, in Concord as many still are. But now and, and later, and before I finished high school even, we had resident priests come up in our church. We had a tremendous amount of difficulty, for example, in Concord, trying to find a piece of property in the town to build the church. Because of prejudice, people wouldn't sell it, so our land was purchased in Concord by my uncle, and then given to the church, and that's how we actually got into a, a population. But, God is good and people work together, and time, education, and association help alleviate most of the pains of prejudice but even today we have as much the amount of prejudice as we witness among other people, not just religions, but ethnic groups and things of that type. Unfortunately, it exists in the world, you know, so learn to live together in peace, is what we try to do.

JG: Do you remember specific instances when you were a child or a young adult when you encountered prejudice? Sort of--?

MB: Oh, I--

JG: Was it an everyday thing?

MB: Oh, no, no. You, you would know people were fearful of you like my own classmates at, at school would wonder why I thought they were going to hell and I said, "I didn't know I thought that. You know, I, I didn't realize that I thought that." I didn't, I never personally experienced prejudice on my behalf. I was aware of it. I wouldn't, I'm not even sure that I would classify it as a deep prejudice as much as I would a lack of understanding of what Catholics actually believed and how you served. Other people didn't understand us and, I think that existed to a great extent. I experienced it a lot, you know. Even when I was teaching, my principal and superintendent

were fearful what I might do at a general assembly when I had charge of a program, you know, that I might try to, you know evangelize, whatever. But that, that's a fear people have. And, it's not completely gone today, but it's a, it's a--there's a vast difference in the world today, people understand religion. And since Vatican II and the greater concept of the ecumenical movement, that those things are slowly moving and with the greater education, I think that education is the concept, that probably explains away how people remove prejudices. I don't think you can do it any other way. You know, I just think people have to come to an understanding of what it's about, and then personal relationships have to exist, so that we minister justice to all. People understand that you're human and that you have amount of love which is the important thing. Not what you wear or whatever else. But it was there, believe me. (laughs)

JG: Was the Catholic community in Concord a close community?

MB: Close, is that what you say?

JG: Um-hum.

MB: Oh, yes. And probably of the most, except for my family who are Lebanese and moved into the area, most of them are families of generations of families who lived there on farms and who were in some way related, you know, by marriage who formed the nucleus of the Catholic church in, in that area.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: And from there, you know, the church has--now, however, it's tremendous parish but most of those are not native North Carolinians. They are--yes.

JG: Was your family readily accepted--?

MB: Oh, yes.

JG: By the existing community?

MB: Very fine, very fine.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: My mother and father were, and both my uncle and aunt were, they, they had businesses. One's a restaurant and the other was a kind of a, what do call it? A candy kitchen. They were very well known and still. One of the buildings, which was occupied by my uncles, was an

historical marker until they had to have a parking place. (laughs) Then that had to go down. But we were very well accepted in the community too. I don't want this to become a story of me. (laughs) I prefer it to tell the story of the Sisters of Mercy.

JG: (laughs) That's interesting.

MB: Nah.

JG: So you learned about the sisters because they came to teach you--

MB: They came to Concord to teach us. Yes, yes. They used to drive back and forth every Sunday to teach us about you know our catechism and religious education.

JG: What did you think of them? What was your experience?

MB: Marvelous. Here I am a member of them. (laughs) I came, I joined the order after two years at, at--I taught at Charlotte Catholic, which was then known as O'Donoghue High School, in Charlotte for my first eight years. And then we founded Charlotte Catholic High School over on Park Road, which now remains one of the three, well, actually, in our diocese, one of the two hospital--high schools in the diocese. And Sisters of Mercy still, one of the Sisters of Mercy is principal of that high school. We still have members on the staff. And the other, three high schools, really, only in North Carolina. Actually, in Asheville, North Carolina, where we had, where I was stationed only a year, there's a whole Catholic center, Saint Genevieve's with a Sisters of Christian Education. And we had our minor seminary there and we had a, a high school, and they had an academy for women, finishing school really, I call them. A military school for boys. And all of that's gone. That's a sad part of this education in North Carolina. We had a military school across the street, Saint Leo's Military School. And we had a grade school on campus. All the education facilities on this campus, I shouldn't say they're gone, but they've converted. The grammar school that we had is now the school for, Maria Morrow School for our children with learning disabilities and brain-damaged children. And the, Saint Michael's still exists. We--Catholic education is very strong in North Carolina and in the Charlotte area and now we have just standing-room-only enrollment, which was a problem we had long ago is having enough students to maintain the school. But now, because of the quality of education that they receive at Catholic schools, they're bursting at the seams. And they have a waiting list for people who register. So the school system is doing very well in North Carolina and we, Charlotte Catholic particularly, is an outstanding high school. Many other schools do very well in the national honors program, or the scholarships for schools. Their athletic program is outstanding, but the educational program is overwhelming. Their students do very well. And we now have many wonderful graduates of our Catholic school in prominent positions in the Charlotte area, and the legislature. We're very happy about that.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: (pause) What else can I tell you?

JG: Why, why have all the schools in Asheville and the schools out here closed?

MB: In Asheville, particularly, the, they, it was simply lack of ability to staff. And the cost of Catholic Church you know, people we are, what do you call it? Building-rich. Who wants to buy a church or a school or a--? They did not have the kind of finances they needed to maintain the operation at lay salaries, and see, sisters' salaries were at that time token. And we were not able to maintain our tuition to be competitive. So as a consequence, they suffered from financial, a financial loss. So that's what happened to Sacred Heart College. I was president of our college. When it closed, we had some beautiful programs going. Particularly, we had fifty-one countries. International English Language Institute on our campus, which brought a tremendous amount of cultural understanding and a vast amount of educational knowledge and experience with other peoples of other worlds. And that was a heartbreaker, to have to lose that. Our evening college was very successful because it was non-residential, but we could not maintain the student population in the dormitories, and the dormitories, the cost of operating them was just eating us up. So we had to take an action soon in order to keep us from having to suffer bankruptcy and having our students lose any credits. We moved while we're in a position to be able to move to place them other places, but we lost the English Language Institute, which was a wonderful program, bringing in people on our campus. And we just would like to make--had a conference center on our campus. So it was a great experience, but financially, and the lack of staff who didn't require the all the kind of salaries that lay people must have in order to maintain their family. You know, we, we, we are trying now, and we're finding it difficult to make contributive services but we still are doing it in some areas. In other areas, we have sisters who have to work in order to help support the sisters now, you know, to keep us moving. So it was simply financial. And I would have to say not just simply financial, as much as, you know, ministries and social work are very attractive today. People are interested in Hospice and are interested in pastoral ministry, interested in serving people with AIDS and homeless and battered. That's just natural for this generation. They have a greater understanding of love, or compassion for this. I think we had more, but I had more, and maybe I should speak for myself, for education. I think this, my nieces for example, and nephew, they tend to want to be, want to serve. They're very interested in AIDS, for example. They're interested in knowing how to serve and to do things for people in Special Olympics, and--see, that's the kind of sincerity they have about serving that group of people. And, and I think that's a wonderful thing. That's not, that's not a bad thing.

JG: What drew you into education?

MB: Pardon?

JG: What drew you to education?

MB: What do we want?

JG: What made you want to be a teacher?

MB: Me? All my life. I was born with it, absolutely, I don't know. Never wanted to be anything else.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: I have always wanted to be a teacher. I taught school before I entered the convent. And I entered the order because it did, it was predominantly a teaching and nursing order and so I, I, I just simply loved teaching. Something I've always loved. And I think you just get a vocation. That way, I was lucky. And I, I wanted to teach, I think more than--when I first came out of school there was no doubt about my wanting to teach. I did have a doubt about wanting to be a nun, but I really; I never had a doubt about wanting to teach.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: And ironically, I haven't been in the classroom since 1963. I was elected to administration at that time and been in some kind of administration ever since, so. But I love to teach. That's my first love. And it, you know, I think that even anybody that teaches has to love it who teaches successfully, today especially.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: I think the pendulum will also swing. This is a, my prophecy. (laughs) I believe the sisters will be back in education because I think that it's going to be perceived soon as one of the greatest needs that we have. I don't care whatever else happens. Education has to, is really the basic ingredient for being able to do any of the other work. And if, if you know, we are to be successful and if there is a moral dimension to be found in schools, we'll have to get back in it. That's a private prophecy. I believe that'll happen. (laughs) I'd like to live to see the day. But I think it will. I think--and I, this is not a condemnation of public school, I consider myself well educated. I went to public school. I think that, I think that this one has to be universal, however. I think, I think this one is something that has to be addressed in all school systems, even in our educational criminal system. We have to have a sense of responsibility, and a, a sense of

rehabilitation, that takes the basic understanding of education. I'm not sure I'm doing the Sisters of Mercy a great service. (laughs)

JG: The thing is, this is--

*Pausing in Recording.*

MB: --since we are here, we came to Belmont at their invitation to open a school. They had a boys' school. We came to open a girls' school, to complement the work that they were doing. And they helped us to, they didn't buy the property for us, but they helped us to obtain it. And when this piece of property became available. This was the, was also the site of our first orphanage, you know, we had one of the schools here where we had an orphanage here. And, so that--this a very, this was a very strong, and I, education center for the, the church and the area. Many of the, we had a lot, most of the Jewish students in Gastonia, for example, attended the academy. And fortunately, we were integrated long before integration was a fashionable thing to do. We had black students in our academy long before integration became the law of the land. And we're very proud of that and one of the, a black girl, was president of our student body before, you know. It didn't take a law to make this take place and it was a wonderful experience. The academy had to close to make room for the college. That might have been a mistake we made. We probably might be, the academy's still something that people are seeking. We get telephone calls for academies all the time. In fact people are still looking for a place. I think that's a disheartening thing that somehow or other, public school systems are going to have to be recognized for their quality and something's going to have to be done to make people be free from the worry of drugs and AIDS. I think all of that has played, I don't think it's the quality of education as much, that the teachers aren't prepared or that we're better. But I think that the moral discipline that we can, are free to exercise because we do maintain a religious school is something that, where you can't even pray in the classroom, couldn't possibly exist. So I think that's the problem. I don't know that it's a--I think that's a distinction, a real distinction, too.

JG: Um-hum. Do you know when the academy started having black students attend? Do you have any idea?

MB: I just know that it was prior to 1959. I know, I didn't come here until 1959, so I'm not sure. I remember that when I came here there was a doctor, a black doctor, in Gastonia. Mr. Wilston. They were not Catholics, but their children attended, their daughters, and one summer we had Saint Leo's Military School, and the daughters attended the academy as day students. They were not resident students, they were--we had a Jewish population of students, I think because, because we had a lack of prejudice to begin with, and it was a good thing. I, I think we're probably very proud of that. We, we boast about that a little bit. That, that did happen. We successfully integrated our school in Charlotte, and our Saint Patrick's School, with a little bit of

difficulty there and harassment from the local area. People throwing bottles at the school and stuff like that when we first took in black students over there but, even among our own. Not just non-Catholics. You know, Catholic people were as resentful as anybody, you know. So, but the integration was a--we took the steps, and I think we, we successfully integrated our schools and our, and they, they, they had a, they play a large role in, in our, in our schools and I think to feel at home. We have a black nun in our community, which is marvelous.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: Very talented. Wonderful. Inspiration. Teaches at Charlotte Catholic. Does a great job. She does a tremendous job with understanding. She has, she understands the faith. She brings in the, in the culture, of the black dimension into our prayer service. So it's just a wonderful experience we have. I'm, you know, I think it's kind of good.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: Wish I could tell you some deep, dark secrets, but I don't know any. (laughs) We have a wonderful community here, the Sisters of Mercy here were number, most of our sisters are here, and the senior sisters were from Ireland. When, when I think when I came to the order, I think there were three. I might be wrong about this number, but I just knew three or four North Carolinians who belonged to the order and boastfully now we have a number of North Carolinians who serve here in our, in our area and a number of our Charlotte and college, Charlotte high schools and the, the college graduates are now members of our community so, you know, that's possible.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: What else can I tell you? We're now, it's two, two dioceses, you know, we're now the diocese of Charlotte and the one in Raleigh. We're no longer under the abbey, where when we first came, we were under the abbot who was also the bishop. And then this, this little area of Gaston County was called a nullius, which is a juridical term but it was a jurisdiction over which the abbot had control. And I think, trying to think of the year that that happened, I think '59. The abbey, we became part of the diocese, we were under the, the abbey and the abbot was our ecclesial superior and, and after that we became incorporated in the diocese where the bishop still is our, you know, our spiritual leader. But we're very close to the abbey. The abbey has provided priests as our chaplains the hundred years we were here. So we're very close relationship. And some of our sisters still teach, teach at the abbey so we are very much interested in education, I believe.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: What else can I tell you?

JG: Why, why did, why did the sisters incorporate into the diocese? Why didn't they work together--?

MB: We didn't have a choice. Oh, that's a, that was a decision that Belmont Abbey diocese and jurisdiction was by Rome, was set, the boundaries of the abbey and the diocese, just like they established new dioceses when they divided Raleigh and Charlotte see the people who live in this area become part of it. It's not a question of your decision. It's just where we were found, you know, where our jurisdiction was. That's a--that was something that was established by the church. And the abbey is also under the bishop now. See, that it became incorporated in the diocese and what we called the nullius does not exist as, as a juridical body to know.

JG: Do you have a feeling for how the abbey and the convent have been accepted locally, right around here?

MB: Absolutely wonderful. All the people--we are part of Belmont. Have always been. And the people in Belmont have--we've educated most of their children in our academy. I think education breaks down a lot of prejudices. They serve on our boards. They support our ministries. They welcome us. We serve on their, we have sisters who serves on the various committees in the, in the area. The Sisters of Mercy of North Carolina were named "Person of the Year" by Gaston County last year. So I, they really--we feel their appreciation and their support, you know, I don't believe that there's any prejudice that exists. Lots of people, that's a term, "Lots of people," a lot have never been on our campus who live in this area so what we did this year as part of our one hundred-year anniversary celebration, we had what we called a Mercy Fest, and we just celebrated all day and invited the world and did various things all day long in order to attract, and had children attractions, we had tours, we had the Sisters' Act outside under a tent and we sold hot dogs and, just to get people to come and take tours. Excuse me a minute.

*Pause in Recording.*

MB: Contributed generously to the support of our, our ministries, you know, they would financially, the people here, from the foundations have been very generous to the support of our community. This property that we bought belonged to one of the old families of, of this area, and the, the granddaughter's still alive, a very dear friend who served on the board of the college for years. Anna ( ) Nancy Burgin was the daughter of Grady Rankin whose, from whom we purchased this property, whose father, grandfather, I believe--no, father, it was her father from whom we purchased the property. And, so we've been very close ever since.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: Very strong black Catholic population too, in this area. And we used to have a set of those in the days of segregation--we had a school, Saint Benedict's, old Saint Benedict's School, which we staffed, which was a school for the black children and they had a, still have a ministry in Kings Mountain, for, which is predominantly a black parish. And they have a black deacon who is just a, really has a, the black cultural mass, you know, the mass that speaks to them in music and word. So it's a, been a, a, a marvelous experience here. And I think the Sisters of Mercy have been very well respected and Benedictine Fathers I don't want to single us out, in, in this area for the work we've done, particularly among the poor. And of course, Holy Angels has been a miracle that, was wrought by one child being abandoned on our campus in our day care center. And from little Maria Morrow, who's now thirty-eight I believe, grew the Holy Angels as you see it today down there. A beautiful facility for brain-damaged children with three group homes attached and two group homes out in the community for the children as they get older and try to get them to have a little bit more of a semblance of family living in a group home rather than in the nursery part. So, this, everything's happened by the grace of God, we have a film made here this year, called *Scattered--Shattered Dreams*, I believe. Was made on our campus, they just left maybe a month ago. It's a December viewing for CBS television or, I think a two-hour movie. Then we rented our facilities recently to another group for Belk's department store commercials. People use our property for, you know--I try to, I think we try to maintain good relationships with the community.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: We have sisters actually involved in hospice in this area. And visiting the Gaston Memorial Hospital, too, so sisters are very much involved in reach-out programs here. And I think that's what breaks down a lot of the barriers there are. Me? What?

*Pause in Recording.*

JG: I wonder if you could tell me about the places that you taught?

MB: Me?

JG: Um-hum.

MB: Personally?

JG: Um-hum.

MB: Very, very--starting at Concord High was my first experience, that was a public school. I taught math there for two years. From there I taught at, which was a, at Charlotte Catholic High in those days was known as O'Donoghue High School, but it's now Charlotte Catholic, the predecessor of Charlotte Catholic. I taught there until 1958. I taught math and social studies. And then I, for one year only, I taught at Asheville Catholic High School. We had a school with only about seventy-five students in it. I think they only had about eleven girls and the rest boys, a beautiful gym and a wonderful basketball team. I had to coach basketball up there. And then I came here in 1959 after I got my master's degree at John Carroll and I've been here ever since. I taught in the academy. We had an academy and junior college in those years. I taught in the academy and then taught in the college until 1963. All of this is math. And I did, I sponsored the, was a sponsor for the Student Government Association.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: And then I was elected treasurer of our order and served in that capacity for about, I can't remember now, seventeen or twenty years, and twenty-one years in administration. Then I was made president of Sacred Heart College in 1974, I think. And stayed there until 1987, when it closed.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: I am currently director of food services here on our campus, for Sisters of Mercy and I do, I am chairperson of the bazaar and other kind of financial little things that we do. And serve on several of the community committees. And so that's my lifetime experience.

JG: Why did you teach math?

MB: Oh, I love math! That's the thing I taught to do! (laughs) And I just--those, those were the things I had no difficulty with. All my life I was relatively good in math, I think. And then, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed my college years, had very successful college years at UNC in Greensboro. Loved my math teachers. You know how you, everything's just, just--I had an easy time deciding what my life career would be, I knew what I always wanted to be, had a choice of going to work at Langley Field. All the math majors were attracted there during the war. I was in college in war years but I wanted to teach so I--and I wanted very badly to teach at Concord High so I was successful in getting the job, and thrilled over that. And I left it only to come here. I just felt that I had a vocation, and I came over to visit a very wonderful woman, who at that time was president of Charlotte Catholic, Sister Stephen, who told me the Lord needed teachers, and so I came. I, I really have to say she played a great role in my decision to come to the convent and to have the opportunity to teach. One that I've never regretted so it's been a beautiful life. We had, we had this, various experiences, you know. So when I taught at Charlotte, at Ash--at

O'Donoghue, which was the predecessor of Catholic High, there were less than the probably a hundred students in the high school and just enough boys for a football team. We used to just die. And now, they have the number one team in the city, you know. So it's a personal perseverance and we had no gym, so I moved to Asheville, we had a gym, had all the boys in the world, and had no coach. Well I had to coach boy's basketball so it was a wonderful experience. We won the championship. (laughs) It's been fun. Catholic school system's been fun and been good to me, good to all of us so I'd hate to see us get out of it. And if I weren't so old, I'd probably want to get back into it. My life is wonderful.

JG: Um-hum.

MB: (pause) Are you a historian?

JG: (laughs) Actually, I'm a college student.

MB: Huh?

JG: I'm a college student.

MB: Are you doing this as your project?

JG: I'm doing--it's a summer, it's a summer job.

MB: Oh, that's wonderful.

JG: So, but it may turn into a project for me at some point. (laughs) And your experience of UNC, Greensboro was, was--?

MB: Oh, fabulous, all I, I have to say.

JG: It was all women?

MB: Pardon me?

JG: It was all women?

MB: At that time it was. It isn't now, you know.

JG: Right.

MB: Yes, yes, at that time it was only four hundred, twenty students too. No, I take that back. Four hundred, twenty students in my graduating class, so in 2000 now, there must be fifteen thousand students. There were four hundred and twenty students in my class. And my, my class was very good to me. I, I was very successful there so, I don't know. I don't know what's waiting for me in the next world. (laughs) I've had it too good. (laughs) So, it was a wonderful school. I, I, I hate to see it go coed but, you know, you have your own little things. And I hate to get, to see it get so large because we had a, that was a model school. That's still a model school. But it was an excellent school, excellent school. And the math department, there were only nine majors in my class, out of a hundred and twenty; there were only nine of us who graduated in math. So, you know, we had, had no difficult time getting a job, everybody in the war years, you know, wanted to--Langley Field was the place for mathematicians to go. And many of them went there. But I fortunately got a job at Concord High. And I got to stay at home. So it was nice. And I loved teaching and I was able to work with student government, which is my second love. I'm a political science minor and, having made this attempt, made it, somewhat of a decision to go to law school, but I, when I was in college I didn't do that. I just studied constitutional law, and I love it.

JG: Why, why did you hate to see UNCG go coed?

MB: I don't know, it's just that's a private thing for me. (laughs) I hate to see anything change. But it was just so nice. But, I mean, that's a, that's a dumb reason not to want something to happen. I think progress has to take place and I think--but I, I think there's a place for women's colleges, I, I really do, you know. I think that, I don't know--I believe Wesleyan went back to being all women's school. I don't know that or not. But I don't know, that's just a, just like I didn't have hate, it's so vast now that it doesn't feel like home when you go back. But when we, when we were there, you know, there were only six or eight dormitories and, you know, can you imagine knowing everybody on campus, now, that's impossible now. You know that's, that's, that's just not a good reason, you know. When you say you hate it you mean, you know, you just hate to think, just like sometimes you hate to see your family separated, but they've got to move on and go so that's what has to happen.

JG: The museum is working on a project on basketball.

MB: Um-hum.

JG: So can you tell me a little more about coaching basketball?

MB: Oh, no! (laughs) That's a joke, now. It's not really a joke but they did, they had a beautiful new gym. I did play basketball. Had coached, you know, women's basketball. And when we

went up there they just had boys who were just wonderful. I didn't have do much just, except blow the whistle at them, but--

*Pause in Recording.*

MB: --There's basketball team up there. And they were excellent. And we did win the diocesan championship that year but it wasn't because of my coaching, it's because they, they, they just had so many boys. Now that, that school C.C. Saint Genevieve was still in existence. Saint Genevieve was just down the road and Saint Genevieve was a, a girls' school. Catholic High was, you know, coed, but there weren't many girls who went there. They still went to Saint Genevieve. So they had the, you know, pick of the group, they just had anybody who wanted to play basketball and, and most of that population was, was not Catholic, and there were some strong basketball players there and they really were good. I still hear from them today. And for Christmas I got a pair of tennis shoes so I wouldn't fall, and just little--it was wonderful experience. Just one year, I was only there one year. I was doing my dissertation. But it was, it was a great experience. You had--they had a little white house for a school cause they had just, it was just the beginning of, of Catholic High. Asheville Catholic High. And they had a great amount of success. And it was successful. But then all, you know, the whole world began to come apart at some point in life when everything up there began to vanish and Catholic schools, and other schools, as vocations began to decrease, sisters would leave the order, leave the community, you know. So we lost the Bishop solo, that property is now Asheville-Biltmore Community College or whatever it's called. Junior college. But it's, it's Asheville-Biltmore, I believe, Vocational School owns all that property and it, it continues to be an education center but it's not a Catholic education center. But it was a wonderful, wonderful school. But I was glad to get back to the classroom. (laughs) I was in the classroom up there too but I was happy to get back down to math. I, I was, I came from there here, and have been here ever since, since 1959. It was nice. But they had a wonderful, they had a wonderful team, had no--you know, it was a good school. And that, and that will--today, this happens a lot. Many different orders teach but at, at that time, there were several orders that were teaching at Asheville Catholic. Sisters of Mercy were there, Sisters of Charity from Kentucky were there, and some of the Sisters from Saint Genevieve were there so that, all Catholic, all sister faculty. Now the Catholic schools, a rarity to have a sister on a faculty because there aren't any left, you know. And I'd like to see that reverse. Now think of another hard question.

JG: Well, were you the only sister coaching a boys' basketball team?

MB: At that time. (laughs) That was just a matter of necessity. It was fun, you know. It was, that was a challenge up there, they were just beginning that school, you know. And they were bega-- just built the gym first, because they thought that that was a, a lot of challenging aspects to

teaching there, to make a contribution to that school. We all had to do things we hadn't done before so it was wonderful.

JG: And you said you've, you played basketball yourself?

MB: Oh, I played basketball when I was in high school and college, you know. Played, you know, we didn't have a college team, but I just played but I, I did play at Concord High, you know. And I, I was captain of my team. That was nice. Very good. Very nice. But my, my brother coached here when we were here. He coached the girls' basketball team. So we have, we had a--I have two brothers who are both deceased now. Both have been involved in coaching. And they were both coaches where they were in school and moved to Detroit but my younger brother taught here for years and coached here for years while I was still here. I don't know anything else.

JG: (laughs) How do you feel about, you mentioned that the sisters here have declining numbers, now. How do you feel about that?

MB: Well, I hope I feel hopeful. In this, that doesn't make good sense, but in this sense of the word. This community of Mercy's have never gotten more than two or three vocations in any given year. We get, we have one now--I think we're in a transition, we take older--we don't take, we take anybody--women who are well prepared now in their vocational training and are entering the convent, we have Mercy Associates. But we also made a decision in 1991, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas joined together, to become one order, one institute, rather, instead of in--we are corporately working toward an increase of vocations of trying to identify women who would like to give their lives to the service of the church in this manner. And I, I believe that, we speak top-heavily about community's median age being over sixty. You know, that's not all, I just don't think they're going to die. I'm just not that, I'm it's just not there. The Lord will, will provide. I think it's more difficult to identify and to explain what religious life is in the world today, because there are numbers of other groups who are doing kind of traditional work that, like for example, staffing parochial schools, we, that was principally the work of the sisters and the brothers. Now, they're being staffed by Catholic, or not necessarily Catholic, but lay teachers. Other things that we're doing in our hospital that used to be singularly staffed by religious are now staffed by, that's a hopeful sign, that's not a--but in order to perpetuate our order, I think that we, we're going to have to redirect and renew. I think we'll attract older women and people who have already a greater sense of how they want to serve and we are more open to various kinds of ministries other than when I entered, we were probably only a hospital/teaching ministry. Now, the sisters in our order minister in numbers and numbers of ways. Pastoral ministry is becoming very strong, and if we ever get to women ordination, who knows what'll happen about that. (laughs) Don't ask me about that. (laughs) I'm negative on that, but I'm open to whatever the church does. But I think, you know, women serve in a different capacity in the

church today, and I think it's very attractive to them. But the laity has emerged. But I, I believe that, and I think that the church, what we do is restricted because of what, however the church will grow. They will miss the contributive services of the sisters; most of our service is in the past. That has not been to the same extent in the last few years where we've had to demand a salary equivalent in order to support. But for years and years and years it was just the Sisters of Mercy nominal salaries, just the contributive services of the sisters is why we are, you know, moving out of the schools and why the tuition in our Catholic schools are almost prohibitive, because they're having to pay equivalent of lay salaries so that, that means our parents are paying tuition that are higher, in some places than tuitions in the local colleges, community colleges. So that's going to be a, that's a, that's a serious consideration. But I don't think anything's, I don't think we're going to die and fade away, and I don't think the Lord's going to abandon us. I mean, I just don't come from that school of thought. (laughs) So nobody's going to scare me there. I think it's possible. I just think we have to serve in real faith and, and respond, and we have wonderful leadership who does that, who, administration, leadership. We speak to the, our directional statement to the service of the poor. You know, to stand in solidarity with the poor and the women, you know, and so I think we do that very well. And as long as we continue to respond, we're not going to be abandoned, you know. I don't think the Lord will abandon us. And we're not going to abandon the people. So, I feel happy. I'd like to see us get a hundred. I don't know if we can handle them. (laughs) But young girls used to come who were not educated, so they had to go through the process of being educated. Now most of the women have come, particularly in the last number of years, maybe ten years, have had, had their education's been completed and they have somewhat of a direction in their life of what they'd like to do, but they'd like to do it through our ministry so that's been a fortunate thing. They could do it outside of the order, but they'd like to make the commitment to it. I think the community life and the prayer life is the focus of what holds religious groups together. So that's what we have to work, to continue our communal prayer and communal living and sharing. We have to have an understanding. We have an associate program of young men and women who want to spread the Mercy charism but remain, you know, at their own jobs and do it there, be of service, but to bring Mercy wherever they go, so I think that's a good thing, too, for the Order. (whispers) I don't know what more to say.

JG: Okay.

*End of Interview.*