

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Claire Schmieler Interview
July 14, 2008
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, PA
Interviewed by Brady Crytzer
Transcribed by Annamae Mayer
Proofread and edited by Mark O'Connor and Judy Silva
Reviewed and approved by Claire Schmieler

BC: Monday July 14, 2008 at 10 a.m. I am Brady Crytzer, and you may introduce yourself please.

CS: Hello, my name is Claire Schmieler and what else would you like to know about me? I am retired from Slippery Rock University [since] 2003.

BC: Could you please explain your affiliation with the university, from the beginning if you could.

CS: Okay, back in 1966 I came to the university to work part-time as the night nurse and in 2003 I retired. In that time I invested thirty-six years of my life and grew up professionally here.

BC: Do you remember the transition from college to university?

CS: Yes, when I think about the beginning when I came here in 1966 I couldn't quote what the actual enrollment was but it is very different than what it is today. We were much smaller. I was here at the time when we had our population boost and I don't remember the year exactly when we left the state college and became a university. But, I think it coincided with the growth in population. Yes, I saw a lot of changes at that time.

BC: Do you feel that they were understaffed or unprepared for that official change?

CS: I never felt understaffed, no. There was a lot of change when we became a university. We had more administrative support. When I came to the university we didn't have the separate divisions that we have today, administrative divisions. I was here when we got the first, when we became the division of Student Affairs. I guess now it called Student Services [Student Life]. But we didn't have a division of Student Affairs or Student Services. There was no vice president over Student Services when I came to the university.

BC: What kind of things drew you to the university?

CS: Well, I will tell the truth. I was a new nurse and I was working at a local hospital. A nurse working here from Slippery Rock State Teachers College came in to have a baby. I was working in obstetrics and had been a nurse for two years and I was twenty-four years old. And she said to me, "I am leaving my job now that I am having this baby and if you're looking for a really cakey

position. It's really easy working the night shifts; it's not very busy at all." And she recommended that I come over and apply for the job. I did and I got the job.

BC: What differences did you see from your hospital job to the job here in terms of the workload?

CS: Very, very different. I was in a hospital program where people came in to have babies and I came to work at a university. They called it the infirmary at that time and the infirmary is where the infirm are put to bed. We might have one or two sick students and occasionally a mental-health crisis. So, quite a difference in the work that I did.

BC: Would you say it is less of a pressure position then before?

CS: Absolutely, absolutely.

BC: How did the department you were hired into change in terms of leadership, name change?

CS: Yes, I mentioned at the beginning we were called the infirmary. Truly we were the place where folks on campus viewed it as if a student was sick that's where they went, that's where they would be taken care of. Today the student health program is about students' health and wellness is integrated throughout their whole life. I had the opportunity to be involved in that transition from a sort of illness focused program to a wellness focused program.

BC: Do you think that the desired effect had happened throughout that program, are students living healthier lives and so forth?

CS: I think students are, umm, having the opportunity to have the information and encouragement to establish healthy lifestyles. Whether or not they are is a different matter. It's about the student health program moving out of the area of only, only seeing the student for the first time when they were sick, or coming in for a sports physical. Where today the student might come for some assistance with a research project or relating to mental health issues or lifestyle issues and so forth.

BC: The health center is currently in Rhoads now, is that where you have always worked on campus?

CS: No, when I came to the university, state college, it was located on the first floor of North Hall. Where it had been since North Hall was built. And when we created the [pause], the current use of North Hall. I'm trying to remember what that is called. I don't know who's there. I think admissions is in that area and so forth. When that was decided that that should occur in North Hall because it was a good location for it. I was here when we made the move over to Rhoads Hall and created student living spaces into a health program.

BC: Where the workers and the nurses happy at that move?

CS: No, nobody was happy. The students were not happy, the staff was not happy. Because when you had been in only one place, change is always difficult. But the good part of it is that everyone that had an opinion had an opportunity to be involved in creating the new space. It worked out to be better space than we were currently in. It was a win-win. We had students involved in the process and they came up with some wonderful suggestions.

BC: What was the staff's biggest complaint about the move?

CS: I think that the issue was that the space wouldn't meet the needs for what the program was. In reality the old space had been an infirmary and had tried to blend it into the expanded services for education. We added a whole program of Health Education and Health Promotion and we had to find space for the students that work in that program and so-forth and the professional staff. The space that we had been in was not really adequate. It was an opportunity but just the idea of what if they shove us into little rooms. Because there was some concern at the beginning that it was viewed that you could just move offices from one space to another without consideration of the work relationship.

BC: What had you heard about the university and what were your first impressions of the university?

CS: I knew very little about Slippery Rock State College. I knew that it was a state college. My husband had graduated from California State College. So I knew about state colleges but I had no clue, I didn't even know that there was a role for a nurse over here. I didn't know anything.

BC: Did you grow up in Pennsylvania, were you local?

CS: I grew up in the North Hills of [Pittsburgh] Pennsylvania and I graduated from North Allegheny High School so I familiar with the Slippery Rock region but I, I knew nothing of the college.

BC: What did you think of the university when you first came here?

CS: I thought it was very large, and it was actually very small at that time but I thought it was very large. I was accustomed to working in a very small hospital. I lived in the country and there were departments that I had never heard of.

BC: Did you move closer to the university when you received the job?

CS: No, no I lived seven miles away so it was fine.

BC: What kind of activities or campus events were you involved in while working at the university?

CS: I had a lot of various opportunities. Early in my career my work evolved around the student health program. It had been the infirmary then it had changed to the student health program and

within the division of Student Affairs. But, as the years rolled by I had more experience administratively, I had the opportunities to serve on a lot of different kinds of committees. I enjoyed that. I had committees on campus and off campus. I was assigned to the Presidents Commission for Women. And, that was a committee that was multi-faceted. There were representatives from all the different divisions. And, it was in that committee that I did my first research project because I had not been in a doctoral program. The commission was charged with the responsibility of studying various types of sexual harassment that could occur on a campus. They looked at sexual harassment among faculty, administrators, and among students. I had the opportunity to sit on a committee that created a research document, did the research, and then published it about students' experiences, perceptions, or sexual harassment at Slippery Rock University. So that was a real exciting experience.

I also, back in the nineties, assessment was a very important part of how the university runs, and outcome assessment was a big issue. And, because our student health program had been involved in becoming nationally accredited and that involved learning about and measuring your outcome assessments. I was assigned to a committee on assessment by President G. Warren Smith to work with Academic Affairs and Student Affairs and across the campus at figuring out how we could measure outcomes and do the assessments. Then I had the opportunity through that work to present our collaborative work. Which I guess was unique in the country for student affairs and academic affairs to do this together. I had the opportunity to present that at a national conference which was a cool thing.

BC: What do you consider to be your biggest accomplishments while you were here?

CS: The biggest accomplishment while I was here was being a part of the transition of the Student Health Center from an infirmary to a becoming a wellness model student health program. To go from that illness model and you see people as sick and you fix them to helping the campus community become healthy and stay healthy and work collaboratively in a positive way.

BC: Was there negativity toward the safe sex program that is present in the health center today?

CS: Absolutely, there was a time in the eighties and nineties when college health issues became national kind of issues. AIDS, HIV, alcohol issues and our staff was very involved at the national level with the American College Health Association and tried to find leadership models to what is it nationally that the experts in the field are saying should be happening on your campus if you're doing the right thing. And we always tried to latch onto recommendations from accredited sources. What should you be doing in your student health program? Of course it was controvers[ial]; just to say the [word] sex in the beginning when we were just in those early years. It was very controversial, there were letters to the editor, and I got letters and phone calls. People tried to tie in my relationship with my church to my role at the university. How could I be doing this?

BC: What were your best and worst moments at the university?

CS: Wow, it's kind of hard to pick out best. The second vice president of Student Affairs that came to Slippery Rock was Al Matthews and for me, when he came to the university it was very refreshing. I would have to put that in the category of one of those high times. Because, I was at a time professionally where I was sort of full of myself. I was thinking that I could do almost anything. But, the [former] vice president that I worked with, when I went to him and said, "I think I can contribute more do you have any recommendations," he looked at me and said, "Claire, you're a nurse I can't think of anything else you can do."

When the next vice president came, when Al Matthews came, he sat down with me and he said, "We're looking for other ways to do things, would you sit down and tell me, if money was not a constraint, if there were not limits, what would our student health program look like?" And, we worked for a year and we created what I talked about. So, that was a real exciting time in my life professionally because it taught me also the lesson of empowerment. That if someone encourages you, if you find a mentor someone that you can talk with. That was my first experience with a mentor.

BC: Do you remember what year that was approximately?

CS: It was in the eighties. I was trying to look at my resume and think exactly when that was. Maybe around 1985 or 1986, somewhere around that.

BC: Do you care to talk about any of the lows?

CS: Yeah, at the end of my career. I came here in student health and had a wonderful career in student health. In 2001, maybe, under Dr. Bob Watson's leadership, we were undergoing a lot of change and I had my finger in a lot of pies. I was an Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs and I was working with a lot of different departments in the division. I had a lot that I was enjoying and at the time the decision was made I no longer needed to be the administrator responsible for the student health program. I felt like my heart was ripped out. It was a low, because all of my career had been in university health. I did a lot of other things, so I stayed for two more years but it was never the same. I was an accreditor for the reviewing body that accredits student health programs. I lost the ability to serve in that role because I was no longer affiliated with the student health program. So it was a big disappointment.

BC: Do you remember any memorable moments with each president during the time you were here?

CS: In the early part of my career, I didn't ever feel like I knew any of the presidents. I mean Carter was here and Watrel. I just knew them slightly. Bob Aebersold I knew very well and he was the first president that came to the student health center and said "I want you to let me know if you ever have a student that is ill that would benefit from a visit from the president." I thought that was a very generous offer on his part. He presented himself as being more student centered.

BC: Did you ever make that call?

CS: I can't say that I ever did, but him offering. He would walk through the student health center. More than that, he was known by the staff and if we had something going on, if we had received some recognition in maybe a newsletter or something he would send a note to the staff involved. Just very personable that way.

BC: Are there any other presidents that you care to mention?

CS: Well both G. Warren [Smith] and Bob Smith are two presidents that I worked with during the end of my career. I enjoyed both of them, sort of different personalities. Just a matter of, it's always a challenge to think of what is their thinking style? Management style? What is that I need? And how do I present my needs to that person in a way that they will say yes to whatever it is that I am trying to promote? I had good opportunities with both of them.

BC: Who were the leaders or "movers and shakers" when you first came to campus?

CS: I remember Dr. [Robert] Watson when he was a student coming into the health center. Oh gosh, there were so many. There is nobody that comes to mind.

BC: Any other influences on you, while you were here?

CS: I was influenced by the women's community here at the university. When I first came here the men administrators ran the show and didn't see a place for women. There were no mentors or role models for women in higher administration. But, the campus women, on several occasions would bring an issue forward and from the Student Health Center it might not have directly affected me. I got involved with those folks, sometimes through committee work or whatever. That really was very helpful to me.

BC: Are there any national or local events that you can remember while you were here at the university?

CS: Gosh, the Kent State problem, the shooting at Kent State. I remember how somber that was. I can remember when students did a sit-in at Old Main. There were administrators upstairs and phone calls were buzzing and a lot of that going on. There was a period of activism on campus. I didn't see that at the end of my career. There were so many exciting things that happened. There is nothing like working on a university campus. When you think about, here we are in rural western Pennsylvania; the university campus is a hub of events going on.

BC: Do you remember any outbreaks of illness on campus?

CS: Right, we had a number of things that happened. Our first case of meningitis where a student died was very trying and very troubling. You had to work with the media. We had several times when we had meningitis and again belonging to a national association was very helpful to call on colleagues that had been down that road and get some tips on how to handle things. A student death from an unexplained cause, just a sudden death. I remember one time an

RA died in a bathtub in their apartment and was found several days later. It was natural causes but it caused a lot of anxiety, a lot of speculation, and a lot of rumor. Student death from alcohol or drugs, we, over the years when I was here, we had a number of those kinds of situations. There always difficult to deal with.

BC: Do you remember any memorable building projects?

CS: Well, umm, when I came to work at the university I was in North Hall. Directly across the street, in where there is a piece of lawn was a small building. It had originally been the Hut. Have you heard of folks talking about the Hut?

BC: Yes, yes I have heard that.

CS: The Hut was where students gathered and the back part of it that faced North Hall is where the security office was. We didn't have university police then. There was a security officer that worked the night shift and he didn't have a cruiser that he rode around in, he sat in that Hut. It gave me great comfort because I was working the night shift and he was over there. Once or twice something would happen and I would call over and he would come by.

The other thing that I remember, it's not a building project but you had asked about things remembering. I remember the first time we encouraged inner-city students from Philadelphia to come to Slippery Rock. There was a time when we were just a white university and we were trying to become more diverse. It was very early in my career; it was in the late sixties. We had students, African-American students from Philadelphia really out of their culture. As the nightmares on several occasions, I provided services to one or two of those students.

This one young lady, in particular, the first time she came to the door she frightened me. I didn't have experience working with an African-American before. She was very large and she had a toothache. So, she didn't feel well and she scared me. And, after a period of weeks, I came to like her. I got to know her better. So, I remember that time when we became more multi-cultural.

But, back to the buildings, gosh so much building going on and so much planning and so much controversy. At the end of my career, I had the opportunity as an assistant vice president of Student Affairs to work with the bidding process as we, and the planning process, as we charted the course for the new residence hall system. That was my area that I supervised. That was really exciting and after I retired I like coming back and looking at what the apartments look like. Wonderful project.

BC: Are you pleased with the direction the campus is moving toward?

CS: Absolutely, absolutely. It is a wonderful place. It was a wonderful place for me to grow up professionally.

BC: Do you have any other events of memories that we haven't touched on earlier?

CS: Gosh, let me do a real quick look over here. Let's see. Umm, something exciting that happened in the student health program that I thought was unique. It was maybe in the late nineties, we began a collaborative project with BC3 [Butler County Community College] and their nursing program where the student nurses would come to the student health program one day a week and have an experience. The idea was to serve as a little hook or enticement that they would think fondly of Slippery Rock University when it came time for them to work on their BSN [Bachelor of Science in Nursing] and that they would come back here. That was a real exciting thing to be involved in.

In 1963, 1983, you had asked me when we had made that transition and when Al Matthews had been my mentor. I see that in 1983 I got the Presidents Award for Outstanding Service. That was related to making the cost saving changes of going from the infirmary to the Student Health Program. That was '83. What we did is that we had three full-time doctors because all the students were sick and they needed doctors. We made the change to mid-level providers to physicians assistants and nurse practitioners. We saved over \$100,000 dollars. It was quite a savings thing. That is what I mean, he listened then empowered and it was good for the university. It was kind of a win-win.

I think highs of my career had to do with when I had the opportunity to leave the campus and take what I knew from the campus out into the larger arena. There was a lot of encouragement to be involved in professional associations whether it was the American College Health Association or the National Health Association for Student Personnel or later in my career when I was involved in the Assessment Movement. It was G. Warren [Smith] who had encouraged me to get involved in the national assessment organization. As you do that you take the university's name out into the larger community. That's again a win-win. That is a nice thing.

BC: What do you miss about being at SRU?

CS: I miss the collaboration with my colleagues and I miss the working with students. I really enjoyed working with young university students because you are at the most impressionable time in your life. You've left your parents' home, you've left high school where people told you what to do and you're in that period in your life when you're learning how to put that all aside and create for yourself how you're going to proceed in your life. It's a really important time in a young person's life and I just loved being a part of that. As I had been empowered back in the '80s by Al Matthews, I learned how to empower students and it's very exciting. When I retired they had a little reception for me and the student that I had tried to empower, fifteen years before and she had left school before she finished, came back to tell me that I was right in the advice that I had given her. She had kind of pulled her life together but she had not exactly gone the direction that I would have liked to see her go. But she wanted to come back and tell me that what I had told her was the right thing and she was on track again and she was back at school. That was fun.

BC: What advice do you have for current or future Rock community members?

CS: What wisdom do I have? I say it is really important to look in your heart and know the truth and when you have a feel for something. It's really important to find someone to talk to and if you see something going on that doesn't feel right, don't look the other way. Say something in an appropriate way. You aren't always going to be well received for that but if you're known for always speaking the truth you'll go a long way.

BC: How would you like to be remembered?

CS: Oh gosh, how would I like to be remembered? I guess I would like to be remembered as someone who had some vision and someone who made a difference.

BC: Is there anything else you would like to add before we wrap up?

CS: I don't think so, I wish you luck, and it's a great project.

BC: Thank you very much, you have been a big help. If you would like to come in for a part two, we would be more than happy to have you.

CS: Thank you.