

LEWIS, RICHARD

**Marist College
Poughkeepsie, NY
Transcribed by Kyra Walker
For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections**

Transcript – Richard Lewis

Interviewee: Richard Lewis

Interviewer: Gus Nolan

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Summary: Richard tells of his life before Marist. He comments on his various positions at Marist, including his time as an administrator and as head of the art department. He speaks of the formation of the partnership with Lorenzo de' Medici College in Florence, Italy and of his contribution to the creation of Cannavino Library.

Gus Nolan (00:03):

Today is Friday, December 5th. We have an opportunity to introduce ourselves to Richard Lewis, a long time--I just said the math of it--he's here almost 30 years, and we finally get him here for the interview. So Richard, let's start from the beginning. Say something about yourself, your early years, where you were born or brought up. Not the dates. Early education, so on. Okay.

Richard Lewis (02:12):

I was born in Queens, New York, and grew up on Long Island in a town called East Meadow. And when I went to college, it was a sort of an unusual path because I was a science person in high school. Graduated scientifically-

GN (02:36):

You went to graduate school too, did you not.

RL (02:38):

I did. I went off...I was in the public school system in East Meadow, which was a great system in those days. It was the heart of the baby boom and well-funded and all library budgets and school budgets were passed without question in those days. I had great teachers, but I was a science kid. I was in a special program called the experimental accelerated program where you did fourth, fifth, and sixth in two years with the same teacher and had a completely different curriculum than the rest of the students. So in the end, I graduated high school a year early. But when I got to college--my first college actually--I would go to five before I graduated. I went to the University of Wisconsin and I was an undecided major arriving, and listened to presentations of all the different programs. And learned that if you were an art major, you didn't have to take a foreign language. So I immediately chose that.

GN (03:43):

How does a life in Queens find Wisconsin on his map?

RL (03:46):

Well, that was as far as my parents would allow the compass to go. And I wanted--I actually had already--I did a lot of traveling as a young person, so I was always into finding new places. And Madison had a great reputation as a town. And so I became an art major there. I had taught myself to draw in high school. I didn't take any art classes. And then I got to Wisconsin and it appeared that I was good at it. And there were students who had done every...all the high school art classes and things like that, and I seem to do as well as them. But I didn't like Madison that much. I liked the town but the classes were enormous. I was in classes with 300-500 students.

GN (04:34):

You're kidding?

RL (04:35):

No, they had balconies. And if you...the way they took attendance is there were numbers painted on every seat and if they saw your number, you were absent. So if you wanted to sleep late, you'd pay someone \$5 to go sit on your seat. And I was used to a smaller school where you got attention. So I decided I was going to take a year off, work and travel. And in the end, I took a painting course that

summer and decided I had to go back to school. So I went to Franconia College in New Hampshire. Which Wisconsin had 38,000 students, this college was an experimental college in New Hampshire, run by a guy named Leon Botstein, who was the youngest college president in the country and had 400 students. And so I went there for a year. I loved it. New Hampshire was beautiful. It was right near Franconia Notch, but my dad lost his job and it was very expensive. So I then transferred to SUNY Purchase, which was just starting up as sort of the arts school in the state system. Then I took that year off where I worked and I traveled around Europe and even got to Morocco.

GN (05:47):

Now you're talking about Europe. Traveling is an international experience.

RL (05:52):

Yes. Well, I...in high school, I used to go on bicycling trips in the summers through American youth hostels. And so I went originally through New York and Vermont and Canada. And then right before I went to college, I traveled all through Europe on a bicycle and went to about eight different countries. And interestingly, which would...I remember camping outside of Florence, Italy and saying to myself, I think this may be my favorite city in the world.

GN (06:25):

Then we'll come back to that later.

RL (06:27):

Right, exactly. Which turned to be more important than I thought. And so I went to SUNY Purchase because I could be both an art major and a literature major, because I was a double major in those days. And then I...after I traveled for a while, I went to SUNY Buffalo for a summer because Richard Ellman, the biographer of James Joyce was teaching there for the summer from Oxford. So I went there and then I finished up at Purchase after.

GN (06:57):

He has a very interesting story about finishing the volume, the second volume of James Joyce.

RL (07:02):

Yes, he was an interesting guy. He was very, very confident. If you pointed out some interesting twists he hadn't thought of, he would just look at you and the look would be sort of like, 'I'm the biographer of James Joyce, don't worry I've thought about that.'

GN (07:17):

You talk about work experience, what kind of work did you ever do?

RL (07:23):

Well, before I got to Marist or in my college years?

GN (07:27):

College years, I mean you were not financially independent, so there had to be some source of money coming in.

RL (07:32):

I worked in framing stores. I worked at a waterbed store, but mostly framing stores where I spent a lot of time stretching people's needlework and putting them in frames or cutting frames for photographs and things like that. I had access to art materials, so you would always get a discount with the art materials that they had there.

GN (07:51):

Very good. Of course I have down here summer jobs. Many people go to school through the year and then in the summers they find some kind of employment. You seem to have mixed the whole thing and because you take a whole year off, then you work and then you go back.

RL (08:08):

Right. Yeah, I mean I even worked at Bamberger's and places like that. You know, when there was such Bamberger's.

GN (08:14):

Very interesting career, you went to five different colleges. You went to about a hundred different stores, I guess. All right. That's a good beginning. Let's come into present time. What's the genesis of you coming to Marist? How did that happen?

RL (08:29):

Well, what happened...I was...I didn't go straight to graduate school after college. I worked in publishing where I met...I was introduced to this woman who did picture research because my friend Donald Margulies-- who's actually a playwright, won the Pulitzer prize. He was my best friend in college. After college he thought this would be-

GN (08:51):

Which college?

RL (08:52):

At Purchase. He was at Purchase. And then, he introduced me to this woman who was a picture researcher, which is a field I had never heard of, which is where you read manuscripts and you've determined the illustration program for a book. And actually mostly you spend a lot of time with photographers and visiting different picture agencies. And he knew I had this word and picture background like he did. And so he introduced me to her and she was the best picture researcher in New York and she recommended me for a job at Heart Corporation Bonovitch, where she was working in a different department. And I had an interview where they spent the entire interview asking me the same question in different ways, which was could I take orders from women? And it turned out, her recommendation for me was, 'he seems like a young, intelligent guy, but I would never hire a man because they never take orders from women.' And so I convinced them that I could, and I convinced them that I could type. And I became a secretary and then worked my way up to art editor, and that woman I married.

GN (09:59):

How long were you there?

RL (10:01):

I was at Harcourt for two and a half years. And then I decided to go to graduate school, and I went to the University of Michigan for painting. And partially because I had figured out that when I went to Madison, I really thought I was going to Ann Arbor. So I rectified that mistake, and Susan and I got married right before then. And so, we had sort of a two year extended honeymoon in Ann Arbor, which was great. And then I came back here. Well actually I didn't come back here right away. After Ann Arbor, I applied to 200 schools for a teaching position. Because at Ann Arbor...I hadn't gone with the idea of teaching. But when I got there I was made a TA and my understanding of what a TA does is you help the professor teach their course. And I got to the first day of classes, I met the professor. He looked at the class, he said there are too many people here. You take half of them, they're your class. So that was the day I became a professor of a college class. I had to make it up as I was going along. I was apparently good at it because I was teaching two classes there. They got me a teaching--part-time teaching gig at the University of Toledo, which was connected to Toledo Art Museum. Which was lovely because you could teach and then bring all the students upstairs to the museum. And students were following me even though I was only there for two years. They would ask me what I was teaching next semester. So I thought, all right, I'll try teaching. So I applied to 200 schools, including Marist College, where a fellow named Dick Platt told me they had no positions available and didn't get anything, didn't get a thing. Susan and I had this plan. Our ultimate goal was that after a long career, we would end up in the Hudson Valley. That was our ultimate plan and that we would, I would teach at the most godforsaken places as we slowly worked our way East. So we applied to...we had code names like Cape Fear Technical Institute and Dismal Swamp University. But unfortunately, they did a study of the college art association that year. There were 400 applicants for every open position available in the country. There were very few positions. The market was terrible. And so other people had applied against the Dismal Swamp University and I didn't get a single interview, nothing. So we were in Ann Arbor, school was over and I didn't want to be one of those people sitting around just stuck in their college town. And so I said to Susan, all right, we didn't...plan A did not work. So plan B is I'm going to get in our car and I'm going to drive to the Hudson Valley and I'm not coming back until I have a job and a place for us to live. Are you good? So I drove to the area around New Paltz where I had friends, and got a job at a bookstore and found a house on a farm for \$200 a month and drove back. This was a very old--it was a \$200 car as well, and didn't have any radio, so it was long drives. But then, you know, got her there, brought her, and we started here. And while I was working at Ariel Booksellers in New Paltz, I got a call on the phone from Susan. Susan was working at Benedictine Hospital as a medical secretary to Dr. Johnson, who was a famous dermatologist. And she said to me, 'is this a secure line?' And I said, yeah, I think it's a secure line. And she said, there's a job at Marist College and it's open. I said, really? And I said, okay. And I called Marist College and the art department was headed by a guy named Alan Moore in that times. He was only at Marist were for a very short time. And I should have realized that by the time the grapevine about art jobs reaches Benedictine Hospital in Kingston, New York, this was very old information. It actually was two years old. And so he said, no, we don't really have any jobs. That was a job two years ago. But he asked me about myself. He knew someone I had studied with at Michigan and offered me one course and it was Arts and Values, something I had never taught. I wasn't even sure what it was. And I said, I'll take it. And I immediately quit my job at the bookstore for one course at Marist College. That summer, Alan Moore--who was the head of the program--resigned suddenly and Evelyn Fisher, who had founded the department was I think a professor at Meredith.

GN (14:42):

I was waiting for that name to arrive.

RL (14:43):

She was a professor at Meredith and she really was the art program no matter who was in charge. She arranged for me to have an interview with the academic vice president Andrew Malloy. And I got really prepared. I thought of every possible question. I practiced it with friends because I really wanted this job. Because there were so few jobs available. And I'm in the interview with Andy and Andy's describing the position to me explaining all the responsibilities that someone heading the art program would have-- including running the gallery, teaching these courses and all these things. And I'm listening. And finally I say, 'are you going to ask me any questions?' And he said to me, 'didn't Evelyn tell you. You have the job?' So it was pure luck, kismet or whatever it was. I remember writing an old teacher of mine who told me that I had the last job on the east coast, which is probably true. It was a one year position. They were going to have a real search after they hired me for the summer, and I had a good year. I acted as if I was going to be here forever and they actually didn't hire me when they finished the search. They hired Larry Montalto who became-

GN (16:01):

Oh, yes.

RL (16:01):

And they also hired a new person, Virginia Marquardt to run art history. But Andy felt so bad for me. He gave me one more year. He said, I'll give you one year so you could find something. And for four years I had these one year contracts that were my absolute last contract. And then one day...one summer, the contract came and it didn't say anything about it being a one year contract. It said it was a tenure track contract and that's how I ended up staying here.

GN (16:28):

That's a marvelous story. I'm glad you told it because I had no idea. I just-

RL (16:34):

No, people often ask how I ended up here because they-

GN (16:37):

I remember you being down there and the area...it was the base of Champagnat, wasn't it?

RL (16:43):

Well, we were in many areas over the years.

GN (16:44):

Art studio as it were.

RL (16:45):

Well, we were in Donnelly, where the computer center is. We used to share it with fashion. Then we were in something called Marist East, which was the old western publishing building.

GN (16:58):

Yeah, I know those areas well. That was always like a gallery. It was a kind of a primitive place wasn't it? From your perspective?

RL (17:09):

Oh, it was...well when I was hired the first time, I was literally the only full-time person in the department at that point because Evelyn was semi-retired. Norm Olin had a half position in math and half position in photography. So it was really me and part-time people. Our gallery was in the student center in the hall that people would walk by on their way to the cafeteria. And actually it was-

GN (17:41):

It was almost a drop-in thing as well?

RL (17:44):

It was. Absolutely. And in fact, every--almost every exhibition, at least one picture would be stolen. So the students were very kind. They would always wait until the end of the show to take something. I had heard a story that Jimmy Cagney had a show there once, before I arrived and a picture disappeared and that time security turned the place upside down before they located it in a dorm room.

GN (18:05):

Very good. Was Nilus Donnelly still with us?

RL (18:09):

Yes. Nilus was around and obviously close friends with Evelyn Fisher. And Evelyn...I actually did a little research before I came here. Looking...I have inherited Evelyn's collection of Marist catalogs, and which is not complete, but pretty complete. And so from that, I was able to tell that she came in 1963. Evelyn Fisher, who founded the art department was first here as an artist in residence. And I remember she had a position that was sort of half teaching and half sort of decorating the college. Designing stainless windows and all sorts of-

GN (18:51):

And tile work for Donnelly-

RL (18:51):

The Donnelly Hall, exactly. Rails.

GN (18:54):

It's kind of a stupid question, but my notes I have...what were you...what was your position outside of teaching? Did they give you, did you have to do advisement. Were you able to do-?

RL (19:08):

When I first got hired?

GN (19:09):

Yeah.

RL (19:09):

I did everything. I ran the gallery. I advised all the majors, which was not a significant burden Because there were probably 11 majors when I first got hired. And I hired the adjuncts. And I taught five classes a semester.

GN (19:25):

Moving on now, you see I have things a little confused. I didn't think that art history was...that Marquadt was here before you.

RL (19:33):

She wasn't. I was hired the year before her. And then when they...the year after...I was a temporary person and that second year they hired Larry Montalto to run the program. They hired Virginia Marquadt for art history and they kept me on for a year.

GN (19:53):

Where did Larry come from? Was he in New York originally?

RL (19:55):

He was at F.I.T. And they liked him because he had a PhD and an MFA, a lot of qualifications that I didn't have. And he'd been teaching for a lot longer than I had.

GN (20:07):

I could just remember some of the luncheons, when groups would gather around.

RL (20:12):

Larry was always there.

GN (20:12):

He was chair of the luncheon committee.

RL (20:17):

[Laughter] Exactly.

GN (20:17):

Did you have much to do with the development of the art program then? In other words, art history was already in place. Was arts & values still in the core program?

RL (20:34):

Sure. It still is today.

GN (20:36):

And you had to teach all those classes? All those freshmen?

RL (20:40):

I taught both studio and art history at the beginning. I taught the history of American arts, arts and values. I taught a course in illustration. I taught every drawing and painting course.

GN (20:49):

There's a long list of those, yeah [laughter].

RL (20:51):

Yeah. I have a long list. I think I've taught maybe 30 different courses over the year.

GN (20:56):

It's all the same really. There's one course in art.

RL (21:00):

I wished.

GN (21:01):

Yeah. Tell me this. How about student interest in art at Marist? I mean, did you see that grow, or has it grown?

RL (21:10):

Absolutely. I mean...because like I said, when I first got hired, we had 11 majors. We're probably...today--this is now 30 years later--hundreds. Well, we didn't even have a major. I mean it just...we had just gotten a major when I had arrived. So we had...it was originally just a bunch of courses, then it was a minor, then it became a major. It was like a combination of...it was called fine arts, and had both art music in it. And then since I arrived with the help of everyone in the department as a group, we added different majors. So we now have a BA in fine arts studio, a bachelor of science in studio, a bachelor of science and digital media, a BA in fine arts and art history. And then of course we have our Florence campus, where we have some degrees there that we don't offer here.

GN (22:06):

Ok, we'll hold on to that.

RL (22:06):

Ok, so we have minors that we added.

GN (22:13):

How many full-time faculty do you have in all?

RL (22:17):

We have eight here in the United States.

GN (22:21):

Oh, amazing. Of course I'm rushing through this now. You mentioned it...how about the computer art and-

RL (22:32):

Yeah, the computer art...well, when I was running the program that very first year, Norm Olin, who had this combination of art and math came to me with this idea. PCs had just been...come out and he thought he could teach an art course on a computer. So I said, do it. And though in those days it was programming, so you would write a program that would make a circle move across the screen and you would say, that's a balloon. And that was the first-

GN (23:00):

You'd know that because underneath it would say this is a balloon.

RL (23:03):

You would have to, because it just looked like a circle. But we were one of the first colleges in the country to offer computer graphics.

GN (23:10):

Is that so?

RL (23:10):

Yeah. And that grew over time. And in fact, I'm only teaching digital media now. And so we kept on adding classes. At first it was, we added it as a concentration in the old major, and then we made its own major back in 2002.

GN (23:30):

Okay. I have a number of things I'm really concerned to see how you respond. One is kind of your moving away from the art and being brought into administration. What kind of a feeling did you have about that?

RL (23:48):

Well, when Larry Montalto left, I took over the art program. And so I was doing that for quite a while, and it took a lot of time. And you may remember those days, it wasn't incredibly remunerative to do things like that, but, but I was very interested in seeing the program grow. And certainly when you're in charge you have more chance to see that happen than you're standing by. So I spent a lot of time and effort building...increasing the number of courses, getting new faculty, fighting for new lines. The kinds of things that you do when you run a program. So I was doing that for a long time and a friend of mine who was a dean in Massachusetts said to me, you seem to be an administrator with everything except the pay. And I said, well, yeah, I guess that's probably true. And so I assume you're talking about when I went into the upper level of administration, is that right?

GN (24:51):

Well, I didn't realize you were the academic... in charge of programs--academic programs under Artin I guess it was.

RL (25:00):

Well, what happened was in...when Artin arrived--Artin Arslanian--which was in 1997.

GN (25:09):

That's after VanderHeyden leaves?

RL (25:11):

After VanderHeyden leaves. Artin came and one of his...one of the things he wanted to do when he first arrived, was he was going to meet privately with every faculty member at Marist College.

GN (25:25):

Oh, I remember. Yes.

RL (25:26):

And art has...it starts with the letter a. So I was the first person he talked to on his long list, and he picked the day that I was going to make a speech and in front of the entire faculty because I had gotten the board of trustees distinguished teacher...faculty of the year, whatever they call it. And I was trying to look at my notes and he came to my office to talk to me about Marist College so he could learn more about Marist College. And I guess we hit it off, because he liked me after that. And then he told me that there was this position opening up for an assistant academic vice president, which Linda Cool had under Mark VanderHeyden. But then Linda left to become a VP at Union College, and so it had been empty for a long time. And so I decided to apply for it, see what happened. I didn't think I would get it, but I figured it'd be good practice for getting interviews and how you think as an administrator and stuff like that. And by then our department was pretty...in pretty good shape. We had a much higher number of majors. So it seemed like a time where I could leave it in Jim Luciana's hands, which he's perfectly capable, and he had been a department chair at other institutions. And so I applied for that job, and for whatever reason they hired me.

GN (27:03):

Now see, I guess...it must have been before that, and I was trying to think who is the co-conspirator that you had that you can...if you remember one time I was a dean.

RL (27:17):

I remember. You were a very impressive dean.

GN (27:20):

You said the right words, and you came and you robbed my budget. You said you got \$2,000 left and we need a program.

RL (27:27):

Yes, that was an annual event. Jim and I...Jim Luciana, who came on in 1990 and was really my co-conspirator. We had figured out that there's a certain time of the year that if you approached deans, they were actually quite generous.

GN (27:41):

You know why? Because Tony Campilii came out with a vacuum and anything left-

RL (27:45):

Exactly. There was a moment where if you didn't spend it, it was going to be lost anyway, so you might as well give it to the art department.

GN (27:51):

Yeah [laughter]. And I remember often we had a number of people at the table who felt the same way. In fact Marquadt was in there trying to get something for art history. Cabinets and things.

RL (28:03):

Right, for slides.

GN (28:05):

Yeah. So that was an interesting time. How long were you...well, there's another part of this administration that you get into, really concerned with the building that we're sitting in, and that fit into it?

RL (28:20):

So when I was assistant academic vice president, and I was only that for three years, the library project was just beginning. And John McGinty was the librarian and he had been working with the architects on the program for this building. And Artin designated me as the chief academic liaison for this building. And...which meant I was going to buildings and grounds meetings and things like that. And it made some sense because I had an art background and it was an architecture project. And so...and John actually was one of my best friends. So we worked hand in hand in every detail in the library. And actually I think Artin regretted appointing me to this position because he was really counting on me to be his right hand man. And because of the size of the library project, I really ended up being sort of Dennis's and Roy Merolli's right hand man. He lost a lot of use of me over this building.

GN (29:34):

Yeah. And that went on for one year or two years?

RL (29:40):

It was...actually when I...I left administration upper level administration in 2000, right at the time that they had the opening of the building. So my work was done in some ways. I mean, I did other things. I mean...the library was one of the areas that I supervised--all the academic services like career development, academic learning center academic computing, HEOP. All those things were under my supervision.

GN (30:20):

And you're well paid for doing all of that [laughter].

RL (30:23):

I really wasn't actually [laughter]. I didn't realize that until much later, but I got a tremendous amount of experience and really operated at a...I gained an understanding of Marist that you really can't get unless you're a or an executive. It's a whole different perspective.

GN (30:45):

What about the Florence program now? What's the genesis of that? How did we get into Florence?

RL (30:53):

All right, so the story of the Florence program was...this was actually after...I left administration for one real...you know how politicians often say they're leaving for family reasons? This was really true. I had...I realized one of the things that happened because of the library project is if you remember, this library is built on the grounds of the old library.

GN (31:21):

Indeed, I do.

RL (31:22):

And we had to tear down the old library-

GN (31:24):

Which was no easy trick because we just built it.

RL (31:27):

With some good materials. And also it meant that Marist College would have to have... would have no library unless we made some sort of plan. And so what we did was we purchased the steel plant across Route 9. Poughkeepsie Steel Plant, which had been abandoned for some years and we purchased it, renovated it and turned it into a temporary library. And the joke was once that was done, it was already better than the original library. So when this library...the new library was finished, the question was what to do with the steel plant. And I was still in administration at the time and I not surprisingly argued it would make a fantastic art building. And not only that would make a fantastic art building, it would be the cheapest thing we could do. And I wrote up a proposal-

GN (32:22):

Now when you talk about being in the administration, are you on the president's cabinet?

RL (32:26):

Yes, I actually was the second highest academic officer of the college, which led to an unfortunate incident where all the other executives were out of town. And I was in charge of the college when it snowed and I canceled classes and they never let me do that again.

GN (32:43):

Not with the dormitory, with all those students dying to get over here.

RL (32:48):

Yeah, exactly. So I always had the safety of everyone in mind. But in any case, they changed that rule after that. But I was the second highest academic officer, so I was at the cabinet. I was actually in the executive council. I was surprised to find--and you may not even know this Gus--that there were certain meetings where I would say something like, 'well, shouldn't the dean of blank be at this meeting? And I would be told we're not meeting at that level. So, I was at some high level of beyond the cabinet apparently. And so any case I argued for the steel plant. There were lots of people who wanted that

building because there's always a crying need for space at Marist College. But because I think I came up with the cheapest proposal, a natural one, because it's raw space is natural to an art department. And the guy who was the executive director of Dia in Beacon came in one day with Dennis Murray and said--without any prodding by me--this is the perfect art building. That convinced Dennis. So in any case...so the plan was that starting in fall of 2000 after the new library had opened and the building had been cleaned out, that it would become an art building. And I remember saying to my wife, Susan, who's come up a couple of times already, I said, you know, I'm really jealous. All of these years we struggled in Donnelly Hall. We had three classrooms with a bar sink, and now there's going to be this great art facility. And she said, well you don't have to stay in administration. And I began to think about it. And then at Christmas I was at my father-in-law's--who was a former college professor and a former department chair--and I was having a discussion with him at the dining room table saying I'm thinking of leaving administration, but I'm afraid they're going to think it's like a ploy just to get more money and they're gonna make me a big offer to stay. And my son, who was probably about 10 years old at the time, he was listening very quietly, had never complained about all the hours I worked, all the weekends and things like that. And he said, dad, what's more important to you, your family or money? And that was like, checkmate. It was like after your son says that when you say, well actually money is more important Rob. So I decided I would leave administration. I explained it to Artin. I explained it to Dennis. They understood. They were...because they're very family-oriented people themselves. And so I got to be one of the people that moved back into the steel plant...moved into the steel plant. And so that's how I came back to the art department. So in any case, they're always thinking of administrative things for me to do nonetheless. And in 2006, the spring of 2006, there arose this possibility. That there was a school in Florence that was possibly interested in partnering with Marist College and establishing some kind of partnership where we were to credit their programs.

GN (35:43):

There's something not right here now. How does this school in Florence know about Marist College?

RL (35:49):

Well we had... Lorenzo de 'Medici was a school we had been sending students to for at least a decade, if not longer. So they knew us.

GN (35:56):

Wasn't there internships over there?

RL (35:58):

I don't know if we had internships, but we might've. But we...but it was one of our sites. It was our main Florence campus...place to send our students. So they knew us through that. And Meg Franklin, who was Artin's executive assistant, ran into the president of Lorenzo de 'Medici at some event. His name is Fabrizio Guarducci, and they started talking--they hit it off. And I think that was the genesis of it. And then Meg arranged for a team of Marist people to go to Florence and tour the facilities and determine if it was sufficient quality for Marist to enter into a partnership.

GN (36:40):

The expression 'part of the team' is in the notes, here in my notes. So this is a team that had been created here to pursue this?

RL (36:49):

Exactly. So I was on that team. Tom Gopal in English was on that team. Tom Warmoth, who was the Dean of liberal arts in those days. Meg Franklin was on the team. I think that was it. I think it was the four of us. And then we were meeting with our counterparts in Florence.

GN (37:06):

Were you flying over there to meet with them? Were they coming here?

RL (37:08):

No, we flew there. We flew there and they toured us around, and they of course treat us very nicely because they were very interested in this, so we stayed at a grand hotel and we had grand meal and we...and they had fantastic facilities, particularly for art. And it was actually...they probably had better facilities than we had.

GN (37:28):

So this is '01 then? 2000/2001?

RL (37:31):

That was 2006.

GN (37:32):

'06? Okay.

RL (37:33):

So that...we came to agreement fairly quickly, so that by the fall of 2006, we had really established the outlines of what would make a branch campus. And then we started putting together--and I was working very hard on this--not only that we would accredit their courses, but we would create...we would have four year degree programs there. So that students--not even just our typical Marist students--but students from all over the world could come to this campus and earn a four-year American degree from Marist College.

GN (38:07):

And never come here?

RL (38:08):

And possibly never actually stepped foot in Poughkeepsie. And so we had...all the art degrees ultimately would be offered there. And plus a degree in restoration, with a world-renowned restorer. And a degree in interior design. And we've recently added now a degree in Italian, sort of natural things. And we've also-

GN (38:35):

There's an art history there as well.

RL (38:36):

We have a masters--our first graduate program out of my department--a master's in museum studies, which is doing very well.

GN (38:43):

Very good. Numerically, do we still have something like a hundred freshmen there?

RL (38:50):

In Florence?

GN (38:52):

Yeah.

RL (38:52):

Possibly. Well, we have...I mean, we also have 30 degree students. And we have every year about 20 graduate students in our program there as well. But also, Lorenzo de 'Medici serves probably about 1500 students a semester from all around the world. So...and they're getting Marist credit. It's actually the largest English-speaking foreign school in Ital, and maybe even Europe.

GN (39:27):

All right. That's a sweep of the development of Marist and the art program and its expansion to an international phase. Now, let's talk about you. What...why did you stay here through all of this? From the primitive stages...certainly you have gotten offers to go elsewhere. I just take that out of the blue, no one told me that. But I was just-

RL (39:57):

People ask me this quite a bit, because I mean, up to that point, I don't think I ever had a job more than two and a half years. But the thing is.

GN (40:03):

Not because of your conduct, but because-? [Laughter]

RL (40:05):

No. Generally no. It's not to say I wasn't fired from some jobs. But the thing is Marist, as you well know, is a place that's very often open to ideas and creativity. And I found it...I think that maybe older schools, more traditional schools, that's not the case. You have to wait a long time before someone listens to you. Here...if someone decides you have a good idea, they give you the opportunity to fail or not. And so-

GN (40:42):

It can't cost too much.

RL (40:43):

Well of course, no, and that's easily...but that's part of being creative here.

GN (40:46):

This is how I'm gonna pay for it.

RL (40:48):

Exactly. And...but the fact is...honestly my job never stayed the same. I mean, starting as a...what was called studio art coordinator with 11 majors to all the different things that I've done over the years, it's never the same. And that's been the great thing about it. So I love now working on our programs in Florence, as you can imagine. I've also had the chance to do these short-term abroad courses where I've taken...where...I don't know if you remember these courses where they study...they take a course on campus in the spring and then they either travel during spring break internationally or they travel in early summer. So we've...I've taught courses...my first time I did it was called visions of Italy with Tom Gopal. I've taken students to Japan twice. I'm taking them again in the spring as part of a course on Japanese art and culture. I've taught a course called epic voyages with Tom Gopal where we read the Odyssey and the Iliad and learned about Greek and Roman art, and then we follow the path of Aeneas. So we landed in Istanbul, made our way to Troy, went to Greece, the Greek islands, Crete and enter Italy--as part of a course. So I mean those...I don't think there's a lot of places where I could do that.

GN (42:13):

No, I mean John Scileppi was flying to get to the Bahamas or wherever he went for the winter.

RL (42:17):

Barbados right?

GN (42:17):

Yeah, Barbados.

RL (42:21):

But the thing is that I've been able to go lots of different places with students and they love it of course, as you can imagine.

GN (42:30):

And so do you.

RL (42:31):

Of course.

GN (42:33):

I was going to say, how do you fill up the 30 years here with the ever new...because the college allows you to plant and come along with something if it works.

RL (42:42):

Absolutely. I mean, I'm not teaching any of the courses that I taught in my first 10 years.

GN (42:48):

All right. Okay. What are some of the setbacks? Have you had some?

RL (42:53):

Oh, well personally the first setback was when they didn't hire me to be...to run the department after my first year.

GN (43:00):

Thank God you didn't walk away.

RL (43:03):

Well it was...I didn't have anything to walk away to, so it was all right. But, setbacks-

GN (43:11):

Disappointments. With students maybe who failed you or disappointed you or-?

RL (43:17):

Well, certainly on a semester by semester basis. You have some students that make you look brilliant and some that don't. And...but I actually have had, I mean, I think one of the advantages of teaching in art and digital media is that almost everyone in the room is there because they're really excited. It's not, I think...I mean, I don't know because I haven't taught management, but a lot of people enter management, other majors because they think it's very practical. People need to be in love with what they're studying. So that's an easy group to work with. And I'm very open minded. Actually the very first course I ever taught was as an undergrad...when I was an undergrad called drawing for people who think they can't. So I can work with lots of different people. So I don't think I've had that many disappointments with students. Sometimes they misbehave, but they're actually kind of young.

GN (44:14):

On the other side of the coin, what's some of your greatest accomplishments, if you can put it that way?

RL (44:22):

Well, I'm actually pretty proud of the library, even though I was only one of a lot of people. I feel like Marist embraced me when I first got here. I was very impressed when I was first hired, when Andy Malloy invited me to a meal at his house around the holidays. And you were there and the usual cast of characters were there, and people were singing and he passed around song sheets for those that didn't know all the Irish songs. And it was such a great sense of community that I've felt...I always felt that I got a level of respect far beyond what I ever deserved. So I was on the academic affairs committee when we set up departments and schools. I worked on this library. I helped set up the programs in Italy. I got a chance to build an art program and get us our own building. And I think it's still today, we're the only department that has its own building.

GN (45:28):

Marist is quite different from when you first arrived.

RL (45:32):

I was really lucky.

GN (45:33):

Can you believe that this happened?

RL (45:34):

No, it was...I really...as proud as I am of some of the things I did. I know I have, I was incredibly lucky to arrive at Marist when I arrived because it was this moment. Probably...I mean, I think really you start with like 1983/1984 and from that point on, it's like we never looked back.

GN (45:58):

Yeah. Well we kind of had... of course I was here from the-

RL (46:03):

A little earlier.

GN (46:04):

'52. I graduated from Marist and I came back to build it with the chapel in '53, so I have that perspective of putting the stones in the ground and will we survive?

RL (46:18):

I know that right before the time I arrived, parking lots were in disrepair. A lot of deferred maintenance.

GN (46:25):

This is an interesting question. I want to ask this: what do you think are some of the biggest...or one of the biggest needs of Marist?

RL (46:34):

Today?

GN (46:36):

Yeah. Now, let me just tell you, because I want to open up this...it can go all different ways because I ask this to many of these people. And some will tell me a parking lot. [inaudible] And they know where they want to put it. They want to put it down there in the well below [inaudible] and so on, but it's gonna cost \$17,000 a car to build. So, it's really-

RL (47:00):

Oh, you mean the leveled parking lot?

GN (47:03):

The leveled parking lot.

RL (47:03):

I learned about that when I was on the buildings and grounds committee. It's a very expensive thing to do.

GN (47:07):

Oh, very expensive. And then, security wants its own building. They can't even meet. There's no room where they...that's theirs. So they need something. Then the science people, 'when are we going to get a science building?'

RL (47:21):

And that would have been my answer about six months ago. But they're getting a science building.

GN (47:27):

More or less.

RL (47:27):

No, they are.

GN (47:27):

Well, they're getting a building that's going to be the physician's assistants, and they're going to have a share of it. But they're looking at the territory they're getting and-

RL (47:39):

And they're not so happy. Well, as someone who's been involved in other building projects, that's par for the course.

GN (47:45):

That goes with the territory.

RL (47:48):

But the fact is...I mean the science building...I mean, there is still unfinished business at Marist. I think a science building is one of them. I can imagine that there may be a second science building coming too, because they're not solving all of science's needs. I think the other need is in the arts. And I don't mean particularly for the visual arts. I think there is tremendous pent up demand, pent up opportunity for theater and for music to have their own majors if they had a decent facility to do that. I know music has improved quite a bit, but I think we need... we're a school with one theater with a lot of people doing it. I mean, it's amazing how much theater takes place on this campus.

GN (48:34):

Like music, it came out of the woodwork.

RL (48:38):

But that shows you that the demand is there. The interest is there. I think that we need like a center for the arts. I think that's one of the pieces...unfinished pieces of Marist College.

GN (48:49):

It probably would have to go on another campus though because-

RL (48:51):

It will probably have to be across Route 9 just because that's where space is. But there's a lot of space over on the other side of Route 9.

GN (48:59):

Tell me, if you would, Marist has changed. Certainly Dennis has had a big part in the leadership to bring us where we are. But he couldn't do it alone. So I mean, you might say, well it's the Hudson, it's location. We're at 70 miles from New York City. We have a tradition, the Marist brothers schools for many years who are feeding, now of course continental USA feeds us and beyond. Hawaii, Japan, China, South America. Well what would you say?

RL (49:38):

Well, I mean, I think...first of all, being in the Hudson Valley is a tremendous advantage because you have the best of both worlds. You have the access to probably the greatest city in the world within a safe distance. And we have historically attracted students from the metropolitan area where families are concerned about the safety of their children as well as their education, and also access to them. And the fact is that a Marist student...most of our Marist students, so they come from now across the country and most still come from the metropolitan area. They can--if a family event comes--they can go home. I mean, I think the most popular excuse for absence at Marist College is still not I was sick but my aunt was sick or my grandparents were having their 50th anniversary.

GN (50:36):

Or a funeral.

RL (50:37):

Or something like that. And I think that positioning was great. I think Dennis did understand from the very beginning when he arrived that the pla...the way the place looks is truly important. And that we were not taking advantage of our location on the beautiful Hudson, that we had somehow turned our backs to it. And as much as it drives faculty crazy, the number one question that parents have when they come to campus is not the academic qualifications of the faculty or even how many full time faculty you have. But-

GN (51:14):

What hits them is the beauty of the place.

RL (51:15):

It's the beauty of a place. And also one thing that we have had from the beginning--I mentioned this before--is this wonderful sense of community. And I can say to parents when they come to visit completely honestly, that people are really nice here. The students are nice, the faculty are nice--they care about each other. And it's...and I think they sense it when they walk on the campus because so much of choosing a college is not numbers. It's an emotional gut decision, whether you feel comfortable or not. And I think parents know and students understand that when they're here they're going to get attention and people who care about them and help if they need it. And most people are pretty nervous about this decision and most of these young people, this is the first really important decision in their lives. And this is a place that makes them feel like this might be a good place to do that.

GN (52:15):

And then seeing it, especially in...well, the fall or the spring, I could live here?

RL (52:22):

This is absolutely, I mean it looks like heaven. And the fact is we've expanded our programs in so many different ways. So that the menu of choices, the opportunities that we have. And now with the international programs, half our students do something international and if-

GN (52:39):

Of course, Joe would die. Tourism, that's all we're doing. But Joe's time passed on. I mean he did too.

RL (52:50):

Well, he started it. I mean I think I could show him things he'd be thrilled about.

GN (52:56):

Of course. One last question, it's a fundamental question, and it goes this way: is college worth the investment or is Marist worth the investment? \$40,000 a year for four years. You get outta here, no job available. You put all the time in. You put all the effort in, and what do you get at the end of it?

RL (53:25):

Yeah, well that is one of the questions of the day. And, I think Marist has been very savvy in that while we're a private college, we've never been priced in the highest echelons of private colleges. So that even within the room, I'm actually on the budget priorities committee meeting...a member of that too. So we look at these questions all the time. And we've always been very careful to make sure that we were considered a good value for the money in the schools that we compete with. But even so, when you're talking about \$40,000 a year and it's not hard to make the argument, it'd be better to buy your kid a house and that would be a better start have them with no mortgage for the rest of their lives. And I guess you could do that if you had a family business, you could bring them into. I think, this is one thing that does not change. The...our traditional age group from 18 to 21/22. Most parents don't want them at home. They want a place for them to grow up.

GN (54:33):

To get out of the house.

RL (54:34):

And education is a very important part of that. But the fact is a residential experience for that age group is tremendously valuable. This is where they grow up and this is where, this is a period in their lives that generally they're not going to learn these things from their parents because they're not listening to their parents. As someone who has a 24 year old at this moment, who's come out of that from the other end, now he's starting to listen again. There's something...that is a ripe moment in every young person's life and this is an opportunity that if a family can afford it, I think they're going to continue to want to. I've explored online education. I'm in digital media, I worked on some of the IBM joint studies and there are some things you can do online, but that's not education as I understand it. That's skill learning.

GN (55:37):

That's what Dennis was telling me. He believes--especially for the graduate programs, there's nothing like...undergraduate-

RL (55:44):

In that period of their lives. Well I would say that the graduate program we have in Florence, they get to go and meet the directors. They go behind the scenes of museums, some of the greatest museums in the world. They work themselves. You can't do that online. There are certain experiences you can't do online. And the success of online programs is not, it's not a great record. many people do not finish. Many people fail. It takes an incredibly disciplined person to take advantage online programs and so it's not going to work for a lot of people. You taught long enough that some of these phases come and go. I think some reality is going to come into the online environment. There are certain things though that we teach that maybe don't need to be taught in the classroom. But that should be seen as liberating to a teacher. They can let you say, do that stuff online and then come with me and now I'll show you some things.

GN (56:45):

The kids teach each other as well.

RL (56:47):

Oh yeah. Well, digital media--we have a teaching lab and we have the student lab. There's no wall between them. The students are listening to us. They're sharing with each other. There are virtually no textbooks for these things. It's kind of a...it's a whole different way of learning. But again, you gotta be there.

GN (57:06):

Somebody had said that you \$40,000 for a car and after three years, what do you have? And so-

RL (57:17):

It still is a crazy amount of money and if I want to get political, there are countries around the world that are doing their best to make sure their young people are educated and not going broke at the same time. And maybe that-

GN (57:30):

We might have to look at that. I've finished. Anything you would like to say that I didn't add?

RL (57:36):

And the only thing I would say is that I talked about a lot of things that happened for the art programs, but there were lots of people who were involved that, you probably should talk to if they were still available. There was Larry Montalto and Virginia Marquadt and Norm Olin. Evelyn Fisher, who created the art program from nothing. And I believe may have been the first full time woman faculty member at Marist College. Certainly in the running, if not, she came in '63 and maybe one of the first professor emeriti as well. And like a Marist person, she never stopped working even though she was professor emeritus. in fact, she was here every morning before I got here. If I happen to get here earlier than her, she knew my car was broken and I got a ride from my...one of my friends. So we would have had what we had without her. And Jim Luciano, and Denise English. Now lots of new people-

GN (58:39):

Is Denise still here?

RL (58:39):

Denise is here. She's chair of the department now.

GN (58:42):

See how out of it I am?

RL (58:45):

She's now chair. And I left that to...I'm now the academic coordinators for our programs in Italy. So I switched to that and let her take care of the department. She's doing a fabulous job.

GN (58:59):

Well, it's been a good run. I really-

RL (59:01):

It has been an amazing run, hasn't it?

GN (59:03):

I mean, I can't get over it myself. I still hang around here.

RL (59:06):

You know, sometimes you walk across this campus and I feel like I'm looking at an architectural drawing. I'm not really looking at the campus. You know, one of those beautiful sky days and things like that. It's been fantastic.

GN (59:17):

Alright, let me just see if we can stop this now.