

SHARE YOUR STORY: STUDENT LIFE AT MUNDELEIN

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Brigid Duffy Gerace's Oral History

Women and Leadership Archives

Loyola University Chicago

2020

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Brigid Duffy Gerace conducted by Regina Hong on August 3, 2020. This interview is part of the Share Your Story: Student Life at Mundelein project, an oral history project to expand and enrich the Women and Leadership Archives' (WLA) records of Mundelein College's history through interviews with alumnae on student life.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator. Timestamps are provided every five minutes, within a few seconds of that exact point in the audio. Sounds such as laughter and actions are in parentheses and notes added for context are in brackets.

TIME LOG AND OVERVIEW

[0:00 – 5:00]: Duffy's childhood, family's emigration from Ireland to America, first impressions of New York, experiences in school when she first arrived, reminiscences on doing household chores

[5:00 – 10:00]: Support received after mother's demise, major at Mundelein, jobs held, favorite classes at Mundelein, nuns' support for her

[10:00 – 15:00]: Memorable instructors at Mundelein, reason for going to Mundelein, audition at Mundelein's drama department, work at Marshall Field's

[15:00 – 20:00]: Places in Mundelein Duffy studied at, reflections on juggling work, school and activities, types of dramas put up at Mundelein, Sister Jeanelle Bergen, BVM, process of being cast in drama plays

[20:00 – 25:00]: Play rehearsal schedules, work as a crew member, memorable moments as a Laetare Player, collaboration with Loyola students and faculty on plays

[25:00 – 30:00]: Favorite role, reason for why it was her favorite role, serving tea at events, description of food served, receiving a hundred dollars from her father

[30:00 – 35:00]: Purchasing a new coat with the money from her father, experiences working as an elevator operator at Marshall Field's

[35:00 – 40:00]: Description of first job hauling coal, description of job selling freezers, work at Mundelein, Sisters' support in her academics, reflections on juggling various commitments

[40:00 – 45:00]: Inspiration from watching parents, memorable experiences of her commute to Mundelein, challenging things about living off campus, popular books during her time at Mundelein

[45:00 – 50:00] Books and movies from the '50s, reaction to inclusion of *Catcher in the Rye* in Mundelein reading list, social activities, Candlelighting Ceremony

[50:00 – 55:00] Religion at Mundelein, Father Clark, significance of May Crowning ceremony in Duffy's life, Duffy's introduction to drama, significance of drama, reflections on impact of Mundelein on later career, filmography

[55:00 – 57:09] Post-graduation, graduate school

NARRATOR BIO

Brigid Duffy Gerace (née Duffy) was born in 1937 in Ireland, the oldest of four children. The family emigrated to America in 1948 when Duffy was ten years old. She attended elementary school at Saint Andrew's. She went on to The Immaculata High School, where she fell in love with drama.

At Mundelein, she majored in drama and was actively involved in the Laetare Players as a crew member and actor in several plays. During college, she commuted from an apartment she shared with her sisters, worked at Marshall Field's as an elevator operator and sold freezers.

After graduating, she worked for three years as a drama teacher before commencing her graduate studies at the Goodman School of Drama (now The Theatre School at DePaul University). Duffy was a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools for thirty-five years and won the Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching. She belongs to all the actors' unions and has performed extensively in theaters such as the Steppenwolf Theatre, the Goodman Theatre, Northlight Theatre as well as TV shows such as *Chicago P.D.*, *Chicago Fire*, and most recently, *Christmas Movie Christmas*. Duffy is currently on the Mother Jones Statue Committee, which aims to build a statue in honor of the great labor leader in downtown Chicago. She has been married to Charles Gerace for 53 years. The couple has two children, Sean and Erin, and four grandchildren.

INTERVIEWER BIO

Regina Hong is a graduate student in the Digital Humanities program at Loyola University Chicago and a Sesquicentennial Scholar at the WLA. She was raised in Singapore and lived in Japan for two years prior to moving to Chicago.

Transcriptionist: Regina Hong

Session: 1

Interviewee: Brigid Duffy Gerace

Locations: Chicago, IL via Zoom

Interviewer: Regina Hong

Date: August 3, 2020

[BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW]

[0:00]

Q: All right, so the recording has started. For the record, my name is Regina Hong, a graduate assistant at the Women and Leadership Archives, interviewing Brigid Duffy Gerace, Class of 1960 on August 3, 2020 for the Share Your Story: Student Life at Mundelein Project by Zoom. I'm in Chicago, Illinois and Brigid is also in Chicago, Illinois. To start us off, Brigid, could you tell me a little about yourself and your family, like the year you were born and where you were raised?

Duffy: Oh my God. I was born in 1937, December — in Ireland — so I'm an immigrant. My mother was very ill, which my sisters and I didn't know about — I'm the oldest of four — and that's why they re-immigrated to America. And old-country Irish people in those days married sort of late, so my father was fifty-two when he got married, which was old in those days. My mother was younger. And my father had a farm, so he was hoping for the boy and he never got the boy, he got four girls. So, we came to America on a cold, cold January day in 1948.

Q: Wow, thank you for that. So, when you came to America, did you come to Chicago or were you living somewhere else?

Duffy: Well, we came to New York and just stayed in New York, really, for, I think about a week. And I remember being mesmerized by the huge buildings and the lights at night. I came from a little farm in Ireland, where we had no electricity, no running water naturally and so, this — My mother had told us she — she was — she came when she was very young and she was a maid in Evanston [Illinois] because she wasn't well educated. Both of my parents only went to about third grade but had great regard for education and wanted us educated. So, yeah, we were in New York for about a week and then, in those days, you had to have a sponsor or you couldn't come to America. And my mother's brother, Joe, who lived in Chicago — We came to live with him for a while and my father did rough carpentry. My Uncle Joe got him a job, which he had to do — that was a requirement, as I remember.

So, we were sent to Saint Clement's School in those days because my uncle lived over there before it was sort of a posh neighborhood. And I remember — I was used to being a smart kid, in Ireland. And I — it was hard because the kids would laugh at our thick brogues, Irish brogues — and the nun — and I'm not saying she was insensitive, she just thought she was welcoming me — had me get up and speak in Irish — Gaelic, as people call it — in the front of the class, which I found (grimaces) sort of awful (laughs). And then every time I get up to read — because I was the last to arrive in the class in January, I wound up sitting at the back of the room — so they made you stand up to read and every — all the kids would turn around and kind of giggle at the

way I sounded and I didn't want to stand up. And I remember — the poor nun, I mean, what did she know really? She sent home a list of words that my mother should teach me to pronounce correctly. Well, my mother pronounced the words exactly as I did, of course, so that wasn't very effective. So. But I got to like school. Then we moved into Saint Andrew's parish, when we got a little place of our own.

But, that December, I was so looking forward to our first Christmas in America. But my mother became very, very ill and died exactly one day — one year to the day after we came to America. So that was pretty rough. Pretty rough start. But we somehow managed. My father really didn't want to spend the money on a housekeeper so we, we took care of ourselves. And when he would tell us it was a day to wash the kitchen floor, we would get a bucket of sudsy water, pour it on the floor and then skate around like it was an ice rink or a roller rink.

[5:00]

I'm surprised the floor didn't fall through. And on laundry day, we had a, a rope, the thing that you hang the laundry on. And it was on a pulley so we would take turns taking a ride on the pulley before we would hang up the laundry, so (laughs) we had fun doing what we were supposed to do — I'm not sure we did it right, but we did it.

Q: Thank you so much for sharing that, and I'm very sorry to hear that your mother died just one year after you all came to New York, to America. That must have been really hard.

Duffy: Yeah, yeah. Really hard. You know, people were really, really good to us. My father put a little note in the *New World* — you know the Catholic publication? — saying “Widower with four girls needs help” or something like that. And these two ladies — who had lost their mother when they were young — responded to it. And they weren’t housekeepers. One worked for the phone company, another one had a job in a bank. But they were the most wonderful people. And they would come over on their days off, and wash the — there were no dryers in those days, I’m not even sure we had washing machines — they would wash these heavy navy blue serge uniforms that would take about two days to dry and get our uniforms set up for the next week. And they felt that we should be ladylike (laughs). So they taught us to embroider. They were lovely, lovely people and we were so blessed to have them in our lives.

Q: I’m so glad to hear that. So now I’m just going to ask you about how you came to study at Mundelein. Could you tell me about what you studied at Mundelein and what your courses were like?

Duffy: Okay. I was a drama major. I had taken drama in high school and I loved it. It was a great escape from, from maybe our hard lives at home. My father believed in “spare the rod, spoil the child”, that old (winces) rule. So he was — tough. He did his best — by now he’s in his sixties, he’s diabetic, he’s not doing well. So I went to The Immaculata High School, which was a BVM [Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary] school. And then of course, I went on to Mundelein, which I remember thinking, was just like The Immaculata. But it had ashtrays. There was a smoker (laughs). I never smoked — huh — everybody smoked, but I didn’t. I don’t think I

could afford it, even if I wanted to. Because I carried eighteen [credit] hours at Mundelein, I worked twenty hours a week at Marshall Field's as an elevator operator — there were no automatic elevators in those days. And then I would come back at night to work crew. And we had a little apartment — my sisters and I — next door to my dad, because he was really hard to live with. So we had to come up with the rent. And, I don't know. It just seemed that we were going day and night. But very excited about our drama major and playing wonderful roles and great literature and making friends within the department. So, I loved it. And the nuns were wonderful, just wonderful to us.

Q: Did you have a — What were your favorite classes, when you were a drama major at Mundelein?

Duffy: Well, of course, my favorite classes were drama and I was able to use drama in other classes. I remember taking a dance class and we had to do a final. And I remember taking the poem "The Drum" and dancing out to the poetry in the drum (laughs). And that was, that was great fun. Yeah. And Sister Philippa [Sister Philippa Coogan, BVM] — she was our English teacher — and we did so many of the Shakespeare plays and Dante — and she was brilliant! And funny. And she would play roles and we would act out everything, which was right up my alley. So, if we did *King Lear* for example, she would announce that she was Lear and then she would like to know who the rest of us (laughs) wanted to be. But she knew I was struggling financially, and she would get wonderful clothes from her niece. So I would have good clothes in school that

I would share with a few others that [amended to who] didn't have good clothes. So the nuns supported us in every way you needed. They really paid attention.

[10:00]

You weren't supposed to live anywhere but your home, with your parents or the dorms — but I couldn't afford the dorms. So, somebody [the Sisters] found out we had our little apartment but they, they were okay with that. They were good about it. They bent that rule.

Q: So glad to hear they bent that rule about the apartments. And you mentioned that the nuns were wonderful, and you mentioned Sister Philippa. I was wondering, were there any other nuns or faculty members that you particularly remember from your time at Mundelein?

Duffy: Oh, sure, sure. Mrs. Phelps (laughs) was our Speech teacher and she, she told us that you always sit forward, you never put your back up against the chair (laughs). She was this sort of grand dame and she had great fingernails and had a very dramatic presence. And I remember one of the funniest things. We always called her Mrs. Phelps, but my friend, Rose Rohter — who is a year ahead of me but had been ill so wound up, really, in our class— one day said, “Uh, Katherine”, called her by her first name. And Mrs. Phelps stormed out of the room, ha! We were all so shocked, and so shocked that Rose would call her by her first name, because it was unheard of in those days.

Who else. Oh, there were — I mean, all of the nuns were terrific. I remember not doing well in Spanish class. And Sister Mary Therese of Avila [Sister Mary Therese Avila, BVM] allowed me to play Our Lady of Guadalupe to up my grade. So I learned, I learned whatever script she came up with and that way I get a decent grade in Spanish. So the nuns were so accommodating — otherwise, I don't know if I would have made it! — through, without their support.

Q: That's nice. It's really nice to hear of the kinds of different assignments that they would think of just to help their students. Now I'm wondering, why Mundelein? Were you looking at other colleges?

Duffy: This is a terrible, terrible thing to admit but after I got through high school — And I lived with the nuns, because life was pretty hard at home, I lived with the Sisters of Providence, who were our elementary school teachers, and they too were wonderful. And my friend, Mary Ann, with whom I, you know, went to high school, one day said to me, “You know, I think we ought to go to college.” I said, “Really?” She said, “Yeah, let's go take the test.” So (laughs), that's how I wound up going to Mundelein. I didn't apply anywhere else, I didn't know anywhere else. So I remember I auditioned for the drama department and the Sister said to me, “If you do not win this scholarship” — and I felt I did very well, by the way, I really worked hard on it and my high school drama teacher helped me — “If you weren't able to go through on a scholarship, would you figure out how to do it?” Well, I came from a very hardscrabble life, so I said, “Sure!” So somebody else — who had greater support at home — got the scholarship and I didn't. So I knew then that I had to — you weren't supposed to be working, of course, you were supposed to

be a student. So the nuns did understand that some of us, in order to pay the tuition, had to work. So that's why I worked at Marshall Field's as the elevator operator and I never went to an assembly. And my friend, Judith [Dorothy] Flynn, always remembers those two empty seats at the assemblies because Mary Ann Fogarty and I would get permission to not attend the assemblies and go to work at Marshall Field's in our little uniforms they provided. So at least we didn't have to think of wardrobe, working wardrobe. So that was fine.

Q: I see. Thank you so much for sharing about that. And now I'm wondering, did you have any favorite places in Mundelein to study or to hang out at?

Duffy: I didn't do much studying at Mundelein because I would just take — took classes. I don't think I had a study period because I had to get those hours in and get to work and get to rehearsal, whether I was working on a crew to build the sets or working on a role in a play.

[15:00]

But one of the funny things about Mundelein — that beautiful grand staircase [the marble staircase in the Skyscraper building] was only used for graduation. No one (emphasizes) ever used it. It was, I don't know, it was magical, in a strange kind of way. But I remember sitting in a corner on the wonderful marble steps, trying to study with a few other people because we had to learn the plots of so many plays. Yeah, so. Or sitting in the cafeteria and not being able to afford lunch and studying and eating French fries that other people didn't want. And so I have always had a problem with my weight, because I do like those carbs (laughs). And they came — they were, they were what I was able to get hold of, free, from other students with their food coupons.

Q: Yeah, yeah, and I imagine that if you are hungry, carbs would have been the fastest way of filling you up, easily available as well.

Gerace: I'm sorry?

Q: Oh, I imagine if you are hungry, eating carbs would have been the fastest way of filling yourself up also, so.

Duffy: Yeah.

Q: That makes perfect sense.

Duffy: Yeah, that's right, that's right. Yeah, and I was so glad to get them.

Q: I'm sorry to hear that though, it really sounds very hard and I can't imagine how you juggled your studies, your activities in the plays, and your work.

Duffy: You know, I thought about that, and I just think that we knew we had to do it and we did it. And there was no real financial support, or any other — except for Sister Philippa's wonderful

clothing, handouts. But I remember asking the bus driver if I could owe him a nickel for the next day. I mean, that's how tight things were. But I don't ever remember feeling — sorry for myself or deprived, really. There always seemed to be a way. And some other students gave me clothes as well and invited me home for dinner, which was lovely. And Mary Ann Fogarty invited me, actually, to her house for dinner. So I didn't exactly go hungry and I never looked like I was skinny as a rail, tended to have a few extra pounds on me that I probably didn't need (laughs). Yeah.

Q: I'm glad to hear that. Now I would like to talk about your roles in the plays. I was going through *The Skyscraper* [student newspaper at Mundelein College] and I realized I saw your name coming up quite a lot. And so I'm wondering, what kinds of plays were you involved in and what were rehearsal schedules like?

Duffy: Sister Jeanelle [Sister Jeanelle Bergen, BVM] gave us a great education play-wise. We did Shakespeare, we did Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie*, we did the Greeks. I got to play Antigone and I remember my friend's father coming for the play and afterwards, he said — telling me what a brilliant job I did — he said, "You know, I noticed you have got such big feet!" (laughs) Right? But we, we did wonderful classical plays, it was a great preparation for going on to graduate school. It was wonderful.

Q: How were people cast in these plays? Did you sign up for it or were roles assigned by somebody?

Duffy: No, Sister Jeanelle Bergen, who was the head of the drama department, made us audition for every play. You never, you never just got anything. Which was — which was great! It was [a] wonderful lesson. So if we went out for the important roles or the minor roles, you had to audition. And you had to be (puts air quotes) “right” for the role. And we rehearsed at night because we had — we needed the guys from Loyola to come and play male roles. And we did children’s shows too. So she prepared us for everything. She really gave us a very well-rounded theater education.

Q: So when you rehearsed at night, was it for every day or was it just like, a few days out of the week?

[20:00]

Duffy: I think for two or three weeks before the shows — and I’m not remembering now exactly — it would be — it would be every night, so we could get the show together, you know. And we had to play in that great big auditorium. So you had to learn to use your voice because there were no microphones or anything. And (laughs), I remember once — in rehearsal — and I didn’t mean to be nervy — in *The Glass Menagerie* — but I remember she gave us certain directions, and certain moves. And I remember saying to her, “You know, that doesn’t really feel right for the character.” She said, “Work to make it feel right.” She wasn’t putting up (laughs) with any talkback of any kind. And I did it respectfully. And I had read books and watched plays. My friend Mary Ann and I used to go downtown and usher so that we could see the plays free. Our high school drama teacher got us started doing that. So we got to see all these wonderful

travelling productions. So I felt, I — maybe I felt I knew a little bit more than I actually did. But Sister Jeanelle was very good about putting you firmly in your place.

Q: Ooh. Yeah, it —

Duffy: Yes! (laughs) Ooh!

Q: I was wondering, you were talking about being involved as being part of the crew. So what did you do as a crew member?

Duffy: You build scenery. So you would get the canvas, you would nail it to what we called the “flats” — you know, the scenery — you painted, maybe you work props where you would have to go and get all the pieces that the actors used. Paint nails [amended to scenery] — that’s what I remember most about it — and a lot of fun. And we had a wonderful man named George Pettersen, who taught us that — oh, and then we had another wonderful set designer come in and he and Sister were having a little battle. So it was like a tennis game. Sister would say, “Tell Mr. Fosser”, and he would say, “Tell Sister” (laughs) and so we would be relaying these messages. So there was a lot of drama, outside the drama (laughs). And we all loved that, of course. Yeah. There were lessons everywhere.

Q: That sounds really interesting.

Duffy: (laughs)

Q: What were some of your memorable moments while being part of the Laetare Players?

Duffy: Sorry, say that again?

Q: What were some memorable moments from your time being in the Laetare Players?

Duffy: Memorable moments being in what? I'm so sorry.

Q: Oh no, no, it's probably my pronunciation. What were your memorable moments being involved in that student organization, the drama club?

Duffy: I mean, it really was a drama club. We had all kinds of nice events, we would have little opening night events, we had certain awards we worked for and get medals and things. I don't know. I remember (laughs) — you remember the funny parts. I remember rehearsing a children's play, late at night, and we had a guy who would play a main role. It was a children's show. And I think it was *Sleeping Beauty* because he had to say, "Flowers, bud and bloom for her." And he could not say that. Every time he said, "Flowers, blood and bloom for her." And we were sitting there trying to keep a straight face. So I remember a lot of funny parts. I mean, we were not

laughing at him. We all make mistakes but, yeah. And then I was — When we did *Glass Menagerie*, my friend, Rosie, played my daughter. And one night, we got a terrible fit of laughter on stage which was pointed out to us about how unprofessional we were. But anyway, we learnt that lesson. And we had a wonderful — the head of the dental department from Loyola University played the main role in — so we had to wait for him to come home from work, to come and rehearse with us. But years later, I took my own children who had major denture — dental problems out to Loyola and Marshall took care of them. So I kept that friendship going a long time.

[25:00]

And then he gave a wonderful commencement address — to Loyola, not to Mundelein — which he incorporated lines from just about all the Shakespeares [Edit: Shakespeare plays]. I will never forget that. I still have a copy of it. And he was Dr. Marshall Smulson. Wonderful, wonderful man. And he was great fun and we learnt a lot from him.

Q: That sounds really interesting. And I was wondering, do you have any favorite roles from your time acting in those plays?

Duffy: Oh yeah. I think my favorite role was Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*. I loved that play. I have seen it now I don't know how many times. So I played the two major women in it — the mother and the daughter. So I played the mother at Mundelein and then, I played the daughter years later in the Chicago Park District production. So — and then when I went to graduate school, the set designer — I was studying set design — and he took *The Glass Menagerie* as the

play we were all going to design and I was the only one who got a hundred on the test. Because I knew that play as well as I knew my own name. So that really worked for me (laughs).

Q: That's great. Could you share a bit more about why that was your favorite role?

Duffy: Well, let's see. I haven't thought about that. Well, I, you know, had a pretty rough life. And this is the story of Tennessee Williams' real mother and his handicapped sister. She had a, a limp. And I just, I just felt I could identify with them. They never had any money — Laura, the daughter, had to keep going and asking for credit at the store which was a terrible humiliation to her. And she — you know, because she was the one with a limp! And the mother sent her and the brother probably wasn't willing to go. He worked at a shoe factory and wrote — this was an autobiography, of course, so the Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* is Tennessee Williams himself. So I loved learning about his life and of course, there were a lot of corollaries there.

Q: I see, thank you for sharing that. Now, I'm going to ask you a bit about the work you mentioned in the form response. You mentioned that you were serving tea at events and then you had to wear white gloves for them. I'm curious, what kinds of events were these for?

Duffy: At Mundelein?

Q: Yes.

Duffy: Events? I remember one event. We served tea in those days, with our white gloves, in, I don't know, it was the cafeteria — I don't know what they call it now. And we wear our white gloves and we would make out of loaves of white bread — we would slice it so that you would have three long slices and you would put this cream cheesy, vegetable something on it and then you would ice it in more cream cheese — and maybe decorate a little — slice it carefully and serve it at these teas, along with, of course, cookies and tea! So that was one event. I'm trying to think of others. I really wasn't around for too many of the events. Because I was working. Or rehearsing, or—.

And sometimes, I worked extra hours at Mundelein. I did filing or some kind of paperwork for some of the nuns to finish paying off my tuition. And then the nuns told me that I should apply for a grant because this was the first time, I think, there was such a thing as a college loan, not a grant. And so I was lucky enough to get a loan and my dad was still alive. He always believed we had to fend for ourselves. So, he gave me a hundred dollars when I was towards the end of my senior year and I thought he made a mistake because he had vision problems, because he was very tight with his money, God love him, it was probably out of fear. He was old in a relatively new country. So he said no (clears throat) — sorry — no, that he did intend to give me the hundred dollars. So I remember going to the bursar and giving her the hundred dollars towards the tuition.

[30:00]

And she told me, “Hold off on that. Go and buy a decent coat.” Because I didn’t have one. I had some thin coat that I got in a resale shop for five dollars, which in those days was a lot of money to me. And I remember getting a plaid coat with a raccoon collar, which was all the rage, as we used to say, or very trendy or whatever you want to call it today. And I remember luxuriating in that coat!

Q: That’s a great story. Thank you so much! I also recall you mentioned that you worked as an elevator operator. What were the working hours like for that?

Duffy: Well, I worked twenty hours a week at Marshall Field’s. So I would work all day Saturday — would be the eight hours — and then the rest of them would be after school, certain days of the week. And I can still, I can still remember some of the “Third floor, lingerie! Seventh floor, Walnut Room!” (laughs) Yeah.

And then I will tell you a funny story. A friend of mine, who is an awful tease, came in one day — he was an actor — and he said — I had an elevator full of people, probably going to the seventh floor and I had to stop at the different floors — and he said, “I have no idea how I’m going to tell you this, or how you are going to react.” He said, “But, somebody in your family just died!” I can’t remember who he said. And all the people were so shocked. And of course, I knew that he was just being a devil. So I had to calmly let the people all out of the elevator and then tell him that if I could kill him, I would, you know. Yeah. He’s not with us anymore, so I shouldn’t tell the bad stories on him. Yeah.

But I used to see a couple of my Mundelein classmates, who were pretty well-set, getting to go for afternoon tea with their mothers to the seventh floor. And I would be the elevator operator taking them to the seventh floor in their beautiful clothes and, I mean. I wasn't envious of them. I just thought, someday, I will be able to do that. And I think that's what motivated me — I have taken my children and my grandchildren for lunch around the tree in the Walnut Room for — since 1970 when my son was born, to this very day. I love the feeling it gives you to be in that Walnut Room and I hope Macy's continues that tradition. Yeah.

Q: Yeah, that would be great. And that's a really awkward thing that your friend did in the elevator. I can't imagine what it must have been like to have to let all the people off the elevator, tell him—

Duffy: It was so shocking, and I tried not to react — to him but — just — I just kept very quiet, because all these poor people! — were of course worried for me. Perfect strangers. Oh my God. Crazy memory, yeah. I haven't thought about that in a very long time (laughs).

Q: What was the application process like for working at Marshall Field's in those days?

Duffy: Elevator operator paid you a little bit more than a sales clerk. I think we got a dollar ten an hour as a sales clerk and maybe a dollar and a quarter an hour as an elevator operator. So the interview — they just wanted you to memorize the floors and where everything was in the store.

And I think we had to come back and show that we could do that and we could smile a lot and look nice in our beige uniforms with our white gloves and stand outside our elevator being very good about it. But my friend, Sarah — I talked her into doing the job too — and she remembers that I was devilish. I would tell her to meet me on the eleventh floor — which was the employees' floor — and we would just park there for a while. And I remember Miss Shannon, our supervisor — once we got back to the first floor — said, “What were you both doing on the eleventh floor?” and we had to, had to play dumb or sorrowful or something.

[35:00]

I don't remember. Oh, the application! I don't really remember. I think it was really basic, not like today when they want the story of your life. And they knew they were dealing with people who had never really worked a job in the world before. I had worked for the nuns for four years so that they would pay my tuition to high school, but I never worked for anybody else.

Well, my very first job, oddly enough — oh my God, this is going to sound so ancient — I worked for the neighbor in back of us. She still had a coal stove — Mrs. Thornton — in her apartment. So I would haul coal from the basement to the third floor for a dime a bucket and I thought, I thought I was rich. I could treat my sisters to an ice-cream cone or something nice. So, yeah, that was my first job! (laughs) But I have had some weird jobs, yeah.

Another one was selling freezers with meat and everything, over the telephone. But my drama came in handy there. It would be something like (mimes holding a receiver to her ear), “Hello, my name is,” whatever, “and how would you like to get your chicken for twenty cents a pound?”

Your butter for eighteen cents a pound?”. And then the catch was that they had to buy the freezer. But I was, I was pretty good at it. I kept getting extra money! So I remember being able to go to Marshall Field’s and have a decent lunch — during my elevator days — because I worked both jobs, because things were tight. So that’s my work history to that point (laughs).

Q: That’s such a smart marketing strategy — starting with the prices of the food and then saying “Oh, to get this, you need a freezer!” Did you come up with that or was that what —

Duffy: No, we had a script. But most people sounded like (reads in a wooden manner), “How-would-you-like-to” so they didn’t sell much. But I could just flip it off and sound like it was so real. And it was! And they got their freezers and they get these great bargains on their food to stick in their freezers. So I kept getting little bonuses because (laughs) I sold a lot of freezers!

Q: That’s great, yeah, I, I can imagine it must —

Duffy: Must have been a little crazy, wouldn’t you say?

Q: (laughs) No, it’s pretty incredible that you were able to get those going. You also mentioned that you “carried” eighteen hours at Mundelein. Does that refer to doing jobs at Mundelein?

Duffy: [Duffy has clarified that “carried” eighteen hours refers to having eighteen credit hours.] I think I just did very limited hours and that I think was only during my senior year — maybe to pay for my cap and gown? Or whatever senior expenses? I don’t really remember, but I remember the Sisters were kind enough to let me work there. But with all my working and all the crew hours and drama, you can see why some of the Sisters had to let me incorporate my drama in Spanish or somewhere to up my grade. I remember I had — struggling a little bit in math, too. And Sister Donalda [Sister Donalda Burke, BVM], figuring out some way to help me do better in math. So, if it wasn’t for the support, with all the hours I had to work to pay the rent and get food and things — yeah, I don’t think I would have made it through. And I remember one of the Sisters actually said to me, “You know, dear, I don’t know if you are going to graduate.” And when I reminded her, when I was graduating, she said, “I said that?” I said, “Oh yes.” I said, “But it really motivated me” (laughs) “to prove you wrong.”

Q: And I’m glad you did prove her wrong. That’s a very heavy workload actually. I, I can’t imagine just juggling all those things on top of studies so, I’m so glad.

Duffy: It wasn’t pretty easy. But you know, it’s like anything else, Regina, you just — you set out to do it and you do it. And I think whether we are aware of it or not, we somehow know that we can’t afford the luxury of a negative thought if you are going to move forward.

[40:00]

I’m not sure I philosophized about that or anything but I think it’s part of, part of who you are. And I saw my father struggle — he had diabetes and could barely hit the nails on his carpentry

jobs — and pushing on no matter what. And so, he was, he was a good inspiration. And my mother. The fact that we were never aware of how ill she was, that she somehow kept that to herself and kept going. I think, I guess part of the DNA, right? Yeah.

Q: And I think that's very sound advice. Sometimes to keep yourself going, you have to keep the negative thoughts at bay.

Duffy: Yeah, and we get them! And you just have to say "Cancel!" every time they sweep across you and they will! And they will continue to do so.

Q: Yeah, that's very true. Now, I wanted to ask you about your commute to college. You mentioned that you were living in an apartment near Mundelein and I was wondering, what was your commute like? And did you have any memorable moments while commuting to campus?

Duffy: Oh yeah, I remember there were moments, some of them not so great. I would somehow — oh my God. I would take a bus and an "L" [the rapid transit system in Chicago] and I remember in speech class, I needed a sound effect for some speech. And I was afraid that somebody else's tape recorder might not work or I wouldn't know how to operate it, so I remember hauling — it was about a twenty-pound, great, big tape recorder — to Mundelein so I could get my sound effect at the right moment. So I would get the 'A's in the drama classes — I think I did. And the speech classes. That was one crazy thing.

And then. A bad thing going home on the “L” late at night. There were some really weird men who would sit just behind you and put their hand around the seat and you had to move on fast. So we never rode the “L” alone. Didn’t walk alone either once we got to the end of it. I mean, things were way safer in those days but it taught you to really be alert, because we were coming in, going late at night, on the “L” — on the Howard “L”. We would get on there at the Loyola stop. So I gave you a funny and I gave you a really bad. The rest of it was fine. It was safe and we studied — or tried to memorize — things together.

Q: What were — Were there any challenging things about living off campus?

Duffy: What kind of things?

Q: Challenging things.

Duffy: Oh, oh yeah. It was very challenging because I had such a schedule and I had to get up early and you were dependent on whether or not the bus was running on time or the train was running on time or what the weather was like. And I remember running late one time, getting off the “L” thinking, I’m not going to make it. And a few of my drama mates — when I got off the “L” — dragged me into a restaurant called “Cindy Sue’s”. They said, “We are all just going to cut today and give ourselves a break.” And we did. And the next day, I was terrified that the nuns

would find out that what we really did was go to “Cindy Sue’s” to have a toasted pecan roll. So, ha!

Q: Did they ever find out?

Duffy: No, no. And I can’t remember what story we made up. I don’t know. I must have washed it out of my brain.

Q: That’s great, I’m glad. Occasionally, yeah, a little cutting is pretty common on colleges.

Duffy: (laughs) Right!

Q: So Brigid, could you share a little about the books and movies that were popular when you were at college?

Duffy: Oh, a big book was Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*.

[45:00]

And I remember being shocked that the Sisters had it on the list for us to read. And movies? I could tell you '50s movies now but I don't ever remember having the time to go to the movies! When I think — I think — Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* was that period. I don't remember any great musicals. No, I don't think I ever had time to go to the movies. So I'm sorry, I'm a bad one to ask that question.

Q: Oh, no, that's completely fine because we were just wondering like even if in the student newspapers or whether in classes what students were talking so that's completely fine. And I was curious. Why were you shocked that the *Catcher in the Rye* was included in the reading list at Mundelein?

Duffy: What about it?

Q: Why were you shocked by the inclusion —

Duffy: Well, because of the language and you know, what Holden is up to in *Catcher in the Rye*. I mean, today, it wouldn't be considered shocking but for that time, it was! And you have to admire the nuns. Because it was a very controversial book. I think. But the nuns thought we needed to read it. You know, they were, they were wonderful because they went, went to everything, as you know, they were in the Selma Marches. You know. They were just — they were the best example. Yeah.

Q: Thank you for sharing that. I was also —

Duffy: I should also — I looked and I don't have a *Skyscraper* anywhere unfortunately and I don't know why I don't. I tried to find out what was going on but I might have forgotten, so maybe do you want to refresh my memory about it? Yeah, I don't know, yeah.

Q: No, that's fine. I can send you some links after the interview if you just want to browse through them on your computer? Because we do have some *Skyscraper* issues online.

Duffy: Really! Oh, I have got to go and look.

Q: Yeah, I will send you the links later —

Duffy: Oh, would you? That would be great.

Q: I would be most happy to. I'm curious — did you — what kinds of social activities did you participate in when you had the time to do so?

Duffy: Well, I remember visiting the girls playing bridge in the smoker for very brief periods of time because I was probably on my way to work. And I remember going over to Loyola and having some fun over there because we had no guys around Mundelein so that was kind of nice. That was about it! I really didn't have much of a social life, tell you the truth.

Q: That would, that would have been hard, I imagine, given how busy your schedule was. Now I'm wondering, did your class have any particular traditions that they did? Like during Class Day or something?

Duffy: Well, I just remember after graduating — every Christmas time — and it started when we were there — where there would be — the lights would be lit in the Skyscraper to resemble a huge cross. And I remember — “Candlelighting” it was called, obviously — and I remember thinking that was so beautiful and so wonderful. And I still go back for vespers in early December — I try to do it every year — to the Gannon Center. I love that but it's that Christmas-y kind of tradition. I love anything Christmas-y.

Q: Yeah, it's a great time of the year. And I have seen old *Skyscraper* photos where you can see the cross in the building.

Duffy: Yes!

Q: It looks so beautiful.

Duffy: Isn't it wonderful?

Q: Yeah, it is. And so since you were mentioning about Christmas at Mundelein, I was also wondering — can you recall any other ways in which religion was commemorated at Mundelein?

Duffy: Oh yeah. The religion affected everything we did at Mundelein. The nuns never really pushed — “Are you doing this right, are you doing that right”. (laughs)

[50:00]

They had a priest, Father Clark, who taught us religion at one point. And he was adorable, we all loved him. He was so dear. But when he had to talk about any embarrassing or any intimate thing in our religion, he would turn red as a rose (laughs). And he was just so, so great. And he gave us such a good perspective on everything. And he didn't — everything wasn't driven home with a hatchet. You know, it was just put out there very kindly and gently and we loved (laughs) him. But we had some giggles over poor Father Clark's embarrassment. He was a tiny priest. Very dear. (laughs) You have caused me to remember things I haven't thought about in years.

Q: Oh I'm glad! And I was wondering — did you ever see the May Crowning ceremony, if that was happening during your time at Mundelein?

Duffy: May — That May Crowning idea — Since I was a young girl, I would have a little altar and I would put, you know, in spring, a lily of the valley or lilacs or. I always had a little place for May Crowning in my life. I'm not sure — I'm sure it was at that assembly that I never went to at Mundelein. But yeah, it's still very dear to me. When my daughter was in second grade, she crowned the Blessed Virgin in our parish so I think it's a beautiful tradition, but I don't think I ever went to the one at Mundelein, to tell you the truth.

Q: Mhmm, I see. Thank you very much for telling me about that. And now actually, I was just thinking about this while we were talking — how did you get introduced to drama in your life?

Duffy: We had a teacher in high school called Anna Helen Reuter and she was very dramatic. And we had drama — it was part of — I think the BVMs always had such an appreciation of the arts that that was a course in high school. And so we were in plays — we had the senior play and I got to play the lead in the senior play. And that hooked me. And you know something? I never had much confidence but my friend, Mary Ann, and I auditioned for everything, went out for everything and I went to speech festivals where I would win and I would think, oh! This is nice, maybe this is ok. And it gave me confidence I never had, coming from, you know, never having any money, sounding different than all the other children. I remember in elementary school, my father wouldn't buy a gym uniform. And we were lucky, we were at Saint Andrew's, which was the first parish to have a gym because Bishop Shields was our pastor. [Added for transition: And my father wouldn't buy a gym uniform.] And I remember at a resale shop getting some ugly little suit that sort of resembled the gym suit and dying it green to match what the real one looked like.

[Duffy: “The poorly substituted gym suit added to my lack of confidence.”] So — I was always fearful of a lot of things and lacked confidence, so I think drama was a great confidence motivator. And that’s how I got hooked.

Q: Thank you so much for sharing that. So, that’s actually all the questions I have on my end, but is there anything else we haven’t covered that you would like to share about your time at Mundelein?

Duffy: Well, I just feel it was such a basis [basis amended to great base]. I was able to go to graduate school and major in theater, get a — get scholarships in graduate school so I didn’t have to worry about the money. I still do theater. I belong to Actors’ Equity and the Screen Actors’ Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. I did *Chicago P.D.* [a TV series], not too long ago, and I did *Chicago Fire* [a TV series] and I was in a movie — it’s a cute movie by the way, it’s called *A Christmas Movie Christmas* and I have a good role in that.

[55:00 – 57:09]

And it played last fall and is now on the *Hallmark Movies Now* [an online streaming service by the Hallmark network]. I think that’s what it’s called. And it’s a fun one. But I think my Mundelein training got me where I am. Yeah. Thank you, Mundelein!

Q: Hurray! That’s great to know. Where did you go for graduate school?

Duffy: Where did I go?

Q: Yeah, for graduate school.

Duffy: I went to the Art Institute, the Goodman School of Drama [now The Theatre School at DePaul University]?

Q: Mhmm.

Duffy: I went there for two years on scholarships and then I just — that was all I could do. I finished up [as] many classes as I could and then I think I got married and then we moved to Germany for a year — my husband was in the service — then we had children. So I finally finished off my Master's in 1970 at Northeastern.

Q: Mmm.

Duffy: And then I did post-graduate work at Northwestern where I was on a scholarship there. Because I was lucky enough. I was a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools and was given the Golden Apple Award [for Excellence in Teaching] one year and that provided a scholarship to Northwestern.

Q: I see. And did you go to the Goodman School right after graduating from Mundelein?

Duffy: No. I didn't go to the Goodman School until three years later. I was a drama teacher in the Park District in between.

Q: Yeah. I think that's all the questions I have, so thank you so much for your time. I will be stopping the recording here, but I will talk us through a bit of the administrative details that follow.

Duffy: Okay.

[END OF RECORDING]