

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University  
Nora Ambrosio Interview  
March 31, 2023  
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MJ: Ok! It is 2:04 p.m. on March 31st, 2023, and I am interviewing Nora Ambrosio for Rock Voices [Oral History Project]. Hello.

NA: Hello.

MJ: So, first of all, could I get some biographical information like your full name, where you're from, things like that.

NA: Okay, so my name is Nora Ambrosio. I'm originally from Long Island, New York, but moved to Slippery Rock in 1988 when I started teaching. I am married and have two children, grown children. One is 23, and one is 25. And I have a little rescue dog named Wally [laughs].

MJ: [Laughs]. Nice! And what is your educational background before coming to Slip[pery Rock]?

NA: Oh, okay. So I actually have an Associates of the Arts degree in Dance. I have a Bachelor of the Arts degree in Dance, and then I have a Master's of Fine Arts degree in Dance. So an MFA in Dance is considered to be a terminal degree for what we call Performance and Choreography faculty. And that's what my areas of expertise are.

MJ: All right, awesome. And what exactly is your affiliation with Slippery Rock University?

NA: I am a Professor of Dance here. And right now I am serving as the department chairperson as well.

MJ: And what other positions have you held here since you've arrived?

NA: Oh, okay, so I am also currently the production coordinator for our department. So that means that I coordinate every performance, every dance concert that we do. I have also—I mean, I've been on a number of committees, you know, I've been here for thirty-five years, so I think I've probably been on every committee there's ever been. But one of the main committees that I was on for the university was the Rock Studies Revision Committee. That was probably like a three-year commitment, and that's when we went from having a Liberal Studies curriculum to the Rock Studies curriculum, which is our general education requirements.

MJ: All right. And let's see, you were here after Slippery Rock transitioned to [a] university, correct?

NA: Oh, yes.

MJ: Okay. So did you witness anything related to the transition to [a] university or was that before your time?

NA: That was well before my time. But, I did really know a lot about it because when I came here, the chairperson was a woman named Lucy Sack. And so now this is, you know, thirty-five years ago, right? She had also been a student here before she was hired. So she had a lot of historical knowledge about the university that she told me.

MJ: Okay. And is there any of that you would like to share?

NA: Well, I think that, you know, it was a teacher's college. And that's when she was a student here, it was a teacher's college. And then she was able to see the advent of many different departments, right? And even the colleges, all the different colleges that were formed. So by the time she retired, I think the university looked vastly different from when she was a student there. Just as it looks really different to me as I'm getting ready to retire.

MJ: And what differences have you noticed? Like on the campus in terms of like architecture and just changes in your department?

NA: Yeah, well, of course, for our department there's been a massive facilities change in that we finally have new facilities that . . . I always like to say, that actually match the artistic rigor of our program, right? We have these beautiful facilities now. And then, other changes that I've seen, I think the campus is much more beautiful. I remember in particular when we had a president named G. Warren Smith that, you know, every time you turned around, there was another tree being planted. And I think the flower beds on our campus are some of the most beautiful I've ever seen, and that kind of thing. But also . . . just in terms of the . . . who's working at the university, I'm seeing a lot more new, younger faculty, which is really exciting.

MJ: All right, let's see, I had a thought. Oh, yeah, there was a renovation that finished pretty recently, right? So . . . what facilities do you have now? And what did you have before?

NA: Okay, so before the renovation, the Dance Department was spread out in several different buildings. So we had a dance studio in the McKay Education Building. We had a dance studio in the Morrow Field House. We had a dance studio in what was previously called West Gym. And then whenever we had a lecture course, we taught in, well, you name the building and we taught in it. We taught in every building on this campus. And so I used to say, it's a good thing that we're dancers and we're in good shape [laughs] because we would, we walked this whole campus for years, right? Just like the students did, because we would be teaching in one building and then have to go all the way across campus and teach in another building; that type of thing. So now that we have the new facilities, we are in two buildings. So the West Gym was renamed Stoner West after the Pearl K. Stoner Instructional Complex. Really it's the Performing Arts Complex. But so we're in the Stoner East, the west side of the Stoner Complex and also Miller Theater. And those two buildings comprise the Performing Arts Complex.

MJ: Okay, my next. . . . Oh, anything else?

NA: Nope, that's it.

MJ: My next question was what buildings you worked in, but it sounds like you worked in most of them.

NA: Yeah, you name a building and I have taught in it over my thirty-five years, and that is no exaggeration. Including Vincent Science Hall! I mean buildings that you wouldn't think like, *why is a dancer in Vincent Science Hall?* Right? I've taught a number of times in that building. So any building you name I've taught there, even the library. And we got kicked out because we were too loud [laughs].

MJ: [Laughs]. When you first got here, what was your original impression of the university?

NA: Oh, okay, so when I first, when I was hired, I was twenty-five and then before I got here, right before, I turned twenty-six. So I was twenty-six years old, but I was coming from New York and I had worked for the New York City Board of Education before I came here. And I don't know if you know anything about the New York City Board of Education, but . . . since I worked for an organization that was really very intense and, you know, you had to fight to get whatever you wanted and that kind of thing. When I came here, I was not intimidated [laughs]. I was not scared or anything like that. And people really embraced me.

I had two colleagues that were also dance people, Thom Cobb, who unfortunately has passed away, and Lucy Sack. And we got along; everybody got along. I was hired specifically to create a Department of Dance because when I was hired, Dance was a program in the Physical Education Department. Lucy and Thom had more P.E. [Physical Education] backgrounds, whereas I have a very strong dance background. So I was hired specifically to create a Department of Dance. And at the time there was a dean named Anne Griffiths, who, I don't know, she just—she and I just got along really, really well. And she was the one who . . . when I went in to her and I said, “We need to be a Department of Dance and this is what we need.” She said, “Okay.” And she was the one who helped us become a Department of Dance.

MJ: Wonderful.

NA: Yeah.

MJ: Quick aside, how did a dance student end up working for the NYC [New York City] Education Department?

NA: Because I taught dance! I taught dance in a New York City high school and one English class. That was really something. Yeah.

MJ: What activities have you been a part of on campus since you got here? Like committees and things like that.

NA: Okay. So again, after thirty-five years, right? Name a committee and I've been on it, except I have never been on the Promotion Committee, the University-Wide Promotion Committee. I never did that one because our schedules in Dance are morning 'til night, weekends, holidays, because we do classes. But then we have these things called rehearsals, and we do a lot of rehearsals. But I've been on so many different committees and, over the years, it's been really

great because, you know, you can get really insular just being with Dance people. So when you go on another committee like a university-wide committee or a college-wide committee, you meet people. So I think I've been on probably 90% of the committees at this university.

MJ: Wow.

NA: Yeah [laughs].

MJ: What would you consider your accomplishments in your time at Slippery Rock?

NA: Okay, well, I think one of my biggest accomplishments was getting the buildings renovated. That was probably a sixteen-year project? And we had a lot of setbacks, but we kept persevering and now we finally have these wonderful facilities. I think another good accomplishment . . . is achieving national accreditation for the department. We were able to do that in 2000, the year 2000, and then got reaccreditation in 2010, and then just this past April again. So that was, I think, a major accomplishment. And I think another accomplishment that I'm really proud of is the revision of the Rock Studies Program, because that was like, probably one of the hardest things that I did. And that didn't have anything to do with dance per se, but yeah, I think that was really rewarding. Yeah.

MJ: Real quick, what was the timeline of the renovation like? When did it start and end?

NA: [Laughs]. It started when G. Warren Smith was president. So, we had a meeting with him and we just said, "Look, we can't continue with these facilities that we have. It's ridiculous." Oh, I know what happened! When we had our first accreditation visit in 2000, they said, "You need new facilities. You're all over, you're spread out all over campus, and you're not meeting the standard." Right? And so this is going back to 2000, and then we approached G. Warren Smith, and at the time Bob Smith was the provost. He eventually then became the president. And so they were on board and they put it on the . . . in their master plan. And then that goes up to the state, and then the state puts it on some kind of a list. So when Bob Smith was president, that project made its way to the top of the list. And we worked with architects for two years and designed a performing arts center. Everything was supposed to be over in the—where Miller [Auditorium] is, but Miller was going to quadruple in size. Well, Bob Smith retired and then we got a new president, Cheryl Norton, and she didn't like it. She thought it was too contemporary. We had to start from square one again. So we were. . . .

MJ: How many years in was this?

NA: This was probably . . . six, seven years in? When did Bob Smith retire? I can't remember.

MJ: I think President Norton came in 2008.

NA: So we were eight years in. Right? And so we had to start from square one. The deal was that we would get some of the facilities in Miller, and then this building [Stoner West] would be refurbished, the east side and the west side for Theater and Dance. We were okay with that. All right? And so then COVID hits. Everything shuts down. Let me tell you, we did our big concerts

at the community college at Butler--Butler County Community College--for ten years. That's how long Miller Theater was closed.

MJ: Wow.

NA: Right? So it was just one thing after the other. Just it was, you know, one thing after the other that just kept us from getting these buildings done. But finally, finally, they were done and we were able to move in last year.

MJ: Wonderful.

NA: Yeah.

MJ: All right. And what would you say have been your best and worst teaching moments in your time here.

NA: Oh! I have been really fortunate in that we have the best students. We have such great students. So my best teaching moments have been with my students. And the times that just really stick out to me are the times when, you know, our students choreographed a dance, let's say. And then we took that dance to a major dance conference, and it was chosen as one of the best. And then out of that conference, it was, that dance was chosen as one of the best of the best of the best. And so, for example, one of our students made a dance that was so stunning and beautiful, and she got to perform it at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. So, here's myself and a bunch of students jump in a van and go to the Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. and she gets to perform at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. And it's those kind of things, like even in three weeks, we have students going to perform--twelve students will perform at the Joyce Theater in New York City. *I've* never performed at the Joyce Theater in New York City, you know what I mean? It is one of the most prominent dance venues in New York. And it's those kind of things that just—I just think it's phenomenal. My worst ones, I have, I know my worst one. Do I—do I say it, really? My worst one?

MJ: I think it's worth it.

NA: My worst one was having to—was getting a phone call from a dad saying that one of my students' moms had passed away. She had been sick. And having to bring the student out of the class and be. . . . I was with her when she called her dad. And then I drove her down to the hospital in Pittsburgh. That was my worst [pause] day of teaching.

MJ: I can imagine.

NA: Yeah, yeah.

MJ: So who were the leaders when you first came to campus? The people [who] had been here a long time and then the people who were up and coming?

NA: Okay. When I came to campus [laughs], the faculty body was--there were a lot of people in the faculty body who were a lot older than I was; like a lot older, right? But there was this group of women who were so awesome and amazing and many of those women were in the P.E.

Department, and many of those women mentored me. I'll never forget being in my office and all of a sudden out of the clear blue, one of them came into my office and said to me, "Do you have a 401k savings plan?" And I was like, "What, huh [laughs]?" And she said, "You must start saving your money now. You must. . . ." Honestly. And she hooked me up with the person who ended up being my financial advisor for years until *she* retired. And boy, oh boy, I am so thankful that that woman did that because I'm getting to retire. And now I got this money, right? You know what I mean? So they just mentored me, and they were awesome.

MJ: Who were they? Who told you about the 401k?

NA: Her name was Fran Brannon; she passed away. And then my—the woman in the office next to me was Jeannie Hamilton; she still lives in Slippery Rock. Bobbie Braden, she just passed away recently. Susie Knieriem; she passed away. I'm telling you, it was like all these great women. Anne Griffiths, who I mentioned, and Pat Zimmermann, I mean, they were just, so helpful. And I was really grateful for them. They were awesome, strong, assertive women who were really great role models. And I don't know, they just thought I was the greatest thing. I don't know, they just all loved me. So that was wonderful. And at the time also Bob Aebersold was the president. And he and I got along famously. I mean, it was really a great—I was really lucky.

Now, were there some people here that I banged heads with? You better believe it. You know, like I remember one time, I'm not going to give you the details, but somebody said something to one of my students that was really not appropriate. And at that point [laughs], oh my God, I can't believe this. At that point, I didn't know that you were supposed to go to *this* office and report it and—I was from New York. Guess what? I took care of it myself [laughs]. You know what I mean? I was like this little, short thing from New York, like tough girl. And I just took care of it myself. And that never happened again. All right, so, yeah, when I think back, oh my gosh, so crazy.

MJ: What about the people who have sort of come up since you've been here? Like, I know you've worked with people who are on the Dance faculty now when they were students.

NA: Yeah, well, let me tell you, it is the most won—like my younger colleagues, can I just tell you they are so phenomenal. And I just oh, I just love them so much. And of course, they come to me and say, "How do I do this? What do I do? What do you think of this?" And on and on. And I'm happy to mentor them just as I was mentored. But when I go, for example, in the chair's role now I go and I'll do like a review, a peer review, a chair review for them. I'm just in *awe* of their abilities as teachers, educators, as artists, right? And we all really support each other in this department. We've always, always had each other's backs in this department. And so that's been awesome. Yeah.

MJ: All right. Anyone else who influenced you or was significant that you can think of?

NA: Yeah. I mean, I think that there were, through the years, I think that there were a number of different people who I really [pause] found helpful. Like after Anne Griffiths was my dean then a woman named Leona Paracenzo was my dean. Oh, somebody I just saw last night, Mary Ann

King. She was [pause] she was the assistant to the president. And when you had some kind of an issue with Facilities or whatever, you'd call her and she'd solve it. She'd solve it like [snaps fingers] that fast. And even last night when I saw her, because we had an event, I said, "Oh, my God, I wish you were still here," you know? So Mary Ann King was somebody who—boy, my job would have been a lot harder without her. So, through the years, I think that there were a number of people who I . . . and then the other thing is this, my husband, David Skeele. This is my thirty-fifth year; this is his thirtieth year. He's worked here the majority of time that I did, so let me tell you, the dinner conversations, right, were all [laughs] . . . they've never been boring. But even he and I were able to help each other. I mean, to this day, this morning [laughs]! He showed me, I said, "I can't get this on this Excel spreadsheet." He's like, "Nora, you have to double click in the box." I was like, "Oh, okay." So, even this morning, he's helping me. Yeah.

MJ: Yeah, now what sort of major events or activities have taken place on campus or in the department, while you've been here?

NA: Well, aside from the building and receiving accreditation, I'd say [pause] every time we were able to hire a new faculty member, that's a major event because faculty lines don't come around very often. I was just getting ready to write an all-department email to tell about a new faculty member that we've just hired. The students don't know yet, so . . . and it's very exciting. Very exciting.

I think also, you know, I had two babies, right? While I worked here. My colleague Jennifer [Keller] had two babies while she worked here. You know, we had *babies*, sometimes *babies* were at rehearsal. Little children, little toddlers because *oh, I had the babysitter coming, but now the babysitter's sick, and I have a rehearsal, so, come on kid, you're coming to rehearsal* [laughs]?

So those were major things that happened. Seeing colleagues [pause], like my colleague Ursula [Payne] doing a performance in New York City and so, getting in the car and goin' and driving and goin' to New York City and seeing her performances and those types of things. Those are the things that just stay with me.

Oh! Writing a big national grant and then being able to do a two-year project with a choreographer named Doug Varone, who is one of my favorite all time. He's an internationally-known choreographer. That was, that's something when I think back on some of my favorite moments, those were some of my favorite moments.

MJ: And didn't you coordinate part of a national dance conference here?

NA: Oh, yes! Oh, yes! The American College Dance Association Conference. I coordinated two of them. So this is going back, and then Jennifer [Keller] just coordinated one that we had last year. Yeah. It was great. Yeah.

MJ: All right. Any other memorable events you can think of?

NA: I'm trying to think there's been this actually, there's just been so many. [Pause]. Sometimes the memorable events are like Ursula Payne and I, because I was—I chaired the department for fourteen years, right? Not counting this semester. So I was the chairperson and then Ursula was the artistic director of one of our dance companies. And so she and I used to travel a lot together because we'd be bringing students to conferences and performances and festivals and on and on and on, and sometimes [laughs] I just look back and we had so much fun. I mean, we worked hard. It was hard. Let me tell you, when you're traveling with sixteen students and you have costumes and props and, you know, three different vans; it's hard, it's not easy. But we had so much fun that those are times, like I still laugh about some of the—I'll have a memory and I'll just giggle because it's just so funny.

So those are memories, really great memories. And then all of those times that I was able to write a big grant and bring in choreographers from dance companies that I always admired. Like I always wanted my students to learn a dance by a man named Bill T. Jones called *D-Man in the Waters*. It's one of my favorite dances ever, ever. And I was able to write a grant and we had one of Bill T. Jones's dancers come in and set the work on our students. That was, I mean, I would sit in rehearsal and watch--look, I'm gettin' goosebumps--and watch these students perform. I mean, do that—and I would just, tears, I would just cry, because it was such an amazing—I was recognizing that it was such an amazing experience for them because they were doing a work by a world-renowned choreographer. And I was recognizing that, thank goodness there were grant funds that allowed us to do this major project, you know? Ooh! That grant actually came from the university. That was a university grant.

MJ: The Bill T. Jones one?

NA: The Bill T. Jones project. And that project went on for . . . I would say about a year and a half. It was one of my favorite things we did here. [It] was amazing. Yeah.

MJ: Yeah?

NA: Yeah!

MJ: All right. What are you going to miss about being at SRU?

NA: Oh, this is, this is an easy one to answer: my students. I love my students so much. And my—oh, look, I'm gettin', oh, God [begins tearing up], and my colleagues. Sorry, I'm sorry.

MJ: I'm looking for tissues.

NA: No, no, it's okay. . . . They—they're just the best. They're just so wonderful and hardworking. You know, some of my students, they're the first people in their families to ever go to college, right? And they just work so hard. It's amazing. And I love the way that they are with each other. They really care for each other. And I think, I like to think it's because they see how the faculty care for each other. And then I think that that just trickles down, you know? Yeah. Yeah.

MJ: Any words of wisdom to share for current people, future people, at the Rock?



NA: Yeah: never take “No” for an answer. When you go up to talk to the dean, the provost [laughs], I don't care. This is my philosophy, if I go and say, “Can I have *bla bla*, can we do *bla bla*?” And someone says to me, “No,” I think, *hmm, I got to go back and figure out how to reword this or repropose this so that they say, “Yes.”* I'm not giving up. Don't you give up either. Right?

MJ: Thank you.

NA: Right.

MJ: All right.

NA: Don't give up.

Both: [Laughing].

MJ: That's all I have for questions. Thank you so much.

NA: Thank you.