

**Oral History Interview with Barbara Bell**  
**Conducted by Andre Gervais on March 8, 2013**  
Transcribed by Alison Froese-Stoddard, 2013

AG: This is Andre Gervais interviewing Barbara Bell, Saint Mary's University Secretary of the Senate. The date is March 8, 2013. Could you please give me your full name?

BB: Barbara Louise Bell.

AG: And what is your date and place of birth?

BB: I was born on June 1st first, 1949, in Winnipeg Manitoba.

AG: Were you really? My girlfriend is from Winnipeg. Not in the line of questioning, but we met in Quebec, in Chicoutimi, and I had a couple of chances to visit, and I love Winnipeg. Beautiful, beautiful city. In the middle of nowhere!

BB: Interesting. And it's changed dramatically over the last 30 or 40 years. It's amazing – the changes that have been wrought in that wonderful little flat prairie town.

AG: Now I just want to talk to you about Winnipeg! But let's talk about Saint Mary's. And that's interesting too!

BB: Absolutely. I used to work at the corner of Portage and Main, the windiest corner in the world. You used to have to hold onto the bus stop in order not to be blown away. Now they've put corridors underneath the road, so people can go almost the whole length of the main business area underneath the pavement, which is wonderful because in the wintertime, you don't have to brave that horrendous wind!

AG: I was there in the summer, and I said I'd love to visit in the winter! But it was like: "No you don't! You wouldn't hack it there, Maritime boy!"

Could you tell me a little bit about your background?

BB: Absolutely. Well, I did spend my early years in Winnipeg. I grew up there, went through the primary school education, I went to Red River College there, University of Winnipeg, University of Manitoba. My original focus was in Arts, but I had a widowed mother who was widowed very early so I had to work for my tuition, she couldn't help me at all. And so I had to work through the breaks and at times I had to take the semester off to build up the money. I didn't move around in Winnipeg during that time... we lived in a three-block radius all my younger years. And I sang quite a bit in my younger life – I was a member of the Winnipeg Philharmonic Choir, I sang in a number of church choirs, my high school choir, I went to Llangollen in Wales – and participated in the international music festival, and that was quite an experience. And I was lucky enough, through my university years, to get on with Rainbow Stage in Winnipeg, which was an outdoor stage at the time. Now they have a gorgeous retracting ceiling on it which will cover it over bad weather, but it wasn't like that when I was there. So almost like an equivalent to our Neptune Theatre here. That's part of the way I made my way through university – singing for a living. I also worked for a manufacturing distributing firm at that time, and a brokerage firm – that's where I worked at the corner of Portage and Main because I

worked for James Richardson Securities. They were a national brokerage firm and from the top floor in that building where my office was, I could see all the way to Gimli Manitoba, that's how flat the prairies are there. That was 60 miles away.

It was a great learning experience, but at that point, I got bit by the commerce bug. Business... I was just so taken with it. I was originally going to teach – that's why I was in Arts – but my focus changed then and I went into Commerce. After that, I continued to pursue secondary education through correspondence, because for a while, I was working in a semi-isolated area in Ontario, so I was working through correspondence. I attended Georgian College in Ontario, and when I moved out here, I was also a student at The Mount, here at Saint Mary's, and at Dal through the Hidon (?) college as well. So...

AG: Wow, the trifecta!

BB: Yes! Well, I'm really a lifelong learner. I'm very committed to that, and I enjoy learning. I enjoy the challenge. Just as evidence of that, right now I'm enrolled here at Saint Mary's in my second semester of Mandarin. So there's a new challenge. Absolutely. We have a large sector of our international students here speak Mandarin as their first language and it seemed like an appropriate challenge, since I was working here, and there were a lot of students that speak that language.

AG: That's fantastic. And you know as you progress, and speak to them, I know that they would appreciate it so much. If you don't know a language, or if you're in an area where everybody is speaking a different language, you lose your wit, you lose your intelligence, your sense of humour, because you can't communicate it. When I was in Quebec, I didn't know French, so I felt I didn't know anything because I couldn't express myself properly. So that's just going to make them feel more welcome.

BB: Well, I'm certainly hoping it will, and I'm hoping that I'm going to get better quicker! It is a challenging language. They say that English is hard, but I'd say that Mandarin is very hard.

AG: Are you writing it as well?

BB: Absolutely, we're learning to write the characters as well as to speak. I'm really enjoying it.

AG: And the courses here – how do you find the courses?

BB: These courses are offered through the Confucius Centre and I can't say any more about the teachers – they are absolutely amazing. They really are, and they have the lessons down to a fine science, and they know how to draw the people into the conversation, and into the learning, and it's really active learning, so that you're doing dialogue in the classes and... they're even teaching us songs, which is amazing. It's a wonderful course and I'm thoroughly enjoying it.

AG: Fantastic. So could you tell me a bit more about your position here at Saint Mary's?

BB: Sure. Well, I'm Secretary of the Senate office here, and it's quite a diverse position because you touch on everywhere on the campus with the possible exception of facilities and custodial. I speak to them, but you know, I deal with students a great deal of the time, mostly in regards to academic appeals, if they're having some issues there - any kind of academic discipline or student discipline that is covered under Senate. I deal with curriculum changes, we handle the calendar, I do all the editing and development of the academic calendar for the next academic year... That task was just completed a month ago. We should actually have that completed and get a printed copy back any day now. So I'm also in a support function for academic planning, strategic planning in the university. I deal with MPHEC in regards to the submission of new program proposals if we come up with a new Doctorate, or a new Masters, or minor or some certificate or diploma program - it goes through this office and I make sure that gets to Senate for approvals.

There's also many, many standing committees that I have oversight over, the Student Success, Sustainability... oh a number of others that I'm trying to put out. Lots of diversity here. One of the things that drew me to the position - I've been here now for going on nine years and when I originally saw the ad in the paper I thought, what an interesting challenge it would be to see the inside of how a university functions and operates. And the scope that was demonstrated in the job posting seemed really, really diverse. Sounded like it would be a great challenge for a person that had multitasking skills, and certainly that was myself. So that's why I joined, and boy, I'm going to tell you, nine years have FLOWN. Now there's the cyclical stuff that happens at predictable times throughout the year here in Senate, there's two dates that are the same. Because even with the cyclical nature of that work - things that are unique and really quite specific to come out of all of that so that there really isn't any two days here that are exactly the same. An amazing position.

AG: Would you say that the university is like a breathing, living organism?

BB: Absolutely.

AG: I mean, you feed your pet every day, but maybe they don't want the same food every day! So it can change like that. And it makes me excited to hear that that everyone is adapting, and that you've got to adapt to the changing needs, I guess.

BB: It's an amazing thing. You know when I arrived here, Saint Mary's to me seemed to be as it had been when I had taken a program ten years previously, and ever since I have arrived, things have been in a state of continuous change. The footprint of the campus has changed incredibly since I arrived. The first thing they did, after I arrived was expand the Science building. And the next thing that happened, that whole concourse, the Atrium and the Global Learning Commons that was built through there to join up with the Burke building. And that definitely was a huge positive impact on the environment for both staff, faculty, and especially for the students. I don't think I go through there at any time of day or evening that it isn't quite busy down there. So that was really an amazing change. The changes that have gone on in the Homburg Centre... I almost don't recognize it from when I first arrived on campus and I was taking the programs there. And there's more to come there, it's wonderful. The renovations they did to the

residences as well, and the McNally building – mustn't forget the McNally building. That's quite a facelift that went on there. So from that perspective, there's been huge changes.

And from a curriculum perspective, my goodness, we've had... I'll bet you... in nine years we've probably had twenty new programs, either Doctorates, or majors, or Bachelors, or revisions... things like adding cooperative programs. For example, the Bachelor of Arts, there's more cooperative programs and disciplines than they had originally, when I arrived. We've got a Doctor of organizational psychology. A Doctorate that was one of the first ones that went through when I came. We've got graduate diplomas in Cooperative Management, oh gosh, there's a whole list of them. I'm just trying to think of some of them. A Bachelor of Arts with a major in Entrepreneurship, which I think is a wonderful thing. That was something that was really needed. You know, Arts can lead to entrepreneurial pursuits just as much as commerce can, so that was an incredible addition. A minor in Latin American Studies. They're quite diverse, really all over the map. Those were huge, they were really big changes here.

Let's see, there have been really really wide changes in regards to the transparency of reporting to the government. There are new standards that have been brought down for assessing institutions and reviewing existing programs

AG: Is this the provincial or federal government?

BB: This is Provincial government. These programs are approved through an agency called the MHEC – the Maritime Higher Education Committee. There's new standards that have come down that are requiring a regular cycle of review which is pretty compressed, so for larger institutions that have lots of programs, this is a significant change for them, it's a significant investment in time and resources as well, and it is going to be an ongoing challenge into the future. Not only that, but there is now globally a movement in the post-secondary area to link all the courses and all the topics within courses to learning outcomes. So for example, if you learn this, where is that expected to apply in a career someplace, or a career path? And again – that's a challenge that is moving out into the future for post-secondary institutions. We are working on it here. We're about seven years into that process of developing new processes, new policies as we go along to try and address different areas, bring them into line with what the new standards are. Just within the last two months we approved a new Senate policy on a simple thing like course outlines, so that now course outlines would now require that there be outcomes attached to the topics that are taught within a course. This isn't something that is new, there have actually been in other areas in the world, Europe, is quite far along in the road in that. The US is also proceeding down that path. They're a little ahead of Canada, but we're moving in that direction as well.

So and the other thing we've changed, the course evaluation process here, I know you wanted to talk about that. In 2007 adopted the SEEQ tool that is accepted worldwide in classrooms for determining and evaluating the quality of teaching. And that has been working really well as far as a tool. The reporting was all revised, and so the reporting is more valuable to faculty. We're still looking at ways to improving that, but as with anything else, of course, it depends on the resources that we can apply to it, so that as the

resources become available, we're still working along those lines. But we do have a percentage of our evaluation system online and that could be functioning better. I would like to see more student participation in that, and simply as we discussed earlier, there is no incentive at this time for the student to fill out the evaluation form. So as a result, the online results that we get are not as high as the results that we get in the classroom. We get about 65 to 68% of the student population participating, and when I first arrived we had pretty much the same percentage of faculty participating in the program, Now that's anywhere between 92 and 95 % of faculty that participate in the evaluation process. So that's a really significant move. We're very pleased about that.

We like to be able to address the student participation a little bit more. It's important information. It's used so many places in the university and it's one tool that feeds back how the students are perceiving the classes and without that, the prof doesn't really have a good grasp on the how to change the texts, for example, or course materials to make the course more actively appropriate to the students and their learning methods. So we're working on it.

AG: Well I know I appreciate hearing that. I know anybody listening will. Like you say, if we're studying, or taking course work it's hard to find the time, or you think – does anybody even care if I want to comment on this, or what I think the changes should be? You mentioned that it goes into so many different things, the information that you get from the course feedback. How does the Senate work to act in the best interest of the students? What are some of the challenges with that? Is it lack of information, or do you find that they have enough information?

BB: Where students and Senate come into play – we are usually dealing with issues that they are dealing with in the community or the environment here. So that, to give you a simple example, during the H1N1 virus problem, there was the general medical population was telling these students NOT to come down to the clinics if they were not almost at death's door ...well, that's not what was said, but anyway... Stay home, hydrate, keep isolated, don't bring the disease to anybody else. Well, what the problem that had, was that , how would they get a medical excuse if they had an assignment due, if they had an exam - and that's the purview of Senate. We're responsible for academic matters such as that, so what we did to address that problem was that we rescinded the piece of academic regulations, I believe it's academic regulation 8, that stipulates that that medical excuse is a requirement. So for a terminal period of time, we suspended that particular requirement so that we could address that need. It wasn't the student's fault that they couldn't do it, so...

That's just a very simple example, but a little more complex example would be a transfer-in student. From the time I started here to about, I don't know – two years ago I guess, the transfer-in students became about 25% of our student population. Student population has got really mobile. They're moving around quite a bit. And so what that does is that if you have transcript that's transferring in from another institution that may not have the same kind of grade values and readings that you do, so that what in those case, as our population increased, it became more evident that we needed to address that. So that we took a look at the grading systems from the places where our students were coming from

across Canada, in the States, internationally, and we came up with what we thought was a revision to our set of ratings that would then make translations a little easier.

Another thing we did at that time was there was a requirement I believe, when I arrived here, for 75% of the courses to be from Saint Mary's. And what would happen in that case would be, we would have a really good student transferring in with stellar academic standing, and when it came time to graduate, they wouldn't be eligible for distinctions, and they had the academic performance, but if they had been anywhere else, or if they had stayed at home or wherever they came from, they would have been recognized with distinction, and when we looked at that, we thought that wasn't fair to the student – that we really needed to take another look at that, And so we did – we revised that academic regulation so that students coming in with transferred credits could be eligible for distinctions and indeed, scholarships, depending on where they were in the process.

AG: And when was that, approximately?

BB: That was two years ago.

AG: Yeah, that's a great example of acting on behalf of the students, and that's so encouraging to hear.

BB: Well, you know this office, we see a lot of the input from things like course evaluations, we hear a lot of input from the students themselves, they're participating on all our Senate committees, we have them at every level, and so their feedback is coming into things like regulations and curriculum and there's something that is brought forward that has merit and needs to be assessed, then we definitely will be acting upon it. So those are just some of the examples of some of the things we have done.

AG: If I can I'd like to ask you about... you mentioned that it was ten years before you started working here that you had taken a course here?

BB: Yes.

AG: So was that when you first arrived in Halifax, or Saint Mary's? Like when would you have first come to the school?

BB: Oh no, no. That was 2000, 2001 that I was in that course. I came here to Nova Scotia – from Ontario, 32 years ago. Ok? The reason I moved out here was because my husband and I had our own manufacturing operation. We were in the ocean sector – we manufactured safety and rescue equipment for the offshore. And we were here for about ten years or so and I'd began to wonder just how current I was staying with the general business learning that was going on in the institutions. There was a management development course offered here at Saint Mary's that I thought would allow me to reassess where I stood in relation to other people that were probably younger than I was, but also the current teaching philosophies and the current course materials. So that I really wanted to get a handle on that. I didn't think it would hurt to upgrade a little bit, either if that was what was going to happen. And being a life-long learner, as I've already said, I was just interested in just refreshing all of that knowledge that I'd gained as I'd come up through the education system.

AG: And what year was it when you started taking the course?

BB: 2000, 2001, around there.

AG: And so then you started working here....

BB: in 2004.

AG: In 2004. Ok. And like you talked about in regards to the campus, the changes that have taken place there.... How did you find the transition from taking courses to now - like you said - getting the inside scoop? Having a look at the inner workings of the university and being a part of that?

BB: I certainly have a greater appreciation for what goes on behind the scenes, there's no doubt about it. In regards to the Saint Mary's community, just from the feeling of it, it looks much better now, and of course the facilities have been vastly improved, but the feeling of the small campus, the one on one the individual attention, it's all still there. So a wonderful environment for students. Having been to the universities of Manitoba and the Dalhousies of the world where you could be in huge classes – as a matter of fact, when I was in the University of Manitoba – that was a long time ago – there were classes where I wasn't even in the same classroom as the prof. I was watching him on a TV. Because the class was just too large. We couldn't fit in any classroom. Now that was a long time ago – I'm sure they have much bigger classrooms, but if the classes were that big then, what they are now, and how on earth do you get one on one attention with an instructor in situations like that. It's very, very difficult. And here it's just a natural happenstance. It's just something that is just so wonderful because you can struggle along and just simply because you know the numbers ahead of you, you may not go for that help, but here you know there's a possibility that you can get in and see the prof, so that's... From my perspective that the wonderful thing about the smaller university environment.

AG: And so did you notice that right away when you first arrived?

BB: Absolutely

AG: What was your first impressions about campus or about faculty or...

BB: Initially when back in 2000 when I first arrived, I found the faculty very accommodating, very friendly, extremely helpful, and that really hasn't changed at all. The faculty here seems to me to be a little more international than it was back then. But back then, I didn't have the long term relationship with Saint Mary's that I do now, so perhaps it was just that I wasn't seeing as many of the instructors as I do now, but it seems to me now that there are more international flavour to the faculty.

AG: Bringing different perspectives, from all over the world.

BB: Absolutely. Different perspectives, different cultural ways, different approaches, that's what makes Saint Mary's so wonderful because we have such a large international student population. What a marvelous diversity there is here. All these different

languages being spoken, and different ways of doing things, and it all enriches our environment. At least I believe it does. I find it really interesting, to deal with the students here. It's a marvelous thing.

AG: How would you describe your time at Saint Mary's since you began working here? You mentioned that it changes day to day, but there are some cyclical things but there are always things to adjust. What are some of the projects that are the same, or issues that come up? Is it like tuition changes that come up, or the academic calendar... It must need adjustments every year.

BB: Absolutely. That's quite a process here at Saint Mary's – well, I imagine, at every university, that process is quite significant. But it really goes through a stringent, due diligence process right from the time that it's conceived by the faculty member to the department curriculum committee through two levels, first the faculty level and then through the Dean, and out to the Senate curriculum committee and then finally to Senate. And if it happens to be a new program, that ends up in accreditation, a parchment of some kind, then that needs to go through academic planning and ends up going through Senate to MPHEC and there's a whole peer assessment process that's done after that. And that all feeds back into our academic calendars. There's all those many levels, and Senate interfaces with them all to coordinate the changes and revisions as they go through the process. So by the time it gets to the Senate Curriculum Committee, we're doing back and forth communications on a daily basis between the Deans, and the Associate Deans in regards to the revisions that are being done.

AG: Has the process become easier with a move in technology toward paperless? For example, you mentioned a lot of back and forth when you first arrived, did that mean meetings, and now it means more e-mails, or is it still very much a 'lets's sit down together' thing?

BB: At various levels, they still sit down together. The documentation is tried to be kept in electronic format, as much as possible. Sometimes with curriculum, it's a little difficult though, because it requires a lot of due diligence, and people being so mobile in their jobs – need to be able to take that kind of information with them. Not everybody is on the Blackberries and i-Pads...

AG: That's true.

BB: And that kind of thing. Although that is improving. The connectivity thing is coming into place. I'm noticing more and more now, that faculty are using them to keep track of meeting documentation, which is good to see. We just revamped the whole program review process to be able to handle documentation dissemination electronically. So we weren't killing forests.. because there are huge amounts of paper that could be, were being consumed relative to that whole peer review process. So that now it's all done online, and our external reviewers are given access to those specific places on our site, so there's no paper at this point, which is really good. So, and of course what that does is establish more transparency to that process. It's also established a historical archive, so that departments aren't reinventing the wheel next time their seven year review comes



around. They can just pull documents off the site and they've got a place to start. So that's a big step forward.

- AG: Definitely. What would you say is the most significant change you've seen in your time here? Whether it's just on campus, or... You would have to say, maybe it's the new buildings come up or new facilities, but in terms of within your area, whether it's Senate business, or dealing with the students... What's some of the things you've noticed - "when I first arrived, this wasn't an issue, now it is..." or "when I first arrive, this was an issue, and nobody asks me about it any more..."
- BB: Well, meeting the demands of government in the way of reporting and review is a huge change since I got here. It's also a huge commitment of resources, both financially and from the perspective of staff. We've hired on an individual now, just to be involved in the review process to try and address some of those increasing demands, because they really have increased exponentially since I arrived here. We can only see them getting more demanding as we go along, so we're trying to address that. That is, I think, the biggest - the review process and having to address learning outcomes throughout the institution. And all faculties as well. It's a fine line, I guess you walk there, in relation to learning outcomes because you really want to allow the freedoms of the faculty to pursue their line of delivery, their line of research. The other side of it - there's the push by government and industry sector to have those more closer aligned with outcomes that apply to careers and employment. It's something that takes a lot of thought and a lot of review to respond appropriately. And not impact negatively on the pedagogical freedoms that exist within the university. Or the research. That's another change - we're doing more and more applied research here all the time. Saint Mary's has got a really great research community. That's the course evaluation process.
- AG: Ok, well this is fantastic. I guess I'd just like to say - is there anything you'd like to add? One of the things about the project is for - if students want to do thesis work, or someone wants to write a history of Saint Mary's... Is there anything you want to add in regards to your take-away message, perhaps? About the university? How you see it today and maybe going forward?
- BB: Well, considering that the first part of my career was in the private sector, and just being in the sector I was in, the ocean industry sector, you really have to be at the leading edge of the market to maintain your market. So you're always looking out there, you're always assessing what your market is doing, you're always looking for the next opportunity, the next product, the next opening for an expansion. And post-secondary institutions, of course, are very much struggling in that sector now, because with the reductions in government funding, and everything that's going on, they're having to reassess all of their processes, and their programs, and so from my perspective, this is a time of significant change, but also significant challenge for not only the university administrators, but everybody within the university community, and not just at Saint Mary's but other places as well. It is hard to stay ahead of the curve, quite frankly, as a small university with limited resources. With the MOOCs out there that are now free, and... Education's changing. So in the next little while, it'll be interesting to see how that evolves.

I would like to see Saint Mary's, personally, moving a little quicker to meet that change. Traditionally, no post-secondary institution is quick to change. It's always a conservative and well considered process to change. As a private sector person, I tend to want that to move a little quicker. I think Saint Mary's has been doing all the right things. They're definitely – fiscally – one of the more responsible institutions. They are financially in not too bad a condition, considering. The Board has been wonderful at making sure the budgets are kept in line, and that everything is covered. They don't allow deficits to build up. We've had some amazing boards over the years in that regard. And that's done marvellous service to Saint Mary's. It's put us at solid footing at this difficult time when we're having reduced budgets and having to look around to see what we can do to marginalize that impact, and still provide the quality and excellence of the service we provide here.

AG: It sounds like a lot of the success of the university comes from people with passion.

BB: Absolutely.

Ag: We're a small province with limited resources, we're relying a lot on individuals.

BB: We are. There are people here that work incredible hours, and very hard to make things work. And they all know who they are. All of the rest of us know who they are, too. They're dedicated, solid, good people. It's an amazing environment to work in. We've got some amazing minds here at Saint Mary's, some leading edge researchers. It's an exciting environment. It's an exciting time. I would love to be a student again, at this time, because there's so many more opportunities than there was when I was originally beginning my education at the post-secondary level.

AG: But as you say, of course, lifelong learning never stops.

BB: It never does.

AG: And as a student here too, I hope that I continue to grow with the university. I'd like to stick around to see it...

BB: Never stop learning. Where there's a will, there's always a way. And it could be just one small piece of information that you don't have that can make all the difference in the world. My advice to everybody would be to keep looking for that piece of information.

AG: Well, thank you very much. I appreciate it!