

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Carolyn Rizza Interview
September 23, 2008
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Sarah Meleski
Transcribed by Teresa DeBacco
Proofread and edited by Angela Rimmel and Judy Silva
Reviewed and approved by Carolyn Rizza

SM: Today is September 23, 2008. I'm Sarah Meleski and as part of the Rock Voices Oral History Project we have Carolyn Rizza with us. Hi Carolyn.

CR: Hi.

SM: How are you today?

CR: Good.

SM: How about you tell us a little bit about yourself?

CR: That's pretty open ended [laughs]. Anyway, I taught here from 1975 to 1999 when I retired, and it seems like a short time to me but when you look at it it's sort of a long time. When I realized that I had been teaching at Slippery Rock University longer than most of my students have been alive [laughs] I thought, "Well maybe it's time to do something else."

SM: What did you go into? Did you go into anything else or did you stay a teacher?

CR: No. You mean after I retired?

SM: Mmm-hmm.

CR: No, I'm retired so I'm not working at all now. I have horses to ride and my husband and I travel a lot and there's always plenty of things to do around the house like clean up all the debris from the storm the other night, and that sort of thing.

SM: Where has been your favorite place to travel?

CR: That's really hard to say because every place has its own special kind of . . . characteristics. I think Antarctica was very special. Last fall we were in China for three weeks and that was quite an experience. We've been in the Amazon. The Galapagos were wonderful. We had a great whale watching trip in Baja, California.

SM: Yeah. I'm jealous [laughs].

CR: [Laughs] they're all . . . yeah.

SM: I'm very jealous.

CR: In another month we're going to go look at polar bears in Churchill in Canada on Hudson's Bay.

SM: Wow. What Slippery Rock era were you here?

CR: When I came it was Slippery Rock State Teacher's College and somewhere in there, I don't know exactly when, it became a university.

SM: Did the department that you were hired into change at all over the years and how?

CR: Yes it did. When I came there was a Sociology/Anthropology major with different tracks and then Social Work became a track: it was called Social Welfare at that time. Kind of early on when I was here they decided to offer a Social Work major and to become accredited by the Council of Social Work Education, and I would say we were accredited in the early '80s maybe. You know, it takes at least a couple of years before you—I mean first you have to develop all the curriculum and then you have to work on the accreditation process so it takes a while to accomplish that.

SM: What buildings did you work in?

CR: I worked in the Spotts World Culture Building and I was on the third floor. Sociology and Economics were together up there, and all of our classrooms were right up there, and then we separated. We went down—ended up Mathematics moved out and we moved into their space in the basement but all our classrooms were still on the third floor so we thought, "Well we're all gonna lose five pounds running up and down the stairs to class."

SM: Did you grow up in this area?

CR: No I didn't. I grew up in Houston, Texas.

SM: What were your first impressions of the college then when you got here, since you were so new to the area?

CR: When I came to interview, I confess, I really must have been a sucker at this place because when I came for an interview, it was in March and as you know March is kind of one of the ugliest months around here and I just thought it was beautiful. I thought the countryside was beautiful. I always wanted to live in the country. I was entranced with the evergreens. I just thought it was great, so

SM: What were some of the changes that you witnessed while you were here? Like with buildings or construction.

CR: Obviously it's grown a lot. When I came here—because I was thinking coming through the traffic—when I came here there were 5,600 students, and of course now there's more than eight-thousand students. Lots of big buildings and the buildings are more attractive. I mean, I always think that the buildings that we had here, some of them of course have been torn down now but they were all like square blocks; somebody called [that] style of architecture “neo-penal.” And the newer buildings have more character, they're more attractive. The whole campus has changed a lot that way.

SM: I noticed the second largest donation in the history of the State System of Higher Education came from your mother in the form of 2.5 million dollars. Obviously that's a big accomplishment in your life and that created a building named after you and your husband. What were some of the other accomplishments that happened for you while you were teaching here?

CR: I think in terms of, I think the accreditation and the continuing accreditation of the Social Work program was one of them and then the development of the Gerontology program. When I was here that was a really exciting part of the university and we had lots of people teaching in it and lots of them were active nationally. I was president of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education when I was here. I was program chair, I was local arrangements chair, I just did kind of all the jobs for that organization and for someone to be president of a national organization from an institution of this type is sort of a miracle, you know. They usually pick people from big name universities and stuff. It was—we were all very well thought of nationally and it was great.

SM: What were some of your best and worst teaching moments?

CR: I was trying to think of some of those. I don't know. I know that there are times when you saw students really get it. One of my biggest frustrations was when we first started using the video tape to teach interviewing skills and so we would have students role play in class and video tape it and play it back and critique it and all that kind of stuff. And so the whole class—it was one of the long classes—met once a week and when the video tape wouldn't work Because your whole class was built around using the machine [laughs] and you know how that is [when] it doesn't work. So you know that was always—every once in a while that would happen and it didn't happen too often and generally if you could call up for support they would come and fix it. But I can't remember ever having [pause] a disaster in class or anything.

SM: Well that's good I suppose.

CR: Yeah, I had students that got angry from time to time. I remember one student [pause] yelling at me about something and you know all the department members, particularly the men, were [pause] hanging around ready to come to my rescue if he started beating on me or something. I didn't think he would, I mean I knew him and I wasn't afraid of it. So it wasn't that big of a deal.

SM: Who were some of the leaders when you were here? What deans and presidents have you gone through?

CR: A fair number of presidents: [Dr. Albert] Watrel was actually president when I was hired but I never met him because he was kicked out before the end of that year and Jim Roberts was in for a while. And then came, I think, maybe Larry Park and then Herb Reinhard. So I mean [pause] it's a lot of . . . until Reinhard there was a lot of . . . It had been a long time before a president had actually voluntarily left this place. And then there was a great deal of stability with Bob Aebersold and Warren Smith and then Bob Smith. [Pause] I think we've had some good presidents and they all have their strengths and weaknesses and you know each of them brings something different to the university.

SM: Who were some of the people that influenced you the most or were most significant during your time teaching here at Slippery Rock?

CR: I think to me one of my real mentors was Susie Knierim. She was the chair, after a while anyway, she was the chair of the Physical Education Department and was the coordinator of the Gerontology program after Ann Bicknell, and both of those women were role models for me, they really were. Susie was excited about what she was doing until the day she retired. She was always thinking of new things to do, always getting everybody ready to go do something, really a great person.

After she retired Bob Gandee became the chair of the Gerontology program and he had a wonderful ability to think of things that needed to be done that you wanted to do. There are a lot of people that can think of things that, you know, they think ought to be done, that you should do, but to think of things that you should do that you want to do and support you in doing them is really a special skill, I think.

SM: What were some of the major events or activities while you were here? Obviously there were a lot of building projects; any particular ones that stick out in your mind?

CR: Not really, because there weren't really that many building projects while I was here. The fitness center [Aebersold Recreation Center], I'm trying to think of whether it was finished before I retired or not, I retired in '99 so that was ten years ago, almost, nine years ago, so I can't remember. Swope [Music Building] was built, and the Art Departments moved around. A lot of them, the buildings were pretty stable while I was here. I have an interesting old postcard, it's a picture of Founder's Hall in the fall with the leaves and everything all around it, and I look at and, you know it's not there anymore.

SM: Do you have any other memories from teaching here or living in this area?

CR: It really has been a great place to work. I always felt like I was supported in what I was doing. There [are] frustrations within your discipline, within your department and things that, you know, seem like they're not going to be able to change. I'm trying to think of any specific, big events but, you know, I can't. I mean, there were some weather events [pause] some blizzards and things like that that happened. I can't think of any one big thing. You know we just had a lot of good times working here.

SM: Were there any big name people that came to lecture here or to do presentations or anything, anybody that you remember?

CR: I'm trying to think of someone I remember and I really—I know there were people here all the time and people I went to [see]. I remember when—what's her name, one of the first transsexuals—Christine Jorgensen, she was here. You know, I can't think of anybody that really stands out. I mean there were some wonderful performances, things like that; nothing that really stands out after all this time.

SM: That and Slippery Rock does do a good job [of] giving us things to do and bringing a lot of people in, so Do you have any words of wisdom? Anything that you want any [pause] current or future Rock members or community members to know?

CR: I think it's really important, I always tried to encourage my students and I would encourage new faculty members in the same way: find something that you are interested in doing and that you would like to contribute and volunteer to do something. Go to a meeting, find out a little bit about the organization, volunteer to do something, and follow through [with] whatever you volunteer to do. And that really is the way you get involved, the way you engage yourself in satisfying work, the way you end up being a leader is just by volunteering. Volunteering to pick up the doughnuts before the meeting and then on to other kinds of things.

SM: Are there any big projects that you volunteered with while you were here?

CR: I was department chair off and on but mostly on. A lot of the big projects were planning cycles that we had. The first, well the Gerontology committee when we had our first long-range planning program. All the departments had to come up with a long-range plan and then there could be self-nominated or self-identified planning units. And the Gerontology program was one of those and [pause] we made our plan and that's where we first, as a group, became an organized entity on campus, by nominating ourselves as one of these groups and writing a plan for what we wanted to do and then, of course, doing it. Any time that you're involved in something that's furthering – something that you think is really good for students and I'm sort of sorry that I'm not still involved in the Gerontology program. I'm involved with the Equestrian Center instead, so I'm still involved with the university but I sort of lost track of the people that are doing the things I was doing while I was here as a faculty member.

SM: What do you do for the Equestrian Center?

CR: I chair the advisory board and right now we've got the big gala coming up in a couple of weeks, so putting together baskets for the silent auction and things like that. I would like to be a little more involved up there than I am but I don't seem to be able to carve out the time to do that because I'm gone so much.

SM: Well, I don't think I have any other questions for you. It was a quick interview but it was good and it was informative so I'd like to thank you. Have a good day.

CR: Thank you.

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***Postscript*** (additional thoughts from Carolyn Rizza after reading the transcript):

*I wish I had thought to talk about the changes in the role of women at the university. When I was hired, I was the only woman in the department (1975). Most departments, outside of PE [Physical Education] and Nursing, had only one woman, if they had any.*

*In 1977 I was elected department chair. I was the first (I think) and only. Nursing was still a part of Allied Health.*

*I remember one meeting of all the administrators—chairmen, deans, vice presidents and president—up in 304 Old Main. I was the only woman in the room—very strange feeling.*

*There was an issue about what to call myself. I thought it was not good that the men got to be chairmen, while I had to be chairperson—as if I had to be de-sexed while they did not. So I used chairwoman.*

*Shortly after, Martha Haverstick was dean, the Women's Studies program started and things really began to change.*

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There's also been a big shift away from the liberal arts to more professional preparation programs. That seems to be in response to student demand and professional accrediting bodies. I'm not sure that's a good thing. We need more breadth of foundation knowledge and more exposure to art and music and history and literature than students are getting. Considering how fat everyone is, I think it was not good to eliminate the PE requirement. Students should actually

take one PE activity class to have balance in their lives and get physical exercise doing something they might like to do as a hobby.