

Interview with: EILEEN SICO

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, NY

Transcribed by Lily Jandrisevits

For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

Transcript: Eileen Sico

Interviewee: Eileen Sico

Interviewer: Gus Nolan

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Summary: Eileen Sico discusses her early life and her educational and professional background that led to her becoming executive assistant to President Dennis Murray. She also talks about her experiences in this position and changes she has noticed while working at Marist College.

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

Today is Wednesday, the 10th of August. We have an opportunity to have a special interview today with Eileen Psycho?

Eileen Sico ([00:32](#)):

Sico. My husband's psycho.

GN ([00:33](#)):

The [laugh], the president's secretary, or I'll get to that later. I'm not sure exactly her official title, but good afternoon, Eileen.

ES ([00:42](#)):

Good afternoon, Gus. How are you?

GN ([00:44](#)):

Oh, I'm good. I'm so glad to have this opportunity to talk to somebody from such a high office. This is the first time we've had a high administrative office secretary here.

ES ([00:54](#)):

And I think you mean that because I'm on the third story of Greystone, correct [laugh].

GN ([00:58](#)):

That's right. Well, right.

ES ([00:59](#)):

That's a high office.

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GN ([01:00](#)):

That's the highest office here in many ways. I like to, this recording and interview is going into Marist College Archives. And so for people who will be using it to get a perspective, I like to use the expression that Leave America Got is, can we turn the clock back a little bit and say something about your early years? Where did you grow up? Early school, neighborhood children. Who you played with their family, okay. What part of the U.S.A. did you come from? [laugh].

ES ([01:37](#)):

Okay. I am a native New Yorker. I was born and raised in Queens. Originally born in Jackson Heights. I moved out of Jackson Heights when I was about five to Cambria Heights. And I lived in Cambria until I was, 19. I moved out to Kings Park on Long Island, and then got--.

GN ([02:06](#)):

Where, where did you go to grade school or high school?

ES ([02:09](#)):

I went to grade school at Sacred Heart in Cambria Heights. And I went to high school at St. Michael's in East New York. [affirmative], St. Michael's in East New York is now no longer there as a Catholic high school. I did two years. I have an associate's degree from St. John's University, and then left to get married, have children, and finished my education when I started working here at Marist in, I started in '93 and graduated with my daughter in 1997.

GN ([02:43](#)):

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Okay, in the high school years, did you have any particular interests where you went to? Did you do music, sports, drama, any kind of activity?

ES ([02:54](#)):

I always had to work. I'm one of six children. My mother came from a large family. My father came from a large family. I started working after school on my sister's working papers when I was 14 years old. And I then had the responsibility because my mother also worked full-time of making sure dinner was ready. And my younger brothers and sisters' homework was done before my parents got home. I also, then when I went into high school, started working at Macy's in Jamaica, Queens, and used to take a bus from my house in Queens to Jamaica, and back home again at night and did homework there. So it didn't leave me much time for after school activities other than CYO basketball and some cheerleading that we did just as a volunteer kind of group.

GN ([03:48](#)):

Good. And through the summers then, do you some of these jobs like Macy's or wherever, did you do those things?

ES ([03:54](#)):

I would work full-time in Macy's during the summer, no, I'm sorry. I would work 20 hours a week at Macy's. When I started college, I, my mother did not want me to go to college. St. Michael's was a commercial high school, and I took commercial and academic courses. So what I wound up doing was I actually had no study halls all through high school and did the traditional math, the algebra, geometry, trigonometry that you needed to get into college along with the, I had Spanish.

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GN ([04:29](#)):

Okay. And then the career training, the secretarial skills that you have, that was part of the next step?

ES ([04:41](#)):

That came from my mother saying that I was going to be a good secretary and get a job when I graduated from high school. So at St. Michael's, I studied sonography, extra English courses and typing classes as well as bookkeeping, so that I had all of my commercial courses [affirmative]. Which prepared me for the working world. And then I also had my academic courses that prepared me for college. When I graduated, in order to go to college, I happened to hook up with a place called Tuition Plan, and they held my tuition book for me while I went to school. And then in the summers, I would work for them full-time from nine to five, five days a week, and then do my Macy's job. So I wouldn't lose that, and I paid off my debts.

GN ([05:33](#)):

Very good. [laugh], you seem to be a financial manager here as well as secretarial.

ES ([05:39](#)):

[Laugh] I try.

GN ([05:39](#)):

You remind me of my sister who did the same thing. She went to the Grace Institute of some school, like, and did secretarial aide and then became the Secretary of Peter Grace, which was very nice. She could get chauffeured home, but it was at nine o'clock at night doing so. Nobody

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saw the chauffeured car coming up to the house. [laugh]. This was not exactly the way she really wanted it, you know?

ES (06:01):

Right.

GN (06:01):

Well, let's come to Marist now. Moving ahead, Marist, you started to take courses here. Is that to finish your degree?

ES (06:09):

No, actually, once my children started to get a little bit older and didn't need me at home, I stayed at home until my son was going into first grade and decided I would look for a full-time job. I actually, my first job, when I first left St. John's after my graduation, I worked for three years at Stony Brook University, and I worked for the chairman of the Department of Ecology and Evolution there. Then when I decided to go back to work up here after, you know my children were old enough to go into school and didn't need me home all day, I took a job with Duchess Day School, which is a private elementary school in Millbrook. And I worked there for nine years. One day I just happened to be looking through the paper. I saw an ad for an administrative assistant to the president at Marist College, and I thought, gee, wouldn't that be nice? And so I applied. I understand when I applied, they had over 270 applications, I think, for the position. And I think with my background, having worked at Stony Brook University and then also having been the administrative assistant to the headmaster at Duchess, that that led Dennis to believe that I would be qualified to be able to handle his office.

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GN ([07:41](#)):

And when you came here, then, did you come as a presidential assistant or the secretary, or what was the title that you had?

ES ([07:50](#)):

I came here as the administrative assistant to the president.

GN ([07:54](#)):

Okay.

ES ([07:55](#)):

Over the years, I then became administrative assistant to the president and secretary to the Board of Trustees, and then I became the executive assistant to the president.

GN ([08:07](#)):

Okay.

ES ([08:07](#)):

And secretary to Board of Trustees.

GN ([08:09](#)):

So the Marist thing is purely kind of accidental. You reading the paper and seeing this ad and putting your name in for it and.

ES ([08:18](#)):

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Right. I had threatened for years to go back to school to finish my degree. I actually wanted to be a school teacher [affirmative]. I love children and I love being around them, which is what helped me with the other jobs that I had. And I thought that if I did go to Marist, well, whether I went here or not, I was determined that I was going to get, finish the two years of school that I had left. And once I started working at Marist, I took advantage of that opportunity and it took me only four years to do the two years that I had left.

GN ([08:55](#)):

And what did you do then? What's your major?

ES ([08:58](#)):

My major was integrative studies.

GN ([09:00](#)):

Integrative study, okay.

ES ([09:02](#)):

So it was a little bit of English. [affirmative], it was a little bit of--.

GN ([09:06](#)):

History,

ES ([09:07](#)):

History, the social studies.

GN ([09:12](#)):

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And that would be in '93 or thereabouts, '94. The years for that?

ES ([09:18](#)):

'93, '94, '95, '96. I graduated in '97. Oh, I started here in January of '93. I could not take my first class until September of '93. And then, I went from there. So I graduated in May of '97.

GN ([09:38](#)):

Alright. So you've been here for over 20 years now or? [Affirmative], just about that. Okay. And really in the same office. [Affirmative], have you had to fund the same job at the same office, or has there been, a redefining of the responsibilities that you would have there?

ES ([09:58](#)):

It's been basically the same job, if you include the phrase on other duties as assigned [affirmative]. So, you know, there's been a lot of things that have come up that might not have been in the job description that we took care of in the office. I've made tons of friends while I was here. I love the people at Marist and the culture, the students. And so the job has pretty much remained the same, except it's gotten more intense because as the school got larger, there were more demands on the president for his time and his scheduling and, which meant more demand in our office to get things organized for him [affirmative]. I think in the beginning I worked very closely with Dennis. He guided me through a lot of the things, and don't kid yourself, Dennis never let go. He never relinquished total control. He had his finger on the pulse of everything that worked in that office. He would always, as time went on, we would be able to figure out how he might answer some correspondence that came in. And in order to take some of the work off of his plate, I would take the initiative to compose draft responses, to some of the things that

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came in, and then we would go over them when he came in the office and he'd make whatever changes he wanted. And it just helped us to be able to move things along much more quickly.

GN ([11:39](#)):

So you had associates working with you then on revising or creating some of these documents or these letters, these responses that are going out?

ES ([11:48](#)):

Right. As the demand for Dennis's time became greater and greater, and he was going to community organizations more and having community people in, and all of the different organizations that the college wanted to talk with him and meet with him, um, we kind of divided into things. Now, when I started here, Susan Roeller Brown, [affirmative] was Dennis's executive assistant. She mainly did writing for him [affirmative]. She would do the research behind the writings that he was doing. If he was doing case conferences or speaking somewhere, she would usually accompany him. She would do the overheads at that point, which we've now made into PowerPoints instead. But she would do those types of things. So Susan had her own assistant, who at the time was Donna Moran when Susan left, Elizabeth Tavares came into the role and Elizabeth assumed a lot of the fact checking and research for Dennis's campus communications, his welcome back letter, his speeches that he might be doing. She would gather the points, get the latest on the admission numbers, the advancement numbers.

GN ([13:17](#)):

The statistics that had to go into these documents [affirmative]. Which are always there. And abundance [laugh].

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ES ([13:24](#)):

Right, right. And, and it requires fact checking. It requires, you know, updating information all the time. Things that the president really doesn't have time to do himself because it is time consuming.

GN ([13:34](#)):

Right. Now, where did you make the steps forward in the technical ability to do this computer science and the ability to function, to use the computer or to use whatever instrument you're using? You didn't, did you have that when you came here?

ES ([13:55](#)):

When I came to Marist, I had actually had, when I was at my former school working there, they had a Macintosh computer, [affirmative], and I went and took Mac classes and I learned how to operate on a Mac. I loved the Mac. I came here and they had the IBMs,

GN ([14:21](#)):

Yes, I'm familiar [laugh].

ES ([14:22](#)):

With the green screens, and they were working in Word Perfect. And another program called Q and A, which I found archaic after having worked with Bill Gates's, Microsoft Word, [affirmative]. So after talking to various people on campus, Marist finally, and not that it had anything to do with me, I think it was just an evolution. We finally did switch over to the Microsoft package, and the platform needed to run that program here. And so I was able to take a lot of the experience I had and transferred into this job. But also when I went back to school at

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Marist here, I did take the basic computer courses in Excel, access on Microsoft Word and PowerPoint.

GN ([15:17](#)):

Oh, good. Okay. Moving on, about your position here. Are you Dennis's first resource when he leaves? Does he call you? Are you on a 24/7 [laugh] to get somebody [laugh], if he's in France or if he's in Spain or Italy now more often? You know, does, I'm sure he keeps in touch with the college daily. You know.

ES ([15:42](#)):

Dennis kept in touch with the college moment by moment, and he didn't hesitate. He always called through the office. A lot of times he would ask me to connect him to various people. [affirmative]. However, a lot of times when it would be a weekend or a night, he would, and some type of emergency arose, or he felt the need to have to get in touch with someone, he would call his Vice President's direct.

GN ([16:13](#)):

Oh, I see. Yeah. For each of the offices, the academic and the financial.

ES ([16:17](#)):

Right. If he needed something with academic affairs, he would call the Vice President for academic affairs. He, if it was financial, the Chief Financial Officer, you know, the E V P.

GN ([16:29](#)):

Yeah. By and large though, you can leave the job here or is it with you when you go home?

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ES ([16:36](#)):

I take it with me when I go home.

GN ([16:38](#)):

You do?

ES ([16:38](#)):

I don't know that I can blame anyone else for that, but I do [affirmative]. Take a, I do have a, great sense of pride in the work that I do [affirmative] and I take responsibility for it. So I try to remember all the pieces, when I go home, you know, if, if something happens, if there's, you know, unfortunately a wake or a funeral and it happens on a Friday night or a Saturday, it's like, okay, so, let's get flowers and, you know, what do we have to do here? You know, it's those little pieces because if somebody's gonna be waked on a Sunday and the funeral is Monday, it's gotta be done over the weekend. So you do it.

GN ([17:21](#)):

Yes, yeah. Very good. Okay. One of the big questions that has always bothered me that I come back is, Marist has changed so much, you know, and the question is, how did this happen? You know? And, and so, the fundamental question answer to it be because of the leadership Dennis had really had, you know, the driving force. But, you know, let's talk about some of the changes though. What would you say, or some of the major changes that you saw in terms of Marist? And we could do a while, let's say campus, you've seen radical changes in terms of new buildings. The library was not here when you arrived, this library. [Affirmative] We had something, there was a building where there was some books, what you'd hardly call it, a library [laugh].

Eileen SicoES ([18:12](#)):

The Midrise wasn't here, the student center wasn't here. There are a lot of buildings not here when I first came on campus. And the growth certainly has something to do with it, but I think the evolution of people probably had more to do with it. It's the expectations of parents now, and I personally attribute a lot of that to, with two-parent families, both parents out working. I think there's a sense of guilt with parents that they're not giving their children enough. [Affirmative] So if they can make somebody else give it to their children, they will champion that cause. [affirmative], and the cost of college certainly has just skyrocketed. So you wanna make sure you're getting what you can for your money. And then the other issue that I think impacted Marist growth is the number of students who want to live on campus. When I was in school, people couldn't wait to get off campus. [affirmative]. You know, the big thing was to maybe live within walking distance or a short commuting distance, but not to be under an adult thumb anymore. And that's not, so today, and today, even when children are wrong, their parents will go to bat for them [affirmative]. In my day when children were wrong, if, if I did something bad, I'd get in trouble in school and I'd get in twice as much trouble for my parents.

GN ([19:48](#)):

Yeah. Right. Well, with that change, the growth, there's also the diversity. I mean, we used to be pretty much from New York or the island, you know, that's the population. Now, most of the students are not from New York. I mean, in fact, I don't know what percentages from, I, one of the interesting statistics that I heard, I think we have 90 full-time students from California. And that, you know, why is the president, the new president going to California? [laugh] There's a whole Marist contingent there, you know, that you may, why does the football team go out there,

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you know? [affirmative], if they don't, you have to be there for them to know about you, you know? And I think that will be part of it, but also we have, you know, a European and an Australian and an Asian, you know, influx of students which much have add to the diversity and things that you or the office has to be able to deal with in terms of well, communication with these people, with they, the homes and so on, and, and keeping in contact with them.

GN ([21:00](#)):

Is that coming out of the presence office or is it, you know, or housing takes care of that or financial takes care of that, or security takes care of the problems of dealing with the extended diversity.

ES ([21:14](#)):

It's a village problem, and at Marist, you know, it, it is a community, and everybody kind of has their peace. One of the big things that many students today have to learn is how to live with someone else in their bedroom [affirmative]. Most children today have their own room, and if not their own room, they're sharing with someone that they grew up with. So, you know, the nuances and the quirks of that person. When you come into the Marist dorm situation, you come in with people you don't know at all, and you come in with people who are used to getting things their own way. You're getting, you know, you're in with people who deal with things differently. And the big thing is you have to learn how to adapt. So that, that plays a major role. It adds to a lot of issues with housing.

ES ([22:16](#)):

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Children coming to school today have more problems stemming from whether they have a stable home life, they have medical issues, whatever the issues are, they now have to be dealt with by strangers, you know, people. So you have to build up a trust. The academics have to grow and they have to meet the needs of the marketplace, you know, to be teaching people how to be milkmen when there aren't any milkmen anymore [affirmative]. You know, it doesn't make any sense. So you need to have somebody out in the marketplace and seeing where the training needs are and what the next phase is, and try to stay ahead of the curve. And that was something that Dennis Murray was always very good at. The Vice President for admissions, Sean Kaylor, Sean's been the Vice President of admissions probably for close to 20 years now himself, he goes out, he meets with guidance counselors, and he has them come to the Marist campus. So they get to see what Marist is like [affirmative]. And then from there, we have gotten known across the continent. We now have a recruiter out in California full-time, Corinne Shell, so.

GN ([23:51](#)):

As much as Marist has changed, would you say there's something that basically Marist is still Marist? You talked about friendships that you had formed, that maintain, you know, it's, I find myself that there's fundamentally a similar spirit. Okay.

*** Interview cuts off at this point.