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NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIAN CALABRO

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Marian Calabro, on April 4, 2023. I am Kate Rizzi, and I am located in Branchburg, New Jersey. Marian, thank you so much for doing this second oral history session with me.

Marian Calabro: You're welcome.

KR: We left off last time talking about your years at Rutgers College from 1972 to 1976. What I would like to begin talking about today, describe for me what student life was like at Rutgers at the time you were there.

MC: I'm sure this is subjective. Others had different experiences. Mine was centered around going to class. I worked at *The Targum*. In my freshman year, I had work-study. So, I was busy, and I walked everywhere. In sharp contrast to later classes, I was never on the phone. I didn't have a phone in my dorm room, which was Tinsley. I very rarely used the payphone in the dorm. If I had to call somebody, I went to *The Targum* office and did it. There was much more personal interaction. If you were going to go to dinner with somebody at the Commons, you went you their room and chatted and then went off together, or you met them at the front door. I went to the Student Center a lot to see movies at night. There were concerts at the gym for very little money. I went to those. I heard Bruce Springsteen play at the River Dorms for fifty cents. This was the year before *Born to Run* was released.

I took the student bus a lot between Douglass and Rutgers, because I took theater classes at Douglass, or I was covering something for *The Targum*. I would take the student bus a lot. I also hitchhiked occasionally, which was fairly stupid. One night, I got into a situation where the guys didn't want to stop the car and let me out, and luckily, we encountered a red light and I just jumped out of the car and came back. I was a little foolhardy in that way.

What else? There was a lot of being outside in nice weather, which the times I've returned to Rutgers, I've noticed I don't see anybody outside in nice weather. [laughter] I guess everybody's on their phones somewhere inside. We'd sit out on the Quad. I remember sitting out on the Quad on warm nights with an AM radio listening to baseball games from Baltimore with my friend Barry Lipinski, who went on to a career at Rutgers in the library system. I saw him at Barry Qualls's retirement dinner. Barry Lipinski was from Baltimore and was a fellow baseball fan, so sometimes we'd try to tune into baseball games. I don't know how typical this was, probably not very.

As I mentioned, the dorms tended to clear out on Thursday nights or Fridays; a lot of people went home for the weekend. I did not, or I rarely did. It was quiet on the weekends. I got a lot of writing done for homework or for the journal that I kept for myself. Some people dated; some people didn't. On the whole, I made a lot of friends and wished they stuck around more on the weekends.

KR: In terms of speakers and bands, in your part one interview, you talked about the anti-feminist Midge Decter and seeing her speak, and then you talked about seeing Bruce Springsteen. Are there any other speakers or musical acts that you saw that stick out in your mind?

MC: Yes, but now I wished I had gone back to my box of memorabilia in the attic. Was it the Kinks? Some fairly big band was there in my freshman year, the group that sang "A Well Respected Man." I think it might have been the Kinks. Other speakers, no one immediately comes to mind. I can look back in my materials. [Editor's Note: "A Well Respected Man" is a 1965 song by the Kinks, a British band.] [Marian Calabro's Postscript: Others I interviewed in person included Gloria Steinem, Lenore Romney, Susan Brownmiller, Dick Gregory, Ingrid Bengis and Flo Kennedy.]

KR: Sure, you can add it to the transcript later.

MC: Yes. That Friday night concert at the gym sticks in my mind, because I was sort of at a tipping point with the guy I was seeing. The question is, was he going to stay on campus for the weekend or not? So, that was memorable. He didn't. [laughter] I think I mentioned to you that I was in that dance marathon. Did I mention that?

KR: No, you did not.

MC: I think it was maybe my junior year. There was a fundraiser. I can't remember the cause. It was a disease-related cause, and it was at the gym. They emulated a depression-era marathon, in which we were supposed to stay up all night and keep dancing to raise money. I don't know if I volunteered or was tapped to represent *Targum* in this. Each student organization, I think, was supposed to have some representatives. I remember we had to pick our number, because you had to wear a number, and we picked thirty, because this journalism lingo, at the end of stories, you used to type the number thirty. I don't remember why, but it was a thing. It wasn't just with us; it was a standard journalism thing. My partner was a very nice guy on *Targum*, a gay guy named Walt Newkirk. He was the arts editor, I think. We were friends. I don't know why I decided to do this. I guess it was an experience. I'm not a great one to stay up all night, but they did let you take breaks and fall asleep on the floor, which I did. I stuck it out until the end. The only other thing I remember about it was the celebrity and very aging movie star named Celeste Holm, H-O-L-M, was somehow associated with this charity, and she came and kind of cheered us on. She was kind of a grande dame at that time. [Editor's Note: Journalists traditionally denoted the end of an article with "–30–" when it was submitted for editing and typesetting. In the days of typewriters, it was a way to indicate the last page of a dispatch.]

In terms of other famous names or speakers, I do remember that the speaker at our graduation was Millicent Fenwick, who was, I guess, a congresswoman and one of the few women in power at that time, Republican. My mother respected her a lot and was very impressed that Millicent Fenwick spoke at graduation. [Editor's Note: Millicent Fenwick served in the New Jersey General Assembly from 1970 to 1972 and then in the U.S. House of Representatives from New Jersey's 5th District from 1975 to 1983.]

KR: What campus traditions do you recall?

MC: There was a statue in the Quad of Willie the Silent, and if he whistled when you went by, you were a virgin. That was really stupid. There was some similar thing at Douglass to do with

a lake, which I don't remember, but it was the same punchline. I can't say I remember many traditions. [Editor's Note: "Willie the Silent" is the nickname of the statue of William I, Prince of Orange, located on Voorhees Mall on the College Avenue Campus of Rutgers-New Brunswick. The tradition being referred to at Douglass College involved Passion Puddle, a small pond off of Red Oak Lane. According to the legend, if a male student from Cook College and a female student from Douglass College held hands and walked around the pond three times, they would be married and live happily ever after.]

I did go, out of innovation, to the first-ever intercollegiate Frisbee game between Rutgers and Princeton, and it was in what was then a parking lot behind the Student Center. It was there because that's where the first intercollegiate football game between Rutgers and Princeton had been, so this was a tip of the hat. I don't think that was actually a tradition. I didn't go to sports games. I didn't do much in the way of real group stuff. The basketball team, the men's basketball team, when I was there, was very hot. They were winning something or other. [laughter] I'm so basketball illiterate, a friend of mine has been talking to me for the past two weeks about all the March Madness and NCAA, and it's like, "I need a Google translator for this, John." Anyhow, I don't know, my traditional activities were not very extensive, I suppose. [Editor's Note: The Rutgers Men's Basketball Team, coached by Tom Young, went undefeated in the regular season in 1975-1976 and made the 1976 NCAA Final Four.]

KR: What was going on, on campus, in terms of activism, and to what extent, if any, were you involved?

MC: There were more gay rights. I don't know how overt the events were, but gay rights was more visible. I wasn't gay, but I was sympathetic to the cause. I believe I mentioned that *The Targum*, as kind of a prank, sent me to whatever the gay rights office was called when I was a freshman, I guess, to startle me, and it didn't bother me. I was aware that earlier classes had been more vocal and active against the Vietnam War. I believe in the late '60s, the group went on the train tracks in New Brunswick. I'm not sure if that was apocryphal or it actually happened. I think it did happen. My class did not do much of that that I recall, and I myself was not, nor have I ever really been, one to go on marches or do other kinds of overt activism.

KR: What about women's liberation?

MC: Like gay rights, it was more in the field of focus. I mentioned that at Douglass, I went to hear someone, who's not Midge Decter--she was an anti-feminist--but it was in a classroom on a Saturday and somebody was there to talk about sexual freedom and knowing your body and all that and had *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and a speculum. My impression of feminism in those days was that it was talked about, but it was also, particularly from the faculty at Douglass, of whom I've had some experience of taking theater classes, lip service in some way. There was a professor, I remember, who I think went on to Princeton, her name was Elaine Showalter. She was quite a name at the time, and I remember her saying, "Well, I'm married to Michael and I checked that off my list." That was the impression I took from her, which bothered me, "Now, I can be a feminist, I've checked that off my list." I knew of a few professors who were married, had children, but were gay women. There was a strong sense of a double life, and I didn't know them well enough to find out why. There was still a lot of traditionalism. There were women

who were happy to be at Rutgers and be in the first class of women, but they also wanted to be teachers because it would give them summers off and it would help them make it easier to raise their kids. A lot of this carries my own bias, I think. I suppose my academic friends would say it was still fairly heteronormative. I learned that word from somebody in one of my writing groups. [laughter] On the other hand, women did have more aspiration. I remember, "I'm going to go to med school," one said, and she did. Those fields were seen as more accessible finally. [Editor's Note: Elaine Showalter, Professor Emerita of English at Princeton University, taught at Douglass College from 1969 to 1984.]

KR: At this time in women's liberation, when you were at college, it was the start of the movement against sexual violence, and that really was growing on campuses. Do you remember any of that at Rutgers or at Douglass?

MC: Not much. As I mentioned, there were pre-meds in my freshman dorm room that had, "You rape 'em, we scrape 'em," on their door. Maybe it was just me, but I knew if I went to authorities, nothing was likely to be done about that. I was more aware of that, I would say, when I went to work in New York in the spring of 1976, when I was still technically at Rutgers because it was the second semester of my senior year and I was doing an independent study to finish my credits, but I was working full time in Manhattan. That was very much the era of, "Watch out when you're on the subway." There were films and videos about how to deal with assault and how to prevent assault. I remember, "Don't wear a wedding ring in the subway," and, "Carry your keys so that they come out from in between your fingers when you're walking home alone from the train, so that you'll have a weapon." I can't remember exactly where these pieces of advice floated up from. I do know when I worked for a film company, which was in the early '80s, we had films like that, which were used in school media, high school and college media, about defending yourself, but at Rutgers itself, I don't remember a whole lot of instructional material in that area.

KR: Let us talk about your academics at Rutgers. You talked about how and why you became an English major and that you took a lot of classes in theater. Describe your course of study and what classes stand out in your mind.

MC: My course of study was fairly random. I took what appealed to me. I took classes with Barry Qualls, because I knew he was a good teacher. I wish I had had some sort of advice to round myself out a little bit more and take a few business classes perhaps. I did tire early of the big lecture classes, so I tried to get into classes that were smaller and there could be some interchange.

Did I tell you the plagiarism story? I meant to. That was something that came to mind after we talked last time. I was in the initial theater class at Douglass, whatever they called "Intro to Theater 101," and it was taught by Betty Comtois, with whom I took other classes and did private playwriting tutorials. I guess she liked me or something because I remember going to her house in Highland Park in later years. That's where I met some of the women professors who I think were still kind of in the closet, not Betty, but others. [Editor's Note: Betty Comtois taught theater at Douglass College, where she established the playwriting program and Cabaret. In

1976, she became the first chair of the theater department at the newly-formed Mason Gross School of the Arts. In 1985, she left Rutgers for the University of Washington.]

Betty assigned some paper to us. I can't remember what it was, but it must have been fairly general because it was a theater 101 class. I think it was a fair-sized class, forty or fifty people maybe. She came in and returned the papers to a handful of people. I got mine. She said, "The rest of you plagiarized. I want you to understand at the beginning of your college career that it's not acceptable to plagiarize." Well, there was like deer-in-the-headlights looks on the faces of many people in this class. I don't know where they plagiarized from. I guess you could buy term paper copies in those days. I mean, obviously, there was no internet. I don't know where they plagiarized because I didn't do it myself, so I wasn't in the market. But I clearly remember this shocked look on the face of one woman who had gone to Westfield High School in New Jersey, very affluent, and she kind of had an attitude like, "Well, I'm really slumming here." She was one of the people who didn't get their papers back, and she was just startled. I thought to myself, "Maybe my big working-class high school wasn't so bad, because I know enough not to do that and I know how to put a paper together."

That was an eye-opener and I think it was very good of Betty Comtois to do that. It was an early warning to people in the arts and who were taking liberal arts classes that this was not the way to go. That stands out still in my mind. I think I still have the notes from that class somewhere in my box in the attic, but they were mimeographed and they probably completely disappeared. I do remember that they began with, "Theater is." The idea is it's an active verb. "Movies are not." Movies are up there whether you're sitting in the audience or not, but, "The theater is." That was her basic principle.

Academics, I remember having some run-ins with graduate students. There used to be, they'd split off a section, if you were in a big lecture class, the graduate student would hold the more interactive part once a week.

KR: The recitation.

MC: Recitation, okay. I would have forgotten that word. Or there were these mini-classes at night for one credit that you could take if you were interested in a specific area. I think there was one about the rise of feminism or something, and it was like a one-credit class. This real bro, a somewhat unwashed graduate student, a hippy guy, stands up and says, "Well, feminism really got its start because of the way my friends and I treated you women." I was like, "Oh, God, get me out of here." [laughter] I remember my freshman English comp instructor; everyone had to take it, I guess. The graduate student, the guy was so poor. He lived in married student housing. I mean, he wore dirty socks. He was a nice guy. I could tell how poor he was and overwhelmed. Those were not happy experiences for me.

On the other end of the spectrum, this is funny, I'm reading Robert Pinsky's memoir right now called *Jersey Breaks*, and he's a Rutgers graduate. He was there in the late '50s, grew up down the shore. I didn't know much about Robert Pinsky. I haven't read his poetry yet, but I saw the cover of the book and thought, "Let me read it," and it's very good. He writes a lot about being in the Rutgers English Department in the late '50s with Paul Fussell, and Paul Fussell was still

there when I was there. He was an *éminence grise*. Pinsky says in this, "I'm not implying that Fussell was perfect. He was a classist and a racist all his life," basically is what Pinsky says, and it was true. At the other end of the spectrum, there were sort of--that was true of this Elaine Showalter, to me, as well--they felt they were slumming that they were at Rutgers somehow. Pinsky got a lot out of his classes with Fussell because Fussell had a belief, from having served in the war, that basic training was important. So, that's why he taught composition classes when he really didn't have to. I think he had stopped doing all that by the time I got there. He was just sort of a celebrity. I don't even know how many classes he taught or whether you had to be a graduate student. I do remember going to a party at his house in Princeton, and it just reeked of classism. I always come back to classism at Rutgers. A lot of people went there because they couldn't afford to go anywhere else, like me. It doesn't mean it was bad, but there was a class element to a lot of it, I think, even the academics. [Editor's Note: Robert Pinsky is a poet and professor who grew up in Long Branch, New Jersey and graduated from Rutgers College in 1962. From 1997 to 2000, he was the U.S. Poet Laureate. Paul Fussell was a literary scholar and public intellectual who taught at Connecticut College for Women, Rutgers University and the University of Pennsylvania. He is best known for his National Book Award-winning *The Great War and Modern Memory*.]

I did a lot of writing at Rutgers. I felt that my papers were always read and responded to pretty thoroughly. The History Department was interesting. I wanted to take a few classes in there, and that was run by Warren Susman, another real character. He was famous for not driving, so he would take the campus bus. There was a little ditty to one of the Gilbert and Sullivan songs, "I'm late, I'm late for a very important date. Warren Susman's waiting for us. He's stuck there on the campus bus," one of those things. He lived in a housing development sort of halfway between Douglass and Rutgers. There were these kind of celebrity/performer professors. He was one. I think a lot of those--well, not a lot, I shouldn't say a lot, I didn't take a lot of the classes--but some of those guys who taught these mini-classes or these sections were very much in thrall to Warren Susman or Paul Fussell or whoever the big name was that they reported to, in effect. I'm trying to think of anything else. Right now, those are the main things that come to mind. [Editor's Note: Warren Susman served as a history professor at Rutgers from 1960 to 1985. He died of a heart attack while addressing the national convention of the Organization of American Historians in Minneapolis.]

KR: What was Barry Qualls like as a professor, and how well did you know him at the time?

MC: He has a sympathetic personality. He's very open to different ideas. He was willing to learn. He told me that I, as a sophomore or junior, had said, "You should have assigned a different book." He was like, "Yes, you're right," whereas other professors might have said, "What do you know?" [laughter] He had that essential quality of enthusiasm about his subject without which it doesn't transmit itself to a student as easily. I got the feeling that he was getting to know Rutgers at the same time we were getting to know Rutgers, because he was fairly new there, and that may have helped. Barry was (and is) a true feminist. [Editor's Note: Barry Qualls is a Professor Emeritus of English who served as a professor and administrator at Rutgers from 1971 to 2017. He served as the Vice President for Undergraduate Education and Dean of Humanities in the Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences.]

I do remember the first time I really understood a poem was in a section, not with Barry, but a section of some English class as a freshman that was led by a guy named Joe Cady, who was out as a gay man, and we read William Blake ["The Sick Rose"], "O Rose thou art sick." It's a sexual poem, and I got it. [laughter] That was exciting. I'd read a lot of poetry in high school, but I hadn't gotten that. That kind of little thing is what I went to college for really. I didn't go for career training. Hey, I'm still reading and writing poetry and teaching it, teaching in a broad sense, sharing it with my writers. [Editor's Note: Joseph Cady was a writer, professor and pioneer in gay studies who taught literature and creative writing at Columbia and Rutgers. He also trained as a psychotherapist and went on to teach medical humanities at the University of Rochester.]

KR: Did you ever have Dick Poirier as a professor?

MC: The name is familiar; I don't think I did. I do remember Walter Bezanson, whom, years later, I had not actively remembered, but I was watching something on PBS and he was on there as a talking head. I said, "Oh, my goodness, Mr. Bezanson." One of my teachers was John Richetti, who's a friend of Barry's and a snob. He was snobby in class. I took satire with him, and he relished the fact that one of the traditional targets of satire in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteen century was women, "Let's read satires about women." I encountered him socially through Barry years later, and he didn't remember me or claimed not to remember saying that. My other teachers, I clearly remember Betty Comtois at Douglass, because I took some private or one-on-one writing or small-group seminars with her. I took an acting class at Douglass that I loathed. Or maybe I had to audit it for some reason for playwriting, and it turned me off to acting classes all my life. I'm not a good actress. Oh, I had a guy, Guetti his name was, G-U-E-T-T-I. I don't remember his first name; Barry would. John Guetti, I think. At Rutgers, I had some English classes with him. He was also overtly sexist. I mean, he didn't personally say anything to me, but there was a kind of overt, to me, sexism in his teaching. I did not take a class with Bridget Lyons. She was one of the very few women in the English Department at the time. I think she taught Shakespeare, and because I went to England for the first semester of my junior year, I took a lot of Shakespeare there, so I didn't feel I needed to take it back at Rutgers. [Editor's Note: James Guetti served as a professor in the English Department at Rutgers from 1964 until his retirement in 2000.]

KR: Did you have an English professor named Nancy Topping Bazin?

MC: Oh, that name seems familiar, very familiar to me. I can picture her. I'm not sure I had a class with her, and I can't remember why she was--was she an active feminist?

KR: Yes, she was. She was at Rutgers College in the English Department from 1970 to 1977, and she was basically coming up with the very early women's studies curriculum within English. She didn't get tenure and went on to Old Dominion University to a very esteemed career as a feminist literary critic. I interviewed her actually.

MC: Okay.

KR: Her interview is a part of ROHA's collection, but she would have been there while you were obtaining your degree. I was just wondering if you came across her.

MC: When you say it now, her name is very familiar, so it's possible that I did have a class with her, in which case she didn't make a big impression on me. I remember a philosophy professor named Renée Weber who did make an impression on me, although I may have dropped her class, and Marty Kempner in philosophy. That was the first philosophy class I liked. That was a biggie for me. He was a nice guy, Marty Kempner. Yes, Nancy Topping Bazin, now that you say her name, I can see her. I think I can see a book jacket or cover that she was involved with, but I don't have an active memory of her.

KR: You did your junior year abroad for one semester in England.

MC: Yes.

KR: What was that experience like?

MC: It was an eye-opener in a lot of ways. It was in Oxford but not with Oxford University. There was what turned out to be a somewhat shady program called Warnborough House that advertised in *The Saturday Review* and other literary magazines. It was privately run and it mostly used what we call adjuncts or freelancers, but they were, for the most part, younger men who were recent Oxford graduates and they had some nominal connection with the university but not academic. I do remember I sang in a chorus on Sunday mornings at one of the schools, the colleges at Oxford. So, I got in behind the walls and ate at the refectory high table on Sundays. Academically, it was demanding because it used the Oxford method of one-on-one tutorials. When I took Shakespeare, I had to read two Shakespeare plays a week and write papers on them. Weekly, two plays with papers. It was demanding. [Editor's Note: Founded in 1973, Warnborough College, located near but not affiliated with the University of Oxford, ran study-abroad programs for mainly American students. The college closed in 1996, after a controversy erupted in 1995 when the college enrolled its first-four year class, duping American students into thinking they had been admitted to one the colleges at the University of Oxford.]

I lived in a house with other American students who had signed up for this program, and I'm still friends with a couple of them. It was a very bonding experience. There were ten or twelve of us in a house, two to a room, and we shared the cooking. It was a different kind of living experience than I'd had, and it was positive. Yes, I'm still friends with and keep in touch with people from that group. There was one gal from Rutgers who did it, Moira Quinn, now Moira Quinn Abraham. She was not in my house, but we did things together.

The writing was demanding. The, I don't know what his title was, Dean of Students or whatever, the man they had to coordinate our social activities was a retired British major, a military man, and I guess because he had trained young people, because he was out of Sandhurst, which is the West Point of England, he was all in. He liked us. He found us very young and enthusiastic. My roommate Suzanne, who was from North Carolina, I'm still friends with her, Suzanne and I really hit it off with him, and we said, "We want to work. Can you find us jobs?" He found us a job, where we went for two hours a day, four days a week to the Dragon School. The Dragon

School is a young prep school, before boys go to Eton or Harrow, the bigger ones, when they're adolescents or the equivalent of our high school. These were rich kids whose parents just basically sent them off when they were six. They were at the Dragon School, and it was down the road from where C.S. Lewis lived and where Tolkien [lived]. It was that whole area of Oxford. I don't know, I didn't meet them, I think those men were dead by then, I'm not sure, but it was known as that area. It was very literary and scholarly.

We worked there from eleven to one and basically did tasks and chores, swept the rooms, did whatever we were asked to do. It was make-work, I think, but we did get fifty pence an hour and we got lunch at one o'clock. We made friends with the two women who did the lunches, and we invited them to our house for dinner sometimes. It was a good experience because I've always been involved with the world of work and I saw how another institution worked. The kids, I didn't have really any interaction with them. They were in classes during the day, but it was good. It gave me pocket money. It gave me a little structure to the day. I could do my classes and my writing around it. The major was somebody I kept in touch with for years. We had a pen-pal correspondence for years and years. I'm sure he's gone now. He was not a young man then, but he was influential to me.

I did not have enough money to stay there for the second semester. My parents were not in a good way financially at the time. When I came back to Rutgers, it was so dreary and so depressing, and that winter, just so everything. I mean, it probably would've been dreary in England too weather wise, but it was just like, "Oh, I'm back here." [laughter] Warnborough House's reputation came into play, because they didn't really have whatever the academic accreditation was supposed to be to give me credits for the work that I did. So, I carried all those papers to the English Department, or I don't remember exactly where I took them or who read them, but I said, "Look, this is what I did. Ask somebody to read these. Mr. Qualls can read these and tell you that these are legitimate work." That's what came to be. I did get credit for the work that I did there, because I had these papers to show for it. So, it was an eye-opener in a lot of ways.

I did some traveling when I was there. On the weekends, they'd take us around to Stonehenge and other English spots. We'd have a week off or several days off here or there, and I went to Amsterdam and Paris and places you could go on the train for next to nothing. I did a lot of theater. I used to go to London every Saturday. I'd do a matinee. Then, they had these late afternoon off-Broadway kind of things, then an evening thing. I'd do three theaters in a row. I went to jazz clubs. It cost very little to nothing at the time, and it was during or after the Arab oil embargo, which people minimize the worldwide effect of that. I found that in all the business histories I did, how important the Arab oil embargo was. England had almost no heat at the time, because they had been denied oil. It was cold wherever you went. [laughter] Even in October, you'd have to wear a coat in the theater. It was a real life experience for me. I still have the letters I sent home. My mother saved them, and it clearly was more formative to me in some ways than Rutgers was.

When I came back to Rutgers, I said, "I'm not staying here this summer. I'm not going home." So, I lived in Washington, D.C. the summer between junior and senior year. I found temp work, which was meaningful work. Then, when I went back to Rutgers, I had enough credits, I said,

"I'm not staying here for another year. I'll finish what I need to in the fall and start working in the spring," and that's what worked out.

KR: About a dozen of your classmates have participated in these interviews, and a majority say that they graduated a semester early. What was it about the curriculum and the credits that people were graduating early?

MC: For me, it was more of a financial issue. I needed to start working, and I wanted a job in New York City. I didn't want to just be a waitress in New Brunswick or something like that. Also, remember, I had gone to Rutgers-Newark as a senior in high school. So, I had accrued a handful of credits there that came in handy in the end game. I guess socially I was a bit tapped out. I had seen a wider world. I had not found another boyfriend at Rutgers. Here I am being heteronormative again. [laughter] I was dating in New York City. I was a young thing in publishing. I was going on dates there. All of that made New Brunswick less appealing.

Rutgers is really coalescing around me since we started doing this. It's out in the universe, it's coming in. Last week, a good friend of mine, who I'm going to New Brunswick with tonight, she bought me a ticket to David Sedaris after my husband died. She said, "Marian, I went to this reunion of old *Home News* people." She worked for the *Home News* in New Brunswick, I guess, years and years [ago]--she's older than I am--so quite a while ago. She said, "I went to this reunion, and there was a woman there and she was talking about being in the first class of women at Rutgers." My friend Diane said to her, "Oh, my good friend Marian was there." The woman said, "Oh, I was in the room next to her in Tinsley freshman year." It was Phyllis Messinger, who's an editor at *The New York Times*. I haven't seen her since college, but I was friends with her during college.

Then, this Friday, I'm going to Metuchen on assignment for *The Metuchen Times,* which is edited by Robert Kaplow, who was my heartthrob and heartbreak at Rutgers. He broke my heart. I'm not sure if I broke his. I suspect I affected him. I think I mentioned to you, about twenty years ago, we kind of hashed over our differences and became email pen pals, but I have not seen him for fifty-some years. I'm going to Metuchen and I'm going to report a story for his little newspaper, which he started in retirement, and meet him and his partner and their dog. Rutgers is all around us. [laughter] Then, I saw Barry last week, and he had a blue book I'd written in junior year that he saved, too funny.

I was remembering an incident from when I was in New York City, it was actually with a friend of Bob's, Robert Kaplow's, who I had been sort of friends with. This guy was named Tim. I must have met him in a social situation. He said, "Do you want to go to the movies?" I said, "Yes, sure, let's go to the movies." There was a theater on Albany Street. New Brunswick has changed so much, but there was still a theater there near the train station. They were playing some foreign movie, which was my great thing, to see foreign movies. I said, "Well, I'll get off the train at whatever time and I'll meet you at the theater." We went into the theater together, Tim and I, and I don't know why, but he left in the middle of the movie and never came back. This was how socially inept some people were, still as seniors. I asked Bob recently, "Did you put him up to this prank?" because they were good friends. He said, "No, I wouldn't have done that." You still had these guys who were not savvy about things. They were psychologically still

immature, and there was that dynamic, which still goes on. "If my friend went out with her, then maybe I can try going out with her." I still, to this day, don't know why he up and left. I didn't have much invested in this at all. I just thought it was sad more than anything. He was actually one of the very first people I knew to pass away from COVID. Right at the beginning of COVID, he got it, and like three days later, he was gone. Bob was very upset because he had remained very close friends with him, and he told me about it, but I had never seen Tim again. Yes, there were sort of social awkward-nesses; that was why I didn't want to stay in school. I didn't want to go to graduate school. I wanted to be out in New York City and dating guys who got it, who understood women. It worked out. I met my future husband at work, and we had a great marriage. [Editor's Note: The Strand Theatre, later renamed Art Cinema, was located at the corner of George Street and Albany Street in New Brunswick. The RKO International 70 was located on Albany Street.]

KR: You lived in Tinsley your freshman year. Where did you live your other years at Rutgers?

MC: I think I lived in Brett second year. I had the same roommate, but she was hardly ever there, because her boyfriend, who had been her big brother, had graduated and he was in med school in New York City. She went Thursdays through Sundays to see him. So, I was alone in the room a lot of the time.

Junior year, I went to Oxford the first half, and when I came back, I lived in an apartment on Wyckoff Street, 65 Wyckoff, the first floor of a two or three-family house, with two women who were a year younger than I, who had the apartment and I had been in touch with them and arranged to take the third bedroom. I'm still friends with one of them. I lived there into my senior year, because I used to commute to New York from there. I'd walk down whatever that street is [Easton Avenue] to the train station and commute from there. Tinsley, Brett, and the apartment were basically my dwellings. I lived briefly at another apartment. I can't remember the street or even who my roommates were. That may have been when I came back from England, because I was hustling around to get a room. I remember that apartment now, but I don't remember what street it was on. It was a duplex, and I didn't spend much time there.

KR: What about your experiences at Rutgers College shaped your future career path?

MC: The ability to interview, which I learned at *The Targum* or practiced at *The Targum*, became seminal for me. Rutgers was part of a continuum, as that plagiarism incident illustrated. I learned to write and never to plagiarize when I was in junior high school and high school. I learned how to do a term paper when I was in junior high school and high school. English composition was very redundant for me by the time I was a freshman in college. It clearly wasn't for other people, but I had learned that stuff. I had been taught that stuff. Rutgers became a continuum in that I learned to write longer papers, longer-form material, more analytical material. I learned to report on *The Targum*.

The only creative writing class I took, there were few and far between at the time, was at Douglass with a woman named Barbara Long, I believe her last name was. She was an exotic figure. She was a Douglass graduate, not on the staff. She was an adjunct. She wrote primarily for *The Village Voice* and she was a damaged woman. She was a polio [survivor]. She had

recovered from polio when she was young, but there was something vulnerable and damaged about her. She effected a kind of tough persona, but underneath it she was clearly vulnerable. She'd talk about being friends with Norman Mailer and he told her, "Barbara, fighters fight and writers write." She would report all this. I liked her and I think I learned from her. I also understood that in many ways she was full of hot air. She lived on the Bowery. She lived, I think, very hand-to-mouth. She talked about how someone had broken into her apartment on the Bowery, and she had to talk him out and talk him down.

She was a New York character on the Douglass campus. She would give us assignments. She wasn't so much a teacher of writing as a facilitator, the way I am now. She would give us assignments and then we would critique them, and that was where my eyes were opened to there was more to writing than reporting, that you could put your opinions in. See, in *The Targum*, you weren't supposed to, unless you were writing an arts review, which I did a lot of because I went to the theater. I was a theater editor. I got free tickets. So, I could put my opinion in there, but I would try to cast it in a historical context in theater history or theater genre or breaking the format of theater. I remember someone in Barbara Long's class. I know we had to cover an art exhibit, write about an art exhibit, and someone wrote about a Greek urn, "The paint has a healthy respect for the pot," and Barbara Long went berserk over this, how great it was. To me, it was like, "The paint has a healthy respect for the pot? What does that mean?" I don't think I was ready to write that creatively at that time, but she kind of cracked open the possibilities. How did I get here? What did you ask me?

KR: I asked--what about your Rutgers experience shaped your career path?

MC: Oh, yes. Yes, that was an eye-opener. There was no overt mentorship or, "I'll find you a job," or, "I'll recommend you to X, Y, Z," none of that. I remember being asked by somebody in the English Department--not Barry but someone else; I don't even remember who--why I wasn't going to graduate school. I didn't want to go to graduate school. The last time I went through the Rutgers stuff a couple years ago in my attic, I was amazed to find a letter I had completely forgotten about from Johns Hopkins, which had a fledging writing program at the time, a graduate program, because now they're a dime a dozen--a dime a hundred--but at that time, there were not a lot of graduate writing programs. I think there was one at Iowa, and then if you wanted dramatic writing, you went to Yale. I don't know if it was a friend of a friend of someone academically, I don't know how they got my name, but they sent me a personal letter saying, "We understand that you're a Henry Rutgers Scholar," whatever I was, whatever my little credential was, and, "We'd like you to come and be in our English writing program." I had completely forgotten about this. I obviously didn't take it seriously. I'm sure I answered it, but I didn't go there. I didn't even go there and interview or anything. It's funny now to think that they would have to do outreach to fill their program.

I think just being immersed in the daily output at *The Targum* and the idea that you just had to sit down and bat out a story and, "Don't worry about the lede. You can go back and write it if you have time, and if you don't, whatever you write is usually good enough." My work ethic, I already had. I had it from childhood. That's the way I was raised and the way I was educated, in a fairly traditional sense, in grade school and high school. I had the work ethic, I had more

exposure to writing and editing and interviewing and research. I learned more about research certainly when I was in college but not to a great extent.

Another reason, in retrospect, I know I probably made the right career choice is that scholars tend to--as someone explained to me--they'll do like an inch wide and a mile deep. I'm a mile wide and an inch deep. I have a magpie mind. I like to know a lot about different subjects. I don't care that I don't necessarily know them in depth. I can talk to people who know them in depth or who practice them. I mean, all these books behind me that I wrote or co-wrote, as I mentioned, I've interviewed over a thousand people in their professions for those. I talked to a nuclear engineer. I talked to an actuary. Any number of professions. The people who created the direct deposit program. [laughter] I can ask the questions, as you do in oral history, that elicit the answers that help you understand why they chose the profession, why they're still excited about it, ideally, if they are after all these years. That, I think that was enhanced during my time at Rutgers.

I remember when that graduate student came to my house in the '90s to do this oral history with me about being in this class. I, myself, I don't think I'd ever been interviewed at that point, and that kind of lit a little lightbulb or sparked something for me at the time. I remember when I started to do the corporate histories, first as a freelancer in the late '90s, I said, "Oh, I'm doing what that guy did with me."

KR: What did you do your Henry Rutgers thesis on?

MC: I did it on four French movies. The title was "An Investigation into Artifice and Reality in Four Films of Jean Renoir." The films were *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, *The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, *The Lower Depths*, and *The Golden Coach*. My thesis advisor was Roger Greenspun. He was another interesting character *a la* Barbara Long. I may not have Barbara Long's last name right because I have a friend named Barbara Long. So, I'm not positive about that, but you could easily check. She taught at Douglass. Roger was a movie critic at *The New York Times*, not the top movie critic. I think at the time that was Vincent Canby, I'm not positive. He was sort of their middlebrow movie critic, and he had this job at Rutgers. Again, he taught a few classes. He came down on the train from Manhattan. I gravitated to people who worked outside of academia, and of course, I was interested in movies and theater. [Editor's Note: Roger Greenspun was a film critic for *The New York Times* from 1969 to 1973. Greenspun taught film history and criticism at Rutgers from 1970 to 1995. Vincent Canby served as the chief film critic for *The New York Times* from 1969 until the early 1990s and then as the chief theater critic from 1994 until his death in 2000.]

The four movies that I wrote my paper on all had theater within them. I think the length of the paper--for me, it was long at the time. I remember it as thirty pages, forty pages, but actually it was twenty! Still, it was a whole lot longer than the things I wrote in Oxford, which, for instance, were four or five pages. They were dense, but they weren't twenty or thirty or forty or fifty. There was a length requirement in this document I had to produce. I just froze up. I remember saying, "How can I write something so long?"

I had a friend in the class of women. I don't know if she's still alive or what. Her name was Eileen Fallon, F-A-L-L-O-N. She went on to be a literary agent. She was a troubled girl, too. I guess we all were in one way or another. Eileen went on to be a literary agent of romance books, I think, which was really surprising. She was not the romance book type, but she talked me through this. She said, "You know, Marian, you sit down and you chunk it down and you say, 'What are you going to say about this movie? What are you going to say about that movie? How are you going to compare them? How are you going to contrast them?'" I had a sense of all this, but she helped me structure it. That's how I wrote the paper. She got me through it. She got me over the initial--it wasn't a resistance--I wanted to do it, but it was an initial panic of not being sure how to write something that long.

I suppose in a way that was a career-formative experience as well, because I remember when I wrote my first book, which came out in 1988, I said to Bernie Libster, who became my husband, "I don't know how to write a book." He said, "Do you think you can write a chapter?" I said, "Yes, I can write a chapter." He said, "Well, can you write eight or ten chapters?" I said, "Yes, I can write eight or ten chapters." He said, "Then, you can write a book." And it's true. [laughter] There was an article yesterday that came up in my feed from *The Atlantic*, "How to write a book. How to get over the fear of writing." It's the same advice.

Roger was an interesting character. He used to take me out to lunch in Manhattan when I was there the second half of my senior year. [laughter] He was a short man. He was about my height, which is about five-two, and not the most attractive guy in the world. We'd go into a restaurant and he'd say, "Let's pretend we're having an affair," and I'd say, "Let's pretend we're not." [laughter] I can laugh about these things. I guess I'm not supposed to, but it was foolish to me. I didn't want an affair with this guy. I didn't find him remotely attractive, but I enjoyed the intellectual talk and status of going out to lunch with a *New York Times* writer and chitchatting about film. Everything was completely aboveboard. I didn't exchange any favors of any kind with him when I wrote that long piece, and he gave me a good critique of it. I think he had to share it with a panel, or some panel had to read it, and it was accepted. Those were all positive career experiences, I'd say.

KR: I would like to shift into talking about your career. Trace your early career working in publishing.

MC: My career breaks down, more or less, into decades. In my twenties, I worked in book publishing in Manhattan. When I was still at Rutgers, I got a job at Grosset & Dunlap by Madison Square Park, and that's actually where I met the man who would become my husband. I did date other people in my early years in publishing as well. The job very little, but I didn't care. I was used to getting a little bit of money, and I was very excited to be in New York and dating and all that. I spent about a year there.

Then, I worked at Dell [Publishing] for four years. That was a great job. I still have friends from that, and it was a very bubbly, yeasty time to be in paperback publishing. Stephen King was coming up. Danielle Steel. At Dell, Seymour Lawrence and his wife had an imprint. They had Kurt Vonnegut, I mean, big names. I always tell the story of riding the subway and looking around and every other person was reading *The World According to Garp* [by John Irving].

Paperbacks were a cultural influence at the time. *Roots* [by Alex Haley] came out when I was [there]; that was a Dell paperback. Oh, my God, that made such an impression when it was on television. It was fun, and I had a great department. I was in a good department, and I had a meaningful job. I just loved it.

Also, you were not a workaholic then. You left at five o'clock. The phones stopped working. Dell was run by this woman named Helen Meyer, who was a character in herself, and she was very famous and very cheap. They still had a plug-in switchboard. After five o'clock, you couldn't get a call, direct call, to your number unless you had them patch in a line. I was gone by five o'clock, you know, to meet Bernie or the guy I was dating at the time and do our thing in the evenings. [Editor's Note: Helen Honig Meyer began working at Dell Publishing in 1923 and went on to become the president and chief executive from the early 1950s until 1976, when Dell was sold to Doubleday & Company. Meyer consulted for Doubleday until 1982. The Dell imprint resides in the Bantam Dell Publishing Group, a division of Random House.]

After Dell, where I worked for four years, I went to NAL, New American Library. That was an awful place in contrast to Dell. It was the exact opposite. I ended up staying there only six months, because I got a call from somebody at a film company, an educational film company, called Learning Corporation of America [LCA] and Highgate Films. Educational media was very big then, and there was a lot of money for it, the same way there was for books in schools at the time. Someone at LCA was connected with publishing people because there used to be overlap. The publishers would do tie-in books to movies. They were looking for a writer in the promotion department, and I really didn't like NAL. I went over and did some sample writing for them, and they hired me.

That was another great experience. I loved working at the film company. It was more affluent than publishing was, not that I made a lot of money, but I just loved it. Again, I made lifelong friends there, and it wasn't a workaholic situation. You left at five, five-thirty. I mean, we did have direct phone lines by then, but even so. They announced that they were being acquired by somebody else and moving to Chicago, and I didn't want to move to Chicago.

I reluctantly looked for another job and worked at Warren, Gorham & Lamont, which was a professional publisher, which was all wrong for me, but it had a silver lining. I went there because I just got the job and I felt like I should take the next thing I get, and they paid a whole lot more than the film company. They were starting up a marketing department. They had dismantled the one in Boston. They were starting it in New York. The new people, of which I was one, were universally loathed by everyone, because everybody liked being separate; editorial loved being separate from marketing. They liked being in two different cities, and here we were, these new people, right in the midst of them. It was awful. Again, for some reason, the only people I got along with at that company were the editorial folks, who did these professional newsletters. I just decided to leave after six months. I really did not like the job.

I had freelanced on and off during these years, because I wasn't making much money in publishing and it was an easy thing to do. I freelanced a lot for Random House, especially because they had opened a video department and I knew about video from working at the educational film company. I had friends who worked at Random House. So, Random House

had called me in and asked me to do this fair-sized freelance project. I said, "I can't. I work at this horrible professional publisher," and then the lightbulb went off. I said, "I can leave Warren, Gorham & Lamont," or "Wiggle, Giggle and Lament," as some of us called it. It was October. I said, "I'll do this," it was a good two-month project from Random House, "and if it doesn't work out, I'll start looking for a new job after New Year's. I'll have a new job by my birthday. My birthday is January 17th." I never took another staff job. I loved freelancing, which became the next two decades of my career.

They had a farewell party for me at Warren, Gorham & Lamont, which was funny. I drank a little too much and I was talking to the people in editorial and I must have said to one of them, "You know, you're the only people I feel I understand here." The head of the newsletter said, "Do you want to freelance for us?" I said, "Oh, sure." I was a little drunk. I don't get drunk very often. I don't even drink anymore, but I said, "Sure." They became one of the best freelance clients I ever had. The first year I freelanced, I tripled my income. I was constantly writing these little newsletter articles for them.

Things just started to pop, and it was right for me. I enjoyed it, and those were still the years that even though you freelanced, you went into the client's office and took the assignment, or you talked to them on the phone. It was even before faxing, because I remember a client in the '90s said to me, "You better get a fax machine. You're not with it." [laughter] So, there was still a lot of interaction and going into Manhattan.

I developed a base of freelancing that led to corporate communications. I wrote about banking for these newsletters. I wrote about insurance. Those became subjects that were very important to me in the corporate history field. I had exposure to these large regulated industries, and that branched into utilities. That expertise--I wouldn't call it expertise. I am not an expert in any of those subjects. I asked the right questions. The specialties really helped me professionally. I loved freelancing. It agreed with me temperamentally. I was never really a watercooler person, like the way my husband was. He loved going into an office and having his staff and his chums and all that. I enjoyed that, but I also liked coming home and just sitting and writing. So, I freelanced; I branched out into corporate communications. That was in my thirties.

Then, when I was about thirty-five, I went out to lunch with my friend Cindy Kane, who's still the best editor ever. I met her when I worked briefly at New American Library, and we remained friends. She had just become editor-in-chief, I think, at Macmillan (Four Winds, an imprint), books for young readers. I said, "Cindy, I want to write a book for you." I don't know what compelled me to say this. She said, "Great." She had always liked my writing, and so she said, "Why don't you write a book about Robert Goddard, who's a space scientist? I want to do these biographies about certain people." I don't know what compelled me to do this. I said, "Robert Goddard? I can't stand the space program. I'll do a book for you about the Craigheads. They're wildlife biologists. I've always been interested in them." That became my first book. [Editor's Note: Marian Calabro is the author of *Operation Grizzly Bear* (Macmillan, 1988), which explores John and Frank Craighead's study of grizzly bears at Yellowstone National Park.]

I then added young adult [YA] non-fiction to my freelance portfolio, and I enjoyed writing the books. They had a lot in common with all the writing I'd done all along--research, interviewing,

putting the chapters together, making a book out of them--but I didn't make enough money by writing YA books to, as Randy Newman memorably put it, "Pay for my toothpaste." [laughter] I liked doing the work, but I needed the corporate communications work. I had several publishing clients, too; I needed that work as well. I had Citibank at that point, and I did some work for Goldman Sachs. I was all over the place--not all over the place. I did have my few specialties, and I liked the YA [young adult] book writing, but it was a lot of work for very little money in the long run. I did four YAs. [Editor's Note: Marian Calabro is also the author of *Zap!: A Brief History of Television* (Macmillan, 1992), *Great Courtroom Lawyers: Fighting the Cases That Made History* (Facts on File, 1996), and *The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party* (Houghton Mifflin/Clarion Books, 1999).]

Those were my on-ramp to corporate-history writing, because I got a call from, at the time, a big player in the field--this was before I started my own company--and they said, "Oh, we just landed a contract with a big insurer in Hartford, Connecticut. Would you be interested? The way we work is we send four or five writer candidates, author candidates, once we land a project, and we let the client choose," because there has to be a high comfort level. You're working within this company for a year or more. I said, "I don't write corporate histories." I gave them the name of a few people I knew, and she said, "No, I'm interested in your going. You know how to write books." This was all out of a directory at the time, a physical directory, because I belonged to the American Society of Journalists and Authors. The editor at this corporate history company used the directory to scout for people, and she said, "I see that you've written books, so I know you can write a book. I see you have specialties in banking and insurance and regulated industries." I said, "Sure, I'll go up there." I won the horse race. I loved the work, loved it. I knew immediately I loved it.

I was ready to do some travel at that time. I drove to Hartford a lot, 135 miles from here. I loved the work, and they gave me freelance work on the side, the Phoenix Insurance Company. I wrote profiles for their newsletter at the time, some of which went into the book or helped with the research. That publishing company gave me another corporate history for our own PSEG here in New Jersey. I did that project, went to Newark frequently, interviewed sixty, seventy people. I still drive by electric substations and say, "Oh, I toured that one when I did the PSEG book." So, that was good immersion, positive experiences.

Then, I had the ah-ha moment. Well, two things happened. The founder of the company I did work for as a subcontractor, Mowry Mann, suddenly died without any succession plans. So, everything there kind of froze. Actually, that happened when I was working on the Public Service book, but I don't know, his accountant or lawyer was signing the checks at that point. They were keeping the projects going. At one point, I just had the ah-ha moment of, "I've worked in publishing. I've had publishing clients. I'm a writer. I know how to put a book together. I know how to work with an art director. I know how to research." I had all the ingredients, and the comparison I always give is, I wrote a book about the history of television in the '90s. It's totally outdated, but the head of GE [General Electric] was asked at one point, "Why didn't General Electric invent television?" He said, "We had everything but the idea." So, I said, "I have everything but the idea. Now, I have the idea." [Editor's Note: R. Mowry Mann died in 2002 at the age of fifty-seven. He spent his career in advertising and publishing, working

at Marstellar Inc. and then founding the advertising firm Hoffman-Mann. In 1988, Mann founded Greenwich Publishing Group, Inc., which published corporate history books.]

The web was just kind of getting started. It existed at this time, but you could still put yourself on the map with a website. The big thing was you could prospect across the country through the web, whereas the guy who founded the company that I first freelanced for, the corporate history company, he did all his prospecting in person, because you had to go in an office then. I woke up one morning and said, "Corporatehistory.com, oh!" Well, that web address was taken. I had a personal website at that point through the Authors Guild. I was also an Authors Guild member. I called my web person, and I said, "Could you look up that web address?" She said, "The dot-com isn't available, the rest of them are. Take dot-net and reserve the rest of them." So, that's what I did.

Overnight, it was CorporateHistory.net, and that was 2004. I was age fifty, and so begins the next two decades of my career. I incorporated or made an LLC at the beginning of 2005, because I could see that there was no more work forthcoming from the outfit where the founder had passed away without succession plans, and I just felt I could do it. I went into it with guts, experience, and not much else. You didn't need any overhead to do it, and I had two samples. I had two strong samples from the insurance company and Public Service.

I got the flywheel turning somehow, and I sold it in 2022 after eighteen years. I had built it up to a point where I had national clients, Fortune 100 clients, and family businesses and other kinds of clients as well. I love the work. I liked being the showrunner, and I still kept my hand in. I wrote or co-wrote a book almost every year, but I was the front person and I did the pitches. It was great.

When my husband got laid off from his last ad agency job in 2005, he was sixty-five, he was able to come on board with me. Technically, he co-owned the company when we registered it, but he was able then to write a few books and do some marketing and be more of an active business partner. It worked out very well for us.

I just sold the company about a year ago, more or less, to someone who did a lot of writing for us as a subcontractor in the early days. It's her baby now. She kept the name. She made her own website. That made me feel good that it has a life. I didn't just have to close it down.

Along the way, I had a crisis of faith. I had a lot of stuff happening in the early 2000s. I don't talk about this too much. My mother died in 1999, and I think when you lose a second parent, you tend to feel somewhat orphaned. I was close to her. I was close to my father, too. He had died twelve years before. My profession was contracting. At that time, I was still freelancing. I had done the YA books and they had gotten good reviews and so on, but I knew I could not make a living at it, or I couldn't figure out a way to make a living at it. I was writing for trade magazines. They were closing and/or migrating to the web, and you made a fraction of what you made when they were in print. In retrospect, I had depression after my mother's death. I didn't recognize it as such at the time.

A few things coalesced, and I said, "I'm going to forget about writing and publishing." I went to paralegal school, and I got a certificate at Fairleigh Dickinson here. They have a Hackensack campus, the Hackensack-Teaneck campus. I was really sad at the time. It's unusual for me to not have a lot of energy, and my husband was appalled by this. We were married by now, and he said, "You're doing what?" He was unemployed at the time. He was between advertising jobs. He was fed up with advertising, and he was trying to make it as a book writer, which, again, it's great. But it's great if you have a spouse who has benefits and a good salary, because we were paying our own health insurance, too, which was starting to cost a real lot of money. I said, "I'm going to do this." My mother had left me a little bit of money, not a whole lot, twenty thousand dollars or something. I took five thousand of it and did this program, and it got me out of the house. I made new friends. I just could wrap my mind around a new subject.

I worked for a little bit as a paralegal in estates and trusts. That was the only area that interested me, because it was about people and history. I could have made a career of it. The office I worked in asked me to stay, wanted me to be there, and it was wearing thin on me after even less than a year. It just was not creative enough.

I picked up some freelance work. I had done a lot of freelance work in travel promotion in the '80s and '90s when Cunard was in the city, even though I'm not much of a traveler myself. A guy who became a good friend was an executive there, and then he opened his own agency. So, he began to give me some more freelance work, and it was kind of a crossroads. I got the corporate history jobs. I think that the death of Mowry Mann, who ran Greenwich Publishing, also figured into all of this.

I kind of--I wouldn't say hit bottom, because I learned a lot in the paralegal program and I enjoyed working in the law office. I just didn't find it creative enough. I think all of that kind of coalesced in my mind and somehow gave me the motivation to start CorporateHistory.net. I hit the U-shape, and I went up. You probably read that research about the U-shape at mid-life. I was at the U-shape bottom, and I started to come up.

I don't regret having done that or spent that time, but I did see that I needed to develop a specialty that was not related to trade magazines, because they were going away or migrating to the web, or YA, which I had given it a great shot and all my books got good reviews and awards, but I couldn't make a living at it. I actually read, I always forget his name, the book is called *Good to Great*. It's a famous business book. He talks about drawing a Venn diagram, and you fill in the different parts of it with what you think you could do as well or better than anybody else, what makes money, and what is sustainable. I don't think he used the word sustainable then. I did this Venn diagram, and it was clear that corporate history was that sweet spot for me. I took the plunge, and here I am, eighteen, nineteen years later. [Editor's Note: *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* is a management book by Jim C. Collins (2001).]

KR: Before I ask you about your work in corporate history, I would like to go back to your non-fiction writing in young adult. How did you go about choosing your topics?

MC: The first one was that Cindy Kane wanted a biography of a scientist, and I didn't want to do Robert Goddard, so I did the Craighead brothers. I have them here. That was fun, because I wrote letters to the brothers. I got their addresses somehow, and I went out to meet them out west. They didn't live together. One lived in Montana. One lived right near Yellowstone. I interviewed them in person and I interviewed people around them, and that was the subject of that book.

Then, Cindy said, "Write about whatever you want." I wrote, I don't know what happened to my jacket [holds up the book], but this is called *Zap!: A Brief History of Television*. It was published in '92, so it's almost completely obsolete now. But cable was really just getting a foothold at the time. That was fun. I enjoyed structuring that. Each chapter is an essay about a different category of television.

Cindy was pretty much onboard with anything I proposed, and then she left and went to Dial [Press]. She was the editor-in-chief, and they were more into fiction and literary, not so much non-fiction. I didn't have any interest in writing fiction. I approached Facts on File, and I thought this would be a good venue, an ongoing venue for me, because they did a lot of reference series. So, I did this book called *Great Courtroom Lawyers: Fighting the Cases That Made History*. Again, they were profiles that required research and, in some cases, interviews. I interviewed William Kunstler. I interviewed Sarah Weddington. I interviewed Linda Fairstein. The rest of them were deceased, but I did go to John Davis's Davis, Polk, and Wardwell, the big law firm, and do research there, and he was long gone. I liked doing this kind of book. It suited my structure and interests. Again, I don't want to go a mile deep on anything. I wouldn't have wanted to write a book on John Davis, but I was happy to write a chapter on him. Facts on File, I ended up doing a lot of editing and freelance for them, but the book just--they don't sell very well.

Then, all through the '90s, I had wanted to do a book on the Donner Party, because I had started to ski out in the Sierra Nevada mountains in the winters. My husband and I would go out there with groups of friends, and I just fell in love with the landscape. When you drive through Truckee, in that area, everything is Donner this, Donner that: Donner Motel, Donner Park, Donner Laundry, Donner Diner, et cetera. [Editor's Note: The Donner Party was a group of American pioneers who migrated to California in a wagon train from Springfield, Illinois and spent the winter of 1846-1847 trying to survive in the Sierra Nevada mountains.]

KR: Yes, Donner Pass.

MC: Donner Pass, yes, Donner Lake, which used to be Truckee Lake. I became interested in them, and I pitched the book. I still have a file of rejection letters. At the time, it was seen as too sensitive a subject, because it involves cannibalism, although that's the least really of the whole story. That's why they're remembered, but there's so much more to the story. Eventually, I said, "How can I get around this?" Scholastic said, "We wanted to do a book like this for years, but we can't. But I have an author who will do it, who's wanted to do it for years." Random House said, "We drafted a book like this, and when the salesmen took it out, they couldn't sell it. So, we never published it." All this has changed radically since then.

I saw that the Society of Children Book Writers and Illustrators had a grant. It was only five hundred dollars, but I said, "If I can get the grant, it will give me the imprimatur of acceptance and then I can sell the book," and that's what happened. It was seen as okay, and Clarion-Houghton Mifflin took it. I just got the rights back about a week ago. It was in print for twenty-four years. I wanted to do a 175th anniversary update of it, which would have been two years ago. I approached them, but it was right at the beginning of the pandemic. Then, I couldn't get through to them, and I didn't realize that Houghton Mifflin was being sold to Harper. When my rights reversion documents came through, my attorney handled that, I was appalled to see, it says, "A News Corp Company" at the top of the stationary. This means it's owned by Rupert Murdoch. I would have loved to have updated the book, but it didn't work out.

I still do presentations on the Donner Party. I have a donnerpartyhistory.com website, and I do presentations for libraries and museums. I did one for Rutgers last year in the Scarlet Speaker Series. That was a passion project really. [Editor's Note: The website can be found at https://www.donnerpartyhistory.com/.]

Then, I pitched a few more books. I had great reception of the Donner Party in terms of reviews and awards, and I pitched a few more books and they just didn't--either the editor didn't go for them or they offered me the same or less money than I made for the Donner Party. The dirty secret of a lot of authorship is that authors have somebody supporting them, paying their way in a lot of ways, and I didn't. I was self-sufficient. I was married, but my husband was not working at the time and, as I said, we were paying for our own health insurance. I just couldn't afford to take a year and not have income.

This overlapped--the Donner Party came out in '99, and that was the year that I was approached about the first corporate history, which came out in 2001, and when I went into that, I loved it. These books actually have a lot in common with corporate histories. You have to tell the story in broad strokes. You have to make it entertaining, engaging to people who are only going to flip through it at best. Some will read it all, but not everybody, by any means. You have to be able to come up with anecdotes and hooks that can involve the reader in whatever aspect of the history you're offering. Those were good preparation for corporate history as well, and also the ability to structure a book is vital. That's what I learned from writing these.

KR: I want to ask you about your writing process. I am always struck by something Mary Oliver, the poet, said. She always had to work to support herself. She said that she would wake up really early in the morning and write from four to eight and give that her first-best effort. She would then go to work, from nine to five or whatever she was working at the time, and her employer would get her second-best effort. I am always really struck by that approach, and that was Mary Oliver's process. What was your approach, and what was your process, given that you were writing and you were also working to support yourself?

MC: Well, God bless Mary Oliver. [laughter] I love her poetry. I'm not an early morning person. Getting me up at four or five in the morning guarantees you'll have a comatose person falling asleep at the desk. [laughter] It's not my thing. I knew of YA authors who did that too, when I was at Dell. That's how they did their careers, or launched their careers. That did not work for me.

I would have to say, for these YA non-fiction books and for my corporate history books, I approached them the same way I approached a freelance assignment, which is that I had a deadline. I'd structure the book, and then I would have x-chapters to write in twelve months, eight months, whatever it was. I would chunk it down, and I would, literally, if I had to, say, "This week, you're going to write four thousand words, or today you're going to write …" I am not a spreadsheet person, but I am a word-counter and that's how I approached it. I learned that one of the most creative and involving parts of writing any book is structuring it, thinking it through, organizing your material. I really enjoyed that part of it, and I allowed for that in the creative process and the development process.

It wasn't just a sit down and be visited by the muse situation. That, I got in a whole other part of my life that grew out of that brief period of depression and paralegal school. I had said, "I'm going to go to Amherst someday." I had gone up there in the '90s. I don't remember how I found out about it. It was before the web. There was a group called, at the time, Association of Personal Historians, and the gal who ran it was in Amherst, Mass. The idea was that you did family histories; your clients were families. She had a little conference, a weekend conference, that I went to, and I learned a lot there. One of the things I learned was I didn't want to work on family histories. It's too subjective, and there's too much infighting and dysfunction. That was clear to me right from the beginning, but I liked the whole concept of this history thing. That's another factor that helped me develop CorporateHistory.net.

When I was in Amherst, I picked up a newsletter from a group called Amherst Writers and Artists, and I said, "This is interesting." I saw that Pat Schneider was a founder, and they had a lot of programs, retreats and trainings and using writing as a way to work with underserved populations. I ordered Pat's book, which was called *Writing Alone and with Others*, the first edition of it, and it really resonated with me. It made sense to me in a creative writing way that other creative writing groups had not. On and off during the '90s, I went to different creative writing [groups]. It was called process at the time. Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*. Peter [Elbow], I have the book right on the other side of my desk; he taught at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The idea that writing was more than composition, that there were different creative methods that you could apply to it. Write first/edit later is what it comes down to. I saw that Amherst Writers and Artists was pretty steeped in this, and I liked Pat's book. I kept saying, "I'm going to go up there someday and take one of these retreats." When I was down in the dumps, one of the ways I pulled myself out--by now, it's like 2003--I did it, I went up there. I was working part time as a paralegal in an estates and trusts office, and I had the mindset very much in those days, "If I don't do this now, the person may die." It happened with my mother. She died overnight of a heart attack, and I saw that it happened to other people. That changed my life.

I went to Amherst. I became immersed in the Amherst Writers' method. It resonated with me in a way that other methods don't, and I'm not a disciple personality. I don't get in with gurus and I don't feel comfortable with people who do. But I knew Pat was the real goods. She had her issues, too, but I knew that her method was viable and it certainly was viable for me. I began going to retreats frequently, and I trained in the method. Then, I became a writing workshop leader, which I still do.

That very much too fed into my loosening up of my writing and my writing process, to get back to my writing process. My corporate histories read--this is not modest--but I'll say they read as well as any other nonfiction I ever wrote because I understood how to capture a voice, how to tell a story, how to use an anecdote to set a scene or develop a theme that had to do with the corporate culture. The creative writing that I did at the time was a stream that fed that river. I never had the split I would say that Mary Oliver had of saying, "Well, this is my first-best work and I'll give whatever is left over to my employer." A, my employer was myself at that point, so I gave it my best shot.

One of the reasons I liked working for myself is what any entrepreneur will tell you: I'm a really hard worker. I have a very strong work ethic and it bothered me if I worked for somebody and they got all the fruits of that labor. I mean, yes, I got the satisfaction, the mental satisfaction, from it, but I didn't always get the financial satisfaction of it, whereas when I worked for myself, I knew I was getting a hundred percent of my output. Not monetarily, I paid my subcontractors very well, but I was using all my work ethic toward my own ends, towards the ends of the business that I had founded and towards my clients' goals. Whatever they wanted from their book, we worked on and were able to develop a beautiful book for a lot of people. Many of my clients said, "It's such a privilege to be able to stand back for a while and really look at the bigger picture. This has been one of the most satisfying episodes in my career," because you get so caught up in the day to day and the quarter to quarter that you don't really look at the big picture all the time. So, that was great. It was good all around.

My process, again, was very deadline oriented. I am working on this biography with Mark Baiada. We resumed it this month, and I have a note here right in my book on my desk. I'm rewriting the existing chapters from first person to third person, because he's much more comfortable with that. I figured out that I can redo this at a rate of basically six thousand words in four hours. So, I know, going forward, how long it's going to take me to rewrite pretty much the existing chapters. That's my process. I'm a practical writer, but creatively I do take flights of fancy. But that's more on the creative writing niche of my life, which will happen tomorrow night. I'm leading a writing group.

I've got a bunch of them lined up for May. It's very satisfying to me to do that. I've been at the Montclair Adult School for, I can't believe it, pretty much since I started the business, so fifteen-plus years. They have a whole record of it in their database. I've taught like sixty-five workshops there. Even if I have ten people in some of them, more or less in others, I've helped well over five, six hundred people get started or return to writing. My population tends to be recent retirees or moms who finally have some time during the day and want to get back into writing. It's very satisfying.

KR: When you were operating your company CorporateHistory.net, what were some of the challenges that you faced?

MC: Landing the projects and convincing, persuading the client of the value, which is not tangible. It's not an ROI, a return on investment, that's a typical return on investment. Someone in the company had to want to do it and see the value of preserving the history that wasn't an

immediately quantifiable value. That often happened at a regime change, or, "We have so many folks retiring," or, "If we don't get these stories, they'll be lost forever." That kind of client understood it.

Partway into the years of leading the business, a colleague who had worked in corporate communications within big corporations like PepsiCo and Kodak at the time--he was kind of in my kitchen cabinet, someone that I spoke to professionally from time to time for ideas and venting--he said, "Marian, there's always somebody at the client who doesn't want you to be there." That was a lightbulb. I began to identify early on who was it within the client team that didn't want me to be there. It wasn't me personally; I didn't take it personally. But this person would either feel like, "Why are we wasting money on this when I don't have enough resources for my department?" or, "I haven't had a raise in two years," something like that, something financial. They saw this as a waste of resources. There are all kinds of internal politics that I learned to be more alert to, that aren't worth going into. But once I knew that, I operated a lot better as a project manager and director. That was a challenge.

Only in recent years, I'm thinking of my final two projects, I think we've encountered what I call the "Amazon Prime mentality," and this was exacerbated by the pandemic, but it existed, I think, before that, which is like, "I can wait to the last minute and order it and get it overnight." You can't do that with the kind of work we did. It required going into the company, doing research, doing interviews, going through archives. If there were no archives, figuring out what they had that could give us some information. Surprisingly, some of these companies, and big ones, had much less in the way of research material than you'd expect. That mentality began to be more evident to me, delay, delay, delay, and then expect it all to show up on your doorstep. It's just not possible with this work product.

Those were my main challenges, I think, and then the occasional bad hire, which you'd have to figure out kind of early on if this writer is not going to be able to handle this project, what am I going to do, but that was very minimal. I was so lucky. I started the business in 2004, incorporated in 2005, and early in 2006, got a cold call from Christine Reynolds, who turned out to design thirteen or fourteen books for us. She described herself in her initial pitch as a graphic designer and a production manager, and I was like, "Bingo, I need a production manager," because that's my weak suit. We just had a great working relationship, and we're still good friends. Corporate History created most of her work for that time, and she's proud of it and I'm proud of it. She won a lot of graphic design awards.

KR: What are some of the highlights of your time doing corporate histories? Which of the companies were you writing about that really stick out in your mind?

MC: They all had positives. I loved doing the interviews with, as I mentioned earlier, similar to what you do, different people in different walks of life who chose different professions. There was an element of self-selection in it. The company is not going to give you a malcontent to interview. So, you tended to interview the longer-term people or someone who had been important at a turning point or in a certain project.

One of my favorite projects was this one, whose cover you see on the back wall [points to the book] *Flying High Again*. It was not so much a history of a company. The subtitle is *PARC's Redevelopment of Plattsburgh Air Force Base*, and that's exactly what it was. I mean, talk about something you don't have any experience in; I didn't have any experience writing about military bases or redevelopment thereof. There was a chapter on military base history. That wasn't difficult at all to research. The problem was I couldn't get too deep into the old base history, because it was a lot of fun to write about. But they hired us to focus on the a contemporary political story of how this particular Air Force base had lost the race--they were axed in the base realignment movement in the Bill Clinton years. They fought hard to be retained and they lost that battle, and then it was, "What are we going to do? Here we are in an economically depressed area anyway." I interviewed dozens and dozens of politicians and local committee people and real estate developers and Air Force people, and you name it. That was a real mind stretcher for me, a subject-area stretch for me. The client had a team of four people. I knew actually even then, before I had this concept, I knew who didn't really want me there, who didn't think I was up to the job, but three of the four people on the core team were very supportive. One had come there as a retiree. He was working part time in the PR [public relations] effort for this. He had run PR at a college in Upstate New York, and he had originally been a newspaperman. He said to me after, "I didn't know how you were going to do this book. I don't think I could have done it." Sometimes, it helps to have that [third party]. That's what I would say in my pitches; you need that third party. You need that outside view. If you try to have an insider write it, it doesn't work because they don't have the objectivity. That one stands out.

BAYADA stands out, BAYADA Home Health Care. I'm also now working with Mark Baiada. It's an unusual company. I always say, they asked for more emotion in their books. Most companies don't. They get to a hotspot and they cross it out. Baiada wanted more emotion. That's unusual and also stretched me in certain ways. I didn't write that book, but I essentially co-wrote it. I assigned it to somebody who was a lovely person, great interviewer. It was such a short timeframe. We shared the interviews, and she first-drafted it. She got the emotion in it, and I cleaned it up and restructured it. So, we worked well together. [Editor's Note: J. Mark Baiada, an alumnus of Rutgers College '69 and Rutgers Graduate School of Business '70, is the founder and president of BAYADA Home Health Care. *BAYADA: 40 Years of Compassion, Excellence, and Reliability* was written by Christine McLaughlin and published by CorporateHistory.net in 2015.]

One aspect that stands out is the business travel I did, because I went to places I would not have gone. For instance, I don't know why, but the prairie of Illinois stands out in my mind, I guess because it's so unlike New Jersey and any other place I'd been. We did a short book for the Libman Company, which makes mops and brooms and cleaning supplies, all under one big roof in amazing Arcola, Illinois, which is about fifty miles or so south of Champaign-Urbana. I learned to add on days, when I could, to a business trip for work, so that I could sightsee, because I might never go back there. I took a couple days and went out to Springfield. It just stands out in my mind for some reason. The Donner Party left from Springfield. There's not much Donner history there, but there is, of course, Abraham Lincoln everywhere you turn. That was fun, and just to see the landscape that was so different. Driving across, it's flat. "Oh, there's a city in the distance." "No, it's a silo." [laughter] I'm approaching Peoria, which I just read is some artistic hotspot--I got a big kick out of that--I was like, "What's this smell in the air? I have

never smelled anything like this." It's soybeans being processed. I had never smelled anything like it. It was pervasive. Somebody was surprised I even had to ask. [laughter] So many new experiences from travel. I loved California. Working on the Farmers Insurance book, which I didn't write, but I pitched and did the project management on, that was great. I had not been to Southern California, I'd been to northern. They all stand out in some way, some far more than others, but they were all good experiences.

KR: Which New Jersey companies did you write about?

MC: [Editor's Note: Marian Calabro turns around to her bookshelf and points out books as she is talking.] Well, as a subcontractor, Public Service, which was technically Public Service Enterprise Group, which is the parent of PSE&G, because they have other holdings. Aegis is one of the last projects I did. They're in the Meadowlands. They insure utilities as a specialty, big specialty. Annin Flagmakers, the oldest and largest flag-making company in the United States, great project. That really boosted my visibility. American Water, which is headquartered in Camden. BAYADA, which is technically incorporated in Philly but is headquartered in South Jersey. Dempsey Uniform and Linen Supply is headquartered up near Scranton, but they now have a New Jersey subsidiary. They didn't at the time we did the book. I have an essay in the Rutgers 250 book [referring to the 250th anniversary]. Public Service. Sandvik Materials Technology, the American arm of a Swedish-based company, they were based in Fair Lawn at the time, Fair Lawn, New Jersey. I don't know how much presence they have there now. I know they moved some of it to North Carolina. Yes, those are my main New Jersey links.

KR: When you would be researching a particular company, how would you handle a particular subject or event that was sensitive, touchy or controversial in that company's history?

MC: I would encourage them to include it, because you approach it as a lesson learned and that's what makes a corporate history authentic and more readable. It's like a marriage. If you pretend you never had an argument, and maybe there are a few out there that haven't, it's not real and authentic. I would encourage the inclusion of--it could be a lawsuit, a class-action lawsuit, but it's up to the client if they want to include it or not because they are commissioned books. If they included these controversies, which most of them did, we'd also make a point to do more outside research, how it was covered in the business press or in the legal world or whatever pertained.

KR: Without going into specifics, when you would be researching these controversial areas and interviewing people, would you find employees reluctant to talk about these incidents? If you found them reluctant, how would you overcome that?

MC: I'd ask questions about the particular incident and were they involved in it or [if] their department had to provide support in some way. I don't remember it as a major issue. At the higher levels, you'd get much more resistance. The tendency would be, if you were interviewing a middle manager or somebody in more of a line position, their feeling was if you were asking about that, then somebody okayed it. I would give the client a pro forma letter, which they would alter if they wanted, at the beginning of the project that basically said, "Please be as candid as possible. That's what makes a credible manuscript. The final manuscript belongs to

the company, and we will have final say over what goes into it," so that people felt freer to talk about certain issues in that way.

KR: From your time doing interviews when you were on *The Targum* to your time doing in-depth interviews associated with corporate histories, how did you develop your interviewing craft?

MC: I would have a set of questions at hand. Some clients would want a particular set of questions to be asked uniformly, which in a way made the books easier to write. I didn't offer it. I waited for them to ask, and if they asked, we would provide it with the proviso that we could branch out from these questions. I remember somebody at Public Service, which again, it wasn't a CorporateHistory.net project--I was just there as a hired writer--I was taken out to lunch by the president's speech writer. This guy had an easy job, if you ask me. He was a Ph.D. from Harvard, and he made sure you knew that. He said, "I read some of your transcripts. You're very discursive." It reminded me of the scene in *The Catcher in the Rye* where Holden Caulfield is talking about going to debate and somebody's yelling, "You're getting off the subject," whatever word they use in debates, [digression]. I just sort of smiled and said, "Well, I managed to get the information that I need." He was another one, he probably wished he was writing the book and he wanted to try to one-up me. "Let it go. How important is this?" I got the job done.

I think it is good to have a reference point and a set of questions, but I think it's also just vital to listen and take it in the direction that the subtext indicates sometimes, as you've done with me. If you're attuned, if your ear is attuned, you can kind of tell what's under the surface.

I will say that being in therapy is a great preparation for the work that I did. It was a great preparation for interviews, because I did develop that. You project on to a therapist sometimes, and I could tell that they knew when something was bubbling underneath, but I didn't want to bring it up and that's their job to bring it out. I used some of that practice or skill that I learned in that way as well.

KR: I just have a few more questions for today. I want to ask you a couple reflection questions. Before I go into that, is there anything else you would like to add about your career that we skipped over or rushed over?

MC: No, I wanted to get the creative writing part in and what people call teaching. I don't call it so much teaching as I'm a catalyst when I lead writing groups. That's been a very rounding and important part of my writing and editing experience. If I think of anything else, I'll tell you.

KR: Do you ever find creative writing to be therapeutic?

MC: Oh, yes. Writing is very therapeutic, but it isn't therapy. I say this to every group at the beginning of, say, a new workshop at the Montclair Adult School. What I like about the Amherst Writers and Artist's method is it has a certain approach that allows you to elicit that material but without treating it as a therapist would. The main technique that it does that with is we treat everything as fiction, even if it is a memoir workshop. We talk about the narrator rather than you and your mother. It's the narrator and her mother, because otherwise it veers into analyzing

someone personally, which I'm not qualified to do. I'm not a therapist. Writing becomes, in my experience, more therapeutic when you do approach it from that third-person perspective, from that narrator rather than you. I can say, "The father in this piece sounds like a real bastard," rather than, "Your father was a bastard," big difference. It gives the writer perspective on that character, the father as a character. The father is a character. If you're writing a memoir, the father is a character. Even though he's your father, the narrator's father is a character.

That's the hardest part of the method to grasp, and it's the thing that makes this method distinctive. In my experience now of almost twenty years of leading these workshops, it makes all the difference, and it does make writing more therapeutic without turning the writing group into a therapy group. "We're here to talk about your writing. We're not here to talk about your life. You came to me as a writer, so I'm responding to your writing." That's honoring you as a writer, and it gives identity to people who don't think of themselves as writers. They become, "I am a writer in addition to being a retired attorney or whatever else I am. I am a writer." A writer is anybody who writes, but you have to apply yourself to it, and that's what I try to do when I work with what I call my writers. [laughter] I'm possessive of them. They develop material that is fresher and more interesting to me than half of the books I pick up at the library that are hot new fiction. I give it twenty-five or fifty pages, and I'm not interested. It's too much thumb-sucking. My writers do better work than that. [laughter] I'm prejudiced, I'm biased, I know. But, yes, it is a therapeutic process, but it is not a therapy group.

KR: Over the course of your career, you went from working in publishing to doing freelance work, which took you into corporate history. You did the young adult non-fiction and had success, though, as you say, it was not incredibly financially lucrative, and then you went into your CorporateHistory.net company.

MC: Which was a publisher.

KR: Yes, which was a publisher. What appears to me is that those steps in your career were mirroring changes in the publishing field as they were occurring. Do you think that is accurate?

MC: Yes, I think it is, to a certain degree. The corporate histories were commissioned by the client, so in effect, they were packaged books. They were self-published books, if you will, except the client didn't publish them. We published them, but they weren't trade books. They weren't on the shelf at Barnes and Noble. There's been a huge move towards that, as we all know in the past twenty years. The majority of books are probably now self-published. I used to keep up with the statistics because I used to do a publishing class every year, and now, I can't even keep up with them. It's so easy to publish on Kindle now. It used to be hard to do that, but now, it's almost an app. You just upload a few things. Whether the content is good or edited is another story, but it's easy to have something to hold in your hand or hold on your Kindle.

KR: Reflecting on the entire span of your career, looking back, what is most satisfying to you in terms of your accomplishments?

MC: The fact that I've made a living as a writer/editor/publisher is a good fit, and I learned from interviewing so many people in different careers, blessed is the person who's doing the work

they're meant to do, who likes the work that they do. It makes such a difference in life. It's like having a good relationship or a good marriage, and I know marriage is not for everybody, but it makes a difference psychologically. If you were attuned to that and you have a good marriage, it greatly improves your life, and if you have to work, which most of us do, having work that is a good fit for your skills, talents and interests is a blessing. It really is. The whole episode now of the Great Resignation and the fact that employers are not as supportive of their employees as they used to be, that's distressing. I think it's another thing that's tearing at the fabric of a nation, because when you have people who are not satisfied with their work, you have people who can't make a good living, or they're doing something they don't want to do. We all know that person, too, the person who's in the wrong job, the person who's in the wrong field. Yes, they get to a certain point, it's real hard to undo it. It's hard to unspool it.

I feel grateful and satisfied that somehow I followed my inner compass and didn't get the MBA when Pace wanted me to get the MBA. I didn't go to Johns Hopkins, which was in that letter I had completely forgotten about, although who knows what would have happened? I don't know. Maybe I would have done it and enjoyed it and become a writing teacher a lot sooner. Who knows? I don't know. You can't turn the clock back, but I'm grateful and satisfied that I was able to make a living at it and am still practicing my profession part time.

KR: I have a Rutgers question. Overall, what does it mean to you to be in the pioneering class of women at Rutgers College?

MC: It made the difference to me. I had disappointment that I could not go to Oberlin or some other schools that caught my fancy in high school, but I felt like, "Well, I'm going to be part of something that's bigger, that's an important change in society." Rutgers was not the only college going coed. Princeton did, Yale did, a lot of them did, either shortly before or after. It may have mattered more to me than it did to Rutgers, but it did matter to me.

I belong to the Biographers International Organization. When I went to, I guess it would have been 2019, the last conference in New York before the pandemic, there was a young history professor at Rutgers on a panel. I don't remember her name, but she talked about a book--it had to do with, I think, Thomas Jefferson or George Washington, a woman who was involved with one of them.

KR: Was it Erica Dunbar?

MC: Yes, that's who it was. I went up to her afterwards, and I said, "I was in the first class of women at Rutgers College, and we didn't have anybody like you, anybody, in any department that I crossed paths with." I'm not saying our class did it all, but it was part of the opening, part of the portal to the wider, more diverse world, that we all need. [Editor's Note: Erica Armstrong Dunbar is the Charles and Mary Beard Distinguished Professor of History at Rutgers. She is the author of *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (2017).]

KR: I have reached the end of my questions. What would you like to add?

MC: I think we've covered everything essential. If I think of anything else, I will email you. I am going to get to that box later. I'm juggling a lot in the wake of my husband's passing. I've totally enjoyed it. I'm very pleased that you reached out to me, and I hope I have been able to be of some help in a greater sense to the project. I look forward to reading, not just mine, but I'd like to read other's experiences.

KR: Thank you so much for spending this time with me. You have been so generous with your time. I will thank you on the record and then let's talk for a moment off the record.

MC: Okay.

KR: Marian, thank you so much for doing this two-part oral history with me.

MC: You're welcome.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

KR: We are back on recording.

MC: Sheryl Lee Ralph came to Rutgers as a transfer student. I think she had graduated high school on Long Island at a young age, and so she was fairly young, younger than I and, of course, went on to be an award-winning actress and was in the plays that came out of Douglass at Little Theater at the time, which I covered, because I was covering theater for *The Targum*, *The Daily Targum*. [Editor's Note: Sheryl Lee Ralph graduated from Uniondale High School in 1972 at the age of sixteen. She began at Rutgers College in the fall of 1972 as a first-year student and went on to graduate in three years.]

I remember she was in Neil Cuthbert's [*The Soft Touch*], a farce that he had written. He was, I think, a senior at Rutgers when I was a freshman or sophomore. This play made a big impression. I don't remember the name, but I can look it up if you want. It was a farce, and she was the lead actress in it. It made a tremendous impression, and it caught the attention of producers of New York. They decided to bring it, I believe, to Broadway. It was tried out of town in Boston. I was covering it avidly as a theater editor. I called the press agent and I said, "Well, how are the reviews?" He said, "Mixed." Well, that meant terrible, terrible; they were awful. I don't think it ever got to Broadway. It was good as a college play, but I don't think it was big enough for Broadway. [Editor's Note: Neil Cuthbert, who wrote *The Soft Touch*, is a playwright who graduated from Rutgers College in 1973 and the Mason Gross School of the Arts in 1978. Cuthbert won the American College Theater Festival's National Student Playwright Award for *The Soft Touch*. The play was first directed by John Bettenbender and produced at Douglass College. Alan Arkin picked up *The Soft Touch*, which made a two-week run in Boston's Wilbur Theater in 1975 and closed before debuting on Broadway.]

Sheryl Lee went on to win the Irene Ryan Acting Award, which was a national award at the time. I don't know if it still exists. I remember her breaking into *The Targum* office, announcing this very excitedly, and the guys were sort of like, "Huh, what? What's that?" I was like, "Yay, yay, Rutgers, yeah, yeah. We're on the map, the theater map." I didn't know her well, but I sort of

knew her professionally through the Theater Department. She, I believe, graduated early and was in the Negro Ensemble Company. You can check the history on this, but she was mentored there by Sidney Poitier and I don't know who else was in the company at the time, maybe Roscoe Lee [Browne] or Ossie Davis. I don't remember, but I remember Poitier being in it. What a break that was for her, and I think that her fame had a seed at Rutgers with that initial play. Now, of course, in her latest role as Barbara Howard in *Abbott Elementary*, she's just phenomenal and everybody's darling and deservedly so. I hope that the oral history program is able to track her down, and I'd love to hear her recollections of that time. [Editor's Note: In 1974, Sheryl Lee Ralph won the national competition for the Irene Ryan Scholarship, awarded by the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (ACTF), for her role in *The Soft Touch*. The ACTF is a national theater program designed to promote theater in higher education. In 1977, Ralph made her film debut as Barbara Hanley in *A Piece of the Action*, which starred Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier, who also directed the movie. In 2022, Ralph won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series for her role as Barbara Howard on the ABC sitcom *Abbott Elementary*, created by Quinta Brunson.]

KR: Great, thank you so much for adding that. I am going to stop the recording.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 6/17/2023
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 7/13/2023
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