

SHARE YOUR STORY: STUDENT LIFE AT MUNDELEIN

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Elizabeth Vitell Oral History

Women and Leadership Archives

Loyola University Chicago

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Elizabeth Vitell conducted by Melissa Newman on February 10, 2022. 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.

Mundelein College, founded and operated by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM), provided education to women from 1930 until 1991, when it affiliated with Loyola University Chicago.

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 WLA staff. Timestamps are provided every five minutes, within a few seconds of that exact point in the audio. Actions and sounds such as laughter are in parentheses, and notes added for context are in brackets.

TIME LOG AND OVERVIEW FOR SESSION 1

[0:00 - 5:00]

Introductions, family history, and how she ended up at Mundelein.

[5:00 - 10:00]

How she met her husband, moving around from California to Chicago, how she picked her major, and the Spanish department at Mundelein.

[10:00 - 15:00]

Being the only student in one class and building a relationship with the professor.

[15:00 - 20:00]

Mundelein working with her to keep her scholarships and place when she needed to be absent for her sick husband and getting a job at Rosary College.

[20:00 - 25:00]

Commuting as a mother and wife, doing homework between classes, and being aware of student activities and organizations.

[25:00 - 30:00]

Experience at an all-women's college and graduation.

[30:00 - 35:00]

Graduation continued, how her parents acted after her husband passed, the importance of the church community, and going back to Mundelein after her husband passed.

[35:00 - 40:00]

A staff member of the Spanish department helping her get a job and her relationship with the department faculty in general.

[40:00 - 45:00]

Being surrounded by religion and the Challenger disaster in 1986.

[45:00 - 50:12]

Being a Mundel Bundle, donations pouring in to stop the Mundelein and Loyola merger, and interview wrap up.

NARRATOR BIO

Elizabeth Vitell was born in Ithaca, New York when her dad was in graduate school at Cornell University. When she was a teenager, her family moved to Chile and she finished high school via correspondence. She worked as a bilingual secretary and met her husband Carlos by being set up by her mother and his sister. There was a lot of national turmoil in Chile in the 1970s while Liz was there and her husband worked for the government that ended up being overthrown in a coup

d'état, so they moved to California where her husband began attending graduate school. They ended up moving back to Chile for her husband's job but came back to America in the Chicagoland area for another job of his.

Elizabeth Vitell majored in Spanish and graduated from Mundelein in 1985. She transferred from Harper Community College to Mundelein College after meeting a Mundelein representative at a fair Harper hosted for four-year institutions. Liz was married with two children and living in Hoffman Estates at the time, so she was commuting to Mundelein in her mid to late twenties. Balancing her family and school-work meant she only spent time on campus to attend class and do homework, so she did not have time to participate in extra curricular activities at Mundelein. Then, her husband died from leukemia in 1984, adding an extra burden of grief and responsibility. However, the Mundelein administration was very supportive and accommodating, making it possible to take a semester off and return after his death with no interruption in her scholarships and grants. A Mundelein staff member also helped Liz get a job at Rosary College (now Trinity College) in the admissions department, which allowed her to support her children after her husband passed. Despite the difficulties Liz experienced at that time in her life, she always saw Mundelein and the nuns that taught her as a wonderfully supportive, kind and impressive.

INTERVIEWER BIO

Melissa Newman was a graduate student in the Public History program at Loyola University Chicago and a graduate assistant at the Women and Leadership Archives 2020-2022.

Transcriptionist: Melissa Newman

Locations: Palatine, IL and Ithaca, NY via Zoom

Narrator: Elizabeth Vitell

Interviewer: Melissa Newman

Date: February 10, 2022

[BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW]

Q: For the record, my name is Melissa Newman. I'm a graduate assistant at the Women and Leadership Archives interviewing Elizabeth Vitell, Class of 1985 on February 10, 2022, for the Share Your Story: Student Life at Mundelein project. I'm in Palatine, Illinois, and Liz is in Ithaca, New York. So to start us off, could you please just tell me a little bit about when you were born (computer notification sound), where you were raised and your family?

Vitell: Sure. I was born here, actually, in Ithaca, New York. My father was a graduate student at Cornell. And I've lived in various places around United States, the longest being in Chicago for over thirty-five years. Also lived in South America. I was married there and widowed around the time I was at Mundelein. Eventually went to law school, became an attorney, practiced for quite a long time, and now I am retired. Back where I started, full circle. (chuckles)

Q: So why did you choose Mundelein?

Vitell: Well, it's kind of a funny story. I—because of—I moved to Chile when I was a teenager. And my parents were with an observatory there. It's still there. It's called Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory, rather famous in the astronomical community. And I finished high school by correspondence. And then I found myself not able—I didn't want to come back to the United States at that time, and I couldn't go to college there in Chile, because I was neither a foreign exchange student nor a national. So I fell into this doughnut hole where there (chuckles) was no way for me to go to school. So I did what any normal, red-blooded girl would do: I got married instead. (laughs) And I had kids, and then my husband wanted to go to graduate school, so we came to California. The idea was that when he got finished with graduate school, I would

start at UC Davis [University of California, Davis], but he got a great job offer back in Chile, and he was the bread-earner. So we went back.

Vitell: Fast forward: we left again, mostly because of the political situation in Chile. I could not tolerate having my kids made to march around a plaza carrying flags and yelling about the glorious armed forces—and I'm not kidding—they were made to do that. So we came back, and then I started going to Harper Community College, like where you are, right? Finally, I'm going to college now at the ripe old age of maybe, I must have been twenty-six or twenty-seven. And by that time, having not been in school for so long, I developed somewhat of an inferiority complex about my intellectual ability. And when it came easily, I was very pleasantly surprised, (chuckles) like, oh, this ain't so hard after all. And I was a mom, and then they had a college fair and invited four-year schools to Harper, and there was just something about the Mundelein table I was drawn to. I gotta shout out to the recruiters back then because it must have been them, you know (laughs). And so I applied and I got a full ride. So that was a big reason. But I didn't know that when I applied, and I didn't apply anywhere else. So I guess the die was somehow cast. And then unfortunately, my husband got leukemia, and he ended up dying right after I think I was about a year in or maybe even a semester. But I did finish and so Mundelein—because of the circumstances—was a part of a really emotional time in my life. It's rough anyway, going to school as an adult. But that made it even harder. And I can't imagine any other school getting me through it. I'm not going to get emotional. (chuckles) I might. (chuckles) No promises.

Q: Totally understandable. And so backing up a little bit, how did you meet your husband in Chile and then what was his situation in moving back to the U.S.? Was he originally from there as well?

Vitell: Yes. So you've got to put it in the context of the time frame. So this was the mid '70s.

[05:00]

Vitell: On September 11, 1973, there was a violent coup d'état in Chile. We were there. And that time the democratically-elected president, who was a leftist, not a Communist, but a leftist, was overthrown and killed. And at that time, I did not know my husband, but he had been working for the government—that would be the [President Salvador] Allende government—in the

redistribution of agricultural land. So he [her husband] needed to not be in that job anymore once the coup happened.

Vitell: I met him because my mother and his sister fixed me up. And I still remember I was really a brat. I didn't want to meet him, I wanted to pick my own dates. I was an independent woman. I had a job at the observatory. I was a bilingual secretary, that's where I thought my life was going. But he was just so sweet and charming that we ended up going out. There was a curfew because of the military thing. So you could go out and come home at eight o'clock. It was almost like having a chaperone, (laughs) but it was the government with guns, not some maiden aunt. Anyway, that's how I met him. And because of his precarious situation, obviously that job disappeared. He was older than me. We had to go somewhere. We could not really stay in Chile. It was just going to be a question of time before they got to his name on the list. It was really scary. So he applied to the University of California, and that's how we ended up in the States. By that time we had one child—my daughter, Francisca. So.

Q: When you came to the Chicago suburb area and started going to Harper, what drove you to want to do that? And what did you intend to study?

Vitell: Well, between leaving the United States for the first time as a teenager and coming back—both times, that time and the second time when I went to California and when we came back to Chicago, which was for a job of his again in Barrington. I developed—I became a Spanish speaker. And so it seemed logical that what I should do is formalize the education that I had from the streets speaking Spanish and really get into the literature and stuff. So at Harper I was just doing basic stuff that you need for college. And then when I got to Mundelein, I met the fabulous Kateri O'Shea and Denis Heyck, who were the Spanish department. And that's what I dedicated myself to, mostly, was Spanish literature there. It seemed, I never really considered anything else, to be honest.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit more about the Spanish department and just what you got from them, your relationship with your professors?

Vitell: So Kateri O'Shea was a former BVM [Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary], and she was in charge of peninsular Spanish, so that would be everything coming out of Spain. The

motherland, so to speak. And Denis Heyck was in charge of all the Latin American. There may have been more people in the Spanish department I wasn't aware of for the language classes, but I don't know if they still have it, but at the time it was called CLEP: Continuing [College-Level Examination Program]—I don't remember what it stands for, but it's some way you can take a test and not have to take like Spanish 101, Spanish 201. So I didn't have to take any of that stuff. So I'm not really familiar with who the basic language instructors may have been, but once we got to literature, it was the two of them: one for Latin America and one for Spain. And they were—the only word that I can use to describe both of them was erudite. I mean they knew everything there was to know about their topics. It was just (makes explosion sound effect) really, (chuckles) wow, they know so much. And the love. The love that they had for their topics just came through so clearly. It was fun studying with them.

Q: Do you remember anything about your fellow classmates, either within your major or just at Mundelein in general?

Vitell: You know, being older and not having a lot of time to do anything but drive to school from Hoffman Estates, go to class, and go home, I didn't really get to know a lot of people.

[10:00]

Vitell: And the people that I did meet were sort of other oddballs. (chuckles) People who didn't fit into the regular—well there really wasn't. There were a lot of different women of different walks of life and stuff, but I didn't have a lot of time for chatting around too much. I do remember that the senior seminar was "Don Quixote" in the original, the original Spanish. Not modern Spanish, but the original, archaic Spanish. So it'd be like reading "Beowulf" in English class. And we started out with eight women in the seminar, and it ended up being just Kateri and me. (laughs) So I ended up getting a tutorial from her in the seminal book in Spanish. It was kind of funny, because I said to her, by that time, we knew each other pretty well. And I'm like, "Do you think we should just, do you want me to go find another senior seminar?" And she said, "No, no no! We'll have fun." And we did. We really did.

Q: That's wonderful. It's like an independent study just for you. (laughs)

Vitell: It was fantastic. I'll never forget it. It was fantastic.

Q: And how was it reading the original Spanish? I mean, obviously, the other students opted out of that, 'cause they found it too difficult. How did you find it?

Vitell: It was tough, but once you got into sort of the swing of the rhythm of the language—most people know the story pretty well, even if it's just from "Man of La Mancha" [1965 musical], but what I do remember is this, and I think you might appreciate this story. So because I had suffered from this intellectual inferiority complex, my mind was wide open to the point where I probably might have been well advised to shut a couple of windows, (chuckles) because I was just letting everything come pouring in. And I was seeing getting this liberal arts education because I was taking other classes. I was taking philosophy. And obviously you can't just—you had to take algebra, you had to take algebra to graduate. But I started seeing all these parallels in literature and philosophy and stuff. So I decided that I could see—and I don't remember the details—but I decided that I could somehow analogize part of "Don Quixote," one of the scenes in "Don Quixote" to Plato's allegory of the cave [from "The Republic"]. It was [a] ridiculous stretch. I mean, I'm blushing, it's embarrassing. But this is where I'm going with my newly-minted mind. (laughs) And so I told Kateri that that's what I was going to write the paper on. And she just kind of went, "Well," you know. (sighs) And so I said—not as blunt as how I'm going to phrase it—but I wanted to know if she was going to mark me down because she didn't agree with the premise. And then she got mad. And she got her Irish up a little bit. And she said, (laughs) "How dare you, really? You think I would—" I mean that probably wasn't her words either, but the subtext of both of what we were saying is, "Oh, no. You're going to screw me because you think I'm dumb." And hers was, "How dare you say that?" And she said, "You defend it. You defend it, and I will read it, and I will mark it on the strength of your arguments. I don't have to agree with it. I mean, it's like debate class, right?" And she gave me an A. (laughs) But I still remember that conversation was the only awkward conversation I ever had with her, because most of the time I was just lapping up everything she said. But that made me nervous, like, uh oh. Because I had spent so much time thinking about it that I was not able to let that go. I think today, and especially after law school, I would probably have taken another look at the possibilities for the paper. (laughs) Maybe focus on alternative energy sources like windmills or something, (laughs) but not Plato's allegory of the cave. (sighs) Memories.

Q: Yeah, it sounds like you had a really good relationship with her. You were able to foster—

Vitell: Oh yeah.

Q: Good conversations and critical analysis of the text.

Vitell: Yeah, I think she was—you know, looking back—I'm pretty sure she was very concerned about me, my health, my situation.

[15:00]

Vitell: Oh! And I have to—well I'll let you ask the questions, but there's more about the administration that I want to tell you.

Q: No, please. I'll let the natural flow of things go.

Vitell: Because I just want to make sure that, although obviously I have the deepest love and respect for the Spanish department, it's things like that happen from top down, I think. I firmly believe, especially after all the experience I've had in life, working and managing and being managed.

Vitell: When my husband got very sick, it was very quick. From the date of his diagnosis with leukemia to the date of his death was one year. So he was in and out of the hospital a lot. And I had to drop—not drop out. But I went and I told the administration that I was going to need to take a semester off. And I had all these scholarships. There was some just straight financial aid, and then there were other scholarships that they had given me. And I didn't even stop to think about what are the ins and outs of what happens with that. Like today, I think if you leave, you're going to give all that up. They never made me sign a piece of paper. They never asked me to do anything. I left. I came back, and everything was just the way it was before. It was almost like magic, and I'm sure it was not magic. I'm sure they had a lot of hoops that they had to jump

through, but they never made me aware of what they were or added to my worries and burdens. Not at all. So, yeah, go BVMs. (laughs)

Q: And you said you'd gotten the full ride, correct?

Vitell: Yeah.

Q: So keeping that the entire way through, especially after your husband died, you had to become the breadwinner and support of the family. That must have been huge.

Vitell: There was a small life insurance policy. I needed to graduate and have a job really by June of that year, of 1985. There was not going to be any money if I didn't. So I ended up getting a job at Rosary College. That's a whole 'nother story, which is now called Trinity, I believe [Rosary College was renamed Dominican University in 1997]? Yeah, Rosary. With the help, also, of people at Mundelein. Somebody knew somebody. Somebody made a phone call. They took care of me. They really, really did. Yeah.

Q: What was it like having those conversations of "I need to leave," or in your mind, did you still think, I can leave for maybe only a semester and I fully intend to come back, or were you unsure about what would happen?

Vitell: I think, well first of all, my husband, Carlos, was very upset that I was leaving at all, because he remembered how I was supposed to go (chuckles) to University of California at Davis. And that didn't happen, and he really wanted me to finish. He didn't want to be taken care of, but the illness progressed really quickly. I think at the time that I had the conversation, by that time, I think we knew that he was not going to survive the illness. Because in 1984—which is when this was—they would not do bone marrow transplants for anybody over thirty. Yeah. Can you imagine how many people—so many people didn't even get the chance to look. Because they—I remember the term that they used was "medically geriatric." Thirty! Yeah. It's crazy. So a lot of different treatments had failed and very quickly. And it was just clear. It was clear. So I did intend to come back, not just because he wanted me to, but also I really didn't see how I was

going to be able to support my two kids at that time—still two kids—without a college degree. Because if you're almost there, that doesn't count. Like horseshoes, you know? I'm going to be working at McDonald's if I, you know. It reverts back to you only have a high school education if you don't get your degree. So yeah.

Q: So backing up just a little bit, then what was it like to be a wife and a mother and commuting to school? How did you balance all of that?

Vitell: Well, while my husband was still alive, he worked. He worked in the agricultural field. So in the summers was his biggest time.

[20:00]

Vitell: It wasn't so bad because we would be out of school in the summer, and he would be working ridiculously long hours. In the rest of the year, we spent a good deal of our limited income on childcare. I'm pretty sure I had to take my daughter to classes a couple of times, which was always fine. Nobody ever said anything, again. She brought her coloring books and colored. School, I remember school holidays. It was like, oh, no, no, no, don't close school, (chuckles) because you really depend on (chuckles)—you really depend on school to stay open. I have nothing but the deepest compassion for parents who've gone through this [COVID-19] pandemic with their kids home all the time. (chuckles) So a lot of daycare, not a real clean house, (chuckles) a lot of pizza, but that's what you do. There's no heroes. You just have to get it done.

Q: And you were going to Mundelein during the weekdays, during the day?

Vitell: Yes, with a full load.

Q: Okay, yeah so—and driving from Hoffman Estates, how long of a commute is that?

Vitell: You know, I was trying to remember the other day, how long it took. I want to say between forty-five minutes and an hour, depending. It was not ideal to live that far away, but I

really it was, particularly after my husband died, I really didn't have a choice. The last thing I was going to do is move kids to another school when they were already going through the loss of their father. I'm not going to shake up anything else. And that drive time, to be honest, it was good transitioning from one role to the other. From either leaving school not—on my way home to being mom and leaving kids off at school and going there on my way home to being a student. So that part of it never really bothered me, except with really bad weather. (chuckles)

Q: I would imagine that it would create for long days, and therefore you'd be pretty tired at the end of it.

Vitell: Yes, very tired.

Q: And when were you able to do your homework? I mean, was that something that you did between classes on campus or at night after the kids went to bed?

Vitell: I did a lot between classes on campus. I logged—I probably wore a groove in some of the seats in the cafeteria (chuckles) there a lot. Because I've always been pretty good at shutting out noise. So I would just—again, it's a question of when you don't have a lot of choices, you have to do what's available. And I was going to have to help with homework with kids at home. Fortunately, a lot of my homework near the end was reading. Just reading books. So that you can kind of do anywhere. You don't have to have a bunch of pencils and notebooks and highlighters spread out in front (chuckles) of you. Yeah, like the "Don Quixote." He went everywhere with me. (chuckles)

Q: With your time on campus being very focused on school, did you interact with or take note of activities going on around Mundelein? And, I mean, I suppose you probably didn't have time to be involved, but were you aware of campus activities happening?

Vitell: I was aware of student organizations and student government, and there was a Latina Association, I believe. But honestly, if I had wanted to be involved with something, I wouldn't

have been able to. So it was almost better for me in my situation to kind of keep blinders on and just march forward and not get distracted by shiny things. (chuckles)

Q: And what did you think about attending an all-women's college? Were you aware of that when you (computer notification sound) saw the recruiting table at Mundel—at Harper College?

Vitell: It's funny that you ask that, because I've been trying to rack my brains to remember whether that even dawned on me.

[25:00]

Vitell: I was so busy reading the materials—and I do remember what the leaflet looked like and those sort of muted colors of the kind of purply color—and I was so interested in the whole idea of liberal arts education in a small school in an urban setting like that. And I don't think it really dawned on me until I got there. But I was a married woman when I got there. I was a widow when I finished. It was the best place for me. I really don't think I was going to be up for—particularly after Carlos died—I was not going to be up for any co-ed interaction. Just not. This way I could just focus on studies. There's always a distraction when there's a kind of a social thing going on in the classroom, I think. And we really didn't have that, especially in the small classes that I was in. Everybody who was there was focusing on what we were doing, pretty much. I don't know. I mean that's my perspec—from where I sat, that's what it seemed like to me. But I could be wrong. There might have been all kinds of interesting intrigues going on (chuckles) that I wasn't aware of.

Q: In terms of meaningful experiences that you had at Mundelein, is there anything particular that sticks out to you, that you hold on to now?

Vitell: Well, the experiences that I told you about with the administration definitely is up there. Graduation was really special. I remember that because all the stereotypical things that are said about nuns, you know with the rulers and the ear boxing and all that stuff—obviously, we never saw any of that. We were adult women and the nuns—except for some of the really old-timers—were all out of habits wearing street clothes. But for graduation, and this is 1985, right. So the

style of clothing right around then was dresses that came to about mid-calf. And whoever it was who was in charge of the ceremony itself said, went around saying, "If I see one inch of dress sticking out from underneath the gown, you're not marching." We're like, "There it is!" (laughs) After all this time, and the very la—literally the last day, here it comes. "You are not messing up my march. You will pin your dress like," you know she wanted—because it was going to look awful. She was right. (laughs) But I still remember that. I'll never forget that, it was so funny. There she is with the ruler. (laugh) The metaphorical ruler, of course, but we did have to pin up—anyone who had their dress sticking out had to pin it up. And she had the pins. (laughs) Big ole apple thing with, the pin holder? Pin cushion, that's what it's called. Yeah.

Q: Who attended your graduation?

Vitell: My father—my parents were divorced. The astronomer was my stepfather. They came, and my father came. Everybody came. They were all very supportive. I was a recent widow. And yeah, everyone came. Kids.

Q: Do you remember anything about the graduation ceremony itself?

Vitell: Oh what's her na—Diana Nyad was the speaker, delivered the commencement address. She was a swimmer, and she was most famous for a failure. She was swimming—I know!—she was swimming—I can't remember what body of water—and she had to give up because of jellyfish bites and things that were happening to her. And the boat that was tracking her or following her—whatever you call it in swimming, Olympic swimming terminology—made her get out of the water because she was like blowing up. And so what I remember is she was using that failure as the inspirational part of her address.

[30:00]

Vitell: That she was going to go back—she did—go back and do it again successfully in later years. I think she swam until she was in her late fifties, competitively. But I thought it was a really interesting choice. And again, I was between nine and—well I was probably about eight

years older than most of the women—and I remember thinking that was a really interesting choice for them to choose a story that wasn't a wonderful success to address us. But I thought it was—well, I remember it. I might not have remembered it if it had been, you know, "Rah rah we're so smart. You're so wonderful. Today's the first day of the rest day of your life and whatever." That's not what she said. She said "You're going to fall, you're going to trip. And it's what you do with it that counts." Words along those lines. I mean, it was still a rah rah speech, but it was from a different perspective. Yeah, I remember that. And the dresses and the pins. (chuckles)

Q: Did your family move back with—not with you, but—so your parents were in Chile. At what point did they come back to the U.S.?

Vitell: Well, when Carlos died, both my father, who lived here in upstate New York, actually, and he lived in New Jersey, but that's not relevant. And my mother and stepfather lived in Chile. They both thought that I should come home. And my feeling was, where? I've had a home, built a home for the last nine years—ten years, I can't just suddenly become your daughter again. Especially my dad, I knew he would fall right into the role of telling me what to do. (chuckles) I had two kids of my own. 'Cause that's just how he was. And I wasn't going to go back to Chile because it would be too painful, honestly, just too painful. So everybody stayed in place. My stepdad, when he retired from the observatory, they moved to Florida. Just to be cliché. (laughs) So that's where they were. And we went back and forth a lot. And eventually I got remarried. Eventually I went to law school, and then I stayed in the Chicago area until now. But yeah, the going back thing, it wasn't going to work out.

Q: Did you have a support system around you after your husband died to help with the kids, or did your parents kind of come in for certain events and then go back to their own?

Vitell: Yeah, they came for certain events. I had a very supportive church community. I belonged to a parish at that point in Schaumburg, and they really did a lot for me. I did have to move house, not community, but house from the house that we were living in when Carlos was alive to a smaller condo. And the parishioners pretty much moved us without us having—I mean there were trucks and pickups and cars full of stuff. Again, it was kind of like that Mundelein experience, I really equate those two a lot. The experience of not being burdened with any of the

details of doing stuff. Somehow it just got done. That's what they did, and it was within weeks of him dying. So, yeah, so that was really my support system. People from that parish.

Q: And how much of time did you have between your husband passing and having to restart at Mundelein? And what was that like having to kind of deal with all of this now yourself?

Vitell: Well, I can't remember the exam—I must have gone back in for a summer semester. Because he died in January and that would have been the beginning of a semester, right? Yeah. So obviously I didn't go back then, and I had to deal with taking care of the kids, and frankly, getting rid of my mother, who had come up and was so distraught and went around wringing her hands all the time that eventually I had to tell her, "Mom, you're not helping me. You're making it worse. Go home. (laughs) You're not helping."

[35:00]

Vitell: So I must have gone back in the summer because I would not have been able to make graduation if I hadn't. So that must be how I did it.

Q: Were there any other staff members at Mundelein apart from the Spanish Department that you're talking about that you had connections with and made an impact on you?

Vitell: You know, I can't remember his name. And in preparation for this, I really tried to, but it's been a long time. And I don't know if I even took a class from him, but there was a professor who got me the connection for the job at Rosary where I ended up being in the admissions department. So I was a recruiter myself, and I still remember my first day. I almost answered the phone, "Mundelein College." I caught myself just before, so it probably came out, "Mu-Rosary College." (laughs) And I don't remember his name, but I'm pretty sure he made a couple of phone calls, and I think his wife worked at Rosary, and he just got them—again, one of those things. Take care of her. It's remarkable. It really is.

Q: I know you mentioned last week during our brief chat that the meaning of fellowship was kind of expanded and very meaningful to you during your time at Mundelein. Could you expand on that a bit?

Vitell: Of fellowship?

Q: Yeah, I had a note written down.

Vitell: Tell me what you—what I said?

Q: Yeah. (laughs)

Vitell: Can you refresh my memory, seriously, about what I said?

Q: Yeah, let me see. (laughs) Well, maybe not.

Vitell: I don't recall—see that's not a word that I—I don't see where it would fit in the context of what we're talking about, because I really didn't, unfortunately, didn't have a lot of interaction with my peers. It was much more with my instructors and my mentors. But what I did feel was, I mean, I always felt a definite—that they were at this level (indicates point with her hand) and I was at this level, (indicates lower level with other hand). They were definitely above me. And I've always been a very respectful person of rank and authority. What I felt was very supported, always supported. Never was anything—I never felt that any class seemed phoned-in or half-hearted or mechanical or anything like that. And if I had a problem, I could go to them with it. And I learned when I got to law school that that's not always the case. I still remember there was a professor in law school—and obviously this is an aside—but he gave the same lectures every single year from the same set of notes. And if—somebody once moved his notes, and he gave the day before's lecture. (laughs) They just wanted to prove a point that he couldn't even improvise (laughs) what we were supposed to be doing today. But to be fair, he was teaching the Uniform Commercial Code, which is deadly boring. (laughs) But I still remember that experience. And

the reason I mention it is I thought, Wow, I am way spoiled, because nothing like this ever would have happened at Mundelein. Honestly, I know this sounds very like, I have no critiques, but I don't. That's why. At all. I wouldn't have changed a thing about the school or my experience there.

Q: And you said that your own parish was very helpful to you and Mundelein was a religious institution as well. Obviously you had the nuns, some in and out of habits, but to what extent was religion a part of your experience at Mundelein?

Vitell: At Mundelein, it was very muted, which was also my experience in law school at DePaul [University]. Very much in the background, but always there if needed.

[40:00]

Vitell: There are chapels, there are chaplains, there are people that you can go to. And the comfort of knowing that that's there was why I chose DePaul. Could have gone to Loyola [University Chicago], too, but I did want to change up the view just a little bit (laughs). And actually, well, I think it was downtown, but DePaul seemed like a good fit for me and it was. But yeah, I mean, at that time I was spending a lot of time at mass and stuff to the point where the pastor actually told me that I needed to start "getting a life" I believe was the term that he used. (laughs) Well, they were worried about me. I buried myself in grief and work, and at some point you gotta do something else. But during that time, during the period of adjusting to being a new widow with two small children, the presence of the church in the background in that muted way was extremely comforting to me. Yeah. So it was a big part of my life outside of—because I was always going to mass—even daily mass in the morning and stuff. That's why he said this, "Enough already." (laughs) I think it was he felt that I was hiding and using the church as a refuge in a way that was not entirely healthy. 'Cause—I don't know what he thought, but that's what he said. "Go out and start doing things." So, yeah, but for me it was very important to know that that was there if I needed it.

Q: Did you ever attend any services at Mundelein or speak to anyone there about your struggles outside of just the academic realm?

Vitell: I didn't use any of the religious-based services there, but I did probably bend Kateri's ear an awful lot about my problems, especially in that one-on-one senior seminar, because there's only so much you can talk about "Don Quixote," we need to take a break. And I was spending a lot of time talking to my pastor, my parish priest, so I really didn't need it. Obviously, if he got to the point of telling me that I needed to get a life, I was telling him a lot of stuff he didn't want to hear anymore. And eat. I got very thin. I basically developed an eating disorder. So they were all worried about that too. I must have looked like a waif, but obviously I don't have that problem anymore.

Q: Very healthy. Were there any specific world events or national events that happened while you were at Mundelein? And if so, do you recall how that maybe affected the school or you personally?

Vitell: I don't know how aware I was of the outside world. I do remember when the Challenger exploded, but I think that was after I had already graduated, because I know they sent my son home from school because all the kids were watching on TV. And it was supposed to be great and wonderful, and instead they watched (sighs) it explode. But I think I must have already been working at that time because I don't remember. Didn't they just had the anniversary of that recently? It was on the news.

Q: Yeah it was at the end of January. 1986. I just did a Google—

Vitell: Okay, it was six months after I had graduated then, or seven months after I graduated. But that happened. But yeah, otherwise, not really that I can recall. But that was just because I had tunnel vision. I'm sure plenty of things happened.

Q: That's fair. And I feel like I get slightly different definitions each time I ask, but what is a Mundel Bundle to you?

[45:00]

Vitell: Well, a Mundle Bundle is an alum. Alumna. I hadn't actually heard the term while I was there. I didn't hear it until after, when I met a fellow Mundle Bundle, and she was just so excited about it. (laughs) That's so funny that you asked that, Melissa, because I never stopped to consider other than the rhyme, what is that supposed to mean? I would love to hear some of the (laughs) definitions that you've got. It sounds like you're all swaddled up in some sort of wrapping. I never really stopped to thin—I can't believe I'm so incurious that I didn't stop to think about why that was. But again, I didn't hear it until I was already one. I think it's only applied to alumna, right? Or is it undergrad or is it people who are still there? I don't know.

Q: I don't know. I've heard different interpretations of it.

Vitell: Okay, so my interpretation is I think you had to graduate to be one. (laughs) But I don't know. (laughs)

Q: It was thought of as an affectionate term in your mind?

Vitell: Oh, absolutely. Oh, I hope so. (laughs) Otherwise it starts to take on some really dark connotations. (laughs) Bundle of what, you know? (laughs)

Q: Well, I have reached the end of my laid out questions that I had. Was there anything that you thought of while we were talking that maybe I hadn't asked about and you wanted to mention? Or anything else you'd like to share?

Vitell: I think I've pretty much plumbed the depths of my memory, but I do want to say that I think this is a really wonderful project. It's so so worthwhile, and we know when this will close—oh I do have something—when we got a letter, the Mundle Bundles. We all got a letter. I think it was around—you'll tell me because you're the archivist—but I want to say it was like around 1997 maybe? Is that when she closed?

Q: So it affiliated with Loyola in '91. The last graduating class was '93.

Vitell: '93. Okay, well, whenever it was about to happen, we got a letter. And there must have been a huge outpouring of Mundle Bundles trying to donate money to keep the school afloat. And so another letter came, and that letter said words along the lines of, "We appreciate so much your offers of money to keep Mundelein open, but what you can't give us—and what we need—is your daughter's." So, yeah, '91. So my daughter would have been in high school at that time. And I remember reading those words and thinking, you're darn straight. She would never, (laughs) not in a million years, go to an all-female college. And it was true. We could not give them our daughters. And so that's the end of the mission. That was one thing I just thought of actually. Now in the course of trying to say what I wanted to say, which is thank you for doing this. Even though there are no more daughters, just keeping the spirit alive.

Q: Yeah, well we're able to do it through your participation. I mean, thank you so much for sharing everything you've had to say today. And I know it was a difficult time in your life, so I appreciate you still wanting to share and going through that with me.

Vitell: It's an honor.

Q: I love hearing these stories about how supportive and meaningful these experiences were and how wonderful the faculty was. Because really I haven't come across any situation in which [people] have bad things to say about Mundelein. Not that—

Vitell: What a great project to be involved in, right? Almost like all bluebirds, Disney bluebirds, flying all around you. (laughs)

Q: It really is wonderful and it does make me a little sad that it's no longer its own institution in that these legends aren't carrying on, you know, traditions.

Vitell: Yeah. (clears throat) Thank you for including me. I really appreciate it.

Q: Yeah. I'm so happy to have you participate in this. And I'm going to stop our recording now, but I would like to stay on with you for a couple of minutes just to talk about next steps.

[50:00]

Vitell: Sure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]