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Oral History: Carol Fredette

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Interview with Carol Fredette

- BRETT: Today is Wednesday, July 12, 2017. My name is Brett Cotter and I'm here with Mrs. Carol Fredette. I consent to having my voice on this recording. Do you consent to having your voice on this recording?
- CAROL: As so I.
- BRETT: All right. So where did you grow up in Worcester?
- CAROL: Grafton Hill.
- BRETT: Grafton Hill?
- CAROL: Yes.
- BRETT: 00:24 Did you know anything about the Polish community growing up?
- CAROL: I really did not. We very rarely left our neighborhood and were pretty free to move around in our neighborhood, but, you know, we didn't dare leave so, ya, pretty much not.
- BRETT: 00:41 Okay. So what brought you to teaching at St. Mary's?
- CAROL: I needed a job and the guy I was seeing at the moment had an aunt in the Catholic Diocese office and he mentioned my name to her and she called me and asked me if I would be willing to step in. Somebody had left St. Mary's in the middle of the year. I found out later the kids didn't like him and they ran him off, pretty much. And I said sure. So the big question was what parish did I belong to, and, of course, it just didn't dawn on me, so I said St. George's. She had no idea that meant orthodox. And I didn't really realize she was asking me if I was Catholic. So, you know, the way it worked out, I ended up working there and nobody cared that I wasn't Catholic.
- BRETT: 01:42 Okay. Did they care at all that you weren't Polish?
- CAROL: No. Well, it was *very* Polish. The first thing I had to do was learn all the names, and let me tell you—those were interesting. There was one; Jabochotrzycki[?]. That took me six months because as you know, I'm not good with names, which is why I call everybody Honey. But anyway... Ya, it was interesting.
- BRETT: 02:15 What subject did you teach there?
- CAROL: English.
- BRETT: English? Did you know of the way that they were teaching Polish and Polish studies and things like that while you were there?
- CAROL: I did. There wasn't much in terms of Polish studies. I think the real focus there was getting everybody to speak English, getting them ready for the college experience, which, as you know is not ethnic. So all of it I think was more getting everybody on the same page as opposed to really stressing Polish studies.
- BRETT: 02:55 Okay. So even though you weren't living in the community or a member of the community, could you get a sense of the feeling of the Polish community?
- CAROL: Oh ya, oh ya. Well, we have to remember too, the entire staff—and you're going to be amazed at this—were nuns, and me. Really, I was the only one who was not a nun. And all the nuns were Polish as well, as was the

Community of the Sisters of Nazareth and literally all were Polish. So I was pretty much the only one who didn't know the culture, but I learned fast.

BRETT: 03:39 Okay.

CAROL: And it wasn't all that different from the Lebanese culture that I grew up in. You know, you went to church, you went to the parish. The parish was ethnic, ours was as well. All the activities centered around parish life. And it was the same at St. Mary's too. So you learn fast, you know?

BRETT: 04:03 Awesome. You brought up the Lebanese culture that you grew up in, and I don't know anything about that. I'm just wondering, since Polish culture has so much emphasis, at least early on, and now today it still celebrates their bilingual-ness, and I was just wondering, in Lebanese culture is there similar dynamic?

CAROL: There is. One of the Arabic classes, of what I want to tell you I did terribly at—Arabic is right to left. And it bears no resemblance to anything. So you literally have to start from scratch. My grandmother gave up on me. And you know when I was young I only spoke Arabic because that's what was spoken in the house. And when I went to school my mother decreed that everybody had to speak English until I learned it, and it's too bad because if you have enough time for me to say: Get the tomatoes out of the refrigerator—I'm good. But I really can't speak it. So, it's too bad in a lot of ways.

BRETT: 05:08 Okay. So when you were working at St. Mary's—back to Polish-ness—what kind of celebrations and festivities do you remember that were focused around Polish heritage, if you can remember.

CAROL: Well a lot of it was the feast days for church. Once a week we would all walk down to the church, the whole school, for confession. And everybody...and you know it was kind of funny because I'd be standing at the back of my line there with seniors, and they'd all be discussing what sorts of things they were going to confess to this week. And, you know, I would say finally: Anybody going to be honest here? And they just laughed and said, well we have to have something otherwise the priest, he's going to yell at us. So, and you know, knowing the priest I had to agree. So it was kind of like: Let's make it up on the spot and see what happens? But other than that, you know, there are a lot of like the blessing, the food at Christmas. Lots of it revolved around food, you know, the picnics and all of that. It was fun and it was nice to be a part of that community.

BRETT: 06:23 Was there much of a division that you could sense between Polish immigrants and Polish-Americans?

CAROL: No, I didn't sense a whole lot of that. For the most part, they helped them out, almost everybody did. You know there was just one standout that, you know, everybody decided she was crazy and they were going to stay away from her. But other than that, everybody pretty much helped each other out, did a lot of translating for each other, that kind of thing. So, it was nice.

- BRETT: 07:01 So, just out of curiosity, was there a lot of- would people speak Polish in the schools, the students I mean; of course the nuns probably would, [I imagine]...
- CAROL: Ah no, they were very careful not to in front of me because they didn't want me... You have to realize I was twenty two and not a lot much older than they were and, you know, they thought this was their good luck because apparently everybody they had started at sixty, you know, that sort of thing. So they didn't want to run me off like they did run off the other guy. So they were very careful around me not to alienate me, so to speak, in any way. And I have to say, they did become family; they were *such* good kids.
- BRETT: 07:54 Ya, I've heard in other interviews with people who've gone to St. Mary's that family was probably the first word they used.
- CAROL: It really was. You know, when I was getting married, I swear they were more excited about it than I was, and I invited all the juniors and seniors because those were the kids I had, to come to the church. And it was their first time, I think, in an orthodox church. They said afterwards: Boy, you're really married because you said everything three times! I said: Yup, that's exactly it! But, you know, they were so cute—the girls gave me a wedding shower. You know, all the families cooked, all of that, so it was really, really nice. It was nice to feel a part of that.
- BRETT: 08:38 Okay, awesome. So, I just have a few more questions.
- CAROL: Sure!
- BRETT: And this one is about clubs that you may not know about, but... So there have been a lot of organizations that have been active in Worcester still to this day are centered on Polish heritage. It's the White Eagle Club and things like that, and the big one in St. Mary's was the Booster's.
- CAROL: Oh ya, the Booster's.
- BRETT: 09:03 Did you have any interactions with those kind of organizations?
- CAROL: Oh, ya. I used to—in my younger day I was crazy—so I did the newspaper with the kids, I did the prom, and we decided it would be a swell idea to have a musical, and after a while it got to be a tradition every year, so we would do a musical. We would pick something that also had kids so we could use the elementary kids, because you know, everybody has *babcia*, etc., and aunts and uncles and all the rest of it. So we needed to get a big crowd. It got to the point where the musical was three nights and the Booster's made dinner theater. So people would buy tickets, you know, have dinner, and we would... I would be in the kitchen with them cooking the dinner and then we had the kids in costumes serve the dinner, and then we would have the play. And it made a lot of money for the school. It was a big deal. You know, we ended up getting a lot of people to, again the Booster's to help with the sets and all of that. We were ambitious, we did Gilbert and Sullivan for the first musical. It was...I can't remember the name of it...Oh my God. Oh my God, it was awful. I mean, it wasn't awful, it was fun. But, God, we didn't have a lot of talent but we had a lot of enthusiasm, let's put it that way. But ya, we did have a

lot of interaction. The Booster's were great to the kids. Really fabulous. And it's funny because they all grew up to be Booster's, you know, which I thought that was good, you know, Karma so to speak.

- BRETT: 11:02 Awesome. Were there any people that you could tell, who moved into the neighborhood who were not of Polish decent and attended St. Mary's while you were there?
- CAROL: Ya. There were several people. The Murphy family... Do you remember David Murphy?
- BRETT: 11:30 I do not.
- CAROL: He was a few years ahead of you, I think, and his dad and aunts all went to St. Mary's, so, you know, Murphy... not exactly Polish. I don't even know why they went to St. Mary's, but they were a huge, big part of it. David, the dad, was *very* talented in terms of singing, and he ended up the star of a lot of our musicals, you know? But there were some families who didn't seem to have any connection, but, ya, did go to the school.
- BRETT: 12:08 Okay. So they were very active in at least the St. Mary's community, but not really in the Our Lady of Czestochowa community?
- CAROL: Well, I think that they adopted it in a lot of ways. If you went there you almost had to. There was no way to separate Czestochowa from St. Mary's. So, ya.
- BRETT: 12:29 Okay, cool. And this question is about John Paul II now. Of course, it was a huge election for the Polish-American community and were you at St. Mary's when he actually was elected?
- CAROL: I don't think so, no, it was later.
- BRETT: 12:46 Okay. Well, still on that topic... Could you reflect maybe on the reverence that you mentioned, you could say, that the Poles had for John Paul II, what they saw in him? Could you maybe comment on that?
- CAROL: Well, I'm sure that they thought he was the best thing since sliced bread, but... You know, it's funny, they didn't spend a lot of time talking about it, at least not to me. So, I can't really say. I mean, I still see people from the parish, still run into them all the time. Do you remember Kyle Lewandowski?
- BRETT: 13:22 I do.
- CAROL: All right. I had both his parents, Peter and Deb, and I still run into them every week at the church I go to right now. There's just so many, you know, so many people will come up and say: Do you remember me? And I'm just so bad with names... but I'll always say: Ya! —even though I don't. But they don't always remind me of things that happened at school. So sorry I can't really answer that question, I don't think there was a whole lot of reference when I was there.
- BRETT: 14:00 That's fine. And there's just one more question, it's kind of an awful lot, but... So nowadays the area around Vernon Hill, the area around St. Mary's is no longer as ethnically Polish as it once was. And that's due to a lot of suburbanization as well as just other immigrants moving in. When you were at St. Mary's did that process start or had it not started yet?

- CAROL: I don't think it really had. The school was still pretty vibrant when I left. And, you know, I had my daughter in the lower School, kept her there even after I came here. Got to be too hard to do because I had to leave her, pick her up, bring her back, and then do the after-school activities. So getting across the city was hard. Now it still is, it's even worse nowadays, but... So I don't think it had started as much, but, you know, I thought afterwards that it was too bad it had gone downhill. You know, so many, so many families opted to send their kids elsewhere because I think that sort of thing was a landslide. You know, once they perceive a place as maybe going to close, then there's the stampede, you know, to get out while you can, kind of thing. So I know that for a long while there it was the grammar school that was supporting the high school, and a lot of the kids opted not to go to the high school whereas previously, *everybody* went there. It was not even a question. You went to the grammar school, and then you went to the high school. And there was absolutely no question about it. So I think it was sad I think when that happened.
- BRETT: 15:59 Do you happen to know of any possible reasons why people were opting out?
- CAROL: Well, I think a lot of it was—first of all, the nuns. They were dying, and no order of new nuns to take their places. Plus, I know that some of the nuns wanted to start their own order, and that was not a good thing as far as the parish was concerned. I remember Father Chet who absolutely told the nuns if they did has then they were out of a job. And they did do it, and they were out of a job. So, you know, the younger ones, the younger nuns, women my age at the time, opted out. And, you know, after that I left, mostly because I was mad, and got a job here. And, then you know, a lot of the younger teachers were gone, and I think that was part of it. I think that in a lot of ways started it. And some of the activities died out. You know, the big thing at St. Mary's was basketball. Oh my God, it was *huge*. They were the state champs one year. And, I mean that's amazing for that time, you know, the school on the hill with the pint-sized gym. I'd be amused to go and watch the games, and honest to God, you had to watch it like this because if a ball hit you in the head, which was pretty likely... There were literally three rows of Have you ever been there?
- BRETT: 17:445 Yes.
- CAROL: Okay, so you know. It's small. Are you Polish? I never thought to ask you.
- BRETT: I am, yes.
- CAROL: Oh, I didn't know that, okay.
- BRETT: Half.
- CAROL: Half?
- BRETT: My mom grew up in Worcester.
- CAROL: So, once basketball died there literally weren't enough boys to keep it going, which is sad, you know. I think a lot of the activities died. I know when I left I think pretty much the musicals stopped.
- BRETT: 18:14 A lot of the school life...

CAROL: Ya, and once that happens I don't think the school is attractive to the students. They want more than that, so...

BRETT: Okay. Can I just ask one more question?

CAROL: Sure!

BRETT: 18:28 When did the younger nuns try and form their own order?

CAROL: It was while I was there.

BRETT: What year?

CAROL: It was...let's see...I got there in '72, left in '85...so it was probably '83.

BRETT: '83?

CAROL: Ya, '83, '84, like that year. And then, you know, we struggled on but Sister Eleanor was the pianist and we didn't have one anymore. So there were a lot of things that were dependent on those particular nuns. And the kids loved them, they were good teachers, they were not old and decrepit. I mean not that the other nuns were, but certainly there was the old fashion mindset and I think the kids were more interested in the younger people.

BRETT: 19:22 When you say younger mindset, is it, so it's a modern tradition, traditional Polish and Catholic values versus more of a reformed kind of values or...?

CAROL: No, I don't think it was that. I think it was just probably that they didn't feel any connection to the older nuns as they did to the younger teachers. I'd stay at school until five o'clock because there were kids in my room until five o'clock. And you know, finally I shooed them out. When I was having a baby they worked out a plan of who would take me to the hospital. Now, you've got to realize that none of these kids really drove because they couldn't afford it, they couldn't afford cars. But some of them had cars and they worked out a plan as to who was going to drive me to the hospital if I should need to go. They were cute, you know? I mean you really had to give it to them. Do you remember...what was his name... Quintella?

BRETT: 20:25 Quintella —sounds very familiar.

CAROL: All right, he went here [to Saint John's High, Shrewsbury MA]—can't remember his first name, but I had his dad and his aunt of whom both were a part of that group and obviously – Quintella -- they both spoke Spanish. They were *not* part of the Polish community, but, you know, they thought of themselves as part of a Polish community. And I feel bad sometimes that that didn't continue, that the school didn't stay viable. But anyway...I don't even know if it's still open.

BRETT: 21:09 It is.

CAROL: The high school is still open?

BRETT: Ya, it's small, but it is open. All right, so I think that concludes any questions that I had. If there are any other reflections that you have...?

CAROL: No, I pretty much told you most of it.

BRETT: Okay, cool. All right, thank you.

CAROL: Sure it was a pleasure.