

2017

Joan DelPlato

Joan DelPlato

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/sr-oral_hist

Recommended Citation

The use of any text, image or audio from the Simon's Rock college archives without permission is prohibited.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard College at Simon's Rock at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Simon's Rock Institutional Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Simon's Rock Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Dr. Joan DelPlato**

Faculty in Art History and Women's Studies (1987 - present);
Emily Fisher Faculty Fellow (2013-2015)

Interviewer: **Molly McGowan '13**

Videographer: **Margaret Cherin, College Archivist**

Transcriber: **Molly McGowan '13**

Supervisor/Editor: **Margaret Cherin, College Archivist**

Date: **November 23, 2015**

Location: **Daniel Arts Center, Bard College at Simon's Rock, Great Barrington, MA**

Collection: **Simon's Rock College Archives**

Contact: **archives@simons-rock.edu**

Copyright: **Simon's Rock College Archives 2015**

Permission to print, reproduce or distribute copyrighted material is subject to the terms and conditions of fair use as prescribed in the US copyright law. Transmission or reproduction of protected items beyond that allowed by fair use requires the written and explicit permission of the copyright owners.

*Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with **Joan DelPlato** is restricted. The deed of gift agreement with restrictions was signed November 16, 2017.*

Selected excerpts from the Oral History Project interview. The full transcript may be restricted. To request access please contact the [Simon's Rock College Archives](#).

Interview with Joan DelPlato

November 23, 2015

Daniel Arts Center, Bard College at Simon's Rock, Great Barrington, Massachusetts

Keywords: Pat Sharpe, Bernie Rodgers, Fran Mascia-Lees, women's studies, pedagogy, Natalie Harper, Writing and Thinking Workshop, the Institute for Early College Pedagogy, Emily Fisher Faculty Fellow, board meetings, PACE, Pathway to Academic Choice in English, Nancy Yanoshak, Bard Academy, Bard, finances, Anne O'Dwyer

“[I came to campus in] spring of 1987, the year I got my doctoral dissertation finished and I came-- in April, I think it was, and my first impression was “oh my god... this place is so muddy.” [laughs] It was really-- it was full of mud, and I had been living in Los Angeles for 11 years and I didn't have any boots, and I knew I was coming to a place that was muddy, so I had to scour [the catalogues] to find a pair of boots. And I finally found a pair that was white suede, so I had these white suede boots on the Simon's Rock campus, lined, of course with lambskin. And I found, of course, that my boots were really ruined!”

“I was going to be here for one year, tops two, and I was going to use it as a stepping stone to go somewhere else because I was on a fast track. And something happened. A couple things happened. One is, I came as a newly single parent, and so I really was reluctant to drag my daughter, who was five at the time, all around the world, the country, to take jobs. So I didn't apply for any other jobs. Also, I started to put down roots, develop some really good friendships and connections with colleagues. And really liked the environment, I was really very surprised by the environment. The students were talkative, they were friendly. In the end, it was community that I found here. It's hard to give up community once you know you've found one that you can fit into. So over time, I think my own sense of what I wanted to do with my professional life changed, and the fast track became less appealing, particularly considering the payoff, which is working with young students, young people who are fabulous. I mean-- I never really understood before what it was like to teach the whole student until I had interactions with students here. I mean, it's just so much fun to interact with students here, and I was able to do the high level stuff I expected to do, but I had to learn to teach in a new way.”

“I had been here-- hmm-- maybe six weeks. And I just thought this was paradise, you know, that I had found nirvana. And Bernie [Rodgers] called me into his office and said “I hear you've been doing a lot of lecturing. We don't do lecturing at Simon's Rock” and it was like, I could hear the POP! as my bubble burst and I was thinking, then, well, what do you do? I really had to learn a

whole pedagogy and I had Pat Sharpe [Dean of Academic Affairs] as my major mentor for that and-- it was very interesting, it was a very different kind of teaching. Certainly the university study had not prepared me specifically for that, but hopefully gave me skills, certainly a background to draw from in applying that material to a new setting. You've got the raw material and you've got the skills and now you've got to apply them in a new way to an unusual place, which is not "sit there quietly and take notes."

"[Pat and Joan] were part of a group of faculty who began, when we had the old-fashioned majors, who were able to get in place a major in women's studies [...] in an era-- this must have been around 1990 or so-- when it was still extremely radical to have a major in women's studies. There were several of us who worked on this and we miraculously got it approved at Bard, because administration there was initially not so supportive. And I remember the first graduation when we had our couple of women's studies majors. They had put [Venus] signs on their mortarboards and when they went up for their diplomas, the women's studies faculty would stand up and applaud them. I was never comfortable applauding all of these singular students rather than the whole class, but I did it because a point was to be made, kind of a congratulations to them and to the college for having seen the proverbial light. But things changed and women's studies kind of evolved into gender studies, and now has gone into new directions with queer studies, but still this was a breakthrough moment in that wave of feminism from the seventies that kind of took on college campuses in an interesting way."

"Bernie was really a good-natured guy. He always had a smile on his face, he was really warm, always on the move, impeccably dressed, very well-groomed, great ties. Together, he and Pat [Sharpe] were-- kind of like-- the parental figures to those of us who were new. And-- tremendously approachable. Both of them could be approached at any time for any reason. [Bernie] was incredibly serious about his role as teacher as well as administrator. You may know, I hope you know, that he would read every single word of every single thesis that students wrote. And he would recount those at the thesis gathering. It was just remarkable what he was able to get. And every time he read a thesis that I supervised, it was spot-on. I mean, this guy devoured literature and anything that came across his path."

"Unlike someone teaching mathematics or biology, there's not a sequence that I must adhere to. I have tremendous freedom. And that's another reason I like being at Simon's Rock and have stayed at Simon's Rock. I don't have someone looking over my shoulder and telling me what I need to do and how to do it. Similarly, students are not in my classes because they have to be. I'm teaching students who are voluntarily in my classes. I mean, that's a tremendous luxury. What professors can claim that that's the case?"

“The loving environment that we create for our students kind of rubs off on the teachers. And I think we become more compassionate, more holistic human beings, who can teach in a new way, a warmer way, a problematic term but I will use the term humanistic way. And it’s been really a pleasure to evolve over time into a more humane thinker. And I do think that’s a way in which, you know, I’m different from my colleagues I got my PhD with. They’re mostly in universities and big colleges, and they hear about my work here and they have told me “Oh, wouldn’t it be great to be in a college like that?” And there are problems, as we know, but I think they’re right. I think this is as close to a learning utopia as one could find. How could you not love that? How could there be anything more important than that?”

“I think it’s a stunningly beautiful campus. I am awed continuously by the trees. Trees are pretty spectacular and they do create a feel. I have students in the beginning, when I work with them on summer programs, or even just the first week of classes, I’ll ask what their first impressions are of Simon’s Rock and they’ll often say, [whispers] “there’s so many trees here, it’s so beautiful.” And they’ll also mention how quiet it is. Particularly people who have come from urban environments-- and-- what is the other thing students will often mention? How dark it gets at night. If you’re used to city life, it’s a very different world. There are stars to be enjoyed.”

“Mourning the loss of Ñacuñán [Sáez, faculty in Spanish] and Galen [Gibson, student] and seeing Galen’s father [Greg Gibson]-- seeing the effect on the students. Galen’s girlfriend and Ñacuñán’s family, his brother who was here as a student and just-- over and over, trying to process it and understand what happened, and having no explanation, really, for it. There is no explanation. And of course, over time, you go into the classroom because that’s what you do and there are students who want to learn and there are classes to be taught and I want to teach them and I love teaching and I think we-- parts of us have never really recovered. Those of us who were here. And then, Newtown [elementary school shooting, December 2012] happened, and really any shooting on campus, and it all comes back, all fresh. I will always remember the site of that extraordinary beauty juxtaposed with the knowledge of what had happened. The students spontaneously put up candles and mementos on the spot where Ñacuñán was killed, on the bridge, and similarly in the library, where Galen was shot.”

“Over the years I have come to see my role as academic advisor as at least as important as my role as teacher. At least as important. In the beginning it was kind of a bother because I didn’t really understand the advising system and I didn’t really know how to do it and let’s go into the classroom! But now I think-- this is what we can give students that other colleges and universities cannot give students, by virtue of their structure. And I think-- needless to say I take it really seriously. I like interacting with people called students, one at a time. And giving them the opportunity to air what’s on their mind. And to mutually problem-solve. I like that delicate balance between being involved and not giving advice, I, in fact, steer away from the phrase

“giving advice” because I think-- You know, students will come to me and say “Joan, I’d like your advice” and I’m thinking, well, I’ve gotten myself to a place where I don’t think I really should give advice, but rather, kind of open up possibilities, which is different from giving advice. I don’t have the authority to give advice and I don’t want the authority. However, I’m happy to work with students to think out loud. And that’s really what it’s about, teaching and advising. I think it’s also really important to, especially with reticent students or shy students, to get them to congratulate themselves on what they do well.”