

Oral History Interview with Sharon LaPierre
Conducted by Angela Baker June 23, 1993

Transcription By: Armin Shujaatullah February 14 2000

AB Okay well lets start off with your full name first.

SL Okay, its Sharon Marie Lapierre.

AB And what was it when you attended Saint Mary's?

SL Waylin.

AB Waylin.

SL Yes

AB Where did you originate from?

SL From Halifax

AB So when you decided to attend university, why did you attend Saint Mary's?. Why did you chose that university?

SL Well, that's a strange story. Actually I started at the Mount for, I guess it was for a week a week and a half, then I heard Saint Mary's had gone co-ed. And I was close to Saint Mary's, we lived just off Quinpool road, so I said that's the place for me. And that's why I went there, cause in those days, if you were Catholic they expected you to go, go to a Catholic university. That was part of it especially my father. Lets say my family did, I don't know how many other people expected it, so things have changed for the better, I think since then.

AB So what was the influence of your family in your decision to attend university?

SL Well I think they were always told that you had to get a good education and I think in those times women were expected to get married, and my mother always told me you look after yourself before you look after anyone else. Because if you can't do that you cant do, do it for anyone else either, so I guess this sort of pushed all of us in the direction of university. Even though there were eight of us and only one who [hadn't] gone to university.

AB So, what were your feelings in attending a university that was so predominantly male?

SL Oh....fright.

AB Fright, ha ha.

SL Oh, yes, when I walked on campus, the first thing I heard was a whistle, and I was with the fellow that lived across the street David Little, and I said “oh, that’s it, I’m going home,” and he said no you’re not. So he just dragged me along, but I think three out of my five classes were all male and I was the only female. But you got used to it after a while, it didn’t, didn’t bother me at all, it’s kinda fun.. yeah

AB Was it? What were some of your memories [of] those times?

SL Oh gosh, I remember there was one basket ball player [Al] Brown, I think he’s a minister now, and he walked in to the class room and I mean, I had never seen anyone this tall. Actually didn’t realize how tall he was I turned around, and here was this knee beside my face when I was sitting down. And I looked, I went ooh, just like on The Friendly Giant, look up, look way up, - and he says “hello little lady, how are you” and I mean, here he was this, I think he was about six foot eight or something and I had never seen anything so incredible, it was kind of funny, cause he just looked at me “hello little lady”.

One other time it was really cold in one of the classrooms, and I don’t know sometimes you look at these things and think, well maybe they’re a little bit sexist but anyway... One of the professors, it was Professor Sutherland, at that point. Taught me history, and he said—wind was just blowing—and he looked at me and he said “Miss Waylin, are you cold?” and I said “Freezing,” and he said “Class dismissed. Miss Waylin is cold.” So we all got up and left. So I mean there were just funny things like that, that happened.

AB That’s great. What were the dates that you attended Saint Mary’s?

SL Oh gosh. Must have been 1969 to 1971.

AB And what was your academic program [like then]?

SL I majored in history.

AB M-hmm

SL Yeah. You had to take philosophy in those days and religious studies. Those were two things we had to take and then little bit of everything else.

AB I see. So did you , you attend full time?

SL Yes I did. Yeah

AB Yeah. Did you work while you were attending school

SL No I didn't. I was one of the lucky ones I guess I didn't work. [Had] a family that sort of figured I should study and that was the most important thing

AB Yeah

SL And I was a little lazy

AB Were you?

SL Wanted to enjoy myself, I guess, so I didn't work

AB So what were the social events that were going on campus at the time that you were there?

SL Oh gosh, they had bashes they called them, I don't know what they call them now. There were no tavern of course on campus. But every Friday and Saturday night there would be dances with you know, bars and things set up, and they were bashes, called bashes. And each department would have one and then of course they always had a New Years dance, and different events. Winter carnival, Homecoming they always had. We all had the same things. But see, I don't know what goes on on the campus now. though I know they go to the bar all the time, but I don't know if they have individual bashes and things for the different disciplines.

AB Did they invite women from the Mount and other campuses to even out numbers?

SL I think that most of the people used to bring dates. I don't know if they actually invited people or not. But they never invited me. I don't know. if my husband was here he could tell you, cause he was at Saint Mary's the same time, but I don't-

AB Is that where you met him?

SL No actually I met him the summer before I went to Saint Mary's. So I , and I really do think that most of the girls that were at Saint Mary's that first year, were already involved with people. and most of them at Saint Mary's, the boys [I think] yeah

AB You think that had an effect on their decision to go there?

SL I think so. Yeah, a lot of them.

AB Okay. So let me see. What were the size of your classes when you were there?

SL Oh gosh. Probably the largest, well the largest one that I remember would have been psychology, and the main class would have, it was in the Burke Education Center, which was the library then. And it would fill one theatre and then they would have a, a television monitor in the other. That would be the largest, I don't I don't even how many people it would hold, but say one theatre and a half. But next

to that probably the largest class might be thirty people. Yeah, so yeah, classes were small.

AB Were you taught by any Jesuits while you were there?

SL I don't think I was. There were a lot of them around.

AB You were there during the time when these Jesuits...

SL Yes, yes there were lots of Jesuits but I don't think I had any of them for teachers. I know my husband had some [two for the same] well I didn't know I don't think I had any. My mind is going. No I'm sure I didn't have any.

AB So what were the research facilities like when you were there?

SL Oh there was probably the research going on, but we didn't hear much about it and I don't...I know my husband actually, Bob, worked with Father Murphy doing fog research one summer, so, there was research going on, but you know as I say we didn't hear too much about it.

AB How about the study facilities, the library and that kind of stuff?

SL Well the library was over-crowded a lot of times, because of course it was just the upstairs of the Burke Education Center. But I don't remember any of the rest of the places being over-crowded, and it would have just been the science building and the McNally building. The rest of—that's all the class rooms there were then, so

AB So about how many students do you think were there while you were there

SL I think there were about 1500 at the most I think probably full time

AB How many women do you think?

SL I heard the first year there were 18 of us full time.

AB Oh really

SL Yeah, yeah

AB So did you in any way, have any type society with just those females or did-

SL There was [out] a female lounge where we would all go and gather and gossip and talk about courses or whatever we would sort of be off by yourself if you didn't want to be stuck in the sub [with] guys all around, so that was kind of nice. They did that especially when we came.

AB Haha [I see] and how do you think the feelings were at the—of the male students [in] your presence there?

SL Ooh, a lot of them were really angry, they didn't want us there they—I mean I was told to my face by a couple of people, that all the females did was ruin the school spirit, that [it] was much better when it was just the males. But then there were a lot who were very welcoming. You know, felt that we should be there and it was about time to turn things around.

AB Yeah

SL Yeah. But there were, there were some people who certainly didn't want us there and they voiced their opinions, but most of us were pretty, you know we just “oh, get away”. You know I don't think there was anyone who really, that really offended cause the ones who would say something, weren't worth speaking to most of the time anyway. Yeah

AB How bout the reactions that you got from the faculty members, your professors?

SL I don't remember any bad parts at all about the professors there. They were all—seemed very nice, went out of their way to help you in any way they could, yeah. Never had any problem, or never saw anything that I would call sexist [or anything] from any of these professors. I hadn't even thought about that till now, whether I had felt any sexism or not, but no, I can't ever remember any.

AB How about the fact that the school had been built and geared, like the activities and the facilities had been geared towards male students. Did you ever feel that sometimes there were facilities lacking that you needed, or any organizations that were closed to you?

SL No, no I never felt that, that sometimes when I speak to other people I felt I lived in a vacuum. You know just... everything went by me, but no I don't. The only thing I ever felt and I've I've heard it from other females too, even later was that they felt that the athletically inclined at Saint Mary's were treated a lot better sometimes by professors, that they were given advantages that, that others weren't given. But I think that applied probably to the male population just as much as it applied to us. You would hear different stories where you know certain someone would go down and or, or-or-or some one playing foot ball who needed a good mark would go and talk to a professor and get it, where we always felt if we went and spoke to a professor, course you never know until you do, but it just seemed to be that things weren't the same for everyone. Just with certain professors you know but not—and of course you couldn't pick them out and say they were, you know.

AB What was the role of sports at Saint Mary's while you were there?

SL Oh my...I mean it was really big. All their A teams were really yeah, big and well known at that time. But I think everyone rallied around them, it was really a rallying point you know. even the girls that came, a lot would go to the, the football and the hockey and everything, they must have felt kind of nice, you didn't feel excluded.

AB Well that's good. What was the student population like when you were there, aside from gender. How about age and ethnic origin of your fellow students. What was that like?

SL I think most of the students would have been about the same age as I was, between 18 and oh I would say 24. I did take one night course when I was at Saint Mary's and of course that was pretty well all adults. But when I go on the campus today, I see a lot older students, and then you didn't really see a lot of older students it was pretty well right out of high school, into university and then out to get a job. You didn't really see a lot of, even 24-25 year olds. I—it, to me it seemed they were between eighteen and twenty, twenty-two, twenty-three, something like that.

AB Were your fellow students from any type of ethnic backgrounds like..

SL I would say pretty well white. You know there, there were—there were a—a few blacks [so] but pretty well on the sports teams as—as far as I could tell, brought in from the States. You know, so I don't know how they felt about being there but everyone, there didn't, I didn't see any racism or anything like that, of course, I say “mm mm” you know, everything flies by me but, a lot of them were in class with me and and I must say that there were two of them that I became good friends with, and one played on the foot ball team one played on the basket ball team, so yeah.

AB How about international students? Were there any that you noticed?

SL There was only one that I remember and he was in training to be a Jesuit. And he—I think he was from Nigeria or something, I couldn't even tell you what his name was. I don't remember a lot of Chinese or even students from Hong Kong or anywhere at that time.

AB Did you notice anything about the family backgrounds of the students that you were with, homogenous ?

SL I think so. I think so. Pretty well all yeah, I would say pretty well. It was just like one class of students. You know all from the same background pretty well

AB Yeah. What was student government like in those days when you were there?

SL Radical.

AB Really!

SL Yes, I mean we were, I think, we were a true sixties group, or early, you know late sixties, early seventies. But the student government was pretty radical, I mean there... and the newspaper too - there were actually students expelled when I was there. I don't know if they'll wanna hear this or not bring it up, but there were students expelled for what they wrote in the paper about the faculty of Saint Mary's, so. And we had sit-ins when they fired a professor and we had garbage strikes because they didn't like the food at Saint Mary's... You could say we were a true sixties group.

AB I see. Do you remember any particular [apages] that you took part in

SL Yes, when they—Professor Sutherland, the fellow that I was talking about earlier. He was let go for some reason none of us could understand or wanted to understand because as far as we were concerned, he was a wonderful professor. Students really liked him.

UNKNOWN MALE VOICE Hi!

AB Hello

UNKNOWN MALE VOICE How are you?

AB Good

SL Had a good [course] and when they decided to let him go, everyone said well were not gonna just sit down for this. [We'll] go and occupy the main lobby. Actually where we ended up was right along by the registrar's office there, from the main lobby right in to the registrars office, and they brought the fire department in, trying to get us out [fast] but we just sat there. I think that—I cant remember, must have been two or three days that we sat there and just didn't move. And then I think probably Professor Sutherland told us that you know, come on now, exams are coming and everything else, so we were quite prepared to sit there for a while

AB Hahaha

SL Which was kind of nifty, really. You know everyone, everyone seemed to be a family then it seemed to me. Everyone got along, which is - , I don't think , well people don't know each other on the campus the way they did then, there were so few students that you would see people all the time and you really, in class you really got to know one another and it became almost a family

AB Hmm I see

UNKNOWN MALE VOICE Drink coffee?

AB Sure!

UNKNOWN MALE VOICE Would you like a cup?

AB That would be great

UNKNOWN MALE VOICE Okay [I]was gonna make some anyway.

AB So what—when you went to saint Mary’s. Were you looking to any future career plans or, what were your future plans afterwards?

SL I wanted to teach.

AB Did you?

SL I did. Yes , that’s what I wanted to do. I ended up in the library instead of a class room, but I thoroughly enjoyed it.

AB Did you go on to more education after you left Saint Mary’s?

SL No I didn’t, no no.

AB Where..what was your work experience after you left?

SL I worked at Saint Mary’s in the library for four years, and then I stayed home with my children until my oldest one was in school, and then I went back with the school board..

AB So do you feel that your studies at Saint Mary’s were useful to you?

SL Oh yes, yes. I couldn’t, I wouldn’t be working without my education from Saint Mary’s, you know. I probably would have gotten it from somewhere else, but you know certainly wouldn’t be able to do the job I’m doing [end of sentence cut off by male voice]

UNKNOWN MALE VOICE I’ll just close the door, I’m making noise, I’m noisy

AB Did you continue your association with Saint Mary’s after you graduated?

SL We’ve gone to a lot of alumni affairs. Never to vote or anything like that, but we’ve gone, you know to different, a lot of different functions that the alumni has held. And we try and get to homecoming as many times as we can, so. We’re not allowed on the campus now though with Carrie there, so

AB Oh, with your daughter there

SL Hahah. That's right she told us, Bob want—Bob is actually taking courses at Saint Mary's, and I keep thinking about it but I haven't done it yet, but she said you cant do it when I'm there. So for the next, last year and the next two years we won't be allowed on the campus

AB You're barred!

SL That's right, that's right

B Okay. Are there any particular personalities that were there on campus that stand out in your mind when you look back

SL Well the only one I really remember was Raila Page. Do you mean other students?

AB Students or people on the faculty, administration

SL Oh

AB I know Kevin Clearly bought your name up.

SL Yes he did, I mean Kevin was the one when I first went to Saint Mary's who, he was the registrar at that point and he took us all individually and set up our courses and and picked out most of our professors and everything so it was really great. I mean to meet him first off and and go through him and and he, a he's such a kind person really. And he just set everything up it was wonderful, my first year was absolutely wonderful. I don't know if he picked all the easy professors or what he did, but it was great. He was always good and Ken Bendelier was there he was dean of men and he was always kind and you know whenever you'd see him, it was "hi, how are you girls getting along?" or "how are you young ladies getting along?" They really seemed to care whether we were getting along or not. And then there was Raila Page who ended up being a guidance councilor at Saint Pat's for a while and spent all of his time playing, uh what's the name of that card game they.. bridge, in the sub . Morning noon and night. We always wondered how he ever got through, and he did yeah. I don't and then there was, oh what was that priests name? Father Hennessey ,of course. I mean everyone on campus knew about Hennesy. So when Bob graduated I remember he said that they wanted, Dal wanted to amalgamate with Saint Mary's, and he said that if they ever did that he would take his sword, his cane sword and he would run them through with his cane sword. haha

AB (laughs)

SL So those were, those were the ones that really stand out in my mind.

AB Are there any other memorable experiences that you can remember in your stay here?

SL You wouldn't want to hear my memorable ones. Oh, oh well just the great time we had you know because everyone seemed, as I say to be a big family and I think even today it probably isn't the same as it was then. And it was really nice, just you could talk to anyone, going along the campus and you never felt "ooh, they're gonna say something behind my back or who are you talking to you know." it was really, it was a nice nice atmosphere. It was just small enough, as I say everyone would just chat and we'd walk along in to class and chat with whoever was there.

AB Yeah.

SL It's great, I really enjoyed it. I think it was the best, best time of my life.

AB Well that's about everything I wanted to cover

SL Okay.

SEEMS LIKE TAPE WAS CUT/ STOPPED AT THIS POINT

SL Okay the one memorable moment I should mention I suppose, sticks in my mind, is that we were not allowed to wear slacks, even though we were paying for own way, through university of course it's subsidized, but still we figured we were paying our own way. And we were told we weren't allowed to wear slacks, so I think it was the second year we kicked up a little bit of a stink and told them we were wearing slacks whether they liked it or not. And there was never a problem after that.

AB Was there a dress code generally?

SL There used to be for the males, but when we reached there, there wasn't. I know when Bob first started which would have been '67 he had to wear a gray flannel pants and a white shirt and a tie. Not sure if it was a white shirt, but a shirt and a tie anyway and by the time we got there though there were no dress codes. I don't think they could wear jeans. They had to wear dress pants. But we figured if they were, you know didn't have a dress code, why should we not be allowed to wear slacks, so we just told them that we didn't particularly care for that, and we were wearing slacks so...

AB Were there any other rules about behavior on campus you can think of?

SL Well, I remember there was one girl who was brought in before the dean of women and she's still there so I won't tell you who she is, who she was, but apparently she had heard that this particular gal was pregnant, and didn't particularly like it and thought that they were going to have to let her go, and this particular young lady told her it was none of her business, and she'd better stay out of her concerns and that was the end of it. We were quite surprised by that, m-hmm yeah. But other than

that those are the only two, two times I remember. As far as smoking, the women smoked on campus. I'm not sure if they just smoked in the alumni, the women uh, uh, you know lounge, or if they smoked in the SUB. I'm not sure, but I know they smoked on campus and [everything else] but it was kind of ridiculous when you think of it, to go with, without slacks because most of our skirts were half way up to our behinds anyway, cause we were wearing mini skirts, so, you know. no, I don't remember any other rules other than those and I think that we were just outspoken enough to put, an end to them pretty quick.

AB Were there any women residences at that time?

SL Yes. Yes and that's... poor Kevin would have a hemorrhage, but anyway, we had our own prostitute. In residence, for part of the year. I can't remember if it was my first year, or second year, but she was only there for a bit till they found out. She was out on her ears, but I mean everyone knew and it was quite, quite something. Faculty didn't know I guess its because they weren't involved in it but yeah, there was. And they did have the low rise originally it was, well, at that point there was, gosh what was there, was the one high rise maybe? But anyway, part of the low rise there was designated for women, and it, pretty well no men were allowed in over there, at all.

AB Were there any type of curfews, or...

SL Oh, there were no men allowed in the rooms or whatever and I would probably assume there were curfews but we didn't, I don't really know because I never stayed in residence, but I know there were no men allowed, so times have certainly changed.

AB Were the men allowed to have women in their residence areas?

SL I don't know. I have no idea. I would be very surprised, because it was still pretty much a Catholic university at that point. And they didn't want to corrupt our morals.

AB What effects do you think it being a Catholic university had on, on the institution as a whole? Did you feel that...

SL I think probably it was more the Jesuits being there than it being a Catholic university. You know I, mm, yeah I I think probably it was just maybe the Jesuits being there. But you have to remember too that probably, I'm not sure of statistics, but I would say at least three quarters of the students that were in there went there were probably brought up Catholic. And to be brought up Catholic in those days was much different than it is today because of course you had religion in school every day, and the church was very much a part of your life because you went to, all the dances you went to would have been Catholic dances, and the schools were segregated then, it would have been QE protestant, Saint Pat's Catholic. So I think

probably it had, it had a lot to do with life on campus. But of course we could be just as bad as any other group around. You know. or maybe we just thought we were. Cause we looked at the other universities to see what they were up to, but I think at that point it really was very much a Catholic university.

AB Okay.

END OF TAPE