

Interview with: VINCENT BEGLEY

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, NY

Transcribed by Lily Jandrisevits

For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

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Interviewee: Vincent Begley

Interviewer: Gus Nolan

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Summary: Vincent Begley talks about his experience attending Marist College in the early days of the school. He reflects on his time as an English major, including his semester abroad studying at Oxford University. He discusses the value of a Marist education in his eyes, and what brought him back as an adjunct professor. He also describes his wishes for the future of Marist as an innovator of higher education.

Gus Nolan ([00:12](#)):

We can start now. Good. Thank you. Again, today is Monday the 8th of April. We have a chance to interview one of the first graduates of Marist from the year 1970, Vincent Begley. Good morning, Vincent.

Vincent Begley ([00:27](#)):

Good morning, Gus.

GN ([00:28](#)):

Vincent, I'd like you if you could give me a short overview of your early life, where were you born, early education, where the family lived. And I'll interrupt during that asking some questions as you go. Okay.

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

I was born in Manhattan on July 11th, 1948. My-- I was then placed in the founding home across town in July of '48. I was adopted in February of 1949 by a couple from Brooklyn. So, I left Manhattan, then went over to Brooklyn, where I spent my first five years until my adoptive parents moved to Long Island, where I began my education in the public school system in Seaford at Long Island. By the time I was in eighth grade, I had decided I wanted something a little different. I wanted to break a mold that my sister and two cousins who had gone to the school had followed. So, I was accepted at St. Agnes Cathedral High School in Rockville Center, taught by the Dominican Sisters of Amityville, and they provided a wonderful foundation for learning. Were very encouraging, very open, just brought out the best in the student. I learned about writing. It turns out that ironically my birth father, who was a Catholic priest of the

Vincent Begley

archdiocese, was not only a writer, he was an English teacher at Archbishop Stepinac High School. One of the founding faculty was a speech writer for Cardinal Spellman at the time, directed plays. And those were all the roots that I had in me. So, when I was in high school, they were formulated. I got involved with journalism, started writing. I was an editor for the newspaper, and I was encouraged. I knew that writing was where I wanted to go.

GN ([02:29](#)):

Outside writing, were you involved in any sports or any other activities, choir, drama, stage [laugh].

VB ([02:35](#)):

I would've loved to have been more involved in sports, but it was not my calling. I was on the newspaper, the yearbook staff. I played in the band for four years. I was involved in a number of volunteer organizations. So, I really immersed myself in everything that the high school had to offer. And found out by the time I was a senior; it had been a wonderful four year journey.

GN ([03:02](#)):

How about the summers? Any work, experience, travel, small jobs?

VB ([03:08](#)):

I had begun working as a little kid, shoveling driveways, raking leaves, cutting lawns, because my father was of the type that didn't matter how young you were, you should be earning something. So, I began earning and I learned how to save when I was old enough to get a traditional kind of job. I was fourteen and a half at the time, and I went to work at Jones Beach as a bus boy. Spent two summers there, earning money to put away for college. My senior year of

Vincent Begley

high school, I got a job working for the post office, which was a lot more money. And so, I tried to have saved money that I could use when I went to college.

GN ([03:52](#)):

What did you do in the post office?

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

I was a-- worked in the sectional center. It's a huge sectional center and spent eight hours a day on a conveyor belt sorting mail.

GN ([04:03](#)):

Oh, very good. Alright, next phase. Marist College. Why did you choose Marist?

VB ([04:10](#)):

I was up in the air about where to go. I had really wanted to go to a school where I could take journalism. I wanted to go to Syracuse, the Medill School of Journalism, and those are the two.

And then my father said, get real. So, I had to lower my economic sites. I was told at the admissions counselor, admissions rep from Marist was going to be up in the guidance office.

When I was a senior, I went up and talked to Mr. Thomas Wade. He was the admissions director at the time. And we got to talking and, although Manhattan College and St. John Fisher were two colleges that I thought about, Tom Wade said the magic word. He said, what if we give you some money?

GN ([04:58](#)):

I see.

Vincent Begley

VB ([04:59](#)):

And I said, that not only sounds good for me, I'm sure that'll sound good for my father. So, he offered me a nice financial scholarship and work study and what other scholarships and money I had. So, I went for a visit and fell in love with it on site.

GN ([05:18](#)):

Okay, describe Marist when you came here, what was the scene like? Were the dormitories up? Did we have wall field?

VB ([05:26](#)):

When I went to come and visit the college before deciding to come here, the Marist brothers were all on retreat. So, it was very silent campus. I couldn't talk to anybody. Champagnat had just been completed. This was end of '65, beginning of '66. So Champagnat had just been open. There was only Leo and Sheahan. Donnelley was built and opening, but it was a very small campus. But to me it was a big campus, it had everything I wanted, everything that I could possibly think about. So, my decision was made and I was never doubted making that decision.

GN ([06:13](#)):

And when you came here, you thought all the way through that you'd like to do something in writing journalism or something in that line?

VB ([06:19](#)):

I did because I had written and published some newspaper articles before coming to Marist. I immediately joined the newspaper staff. One of my jobs was at the library and also with admissions this time under Mr. David Flynn. I enjoyed meeting new prospective students. I

Vincent Begley

enjoyed taking them around and talking to them. So, I married that with my writing and continued. My only regret, if you could say it, was that I was an English major and I probably shouldn't have been an English major, admittedly, fifty years later, I could say that I was not enamored with 17th century English Poetry [laugh] or Shakespeare. I was having a father who had been a playwright and directed plays, I gravitated towards theater. And I got involved in theater at Marist and worked on the newspaper. And that was my calling. The fact that Marist didn't have the program that I wanted was really negligent.

GN ([07:24](#)):

There was no track in journalism.

VB ([07:25](#)):

There was no track in journalism, no track in creative writing. But I once took a walk around campus as a sophomore with then brother Linus Foy. And he told me that there is only a slight difference between Marist and Harvard, and that is what you put into it as a student. And I took those words to heart and I realized, you know, borrowing the old Kennedy phrase, it's, you know, not what your college can do for you, but what you can do for your college. And I realized by getting fully involved at Marist, in turn, Marist was paying me back because the opportunities were here. There were no end to the opportunities. Nobody ever said, we've never done that before. You can't do it.

GN ([08:14](#)):

Right. How about the music? Did you stay with the band or did you do anything there?

VB ([08:19](#)):

Vincent Begley

I would have continued because I had been playing for eight years, but Marist had no opportunity. There was nowhere to go with it. So unfortunately, I had to end my music career.

GN ([08:32](#)):

Other aspects of Marist at that time, making friends, you seem to have a rather social ability to be able to make new friends, is that a factor?

VB ([08:45](#)):

I think it was a factor of my personality and Marist, when I went to high school, I was the only-- I didn't know anybody when I started high school. So, I had to learn how to step up to the plate and meet people and discover who I was. Marist gave me that same opportunity again. I started-- I was the only one from my high school who came to Marist. So, I wasn't labeled. I had no identity. I could recreate my identity. I met a number of students. I was open to listening to different mindsets, enjoyed the fact that the faculty were so willing to talk. Brother Cyprian Rowe was my freshman English teacher, and he was amazing. Amazing man. Dr. Donahue, he was brother Donohue then, opened my mind to thinking with philosophy. Dr. Lou Zuccarello, I was so immersed with people who wanted you to think, and the students that I met in all the activities, it was like being in a candy store.

GN ([09:52](#)):

How about other activities? Did you work at any time while you were while in college and then during the summer?

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

Vincent Begley

I continued working at Marist in the admissions office during the year. In the summer, I was a parlor car attendant on Long Island Railroad, which meant that the trains that went from Jamaica, Queens out to the Hamptons. I had a car, and my job was to serve those twenty or twenty-five people. Again, it was a-- every position I had seemed to be dealing with people. So, if you wanted to help increase your tips, you had to learn how to be friendly.

GN ([10:30](#)):

One question I think you mentioned earlier is that you were in the abroad program. Want to say a few words about your experience in London [laugh].

VB ([10:40](#)):

Well, brother Joe Bell, as we called him, brother Joseph Belanger, when Sheahan Hall was started my sophomore year, it was called the humanities house. And it was intended for people who were thinking of going abroad. It was sort of like a--.

GN ([10:56](#)):

A league club.

VB ([10:57](#)):

It was sort of like an incubator for-- and it also was the place where people from abroad came back. So, he was encouraging me and encouraging me. And an opening came to start a program at Oxford, at Manchester College in Oxford University. He told me, you'll be the first student to go there, which was not new for me. I didn't mind starting fresh. They didn't know anything about the program, though. That's the only drawback. They did not know that-- when I arrived at Oxford, having gone traditional two years at an American college, when I arrived at Oxford, they

Vincent Begley

asked me, they said what would you like to learn this year? I said, well, what courses do I have to take? They said we don't give courses. I said, do you have a catalog? We don't have a catalog. I said, then what do we do? They said, you create a program that you want and you will have tutors. And I said, I haven't even started, and they already need me to have a tutor. But they said, no. Here a tutor is somebody you sit down with one-on-one for an hour and a half each week, and you read your essays to your tutor, and they evaluate it, and they challenge you to support what you said. And the next essay, you came better prepared and you learn more. So, the educational opportunity was amazing at Oxford to be-- they had a full lecture program and you could go to any lecture you wanted to go to. I went to lectures by Dame Helen Gardiner, who was T.S. Eliot's friend and official biographer a man by the name of Dr. Lord Cecil.

GN ([12:35](#)):

Are you evaluated by word? How-- or are you evaluated at all?

VB ([12:39](#)):

There was no evaluation. Oxford does not have a grading system. They don't give tests. They don't give grades, which became a challenge when I came back to Marist, because I was the first student to go to a program that was like this. Had they known beforehand, they probably-- we would've done something differently. So, we had to craft together a way to give me credits for what I had learned.

GN ([13:05](#)):

Did you get twelve credits or fifteen?

VB ([13:07](#)):

Vincent Begley

I got fifteen credits. Not the GPA that I had left with, but looking back, I would not have changed it for the world.

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

Wonderful. I'll move on. After graduation what did you do? What's the first thing you did? The first job, maybe.

VB ([13:25](#)):

I graduated in 1970. That was the year of the Kent State shooting. That's when colleges closed their doors. And colleges had been in chaos for the two or three years prior to that, because of the Vietnam War. It was faculty against faculty, student against student. It was very tough time. So, I was asked by the dean at the time of students who's now Tom Wade and brother Cox at the time, would I stay on work in the dorms and work with-- as a liaison with students and faculty, because I had earned the respect of the faculty. I had been a good student involvement person. So, for two years I worked in residence admissions and with the Dean of Students. So, it was an opportunity to figure out-- it was sort of my graduate school without credit.

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

When did you eventually go to graduate school?

VB ([14:23](#)):

I believe it or not, at that time, there was only one flavor. If you were an English major, you became an English-- went to graduate school. And it meant, I, at that time, I had to know either French or German to be able to read it. And English was difficult for me. Languages were not

Vincent Begley

my skill. So, I realized I was not going to cut it as an academic. So, I did not go to graduate school. Fast forward, forty years later, I went and did my master's in education.

GN ([15:02](#)):

What did you do for that big part of life after you left Marist?

VB ([15:07](#)):

After I left Marist, because Marist had done such a great job in training me to think and not be limited. And because I had done enough writing and research, I realized the traditional job at a corporation was not my calling. So, I was challenged to think of different ways. I did a lot of freelance writing for newspapers and magazines, but I earned my bread and butter as a shoe salesman. And it was a challenge. I-- the summer of 1974, I married a Marist graduate who had gone abroad. She had gone to Paris, and she had wanted to be a French teacher, but unfortunately teaching was-- French teachers were in not in high demand.

GN ([15:59](#)):

Right. Yeah. One other aspect of Marist that you've come back now to do some teaching, how did that happen?

VB ([16:09](#)):

I, you know, it's funny to be a student and then to work in the administration and take a long break. I was working for Mount Saint Mary College. I was the director of marketing communications, and a call came in from Marist that they were looking for an adjunct who might be interested in teaching in the school of communications. And I said, I'm your man.

Vincent Begley

GN ([16:35](#)):

What year was this now?

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

This was now 2002. End of 2001. The spring of 2001.

GN ([16:43](#)):

Do you remember who the dean was?

VB ([16:45](#)):

To be honest, I don't, can't remember.

GN ([16:48](#)):

Okay. () would that have--.

VB ([16:50](#)):

It might have been.

GN ([16:51](#)):

Yeah, alright. Different phase, and then on the same subject, Marist has changed dramatically from your first days coming. What would you say is the driving force for that? Would you say it's the Marist spirit, the president, the economic development of the country. Into what phase would you put this different Marist that we have now? How did it happen?

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

Vincent Begley

I think the Marist brothers were forward thinking and risk takers. They were willing to take calculated risks to go from one step to the next. When I started Marist, it was an all-male college. It was mostly blue-collar, children of blue-collar workers. Marist saw that the future demanded some changes. So, the decision to go co-ed was important. Another decision, and I played a part in this because I, in fact started a panel discussion on the Bundy Act of getting aid as a college. I was pushing that Marist was not going to have to lose anything if they declared themselves a secular college. The Marist spirit was immersed in the college, it was here. So, I encouraged it, and Marist did that step. And I think by doing that, it allowed them to reach a broad audience of students by going co-ed by adding new majors, by their amazing building programs, by the very fact that their graduates, myself excluded because I didn't light any fires in the corporate world, but Marist earned a great reputation out in the workplace. So, I think Marist owes a great debt to the Marist brothers, the Marist spirit primarily, I think, to Linus Foy, who was really a forward thinker.

GN ([18:58](#)):

Okay. And with all of this, Marist is still in the same-- it's not Siena, it's not Vassar, it's not Fordham, it's not Iona. What is this Marist spirit of which you spoke? How would you describe that?

VB ([19:13](#)):

Well, let me correct you on that. I think it's Siena squared. I think Marist is a-- has such a high reputation out there among high school students. I think the Marist spirit is embraced by anybody who joins the faculty. I think it's an amazing, it's in the air, it's in the DNA, I think of anybody who's part of Marist. I think they're committed to it. They do it with a passion. And I think that's

Vincent Begley

what's driven Marist. And I think that spirit-- talk to anybody who's graduated from Marist and, you know--.

GN ([19:55](#)):

Well, you're kind of the embodiment of that. You have friends from Marist still now? Forty years after you left here.

VB ([20:01](#)):

50 years almost, yes.

GN ([20:02](#)):

Do you feel that that same spirit is enacted in the recent graduates?

VB ([20:09](#)):

I think it might be, but I think the only trouble I see, and it's not just Marist, I think it's in the nature of higher education. Higher education has now, new demands have been put on it to students-- come get me a job, show me the path to a career. When I started, it was, show me a path to become a learner, a thinker, and a driver. Now I think the students now, because of their parents, expect to come here to take the right number of courses at the right time, do the right internships to land a job in the business world.

GN ([20:55](#)):

Okay. The crystal ball, what do you see down the line for Marist? Talk about Marist as you might envision it in ten or fifteen years, years from now. Will it still be here?

VB ([21:09](#)):

Vincent Begley

I think it will be here, but I almost think I would like to see Marist start a Marist within Marist. I guess having, I was just back in Oxford on a trip because I had to take a trip to Rome and I had a chance to get up to England for a day. The Oxford mentality of learning for learning's sake, I would like to see that embodied here. And to have students take a course or a program that is not so grounded in the traditional three credits, three credits, three credits, give them a chance to have tutorials, be in seminars, learn to think, and not be so directed on a career path. So, I'd like to see Marist start a Marist within a Marist that would eventually spill out. Because even though colleges like Marist have great technology, it's still done the same way, textbook, syllabus, test, assignments, grades that was going on twenty, thirty years before I even went to college. If one thing I would like, I could just add, I would like Marist to be the first college that allows students to take courses either for two credits, three credits, or four credits. You can take a course, one student takes it for two credits. One, taking it for four. Student taking it for two knows that this is what they have to do to get those two credits. The student taking it for three has to do this. The student taking it for four does it for this. That way it puts more of a opportunity on the student. I really want to invest my time in this course, so I'm going to do it for four credits. That other course I'll take for two credits. I would like to take it, but I don't want to invest as much time in it. And I think then you're allowing students to really create their education.

GN ([23:06](#)):

Very interesting. Okay. Related to that then, let's say, suppose you were invited to speak to the board of trustees about a need that Marist has. Is this what you would say to them?

VB ([23:21](#)):

Vincent Begley

Yes. I would say be one of the first colleges that decides we need to rethink how higher education is delivered rather than continue the tradition of 100, 200, 300, 400 level courses, three credits, GPA. I think America is ready for that. And I think I'd like to see Marist take a step. That's why I'm saying create a college within a college that you could investigate how is it working, and then be able to expand it.

GN ([23:52](#)):

Yeah. I guess we would need a major grant though, because the mentality now of most students is what you've been saying, go to this college so when you finish college, you would get a good job. But if that didn't matter, you didn't have to pay off a student loan, and you were supported for this learning, you'd be home free at the end of it. You'd be very smart, or at least you'd be educated.

VB ([24:17](#)):

Right.

GN ([24:18](#)):

Yeah. You're supposed to be doing the talking, not me [laugh]. Okay, another question, is Marist worth the investment? I say that because it costs \$50,000 a year, now. It takes a lot of effort. Marist is a place where you have to go to class. You just can't live in the dormitories because then you soon will be dropped. You'll be low-- your grade average, it takes a commitment on social--. You have to leave home for the most part. The campus is, most students come to live on campus. And so, it's a whole new social world. So, it takes a lot of guts and donation, a commitment to do this. At the end of it, you know, is it worth it?

Vincent BegleyVB ([25:11](#)):

I would say that the dollars and cents is questionable because when I came to Marist, it was \$1,400 a year, tuition, room and board. But even then, \$1,400 was more than if you had gone to a state school for \$400. So, there has always been a-- you have always had to pay more for it. Do I think sixty, fifty, \$60,000 is worth it? I would say it is. If the students felt the ownership and responsibility of it prior to getting-- graduating and being hit with loans. I think what happens now is students are not aware of the cost because it's not real to them. They're of the debit card generation where, you know, you just, things get paid for. Like the course I teach, I don't require them to use a textbook. I teach from a textbook, but I provide them with ample reading material, et cetera. I'm saving them about \$135 because I'm not requiring tax, that doesn't impact them, doesn't mean anything to them, because that \$135 for the textbook isn't coming out of their pocketbook.

GN ([26:24](#)):

It's not theirs

VB ([26:24](#)):

It's not theirs. So, I think as far as an investment in the future, they're going to owe a lot of money and hopefully they'll be able to get jobs that they enjoy. But I almost wish that they had to pay for college after they graduated. That instead of taking loans, sort of like the tuition they're paying is covering the tuition for a student rather than build up debt and graduate with debt, graduate with no debt, but have an obligation of paying the college back.

GN ([27:04](#)):

Vincent Begley

With a good job. You'll probably get-- if you have a good education, if you can read and write, you probably will be wanted in any organization.

VB ([27:12](#)):

Well, that's what I tell my students. I said, the two skills that will separate you is if you have good writing skills and good critical reading skills. I said, that'll separate you because most people don't read and most people don't venture to write.

GN ([27:27](#)):

Would you put speech into that?

VB ([27:29](#)):

Yes. Speech, public speaking, yes. I think what helped me at Marist was as an admissions counselor when I was a senior going around, I never knew when I went to a high school was I going to be just talking to one or two students. Often times I would go in, there was a whole auditorium of seniors. I had to think on my feet and be able to be articulate enough to them. So, I think public speaking skills are essential.

GN ([27:54](#)):

One last big part of the question though. Your personal response. What was, if I could put it this way, what was your biggest disappointment at Marist? Or was there any?

VB ([28:10](#)):

To be very honest, I, other than the snafu of my grades from Oxford back to Marist, I would say I had no disappointments because, I was like this kid, I'll use the expression, a little kid is

Vincent Begley

brought into a room and its waist high in manure. And the kid goes into the room, and he jumps in and he's slashing about throwing the manure all over. And he has a smile on his face. And they said to him, what's going on? And he said, with all this manure, there has to be a pony in here somewhere [laugh]. So that was my attitude, so I could have no disappointment. Marist, let you look for that pony.

GN ([28:51](#)):

Okay. Well turn it around now. What was your biggest joy of Marist?

VB ([28:57](#)):

I think my biggest joy was feeling part of something. Meeting the woman who was my wife for forty-five years at Marist. Having a son, we couldn't afford him undergraduate tuition. He came and worked here as the director of intramural sports, and he did his masters here. So, I did continue the family tradition in a small way. So, I think Marist was my-- the greatest gift is that it's a place where I can come back to, and I've come back for seventeen years as an adjunct.

GN ([29:34](#)):

We're not paying you a lot of money for that. So--.

VB ([29:36](#)):

No, unfortunately, I was born without a money gene. I did not have this drive to make a lot of money, hence the reason I'm still working. But it's just that Marist is a-- there's a spirit here that you can still sense even fifty years after I graduated.

GN ([29:56](#)):

Vincent Begley

Wonderful. Now I've covered mine, is there anything more you'd like to add to this opportunity? Because I have to tell you, I found this interview, it's most interesting. I never heard this explanation about how Oxford works, you know, and I think that's a great insight and a good idea that people might pick up, that we could have used that here. So, and you have permanent friends from your early years at Marist as I witnessed today. I'm talking about what's his name again [laugh].

VB ([30:32](#)):

Bryan Maloney.

GN ([30:32](#)):

Bryan Maloney.

VB ([30:33](#)):

I don't know, the only thing, I was very surprised to get your call to do this because I never felt that I was on any radar important enough to talk to. My personality is, I don't need to be center stage. But--.

GN ([30:57](#)):

It's a joy to have you let me simply say that. And with that, I'll let you look and see the interviews that I've done already. I think you'll recognize most of these people. Okay. Thank you very much.