

John Witter

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, NY

Transcribed by Jackson Turner

For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

Name of John Witter

Transcript – John Witter

Interviewee: John Witter

Interviewer: Gus Nolan

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Summary: John Witter describes his time at Marist, and how he went on to start programs at local prisons to educate the inmates there. He also talks about how the band should have a music major, since so many students who are playing have a serious commitment to it.

Gus Nolan (00:00):

Okay, I'll welcome you. Today is October 24th, 2008. We're interviewing John Witter here in the Marist college library. John has been with us on staff for over 30 years. Good morning, John.

John Witter (00:19):

Good morning.

Gus Nolan (00:20):

John, we're going to approach this, and the form that I gave you kind of a basic outline of life before marist, life at Marist, and then where do you think marist might be going in the future, Okay? So to begin, where were you born and where did you grow up? State, town, the city? No dates required.

John Witter (00:42):

Okay. Well, I was born in Huntington, Long Island on the North shore, Southern County. And I grew up in East Northport, and I lived there my entire life until I came up to Marist in 67 and I pretty much never went back.

Gus Nolan (01:06):

Alright, interesting. Where did you go to grade school and high school?

John Witter (01:08):

I went, first I went to Saint Philip Neri in Northport, and then they built St. Anthony of Padua in East Northport. So I went there and then I went to St. Anthony's high school, which is in Huntington now, but it was in Smithtown at that time.

Gus Nolan (01:27):

And during your high school, years and grade school years, what were your particular interests? Were you a med student, history student art student? Do you have a particular liking?

John Witter (01:39):

I would say I was interested in English and History. Those were my, my favorites.

Gus Nolan (01:46):

Okay. And activities were you involved in choir or activities plays, drama clubs or anything like that in grade school or high school?

John Witter (01:56):

Well, in Catholic grade school, everyone had to be in choir. That was a requirement. So we,

Gus Nolan (02:02):

Except the blue Jays who were to sit down. Okay.

John Witter (02:06):

So, that, that was good because, that really instilled in me a love of singing and music, which I still have until today. We, you know, we always had to, every week we had to all go into the, the, the theater or

wherever it was and practice the hymns for nine o'clock mass. So I did that for eight years. And, being Catholic schools back in those days, there were no sports and there was really no, almost no theater or any other activities. But I did participate in, in Little League all those years.

Gus Nolan (02:49): Okay.

And then high school

John Witter (02:51):

In high school. For the first couple of years I did track and then I got involved in theater. And I'm trying to think of any of this. I think those are the major organizations. Yeah.

Gus Nolan (03:08):

Did you stay with track for any period of time? Two or three years?

John Witter (03:12):

No, just the first couple of years. I have three brothers and they were just always much more proficient in sports than I was. So they, I was always kind of being overshadowed by them. So, so I got into theater at that point.

Gus Nolan (03:31):

And in theory, do you have any particular role in Manfrotto seasons or anything at that time?

John Witter (03:38):

No. Just, you know, the, your standard musicals that were put on in the chorus, no major roles.

Gus Nolan (03:47):

And, then how did you hear about Marist?

John Witter (03:51):

Actually very early in my senior year. It was probably a homecoming football game, a fellow named Jack Corcoran who graduated a year ahead of me in St. Anthony's, came back and was telling us about this

great school that he just started going to called Marist in Poughkeepsie. And I, at that point, I really wasn't sure if I was going to go to college or not. I actually was going back and forth with my dad. And I told I that I, that I might, I may just enlist. And he said, absolutely not. You're going to college. And to make a long story short, a number of my best friends had applied to Marist. So I applied to Marist and, actually that was 1967 when I graduated from, from St. Anthony's and I believe they were 14 or 15 in my graduating class who got accepted to Marist that year.

Gus Nolan (04:57):

Now, is that, is that the time of the trouble in Vietnam?

John Witter (05:03):

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Gus Nolan (05:06):

So the choice was war or a different kind of war here.

John Witter (05:11):

Yeah. Well, in my senior Year, things had had, were really hadn't really come to the boiling point I would say in Vietnam, and once I started going to school here, and I realized that I had made the right choice, and that I was glad I was in school. But of course at one point, they had the lottery and, with the draft and, I was in my junior year here and I was lucky I got a high number. And I have to be very honest. If my number came up, I would have been among those who had, who went to Canada. I was not going to, I was not gonna serve in Vietnam. I wouldn't be willing, would have been willing to serve, but not in Vietnam.

Gus Nolan (06:05):

Interesting. We have some interesting stories of people at that time. Like John edbert who is helping the development now. Even though he was in college, the draft board notified him that he had me picked and he should have been exempt. He was a senior year, but, he had to go, and the thing would eventually be adjudicated, but he'd still be in the service, you know, so he did. And actually as it turned out the college to give them a diploma, he was in good standing in the senior year and he had some good number of cutters. So, and that made a big difference to him later in life. Then how long were you a student at Marist? Were you here for the four years then?

John Witter (06:53):

No, I wasn't. I came in on the four year plan, but I ended up on the nine year plan.

Gus Nolan (06:59):

Okay. Okay. Where is there a break then? When do you become a member of the staff here or in the working capacity?

John Witter (07:10):

Well, I attended Marist full time pretty much for three years. And that was the end of my junior year was 1970. And that was, when Kent state and Jackson state happened. And at that time I was also very much involved on campus here. And also down in New York city with the antiwar movement. And I dropped out, I didn't come back in, in the fall. I just had to really rethink what was my purpose if students were going to college and getting killed, on college campus. And, and that probably went back to my original misgivings about whether I was ready for college right out of high school. You know, not really sure, exactly sure what I want I wanted to do with my life. So that all kind of came to a point there. And so that was 1970. I ended up meeting somebody, getting married and starting a family right away. And after being out there for a couple of years, in some pretty crappy jobs, I decided early in 74, that, that, it was time to go back to school and finish my degree. So I, that was in, it's easy to remember because it was tax day when I started here again in April of 74. And, I was living in Hudson and I came back and I had as a student here, I had worked here a couple of summers on the maintenance department. And as you remember back then, Marist was pretty small. So you do something like that. You get to know everybody. And so I came back to, to re-enroll and I don't remember who I ran into, but somebody said, so you have a job. And in fact, in this area yet, and I said, no, I don't. And they said, well, you know, there's a custodial position open. And one of the benefits is free tuition. So I went over to,

Gus Nolan (09:52):

Who would've been in charge of alcohol?

John Witter (09:54):

And he prevailed and I believe it was Vicky puttanya, the secretary there who knew me. And she goes, hi, John, how are you doing? I go ahead. And I said, I hear you have a custodial job open. And she said, yeah, would you like to apply for it? I said, absolutely. I'm going to get free tuition. And so I came back to Marist and started again in the fall.

Gus Nolan (10:13):

And what year is that now?

John Witter (10:16):

That was 74, 74. So, but of course I was working full time and I had a family, so I had to finish up

Gus Nolan (10:24):

Part time degree. Okay. Then let's just talk about the various experiences in the job thing. How long were you doing that? Did you work in the custodial position and then how did you move into the next?

John Witter (10:38):

I did that for five years. I finally finished up all my credits. I graduated with the class of 76, but I didn't finish up all my credits until January of 77. And I thought, I'm just going to, you know, I've got a job, and I've got benefits and I'm just going to wait and see what kind of positions are open. And at that point there, weren't a lot of positions really opening. And I was trying to decide if I wanted to stay in the maintenance department or get into one of the other departments.

Gus Nolan (11:11):

And Linus Foy was president?

John Witter (11:13):

Yes. Yes. And actually I used to, I used to go up and empty his wastebasket.

Gus Nolan (11:20):

So you got known in the building at least then, right?

John Witter (11:22):

Oh yeah. Yeah. Well, back then Marist was still small and, you know, everybody knew everyone. I mean, I would go up there and while I was emptying his wastebasket, we talked about because he had started a family. We talk about our kids.

Gus Nolan (11:34):

Yeah. Oh yeah. Okay. And his, his son now, just got married this past, well in the fall and then I had to put a date on it. But, I and then his daughter, you know, is in town, she's a doctor and has a small family, has a child who is just beginning to crawl. So I'm getting these reports, he lives next door to me virtually.

And so that's why I know so much about him and what he is doing.

John Witter (12:07):

Where do you live?

Gus Nolan (12:08):

Stonebridge. It's off course of the McCann golf course. Okay. That's, townhouses over there. We'll move on then. When, when do you move to look around and see, what is the opening that you go from maintenance to, to where?

John Witter (12:27):

Well, at what, when I was a student at Marist, let me just, maybe back up a little bit, my father was a volunteer fireman. He just passed away last February, and he was volunteer fireman for 70 years. And my mother was always involved in a lot of groups in our church and outside the church volunteering. And that was kind of a, you know, working in the community was something that, that I kind of grew up with. And when I came up here as a freshman, there had been a big brother program that was connected with the children's home, but, whoever had been running it had graduated and there was didn't exist anymore. So I got that started again. And also, I don't know if you remember something called Vista volunteers,

Gus Nolan (13:27):

Vista, yeah.

John Witter (13:28):

Vista, and Marist actually had a program. And I think Bob Norman was in charge of the program. You, you, you were, Oh gosh. Okay. I applied for that program. I got accepted and then Nixon got in and pulled the plug on all the funding. So I was actually going to spend a year as, as a Vista volunteer. So, I was always kind of leaning in that kind of community service direction, and, I have to say, as a Catholic, one of the things that really impressed me more than the, say the 10 commandments was the spiritual and corporal works of mercy that we always had. And, so when they're in the fall of, 78, a friend of mine was going out and tutoring at green Haven correctional facility where we had a correctional program out there and they said, I think you would really like this. And I went out there and I loved it and it was great. And so, I would do that in the evenings and I got to know Larry Solomon, who was the director of that program. And they lost their counselor in the early spring of 79. And, once again, somebody said, Hey, John, did you know, there's a, they're looking for a counselor at a, I said, Oh, they are. So I walked in there and, I was about to ask Larry about the position. And he said, Hey, we have a counseling position, John, would you like to apply for it? So I got, I got hired very quickly temporarily. And then a few months later, they, they did a search for it. And I got, I got the job.

Gus Nolan (15:32):

Can you address a few comments that, what did that involve that counseling, going and tutoring or talking to inmates or what's the nature?

John Witter (15:42):

Well, the, the tutoring that I was doing was in, in English and in writing, and what really impressed me right from the beginning when I went in, there was the incredible hunger for knowledge and for education that existed there. So when I got the job as a counselor, I was going in there and as an academic counselor, so you know, involved doing their financial aid during the registration, working with the instructors, doing academic review with them, since we did have a four year degree and involved advising them, what, what courses advisor

Gus Nolan (16:34):

Now they would take courses in the institution then, right? So like guys, like get done or you would come and teach philosophy club, the Dean would come and they would have those kinds of courses. I had an experience of doing that, but not there over in, sopas. There was also some institutional rather we're always teaching and reading, but the motivation was the fellows want to learn wanted to get driver's license? And they had to be able to read the exam for the driver's license. That was the only reason they were interested in meeting with to be able to get their driver's license, you know? Did you do any reading, account, counseling or, instruction?

John Witter (17:17):

No. No.

Gus Nolan (17:19):

Just writing?

John Witter (17:19):

Yeah.

Gus Nolan (17:20):

Okay. So Larry Solomon is the, he was the director of that program?

John Witter (17:28):

Right. And it was also an HEOP program.

Gus Nolan (17:31):

Okay. Was it just Green Haven or was it...?

John Witter (17:33):

No, at that point it was just Green Haven. Okay.

Gus Nolan (17:37):

Then there's another fellow comes on campus, Lateef. He died two years ago,

John Witter (17:44):

Lateef Islam. Right.

Gus Nolan (17:46):

Was he here at that time?

John Witter (17:48):

No. He was an inmate there at Green Haven at that time. And, I'm, so he was one of my students who I advised and I was very impressed with him and he was, he was very active in their, in inmate organizations that they had. And we had, we were just starting our transition program where, I don't know if you remember at one point in the mid seventies, we actually had, they were being released and they were taking classes here and then they would go back to the prison at night.

Gus Nolan (18:24):

Right. And then eventually they set up a home here.

John Witter (18:27):

Right. Right. So, one of the first students to come in, he was one of the first students to come into the transition program. And I remember my job was to go to Greenhaven and pick him up at the rear gate and, bring him to Poughkeepsie and, and to, and to get him settled. And we eventually got to be very, very close friends, pretty much the same age and Lateef not only graduated from Marist, but of course then he ended up working for special academic programs full time.

Gus Nolan (19:07):

And became quite a name in Poughkeepsie as well.

John Witter (19:09):

Yes, he did. Yes. Social activist. Yes.

Gus Nolan (19:13):

Okay. Let me ask you a question that I kind of have a broader thing about, some of the changes that you've seen here at Marist, from the perspective of sites, like we, we eventually opened other sites, didn't we, for Instruction, advisement, then the use of the technology that comes on board. Did you have any experience with any of that?

John Witter (19:43):

Yeah, absolutely. Well, we started off with Greenhaven and that was in 79 and 80. We started at juvenile justice certificate program at Fishkill. So that was our second facility and the person who got that program started, I don't remember her name, but she was moving on and I was already chomping at the bit to have my own program. And so in, July one of, 70, of 80, I was made the coordinator of the juvenile justice program at Fishkill. And that, and then eventually we opened up a program at downstate. We opened up program at Otisville state, and then eventually Otisville federal Denbury federal. We opened up programs at different youth, facilities here in Highland, Goshen. And then we started eventually with job Corps programs, so special academic at one time, special academic programs had 20 full time staff. And at one time we had 500 full time equivalent students in our program, which is, which is larger than some very, very small colleges. So we were a major,

Gus Nolan (21:10):

Who Used to be the driving force behind this, you know, with that Larry Solomon or,

John Witter (21:13):

Well, Larry Solomon, and then Frank Seta took over and then eventually Eileen Bull who's still here, was, in charge of the program. My program at Fishkill eventually, we had a four year degree there and we got an H GOP grant. I was also given responsibility for downstate correctional facility. And so we had the campus H GOP program and we had green Haven and Fishkill also H GOP programs.

Gus Nolan (21:52):

What part would you have played in those grants? Did you have to gather the data and submit what the objectives would be?

John Witter (22:00):

Yup. Yup.

Gus Nolan (22:02):

Well, that kind of, so it is a pretty much heavily dated based program you got to have.

John Witter (22:09):

Yes. Yeah. That was the one thing that I found out, which was, you know, at Marist, do you have the time of the year where everything is and everybody's running around like crazy, and then you have a little bit of downtime in between, in the middle of, well, the state had, perfectly scheduled all every semester. And at the end of the year, we had these reports that we had to do. And that was whenever I was used to having the downtime that's when we had to do this. And the state, in comparison to Marist was very backward in the sense that they would, they would give us these forms to fill out, these blank pieces of paper to fill out. And, because of Marist, we very early in the facility got into using computers. You know, the first computer that we had in our office had the two, five and a quarter inch discs that you would put it in and out. And, eventually with the help of my, my inmate clerks and help from on campus, we developed actually a program where we could put in the information and then when it came report time, most of that could be printed out in a report form, but it wasn't until years later that that Albany finally got around to developing their own program.

Gus Nolan (23:41):

It always amazes me. They ask you for your date of birth that never changes every year, its your date of birth, you know. They don't seem to have any kind of record about, you know, and what degrees they have, what the education at your grandpa's old high school and all of that, as well as you'd have to start all over every time.

John Witter (23:59):

And, also on the technology thing, I was very much interested in that. And, at, in the early nineties, the facility actually gave us a room where we had 15 computers. We networked the computers and we had software, and then we had a computer lab just like mass had on campus, where the students could go in and learn certain programs and type their papers and do their work in there.

Gus Nolan (24:29):

That's in the early eighties?

John Witter (24:30):

That was in the early nineties.

Gus Nolan (24:35):

Okay. Well, looking back, what will you say were some of the more challenging experiences that you had to confront in your career here?

John Witter (24:47):

Well the challenge that we always had to deal with with the correctional programs is that the people were for, or against them. Now, we saw them as an extension of, of what Marist and the, and the Marist brothers and Marist community were about. It was we're bringing education to, to the disadvantaged. And all of the research that was done showed that beyond a shadow of a doubt, the more education you had when you left prison, the less of a chance of returning to prison. But it was a, it was just a very, big political issue. And, you would assume that everyone on the college campus was supportive, but there are many people who did not support us. And didn't make things easy for us. Right. Eventually as the prison programs grew, not only in New York state and around the country, they became more visible to the public and the public started complaining, to their representatives. Okay, these guys are getting free, higher education, and we have to take out college loans and our kids aren't, we had to do second jobs. So also in the early nineties, we spent a lot of time in Albany and Washington. We, we all had to become lobbyists also for the, for the programs. And that was difficult because we were spending more and more time doing that, doing that. And, and this is the time, you know, time that you, you know, that you really want it to be in, in the facility developing the programs. And then eventually in, 95, that was when the programs ended first, they pulled Pell, Clinton signed the uniform crime bill, I believe it was in 94. And then of course, Mario Cuomo didn't get reelected. And, governor Pataki, I think on January 1st or second, signed an executive order saying that if you were a felon in a New York state, correctional facility, you would not get tap anymore. So in June of 95, that was pretty much when the programs ended, except for the programs that were in the federal prisons, because those eventually were run by contract.

Gus Nolan (27:32):

Were there other colleges doing the same thing?

John Witter (27:35):

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. At Fishkill alone, we had Dutchess Community College and Mercy College. At Greenhaven, There were Dutchess and Mercy, Skidmore had something called university without walls. So yeah, there were many colleges that had correctional programs throughout the state.

Gus Nolan (28:00):

Were you really cutting new territory here, or are you following another model? In other words, were you copying Mercy's plan or do you feel they were?

John Witter (28:10):

Oh, no, no. Marist was, was one of the originals. We were one of, one of the first, and one of the things that was very exciting about my 15 years was that right away, you know, and I'm not gonna mention

other colleges, but right away, it was clear to the people in department of corrections who supported the programs, that Marist was very sincere, about what they were doing and that Marist was going to run quality program in the facility. And so as the years went on, we got to really not only expand the number of students in the program, but expand the different things that we offered. In the, by the early nineties, we, besides having a computer lab, we had a literary magazine. We were, the inmates were writing plays and we were putting on, on plays in the facility. We, we were really, the, the idea was as much as possible. We want to make this a real college experience for, for these guys.

Gus Nolan (29:27):

Yeah. And then in that same light now, the challenge is that the one thing the successes would be just these things you're saying and getting this.

John Witter (29:37):

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. It was a lot of work, but I think, and there was a lot of frustration, but there was a lot of feeling that every year when it came to graduation day, that, that everybody felt really good about, about what they went through.

Gus Nolan (29:55):

Is there an afterlife with these? Do you ever come back to them or they do? Is there any followup with, the clients that you had in the program?

John Witter (30:04):

There are a few people who, you know, I'm still in contact with, occasionally, but, but no, and that's one of the things that I like to do. If I ever get to retire from here is to go back and, there's definitely a book or a documentary there to go back to these guys and, and, and see, see what they've done, because, you know, many of them got out, stayed out, started families or put their families back together again. And, many of them are working in areas of social service and community service. But teeth would be a typical, right. He's one of the privates, examples of that whole thing.

Gus Nolan (30:54):

Well, I'm trying to focus now on, where are you today? What, what what's going on in this activity, as we speak. How big a staff is there? How many operations are there? Are you aware?

John Witter (31:16):

I'm it. I am from 20 we're down to the last man standing and I am special academic programs. That's me. Yeah. And, when I started, I guess there were just three of us and I, when the programs closed down for the next 10 years, I ran a job Corp site for Marist over in Callicoon. And then, right when we were closing that program, my supervisor Alger Caskey finally got the call he was waiting for, he was going to divinity school and he got a job as a minister. And so they needed somebody to run the program. And so I moved up into his position and at that point we only had green correctional facility and Otisville federal correctional facility. So we were offering courses part time to the students. In the last couple of years, we expanded into, the state, once again, came to us and said, you know, we know that you do quality programs and we want to expand the program. So last year, in the fall and spring, we ran a program at Albion women's prison and Washington correctional, which is up in Comstock. Our, contract was up, the

end of June and we reapplied and they decided to give the Albion contract to a local, to Medaille college, which is a local college there, but to keep us in the program at Washington and at green,

Gus Nolan (33:08):

And who teaches or who services the needs for that program now?

John Witter (33:14):

We have adjuncts from the area. We did have a full time adjunct, who was in the OLC program, who was teaching a course at green, but he has since left Marist, but he's, he's coming back in the spring.

Gus Nolan (33:35):

There's a number on it. How many adjuncts are there? 10?

John Witter (33:37):

Let's say we're offering 9, we've got about 15 adjuncts right now. The Otisville program is, hasn't started up again. We'll probably have three there. So, maybe 18-20 adjuncts and they, their state is still trying to expand those, those programs. Those were only half time. Students are only doing part time.

Gus Nolan (34:16):

All right. Looking ahead now, Marist has changed since you first came here. Still go a little bit about that. In terms of like the administration and staff, who do you report to now?

John Witter (34:31):

I report to Eileen Bull.

Gus Nolan (34:32):

I didn't vote. And she is where?

John Witter (34:34):

She's with the school continuing education.

Gus Nolan (34:37):

Oh, she's back on campus?

John Witter (34:40):

Well, she, she runs Goshen, center right now, which as you, I don't know if you know, that's going to be closing in the next year. We're going to be closing the Goshen center.

Gus Nolan (34:54):

Oh, I didn't. Does that face Fishkill? I see a big sign for Fishkill coming up route 9 yesterday.

John Witter (34:59):

Yes, right there's still the Fishkill center. So, I'm not exactly sure what she's going to be doing after they closed the Goshen center.

Gus Nolan (35:08):

All right. That, that's one part of it. But now, in terms of the, the facilities that you work out of st. Anne's, is that where your office is? Is it where, do you have a private chauffeur who takes you to these institutions?

John Witter (35:29):

Nope.

Gus Nolan (35:29):

How often do you have to, how much travel do you do?

John Witter (35:36):

Green since it's in exactly. I go there almost once a week, and Comstock, Washington, correctional facility a couple of times a month. And, at, once, Otisville federal opens I'm up there maybe once a month.

Gus Nolan (36:00):

What explains your longevity here? What has kept you here? Well, it's a job, but it's part of that. I mean, you're kind of dedicated to the endeavor.

John Witter (36:15):

Well, it's my Alma mater. When I came up here, I really fell in love with the Hudson Valley. Long Island is just completely overrun with barbarians. And, you know, when I was a kid, my parents thought I was going to be a priest. They were, they were pretty sure I was going to be a priest. And, they had gotten me this, I belonged to this Catholic book club. I don't remember what it was, but I used to get these novels and stories and read about st. Francis, Xavier and all that. And, you know, I always thought, you know, I don't want to be a parish priest. I want to be a missionary. And if the Catholic religion allowed you to get married, I may very well have, have become a priest. And I think Marist in, in many ways, once I got to work in the correctional facility really kind of afforded me the ability to be a kind of a missionary of sorts, because I'm going out to the, you know, not on campus, I'm going out to the hinterland there, you know? And, I really, it just really gave me a feeling of purpose for, for my life that not only did I have a job, and something that I like to do, but I felt I was doing something good for mankind for society, for, for, you know.

Gus Nolan (38:03):

Is there much anxiety to what you have going, or did you have that during your visits to Greenhaven?

John Witter (38:09):

Anxiety as far as?

Gus Nolan (38:12):

security?

John Witter (38:13):

No, actually, you know, I always feel safer in a correctional facility than I do on the streets of Manhattan. No, and I, I really, it really got to be kind of like, a home for me. It just, I mean, I was a Marist student and, you can verify this Gus, you know, you'll, you'll say any questions and they just, all kind of, most of the students just kind of stare back at you and, and in the correctional facility, you know, you went in there and you and the teachers would say any questions and three quarters of the room would raise their hand and then they'd be fighting each, then they'd be arguing with each other about, you know, and then they'd be saying, yeah, well, well, I went to a library and I read such and such, and I found out and just, just the, the, the hunger for education. And that was kind of an experience that I had because once I got married and I started a family and I came back and I came back as an, as an adult student, my whole education was different. I sat in front of the, in the front of the class and I had my hand up, you know, you know, the whole time. And it was just a completely different educational experience than being your traditional undergraduate, who comes in and basically is in college because their parents want them to come. And they're really not exactly sure why they want to be here.

Gus Nolan (39:52):

Right. Yeah. It's the thing to do really. It's just to go to college, whatever that means, you know. What strikes you about the changes on campus? One thing would be buildings, but we'll start with the buildings. It's like, you know, do you think building this football stadium was a good idea?

John Witter (40:14):

I don't know if I can give my opinion on that because I'm not, I'm not, sports is not really big with me. I don't see how people have the time to watch all these sporting events. I'm so busy with my life. Was it a good idea? I don't know. I, I guess so it's the one thing that has continually impressed me about Marist as it looks great. You kind of like, it's such a beautiful campus, it's a gorgeous campus. And,

Gus Nolan (40:52):

Maybe I should have asked the library first, but you were here for three different libraries at least, you know? Yeah.

John Witter (40:59):

Oh, I love the library is beautiful.

Gus Nolan (41:00):

The one we have now?

John Witter (41:02):

It's gorgeous.

Gus Nolan (41:03):

I remember you weren't here for one in Donnelly, I guess, would be the first hole. Was it ever in the Greystone?

John Witter (41:11):

I think the first library was in, what was it Fontaine?

Gus Nolan (41:19):

No. It went to Fontaine after it was in Donnelly. And then It went to,

John Witter (41:26):

I remember it was in Donnelly, but I do remember something, the building that connected Fontaine and the chapel.

Gus Nolan (41:35):

Yeah. That fun thing.

John Witter (41:36):

Wasn't there a library there at some time?

Gus Nolan (41:38):

Yeah. Well, that's where we moved from.

John Witter (41:41):

Right, right. But even before, even before Donnelly wasn't there was no.

Gus Nolan (41:48):

Okay. When you came with Donnelly up?

John Witter (41:52):

Yeah. Donnelly was up 67.

Gus Nolan (41:54):

Yeah, was Sheahan and Champangnet up?

John Witter (41:57):

Champangnet was, I, I think I might've been the first student among the first class to use Champangnet in 67. Yeah, so the, the three dorms are up,

Gus Nolan (42:09):

the library has to move from Greystone to Donnelly.

John Witter (42:12):

Okay.

Gus Nolan (42:13):

You used to be in Greystone.

John Witter (42:14):

Okay. Okay. So within Donnelly, right. Then it went to Fontaine. Right.

Gus Nolan (42:21):

And then I don't know where it went when it was no longer in Fontaine when they were building, we of course, the were across the street someplace in Western Printing or something.

John Witter (42:31):

Yes, we, yeah. It was across the street for awhile. That's right.

Gus Nolan (42:36):

So, but now the present, the building in which we are in, you know.

John Witter (42:41):

Gorgeous, this is lovely. Yeah. Of course we have this wonderful view here.

Gus Nolan (42:46):

Yeah.

John Witter (42:49):

So, I mean, who wouldn't want to work here?

Gus Nolan (42:53):

Right. Right. And then do you ever, did you take, make use of the Amphitheater days? Like you're not a sports fan, but you're in good shape. Do you work out at McCann center?

John Witter (43:07):

I, I used to, but really my, my family, and my personal, I live on the other side of the river in New Paltz. So that, I would say I go through phases where I'll go over McCann and work out, and then now I'm more into walking. I really want to be outside. And I have friends who like to walk. And so it's not unusual for me to, before work, to go out on the rail trail in New Paltz and go, go for a walk for an hour in all kinds of weather.

Gus Nolan (43:43):

Yeah. Yeah. Do you have much interaction with students on campus?

John Witter (43:49):

No. No, I don't. That, that, that, that's the one thing that I do, you know, miss that, you know, I would like to have, more interaction with the students on campus. When we had the correctional programs, there was some limited interaction, because we used, we had students coming into Duke going in and coming in and doing, and doing tutoring and working with us, you know, doing internships.

Gus Nolan (44:25):

Okay. What would you say were the factors that made Marist what it is? I mean, how do you some colleges folded and time that you've been around, you know, is it just the location here or is it, what, what do you think would be the driving force? It's a good college. People would have some respect.

John Witter (44:55):

Well considering where we've traditionally pulled our students from, it's a great location. I mean, I loved it when I was a student here. I could just get on the train and it wasn't a big deal to go home, you know, for a weekend. It's a beautiful campus. And I think one of the things that I really, one of the reasons why I came here was this guy, Jack Corker? And he said, you know, it's like St Anthony's high school at the college level. And the one thing I really liked about St Anthony's was everyone knew everybody. It was like a big family. It was a community, it was, it was tight knit. And when I came up to Marist, I really felt that same sense of family and community here. And, and it was, you know, it was small. And, like I said, I worked here a couple of summers as a student. I eventually got to know everybody. When I was a custodian here, I spent most of my time in Donnelly hall and they remember Andy Bervelco was always saying, John, you're spending too much time talking to the instructors. And I'm saying, look, I'm sorry, I'm pushing my broom. And I know this instructor and he comes and says, how you doing? You know, as far as how it's changed, I mean, I go to the founder's day and I go, you know, well, I see some people I recognize, but I'm like, I don't know any of that. Who are these people? They all work here.

Gus Nolan (46:38):

Yeah. Again, he had 20 year thing and I said, well, they got me at this place. Yeah. I know about four or five pretty well, but the other five I would have, where have they been hiding?

John Witter (46:47):

Right. Right. Exactly. Not as a loop, you know, I just don't know. Yeah. Well, part of mine is because I'm, you know, I'm not really, you know, I'm working on campus, you know, I spent, that was 10 years at job Corps. I was pretty much over in Calikin, so, yeah.

Gus Nolan (47:03):

Okay. What percentage of the time are you on campus?

John Witter (47:08):

I'm probably here at least 75% of the time. Just working with the teachers, a lot of paperwork or working with people in Albany, so.

Gus Nolan (47:22):

And you do this, you're your own secretary.

John Witter (47:27):

Yes, I, yeah. Yeah.

Gus Nolan (47:28):

Write your own letters and push your own stuff around.

John Witter (47:32):

Yeah.

Gus Nolan (47:32):

What would you like to see change?

John Witter (47:37):

Change as far as?

Gus Nolan (47:39):

In the college, what, what does it have to do, you know, to stay where it is in other words, is this the, the spirit I think within the thing, and I meant to say that to you before you're talking about when you were first, he could go home on the train. We did draw up pretty much from two States, you know, and maybe three Connecticut and New York and Massachusetts Hill or Jersey, if they're a state. Now more than half the campus do not come from New York. So it's much widespread. I mean, technically theirs some from Hawaii, then California, there's something Texas, you know, but they have minimal life. That's just the sense that it, but, what, what would you say has to be the continuing, as it were for students to come here? The visibility of the campus, certainly with one thing, no more than likely, anything else that you would add?

John Witter (48:48):

Well, I, we keep expanding. I would say I'm not sure if anyone's thought about, is there a point where we're going to reach where we're going to get too big, and where, because I think one of the things that I liked and I think it's still a, I'm not a student yet. I really don't know the students, but I really feel that Marist is still at the point where it's not too big and it, and there's this real sense of community. And that you're just not, you know, a number you're not just one of, you know, 10, 20, 30,000 students. And you're kind of lost in the shuffle. I have known a lot of kids who've grown up and they've gone to some of the big state universities. And I never heard them talk about their college. It's the way, you know, you hear people talking, talking about Marist, so how big are we going to get, you know, where are we eventually going to draw a line and say, you know, if we get any bigger, we're going to lose this.

Gus Nolan (49:57):

Yeah. We, of course that's several times when I was here was 1200, then it was going to be 1500, then 2000 would be the limit. Yeah. But what is the actuality of it? I think we're getting to that point now, because you can have a big class as a hundred or so, you know, he used to have small up with his, that interaction. And I think I've talked to the president about that. And although online education causes at home is a possibility, but not for college aged students, right. For the veterans coming back, if they want that kind of education, you know?

John Witter (50:37):

Yeah. I would say if Marist wants to expand, it needs to be online and it needs to be with the adult community and that those are the air and especially the, the adult community that's in the graduate program. So that's where they should really look to expand and not, you know, I think as far as undergraduates, I think we've kind of hit a point where, if, if we start going beyond that, we're gonna look into that.

Gus Nolan (51:04):

Or it will be inconvenient. There won't be enough room for us in the box here.

John Witter (51:08):

Right, right.

Gus Nolan (51:14):

Would you like to see something change,

John Witter (51:19):

Um, uh,

Gus Nolan (51:25):

Are there too many structures? Are there too many reports too, where there are too many?

John Witter (51:31):

I'm actually lucky. I'm kind of out of that when I was in the HTLP thing in the prisons, I wasn't in that loop there, but now I'm kind of out of that. So I can't really comment on that. I would like to see, I can, one of the things I've seen is that the size of, and, and, and my love is the arts and I see the size of the music program. And, and the, the correlation, you know, you hear more and more every day, the correlation between music and intelligence. And, I think that that is very clearly, you look at the size of our music program and you look at the caliber of our students, and I think that's a no brainer. And so, I would say let's, let's, let's get them, let's have a real major in music. Let's have a, let's get serious about this. And instead of having a music major,

Gus Nolan (52:37):

Most of it is hobby. Now these kids play instruments in high school or whatever, and now they have a band. Great. You know, they can, but we don't have too many classes or don't have a major specifically in music.

John Witter (52:48):

Right. But I think it's very interesting that, and you know, the, they, they're doing studies in neuroscience and the brain develops differently. The more you study music in the morning, play music, etc.

Gus Nolan (53:09):

Very interesting. Yeah. That insight, what's your best remembrance of years here, or some of them. Are, they, they deal with people, success stories, programs, seeing the buildings go up.

John Witter (53:27):

Let's see, seeing the two parking, lots being torn up and grass being planted.

Gus Nolan (53:34):

We're not finished yet.

John Witter (53:38):

Of course seeing the, the, the, the, the field house and then, and the new McCann center expand. That's, that's, that's been great. I would say as far as working here, just really the years that I spent, probably

the eighties and the early nineties working in the correctional programs, when, when you could really see that, you know, you were making, making a difference. And just having the ability, like I said, to really start to turn it into not just simply bringing courses in, into the facility, but to really develop the program. I mean, I would say for me, the highlights were having a literary magazine and seeing, student play, a student written plays, performed in your correctional facility for the, for the staff and for the students. And at the graduation ceremonies, when we'd have our, our own valedictorian get up there and talk, or have somebody who had gone through the prison programs come back and speak to the inmates there about how we're gonna, you know, what really, you know, seeing how education can, can change somebody's life, completely turn it around. That's a very satisfying,

Gus Nolan (55:20):

Yeah. You're a bit of a philosopher here as well. I just happened to be able to do that. We're down to about the last five minutes. Is there anything I've not brought up that you would just like to add to this little interesting interview that we've had, if you had to go to the board, would there be a recommendation that you would make and say, you know, it's important that Marist does this?

John Witter (55:48):

I think, and I see Marist is making efforts, but and I really don't have the research or data on other colleges, but, as they are claiming that the traditional student pool is going to start to decrease in the next few years, Marist has to look at, okay, how are we going to continue to draw students? And I think that Marist should make a major effort to go green as much as possible. I know that with the recycling, and a number of things that they're working on that. But that, I think that, you know, if you're, if you have campus saying campus B and they're equal, and one is green and one, one isn't, I just, I think that's a major issue for young people and parents.

Gus Nolan (56:43):

How would you articulate the big green? What is it you're pushing?

John Witter (56:49):

Well, to try to use alternative energy to attempt to, you know, recycle. I know that there are some companies out there that are really on the cutting edge and that actually produced no trash. And everything is completely recycled. I think this one company said, yeah, we have about two bags of garbage that we put out every year. And I know that, you know, the sciences and environmental sciences is not a big part of Marist here, and I'm sure other universities where that is a big part of it, you know, have the edge on that. But I think if Marist, you know, because it's all, what are businesses doing now, the role we're agreeing, we're agreeing so buy from us because we're green. Cause we're good to the earth. I would say there should be, because I think Marist, otherwise it's pretty much doing everything that, that it can, it's got great programs. It's good. It's a great site. It's a great experience here. So I don't know if there's anything, you know, beautiful library with, you know, state of the art, you know, new building, going up all the other, you know, as far as technology where, you know, we're, state-of-the-art, you know, I don't think we can push the envelope any, any more there. And I think we just keep, you know, try not to

Gus Nolan (58:18):

Yeah. Tons of energy, if we could cut down the lighting bill, and not use so much electricity.

John Witter (58:23):

I don't know how about Central Hudson would feel about that, but, you know, solar, solar panels on the roofs, wind turbines, really mandating, and, you know, re really beefing up the recycling program. I know I'm very impressed that the cafeteria, that they do composting. And I heard an ad recently, something about Vassar and Marist both do composting.

Gus Nolan (58:59):

So I I'm delighted that this is a kind of a, maybe we have to have you come back and give another little interview on the progress that we made. Well Jonathan, very nice talking to you. And it's been a, an eye opener for me to see your career and what you've done. And we're proud of that. I'm only speaking for somebody on the staff who knows about it and why is that then evolved, but I know you, and so it's been a delight to have you. Thank you.

John Witter (59:29):

Thank you very much.