

Oral History Interview with Geraldine Coll
Conducted by Angela Baker. 1993
Transcription by Sarah Brennan, February 2000.

AB: There we go, I think I've got it this time... Ok, could you state your full name please.

GC: Ok, my name is Geraldine Coll and I was born on April 15, 1940.

AB: And your educational background?

GC: Ok, I went through grade school and high-school and graduated with a bilingual course, uh, bilingual business course and I took university courses (laughs) I took university courses but didn't complete a degree.

AB: What type of university courses did you take?

GC: Business, Management Organizational Behavior, uh Accounting...

AB: So you've been at the university for 10 years?

GC: 10 years here.

AB: And how has your role and responsibilities changed?

GC: Well, they haven't changed in that I still provide Dr. Ozman with the same service that I did when I first came, which means that I do I manage the Office of the President. I, when I first came I did not have anyone that reported to me, now I have 2 young girls who report to me, because of increase in tuition, I mean tuition, Oh God, increase in the student numbers or enrollments, umm, you wouldn't think that our work here wouldn't increase as well, but it has, so that's why we have 2 other people in the office.

Um, let me see, the scope of the position has changed in the, I've taken over a lot more of the responsibilities. When you first come into a position, it doesn't matter how experienced you are, you have to learn what happens in the office that you've taken over. It takes about a year. After that you're able to take over. You are able to take responsibility for certain items that the President would not have given you before because you were new to the position, you had replaced someone who may have been doing that and from that time on, now, at least I can think ahead of time. I know what Dr. Ozmon needs, what he wants, I can answer questions, knowing him as a person, knowing how he thinks, and it makes it so much easier. I find that people come to me a lot because I, for some reason, am a wealth of information. I tend to, anything I find out, I put down somewhere, I have cards and I have a book where anything I find out I annotate, so after a while you get to the point where you

know an awful lot. Sometimes it takes people 20 years to know what, what a university is all about. Having been here 10 years I am one most of the people come to if they need to know everything and if I don't know it, I'll go find out and then mark it down as well, so that next time it comes along, and I love working with students. I find that I help students a lot. Sometimes it affects my work in that I take a long time with them but I feel that that's the important part of it. The, its important that I run the office well, that I take care of Dr. Ozman, but we're all here because of the students and we have to take the time, even if they should be seeing someone else at the time, there's no-one else around and its amazing how many times we can help them as well, and make them feel more comfortable - tell them who to go to. Sometimes they have to see the, uh President, sometimes its a Dean, so all that kind of interferes with your work and yes - for me, it's the part I enjoy the most - I really enjoy that part.

AB: What changes have you noticed in the students since you've been here 10 years?

GC: They change. It depends. I find every year there seems to be a group, I shouldn't say every year, there is a different group every year, but about every four years or so, the group of students coming into the university change, there's... I can't pinpoint what the difference is, but they are different. I don't know if the changes in, are in our environment here in the city, in the schools.. it's just that the children.. I call them children - but the young people come in and they have a different way of thinking so you can notice the difference. But you can't pinpoint exactly what it is - it's how they do things, it's, we can always tell in the month of September what the year is going to be like. Whether it might, how do I put it, some students are more mature than others. Sometimes a group will come in that aren't as mature and you notice the difference because you've been here with the other group, not ... as a student, I don't know if you're noticed that but we have, we have noticed that. But it doesn't mean that they aren't doing the same thing , it's just that they're a little different in their thinking - how they go about things. And then you can get a year where everyone is just ... ummm... we don't have any problems in Residence, we don't uhh, have any uhh, how do I put it, it's hard to pinpoint, just a difference.. personalities..

AB: So there's been quite an increase in numbers?

GC: Oh, when I first came you could walk down the hallway and wouldn't have the same amount of students that go through this hallway, just, it just seems now like you have to kind of, make room to get through the hallways, whereas before, you know, you could walk through and there'd be students on either side of you, but there's been a lot, well, I wouldn't say the last 10 years, but I guess I wouldn't be far off but it's almost doubled in that, you know student numbers.

AB: So, how do you feel those increased numbers have changed the nature of the university?

GC: We have a lot more students from Asia, China, ahh, we have a lot of international students from different countries that we didn't have before. I find a lot of older students are coming back to take courses because they've lost their job or something. Continuing Education has really increased there and that again is the mature students from the ages of 25 on. I've noticed a lot of older people, I mean you know, I'm 53 but older people in their 60's and they're going to university. Things like that.

AB: Ok, let's talk about the changes you've noticed in the staff over the years. That must have grown as well.

GC: Not, not as much, umm, some departments may have added one or two people - that's in the support staff area. , I find that, when I first came there were a lot of secretaries here who might have been here longer, but like everything else, they become transient society as well because I find that now the secretaries who are coming in now are younger, so kinda makes you feel a little more ancient somehow.

AB: Why do you think that is?

GC: Well, I don't know. I think that maybe some women have stopped working and have decided to stay home and do something else, or have gone back to school, but I have found that a lot of the secretaries who have come in are much younger, but that's here at Saint Mary's. I don't know if its the same at other universities or not, but then again we also have new people who work as support staff who have just come in to the workforce after being home a long time and there are two or three of those but the staff in numbers has not increased that much. It's pretty well stayed the same.

AB: Have you noticed any other changes in the student population in terms of gender maybe?

GC: You know, I haven't really.

AB: What changes in academic programs have you noticed?

GC: Oh, many many changes. I couldn't list them for you but I know that we ahh, a lot of the faculties have Masters degrees , a lot of new programs like EnviroScience and umm, oh gosh, I can't think this morning, but I know that there's a lot there because I have seen them go through. Umm, the Executive MBA Program, umm everything seems to have developed very, very quickly umm, we also have an office, we have offices outside the universities in Truro, in Dartmouth, those are mostly business offices, which come under the Faculty of Commerce but ah, Continuing Education have an office at the World Trade and Convention Center and they put on many courses which are of interest to people who work downtown

and they're popular. I know if I put all this down, I'd have much more talent (laughs).

AB: But that's things that stand out in your mind.

GC: That's right and I know that after you leave I'll think of many more, but right now that's about all I can think of.

AB: Ok, are there any significant events that have happened at the university over the years that stand out in your mind?

GC: Oh, we had the Tower built, since I've come and that was quite quite something to go through, to see it being built and have it there. We, ahh,.. trying to think of significant changes.. can't think of anything else, not, not in buildings or anything like that.

AB: Ok, so, you say you enjoy the personal interaction you have with the students. Do you find that this changed since the numbers have gotten larger?

GC: No, well, it's changed in that there are more people who are seeking help and ahh, but other than that, I've just enjoyed working with them. I also have a few people I can fall back on if I can't help them. I have a couple of Associate Deans I send them and they're terrific, or the Deans. If I feel they would see a Vice President I make sure that they see a Vice President. I try to make certain that they go through the lines of ahh, of administration offices, especially if they have a problem with their professor. Then I make certain that they speak to the Chairperson. The Chairperson can help them and I just have them go up the line. It seems awful to have to do that, but it's the only way that we can do it and systematically make certain the student reaches the person who's able to help them, but, ahh, but then if all fails I make certain that they see the President and his door always open. But I can't have them completely go in there right away, I have to go through the lines, you know, of, communications and make certain that the student is taken care of and sometimes he or she may only have to see one person. Sometimes, they're not happy and we make certain we keep up. Usually it stops at Dr. Dodds office: the Academic Vice-President. If it has to do with academics. If it has to do with administration, and then I start with Mr. Newell next door.. so,

AB: So, ah, what do you feel students wish to gain from their educational experiences ... at Saint Mary's?

GC: I'm sorry?

AB: What do you feel students wish to gain from their educational experiences at Saint Mary's, do you think that has changed?

GC: Well, I think it has because the um, the job market is not there like it was before, and I think it's difficult for students. They're trying to find out themselves, what they want to do. They're trying to make sure that they take the right courses that will pre - prepare them but it doesn't matter sometimes how much you take, there are no jobs. There's no way, so I find that because of that a student returns and takes more courses, which really prepares them well, because once they have a Masters degree or something, they have a better chance, but, uh, that I find - students who may have left with a BA, Bachelor of Commerce before, but I find students are coming back and making certain they take, you know, a Masters or an MBA or something like that. I find that they really need it.

AB: So, what do you feel that Saint Mary's has in particular to offer students?

GC: Well, we always like to think of ourselves as being a family. I've had many students tell me that once they've left they realized how much they had gotten to know the people at Saint Mary's, staff and faculty. They've told me that they've always felt they could walk right back through that door and someone would say hi, how are you. We try to do that, in spite of growing, we try to keep that going and hopefully, we'll be able to do that but I think that because we're a little smaller than Dal. Dal is so big that I think a student can get lost a little more easily, where here, we still have names for students, I find, instead of just numbers. That's what most of us try. We try to make certain because umm, it's very important, you know, its important that they feel that they can come to anyone and get help. And um, I'll be the first one to do that, Donna out here too. That's one thing we have to make certain that they are very happy, if not then we should lose them.

AB: So, what are the challenges that face Saint Mary's now?

GC: Oh, I think all the universities of Nova Scotia are facing a challenge - because of, budget restraints, governments changing, federal governments changing, ah, every one of us, whether you work downtown at a private business or whether you work for a corporation it seems everyone is looking and rationalizing and looking things over and we have to watch every penny which, at Saint Mary's has always been done because we had a Financial Vice-President who works hard at that, and ah, we've done without in order to have a balanced budget. Maybe our classrooms aren't as big and they're not as nice. A lot of equipment is donated, but, I think that everyone has to look and rationalize things a little differently, and so do students. They have to manage their money a little better than they did before because it's getting more expensive now to do everything, so I find that's changed, where before there was a certain level where people felt, I can afford to go to university, I find its gotten to a point -myself- and that's a personal thing - it's getting harder for students to find the money to come to university, where it was easier before. But again, there's so many things behind all that, so.

AB: Alright, let's talk a bit about Dr. Ozman's presidency, umm, what goals do you think he's been attempting to have for Saint Mary's in his years here? What priorities does he have?

GC: Well, his first priority, as always, are the students, he wants to make certain that when they leave here, we have a mission statement and he believes in that mission statement. That we offer a student a quality of life which encompasses their studies, their life as a citizen. That they're able to walk out of Saint Mary's and be a good all round person. That we've had everything from the spiritual to the classroom to, um, how would I put it, that's what I found anyway, that since I've worked here that seems to engulf everything, sports, and everything are all involved in that, but academics and of course make certain that the departments and professors, how would I put that, usually I don't have problems even thinking, I think it's because the tape is on.

AB: (laughs) Take your time.

GC: Just making certain that they receive all the teachings they should receive before they leave and we prepare them for life outside 'cause it doesn't matter how much you learn - if you aren't prepared to go out there and face everything- there are many times I've seen a student come back and say, well, that's not what I was taught, but it changes once you're out there. This gets you started and then from there a student has to say, I need this, I need that, this is, you know, the direction I should go, but I think that Dr. Ozman just, his main goal was to see that when students leave Saint Mary's they're proud of it, that we've given them a good education and a good all around perspective - we've made a good all around person out of them that when they go out they're ready to meet the public. But, ah, I think that's something you should ask him - that's just my way of thinking.

AB: Yeah, sure (laughs)

GC: But I've enjoyed working with him, and um, he's one of the nicest persons I have ever worked for because of the way he treats people and students. I've watched him and he just walks all around and he's very good at that. He's very good at making certain that um, how would I put it, he knows what happens within his university. He, and he's very much aware of that and he's always working on it.. so.

AB: Ok, how about the staff you've worked with?

GC: Yes.

AB: Over the years. how did the staff interact? What type of relationship did you have with them?

GC: Oh, it's a very nice place to work - we have different personalities, we have different, people who have personalities. Some like to be quiet, some like to talk.

I've enjoyed it. I've had a good relationship with all of them. I find we have a few characters and they kind of make things more interesting. I know most of the staff, but for one reason or another I feel that, I like to talk to everybody, therefore I should say probably up to about a year ago I haven't had much time since then, I would go down to the cafeteria. I would know all of the people who worked there - the people who washed dishes - everything, 'cause I would talk to everyone - I would talk to all the cleaners, um, because I enjoyed them, they're all nice people. And the same thing with the secretaries and the people who worked in the Business Office, Accounts and everything. I found that it got so busy in the last few years that it's harder to do that but I always prided myself in knowing the staff at Saint Mary's and they're hardworking and they're nice people. A lot of them have chosen to stay here for a long time, like I am probably one of the young ones with 10 years here, but a lot of people have been here a long time and they've enjoyed it and they've progressed to other positions, but ah, on the whole I would say we have a very professional staff and ah, they're there to help everybody.

AB: That's about all I wanted to cover, unless you can think of anything else you would like to add?

GC: No, I wish I'd been a little bit more relaxed, not me not to be (laugh) but I think that as a whole, I've worked in a lot of places. I've worked in universities out west, I've worked in colleges and, I think most places are the same but Saint Mary's there seems to be a history, which has grown with it and when I worked out west, places were very young, colleges were very young - they'd been build 20 years ago and things like that. Down here, universities were built a long time ago and Saint Mary's is one of them and it carries with it so much that I don't feel in the 10 years I've been here that I can actually speak about it, there's so many other people, that the names I've given you - that have been here and they know it. They know is so much better. I find that I love to listen to them, I love to find out things, not talk about it, just to find out all the things that went on before I came and ah, the people like Kevin Cleary and Elizabeth Chard, some of the people I've given you the names of - They've been here a long time and I still feel quite young within the organization. It takes a while to get used to everything too - when you first came in so , I think I'm almost a Nova Scotian because I came from outside Nova Scotia, but other than that I enjoy it..

AB: Ok.

Tape Ends