

Roberta Staples (Part 1 of 2)

Roberta Staples

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, New York

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For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

Roberta Staples (Part 1 of 2)

Interviewee: Roberta Staples

Interviewer: Gus Nolan

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Marist College History

Marist College (Poughkeepsie, New York)

Marist College Faculty

Marist College – Social Aspects

Summary: Roberta Staples discusses her upbringing and her eventual role at Marist College as the Director of the Marist College Counseling Center. She discusses the social aspects of the college, the shift of the Counseling Center as an academic learning center to a more clinical, therapeutic hub for students. (PART 1 of 2)

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Gus Nolan ([00:00](#)):

Today is June 29th, 2010. We're meeting in the library here at Marist College. The interview this morning is with Roberta Staples. She is the Director of the Marist College Counseling Center. Good morning Roberta.

Roberta Staples ([00:24](#)):

Good morning.

Gus Nolan ([00:26](#)):

Roberta, as you see, we're doing these interviews for the archives and we're trying to get some data and stories about the earlier years at Marist and you are well qualified to be able to talk about those. But before that, let's just talk about you. Could you briefly give us a thumbnail sketch of your early years? Where were you born? Not when! Where?

Roberta Staples ([00:52](#)):

I'll tell you when I'm okay with that. (laughter).

Gus Nolan ([00:55](#)):

Where you went to school and so on. Okay.

Roberta Staples ([00:58](#)):

Well, I was born in 1948 in Maine. My father was a sea captain, as was his father and all those before him. He felt a little bit like King Lear because he had three daughters and sons. So, I grew up in Maine and went [...].

Gus Nolan ([01:13](#)):

Were they all ungrateful too? (laughter).

Roberta Staples ([01:15](#)):

No. And I went to the University of Maine [...].

Gus Nolan ([01:21](#)):

Well before that, were the local elementary school and high school in the same town?

Roberta Staples ([01:27](#)):

Yeah, the town is Thomaston. It's a very small town on the coast. I think I graduated with less than a hundred in my graduating class and it was a group that was pretty much intact from the time we were five in kindergarten.

Gus Nolan ([01:44](#)):

So y'all know each other very well?

Roberta Staples ([01:46](#)):

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Yeah, perhaps more than we needed. After high school, it was time to leave town.

Gus Nolan ([01:53](#)):

Okay. And college. Where was the college? You went to?

Roberta Staples ([01:57](#)):

University of Maine in the wild sixties. Stephen King, the writer was one of my classmates. So those were good years. Majored in Psychology and English.

Gus Nolan ([02:10](#)):

What was the motivating force for going to college? Was it part of the family tradition?

Roberta Staples ([02:16](#)):

It was expected. My father said, "Go to college, get an education, you'll use it." He had gone to the University of Maine, majored in forestry and went to sea for the rest of his life. But yeah it was expected.

Gus Nolan ([02:32](#)):

I talk a little bit about the high school experience in terms of the nonacademic things or were there any? How about sports? You've been an athletic person most of your adult life. I suppose it didn't happen accidentally.

Roberta Staples ([02:44](#)):

Well except for just playing, we were country kids. You know, swimming in the ocean in the summer and that kind of thing. Not organized athletics at all. Although they told me, "You're tall, you should play basketball." I didn't really like basketball. I didn't do anything in any organized way. Actually. I didn't start working out until I turned 50, so I'm not an athlete.

Gus Nolan ([03:08](#)):

How about hobbies, choral piano, music, empty?

Roberta Staples ([03:13](#)):

Little bit of a lot of different things. You know from traditional crafts and design of fibers, I was a knitter and I took up cooking for a while and all those sort of home, Martha Stewart sorts of things.

Gus Nolan ([03:31](#)):

Sewing artistry [...].

Roberta Staples ([03:34](#)):

Design [...].

Gus Nolan ([03:34](#)):

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All that kind of things. Yeah, a little different. Change in focus through your high school and college. Did you have a job at any time? Did you work in a store or in the school or?

Roberta Staples ([03:48](#)):

I worked. I think I started working summers at age 14 and I've been working ever since. [...] Summer jobs, mostly waitressing and food service. And there was a school for handicapped children on the coast up there and it was a residential program, so I did some summers doing that.

Gus Nolan ([04:13](#)):

So you had a full adolescent experience of school and non-school activities. Through it all? Yeah, very good. Now moving on, what is the link between finishing [...] college and then going in to counseling? Is there a [...] Psychology, is that the link there?

Roberta Staples ([04:33](#)):

Yeah. I majored as an undergraduate in psychology and back then it was harder to get into PhD programs. And I had to pay out of pocket because the sea captain father believed in education, but only so far. He had a BA. I was to stop at a BA. So I got accepted at the Masters Program in Clinical Psychology at SUNY New Paltz. So that's what brought me to the area. I finished that in two years. I think two and a half years. Shortly thereafter I got a job with Dutchess County Social Services. So I was a caseworker. I lived up at Dutch Gardens with Larry Sullivan as a neighbor. And (Jeptha) The Lannings as neighbors. I saw the posting for the position here at Marist. So that's the connection.

Gus Nolan ([05:25](#)):

So that explains how you found your way to Marist. You were already living in the area.

Roberta Staples ([05:28](#)):

I lived across the road. In fact, when I was still in graduate school, I had to write a paper. I was living in Dutch gardens. My program was at SUNY New Paltz but I thought I would check out this Marist College to see if their library was open to non-Marist people. So I just drove onto the campus and if you remember, this was 1974-75. We only had a few buildings but we had a huge, huge sign out by what's now Donnelly. One of those, "You are here." It painted a picture of all three or four buildings. Now we have how many buildings and no signage anywhere. The library was in Donnelly. Then I met Adrian Perreault, he came up to me and wanted to know who I was and what I was doing, walking around in his library. And he gave me a short history as he always did about the horses and the Greystone Building [...]

Gus Nolan ([06:25](#)):

The whole history, not just the short history [...].

Roberta Staples ([06:25](#)):

And then he let me sit in the library and finish the paper I was writing.

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Gus Nolan ([06:29](#)):

That was the price you paid but nevertheless it was worth it. And then you sorta poaching for a position here. Is that the way it goes? And how did they interview? Do you remember the interview? Was there an interview and might've been a very simple operation?

Roberta Staples ([06:47](#)):

There was. I think it was a simple operation, but there was a lot of turnover going on in [...] I think counseling center had been in the psych department and it had fairly recently been separated off. And a man named Cagle Moore. I don't know how long he'd been at the college, but he was a psychology professor and then moved over - I think we were in Champagnat then - to establish sort of a separately based counseling center. Linda Scorza who was the secretary. She's still here on special services. And my position was Counselor Specialist in Testing and Research. I guess I like long titles.

Gus Nolan ([07:31](#)):

Yes. Yeah. Sounds impressive.

Roberta Staples ([07:33](#)):

But a month after I started Cagle Moore moved to California. Who was Dean of students? Tom Wade was Dean of Students [...] but he left [...] Who became Dean of students? Fred Lambert became Dean of students. So there was a lot of moving around. It's hard to keep track. Economic times were very difficult.

Gus Nolan ([07:58](#)):

This is in the mid seventies?

Roberta Staples ([07:59](#)):

Yeah. So it started out looking like a very specialized position. But what then became the reality was that there were really three of us in the Counseling Center, Larry Sullivan, Ann Haggerty, and myself. And because the director had left, Ed Waters sort of oversaw the operation. But all three of us were sort of generic personal counseling testing [...].

Gus Nolan ([08:28](#)):

Was Larry Sullivan considered a counselor? In those days?

Roberta Staples ([08:30](#)):

Yeah, I think it was a quarter time.

Gus Nolan ([08:32](#)):

Okay. So you go through an interview, you're given this position, it must've been a rather difficult to be convinced that you should stay here with so much movement going around or was it interesting enough? And say, "No, I'd like to stay on this boat."

Roberta Staples ([08:53](#)):

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Yeah. It looked like it would be good ride. Little did I know how long the ride would last.

Gus Nolan ([08:58](#)):

In the interview process, do you remember [...] was Dan Kirk there or Bill Eidle or anybody like that?

Roberta Staples ([09:07](#)):

I don't know that they were in the interview. I vaguely recollect [...] it was in one of the rooms around the corner from Bob Lynch's current office. I think there was a separate interview with Cagle. So in short order, I met all of those people, but I don't believe it was a big group interview.

Gus Nolan ([09:28](#)):

Now you're given the position here. What do you expect it to do? Give tests to freshmen coming in? Is that the idea?

Roberta Staples ([09:34](#)):

That was part of it. And there were some personality [...] and I think maybe that spoke to the counseling center coming out of academic psychology. I think we pretty quickly evolved into more of the therapeutic crisis intervention and less of the testing and research. Because my service to the students changed in that direction. They weren't really interested in taking tests.

Gus Nolan ([10:06](#)):

The students weren't interested in taking tests. But weren't there a battery of tests given to them [...] and the progress as time goes on.

Roberta Staples ([10:14](#)):

And that came later. That came, as I recall, did we get some Title IX funding? We were really precariously placed in terms of finances and the size of the incoming classes. This is probably late seventies or maybe early eighties. I'm not very good with dates. But the whole college had to look at retention efforts who were struggling to get enough students to fill the class. In fact, in my early years [...], we were renting dormitory space to students from Dutchess and the Culinary cause we couldn't fill. We couldn't fill our own halls. And those Marist students that we did bring in, weren't really doing well academically. They were flunking courses and some badly behaving and some not. But [...] it became important to sort of get a clearer sense of what they look like academically when they came in and then what support they might need in order to retain them. Not only the [...] lifestyle issues, but [...] academic support and tutoring. The Learning Center came about in those years.

Gus Nolan ([11:29](#)):

Well getting into Marist was not very difficult in those years. In fact that Jack Ebert says that when he was a student [...] he's in advancement now, one of those. He talks about coming in, graduated from high school and he didn't know where to go to college. "They'll go to Marist, they'll take anybody." So we were open to educating anybody.

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Roberta Staples ([11:51](#)):

Or trying to (laughter).

Gus Nolan ([11:53](#)):

Maybe the rationale then, if the economy is [...] so Linda did here [...] where does the push come for a developing of the center? So that you're able to do more and you're staffed that you all had positions. [...] What's the explanation for that?

Roberta Staples ([12:15](#)):

I think the tie in was more with the potential to retain students. If we can keep them, they'll continue to pay their tuition. And that would be a good thing.

Gus Nolan ([12:23](#)):

And how would you [...] the problems you were dealing with were not so much or were they disciplinary in terms of alcoholism, absenteeism? [...] I mean that kind of personal problems. I know some of your staff did deal personally with some of those people. But would that have been a college issue? Were we dealing with students who are not attending class? Or were we trying to motivate them to go to classes? Is that one of the functions (...)

Roberta Staples ([12:57](#)):

Yup. (...)

Gus Nolan ([12:57](#)):

(...) that you would put into that office?

Roberta Staples ([12:59](#)):

Doing some motivational stuff, stress management, study skills. A lot of the students came in and didn't know how to begin doing academic work. So we did a lot of that. And in fact, when I first started, this was under Cagle Moore and under the Dean of Students sort of in that track [...].

Gus Nolan ([13:20](#)):

About '74-5?

Roberta Staples ([13:22](#)):

And then Counseling was moved under the academic line. So we report actually to Liz. She was my supervisor for awhile. And Vinny Tuscano. So we were sort of an academic support. And then at some point, we [...] in fact there were some years that when Larry went on sabbatical, I was the only one [...] doing any of the work. So there were some lean years. But we survived.

Gus Nolan ([13:56](#)):

And then the other development comes with this testing program that becomes popular. At least, the taking of the test to become popular.

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Roberta Staples ([14:09](#)):

Yeah it was part of the battery of [...] part of the paperwork the student had to complete before coming to Marist. So many summers were spent scoring answer sheets, profiling the individual students in terms of looking at their SATs. There was an instrument that looked at motivation, another one that looked at [...] academic skills, study skills, personality [...].

Gus Nolan ([14:35](#)):

You described people coming to your office or to the center kind of willingly. To find out what can be done to help their own problem. There comes a point later when there seems to be a kind of a negative aspect of viewing counseling that was something wrong with you if you were going to counseling [...] I recall a survey that Royce White did on that subject. [...] And it seems as though a number of students knew about it but they didn't know where it was. That was kind of the feeling that they had at that time. You lived through that period.

Roberta Staples ([15:12](#)):

Yeah, and I think some of our students would say the same thing and my reaction to that is if they need it, they'll find us. We always had ample numbers of customers, but maybe it's still the case. Hopefully less so on that there is a stigma about mental health treatment and personal counseling.

Gus Nolan ([15:38](#)):

But it seems to me the other side of that ledger would be that you have a fund of information about the student that they don't know about themselves. And so that if it was changed to something like talent investigation and development, [...] what talents do you have we know. Do you want to know? Come on over. So I was wondering how the students in 2009 and 2010, do they feel the same way? Or is there a more openness to come from counseling to find out what they can do?

Roberta Staples ([16:14](#)):

I think the world has changed enormously. Well, back to the testing we did that and I would profile the freshmen class coming in in terms of statistical data, but we also made available to any student to sit down and go over their test profile. Some were actually told by instructors that they had to do it. Others came on their own and it was just that kind of feedback in terms of advice-giving and how they might proceed and succeed. And at some point, we stopped doing that testing. I think we ran out of funds and the transition moved into more clinical work in the Counseling Center. Times have changed right now. We're seeing more families come in quick to acknowledge. You know, my son or daughter suffers from depression or eating disorders or whatever. We need to know what kind of support is available. That never would have taken place 20 years ago. That conversation would not [...].

Gus Nolan ([17:13](#)):

That's amazing. Well I suppose that's part of this whole change that it developed in the students who are coming now. They're not the first generation to go to college. Their parents went to college and they know the services that are available and consequently want to capitalize on it to proceed with it. [...] We may come back to this [...] another way to this. But let's continue with

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the change now. We're saying the certain changes have developed. [...] the changes in administration, had they been completed with Dennis Murray here? When you arrived or was Foy [...] still in charge?

Roberta Staples ([18:00](#)):

Foy was in charge. He was the president. So I was here before Dennis.

Gus Nolan ([18:05](#)):

You were here before Dennis. Unlike Tom, whatever his name is, you know, applied the same year as does Tom got the painting job. I thought that was a very funny line that time. Changes on campus. Changes starting with your office. Where have movement's been made?

Roberta Staples ([18:30](#)):

Growth growth growth. When I started, the Counseling Center was three dormitory rooms in a row on the first floor of Champagnat. We moved from there to what is now part of the dining hall down at the foot of the stairs. And we were housed with HEOP and I believe, career counseling. So yeah, it was psychological counseling, career counseling, and HEOP. And we were in this big area with partitions in between. So we were there for a few years. And then when Father Lamorte left Byrne, we created the proposal that Campus Ministry, Health Services and Counseling, mind, body and soul really were more compatible in terms of the work that we did, the students that we saw, the students that we saw in common. So we moved over to Bern.

Gus Nolan ([19:33](#)):

Now who was the administrator? Who are you reporting to? Are you reporting to Father Lamorte or you're reporting to Jerry Cox or? What's the line of breakdown in terms of that already there?

Roberta Staples ([19:48](#)):

It's moving around, but [...] that was the year, Father LaMorte left the college, so we took over at Byrne and reported to under Jerry. And that's also when Deb DiCaprio came in. She had been a mentor and she became assistant Dean of students. So the three of us, Sister Eileen Halloran [...].

Gus Nolan ([20:09](#)):

Was Sansola on the scene yet?

Roberta Staples ([20:14](#)):

He (Sansola) was running housing.

Gus Nolan ([20:14](#)):

So all of those complications [...]

Roberta Staples ([20:20](#)):

But the three directors in Bryne were Jane O'Brien for health services, Eileen Halloran for campus ministry and myself in counseling.

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Gus Nolan ([20:29](#)):

Okay. Were you getting funding for your operations or was it just pretty much [...] Who went to the bargaining table to get that? Did you have to go to your superior as it were, to say, we need money for whatever.

Roberta Staples ([20:48](#)):

And we were allocated pretty much the same dollar amount every year and made it stretch.

Gus Nolan ([20:54](#)):

Because prices went up in and more needs develop, but you made it stretch. Yeah, that's a familiar story here.

Roberta Staples ([21:02](#)):

And again, our work became more clinical, less of the testing that was being done. The Learning Center was growing at that point. So they were providing a really important service and the students who would come to the counseling center were students sometimes homesick, sometimes a victim of an assault or something traumatic, sometimes family issues [...].

Gus Nolan ([21:27](#)):

Is that the clinical aspect of what you're talking about?

Roberta Staples ([21:31](#)):

Yeah.

Gus Nolan ([21:31](#)):

There's more of that kind of work than the academic analysis of data.

Roberta Staples ([21:40](#)):

My sense is the academic support side of the house was growing stronger as well. So we were sort of being a little redundant and counseling became psychological services.

Gus Nolan ([21:52](#)):

Okay. Let's talk about the campus has changed somewhat between the time that you were here first. What strikes you now most dramatically? Maybe the Hancock Building I don't know. There is always something new, bursting out of the ground.

Roberta Staples ([22:10](#)):

And that's exactly my feeling. And you started by describing me as Director of the Counseling Center. I'm not. I am now Director of Professional and Student Development. So three, almost four years ago, it was a lateral move, but allows me to do a lot more training, hosting conferences, sometimes doing the training myself. So I'm working more with external groups that are coming in and how they love, absolutely love coming to this campus. We have just the most beautiful facility and the compliments I get on, you know, the personnel [...]

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Gus Nolan ([22:54](#)):

That deserves credit for [...].

Roberta Staples ([22:54](#)):

Oh absolutely!

Gus Nolan ([22:54](#)):

For bring in this shining jewel that it is. It was rough in those early days. But we managed, struggled on. Again on terms of the campus, of the library the place we now see, you've seen different libraries here or you've gone from Donnelly to Fontaine to now where we are here. Which has been a (?). Has there been a significant or sufficient, information for you put into library? Do you get journals or are they available relating to the work that you're doing?

Roberta Staples ([23:35](#)):

Actually on that note, I have to say most of my journals and information is online. And I subscribe to my own journals of the things I do a lot of is violence prevention, education, and crisis intervention training. And that's, that's pretty specialized. Yeah.

Gus Nolan ([23:53](#)):

Well, I would have to say in communications [...] the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature used to be the source you went to, to find all the articles. Now it's online. I mean, why would you bother? And then you can print out everything you want in two seconds rather than type and take notes. The students, they have no idea of the laborious situation or research paper used to be in terms of those factors. Tell me this, was the building of the stadium a good investment? Of course, \$9 million.

Roberta Staples ([24:30](#)):

I don't know. I really don't have a call. I can see both sides. That's a big, big price tag. Yeah. I don't know that we've seen the payoff yet, but we may.

Gus Nolan ([24:42](#)):

Well, someone I think, Linus Foy pointed out, one of the payoffs is a Saturday afternoon you will see a hundred people in uniform lined up with the Marist College Football and they pay more than \$30,000 to come here. Yeah. So it is an attraction for you know. It's not Notre Dame, you know, but it's not Marist to fold either.

Roberta Staples ([25:08](#)):

So it's really impressive. Well, you know, I work out at Mike Artegas, that building is so much higher that I can be on my treadmill or whatever and look down across the street on that field.

Gus Nolan ([25:19](#)):

All kinds of things. I mean this afternoon or this morning coming in, there's some group out there of girls with nets and I guess there's a lacrosse. I don't know if that's Marist or high school or a camp or [...].

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Roberta Staples ([25:31](#)):

One of our summer camps. But run by the Marist coaches of those teams.

Gus Nolan ([25:37](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. That's [...] another happy fallout as it were of the development. You know, that there are enough students who want to come to these things now. I understand that it's very difficult to get onto the Marist basketball, at least the girls. Summer camp, you know, [...] it's a sellout every year for that to be able to. So yeah, I suppose you might say that [...] Other buildings? You [...] cause you don't have to travel across to [...] the new Fontaine building or [...] or the communications building there.

Roberta Staples ([26:27](#)):

Lowell Thomas and Dyson and when I'm hosting conferences as I did, Marist hosted, the New York State Coalition against Sexual Assault had a week-long training for crime victim advocates. So law enforcement, mental health providers, we had about 50, and their classroom space was in Fontaine and they stayed in our residence halls. And again, a group that just [...]

The interview cuts off @ 26:51.