

Christina Vertullo

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, NY

Transcribed by Aubrey Giesler

For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

Transcript – Christina Vertullo**Interviewee:** Christina Vertullo**Interviewer:** Gus Nolan**Interview Date:** 8/24/15**Location:** Marist College Archives and Special Collections Reading Room**Topic:** Marist College History**See Also:****Subject Headings:**

Summary: This interview touches on a wide range of topics concerning the history and development of Marist College. In particular Christina Vertullo discusses early life before Marist, her time at Marist, and her involvement with Marist service in Ghana.

00:32 Gus Nolen: Today is August twenty fourth. We're meeting this afternoon in the Marist college library with Chris (Christina) Vertullo. She's a member of the Marist faculty and has been with the college for a Good number of years good after noon Chris.

00:47 Christina Vertullo: Good afternoon Gus, how are you?

00:49 GN: I am good. Chris I think I explain to some time ago that this is a recording to be used in the Marist College archives. We're trying to get a picture of from those who have been here for a number of years a long view of the college and how it has developed, its history and development in the last two decades, three decades. I think you can be a very valuable asset to this enterprise. First however, though let's get an overview of yourselves. Say few words, please because about your early life. Where were you born, went to school, and early interests?

1:29 CV: Sure Gus So I was born on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Grew up in Woodside, Long Island in the first four years of my life. Moved to the Adirondacks by Lake George. I had an immigrant father who believes children were assets. And we worked from early ages on. We had motel business which we physically built. Which I worked at got a lot of leadership qualities through that work. Learn to drive a tractor at age twelve and became a woman with many abilities, qualities of building.

02:17 GN: Chris in that period of time talk about some interest that you had. Outside of work did you read much, listen to music? I don't know if there were movies up there in the Adirondacks.

02:31 CV: I guess I could say that I commune with nature. I certainly we didn't go well. There was actually a little movie theater that we went to occasionally in Lake Luzerne. But live was very different rural, work oriented as I said. Back then I always thought there were three careers a woman could do and she could be a secretary she could be a nurse or a teacher. I was sort of on the cusp of when women were admitted to engineering school. I knew I wasn't going to be the secretary. I didn't really think I had the patients for a nurse. Left me with teaching. But I knew I would want to be a teacher.

03:20 GN: Good going to high school though was it a big high school. Coed how would you describe that High school experience?

03:31 CV: It was very rural. There were two grades. It was a school from kindergarten to twelfth grade. There were two kindergarten classes, by the time I graduated there were thirty two students. So it was easy to excel, to be at the top. It was an International Paper Mill Factory area. My father worked there. Many young men the graduated from the school went on to work there. So it was unusual and I thought I could do well because I had done well in high school in a small environment.

04:15 GN: Good. Now you go to college and where did you go to college?

04:18 CV: I went to the college of St. Ross in Albany a New York.

04:22 GN: Majored in?

04:23 CV: Majored in mathematics. Knew I wanted to be a math teacher. Tutored students etc. like the idea of teaching mathematics.

04:34 GN: And right out of college did you get a job teaching?

04:39 CV: Taught at Roosevelt High School in Hyde Park, New York. Came to Hyde Park with one of my college friends, we roomed together in an apartment in Hyde Park .And I taught for four years until I stopped to have a baby. Had gotten married to another math teacher.

04:58 GN: OK moving on from a high school how did you find Marist. What was the occasion of you coming here?

05:06 CV: Well Marist was in the community of Poughkeepsie. I lived about twenty five minutes away. My husband was a math major math teacher and he graduated from Marist. I remember bringing my children to Marist College to swim in the outdoor swimming pool. Where they learned to swim at a very early age.

05:29 GN: There's a picture of that swimming pool just above you there. I would like to have a copy of it for my own propose, but staying focused on this now. What was the position you applied for when you came here was it a regular teaching position?

05:50 CV: Yes. My first time that I applied at Maris College was I think nineteen seventy six. I became an adjunct professor

following year in seventy seven. I stayed at Marist for two years teaching mathematics and then I left Marist for a period of five years.

06:15 GN: In these coming to Marist were there interviews or you just saw the president of the chair of the department. What was the process by which you were approved?

06:27 CV: So as an adjunct I showed up one summer morning, afternoon or so in July. Had an interview with John Ritschdorff. And I said when I will know if I have the position and he said you have it. So I was excited that I got the adjunct job for seven hundred dollars.

06:49 GN: All that. Alright, moving on to a full time position. When did that happen been.

06:57 CV: So the Year Later. So I was full time at Marist from seventy seven and eighty. Taught calculus, statistics, an operational models class for the business department, an intermediate algebra for a core mathematics.

07:17 GN: You had spoken earlier about your further education in computer science and the computer field did you ever think of going into that field.

07:28 CV: While since I didn't have a permanent job at Marist and I had a change of marital status I said all right what am I going to do if I don't have a permanent job and Marist to support myself. So I looked at my students who had degrees in computer science and were making lots of money. And I didn't really want to go back to the high school because I liked the college teaching so much. I got a master's here for Marist in computer information systems. Prior to that I had gone to Dutchess and taken oh the early computer courses and Cobalt and Pascal and learned how to program there.

08:14 GN: But there was no possibility of doing, teaching computer science here?

08:18 CV: I could have taught the computer science if I wanted to but I enjoyed teaching the mathematics. So I took the degree and never really used it, but it taught me lots about being a student and seeing teaching from the perspective of a student. So I think it made me a better teacher here at Marist.

08:43 GN: In your firsts to this year I think there's been a dramatic change in the availability of equipment for instance in classroom.

Have the math people profited by this.

08:57 CV: Well sure. Not as much as maybe computer science. But we certainly went from when I was in college a calculator was bigger than a typewriter and if you dropped it you could kill the whole class. Heavy etc. I don't even know if I can drop it. To handheld calculators, to computer software, to using mini tab if you wished on the computer. So technology for math was in visual displays of the of calculus. Pictures that you would hand draw in the past or the use of the handheld calculator which is a computer that you can program. Or get statistical packages so much different than even in the eighty's when I taught the simplex method and they had to do laBoreas calculations. Now you let the computer do the calculations a new apply the concept.

09:59 GN: But in the class they use power point, overhead slides projectors or rather than to chalk on the board extra.

10:07 CV: Well we don't to chalk and talk as much. I use the document camera and write my notes on paper and it's displayed up on the screen and so it's clearer for the students etc. and never could I have a imagine that. In the seventy's eighty's or early ninety's. Or yes, we can display the computer we can look up facts if we need to. Excel is not really used as much in the courses that I teach, but certainly other math professors might be using Excel and other computer software for statistics.

10:47 GN: OK. Let's change the focus a little bit again now. Anybody coming on the Marist campus now would be stunned as compared to what it was when you first came and so the question is how this did happen anyway. And you would have to say. Well the driving force of it is.

11:10 CV: Dennis Murry. So just like I'm not the same person now that I was in the seventies and how I teach, nor are the students are the same campuses isn't the same the buildings are more sophisticated? You did to get into them in the classrooms are nice looking. Everything is so different than before. The campus itself is physically different. So really the change I feel came with Dennis Murry.

11:40 GN: That's the leadership role. Now moving on from the leadership role there are other factors there's location, there's the

Marist spirit, there's a tradition could you say something about that area.

11:54 CV: Well the Marist tradition is through the Marist brothers. Their philosophy of doing things quietly helping people, community, service, ethics, Leadership, involvement of students, interacting with students. And so that spirit is still here and that's really something that makes Marist unique. Other colleges do it too. But ours is the Marist spirit. And it's important for us to maintain that ethical perspective in the service perspective the leadership perspective educating the whole student. Seeking ways to expand yourself, travel etc. And that's a brand that Marist needs to remember and utilize and carry into the future in order to make us unique from other universities.

13:01 GN: I think for my point of view I would have to agree and I think it's probably one of the best example is in the presidency starting with Brother Paul Ambrose, following by Dr. Foy and Murray himself now has become an honorary member of the Marist brother so there was a kind of tradition did you know Brother Paul.

13:26 CV: I knew Brother Paul. Yes. Very engaging had good ideas. Travelled a lot into his older age. Was really like a model oh, I'd like to do all those things that Brother Paul does extra or how he raised money or how engage people and all the little funny stories that go about Linus Foy was the one who hired me here at Marist then Dennis was the president.

14:02 GN: For the last thirty eight years something like that. That's one's series of changes are there courses that you taught that the content has changed because the students themselves learn more in high school or come with this knowledge.

14:23 CV: Yes exactly. So one of our basic core courses was intermediate algebra and slowly we said we don't need that anymore because as Marist grew in reputation in name it brought in better students. As the faculty grew more faculty had P.H.D.'s. Now everybody nearly probably ninety five percent have Ph. D.'s in terms of full time faculty. So there were better expectations for Marist and certainly math courses like intermediate algebra that I just mentioned went by the wayside because we didn't need it. Even something like I've just mention a little while ago. Simplex which we taught in operational models once the computer came we didn't need to teach that you know manually. We do the concepts of what happens so you play a what if concept trying to make judgments extra so certainly a has moved up in what we need to.

15:36 GN: And moving up the require to teach at Marist has also moved up. Could you say a few words about that?

15:44 CV: So I have a masters and I've been here a long term and tenure track, but anybody hired permanently on a non-tenure track for me anybody hired permanently would have to have a Ph. D. At Marist so the requirements have changed academically from the early nineties has changed drastically for professionals for faculty members.

16:22 GN: And the going along with that the performance of the on staff that is you evaluated on by yourFi can chair or by the Dean or by your students.

16:33 CV: So you're evaluated in three areas at Marist in terms of your teaching in terms of research or professional development in terms of service, to the college servers, the community service to the students. So the requirements are certainly if you're on a tenure track you're expected to develop. Professionally produced research. That's professional join for teaching. You know. Good student evaluations. And good reviews by your peers whenever you're evaluated good reviews by your chair extra and another factor is marit pay. We never were valued and praised or not praised by how much you got in terms of marit pay so that was an all-new as Marist went through and you're making faculty accountable.

17:37 GN: Ok let's talk about the students now. How have they changed or how they radically changes this is the campuses change the requirements have changed? I don't think I can get into Marist as a student much less as a faculty member.

17:53 CV: I think we could all say that is we move on etc. So possibly the student of years ago that was in the lower one third of the class may not get and today even. Maybe a little more than one third of the class. So you know how the colleges draws from a large diverse background of. Economics, of at ethic Capacity of geographical capacity, academic capacity. So if you're not pretty high in your class don't even bother to apply to Marist anymore. Because chances are you won't even get in. So the students you know you

always still have the weakest students they're always there, but overall the students are stronger if you were to use a SAT or a High School G.P.A. the cutoff is higher for any of those. So Marist has changed just like its campus says, change its reputation is changing, and it's known throughout the United States and now becoming known in the international community.

19:11 GN: Yes. OK. It all has change, it used to be a just a men's campus. And then we decided to let women in and now they dominate your place. Have you found a woman here to equal to beyond or about the same as the male student?

19:32 CV: Well we know that Marist is about sixty percent women forty percent men. And it's the same national trend. So it's not just peculiar to Marist in terms of the percentage of students.

19:48 GN: Is that true. Nationwide that this is that there are more women going to college throughout the country and there are men.

19:58 CV: It is my belief that's true. That Nationwide less men are going to college than women so we have more women. So as we advance through possibly in the beginning I don't know if the women were weak or not I can't remember specifically, but I can tell you a lot of the women are strong. Just like I guess a lot of the men are strong etc. So I see the women as contributing to the campus, to the academic environment. Sometimes easier to engage women in discussion and class at least in my classes it is sometimes than men.

20:52 GN: Well in the field of mathematics do you see a particular difference?

20:56 CV: There are a lot of strong women in mathematics at Marist College. Some of them go into teaching but not necessarily. So in the past, maybe seventy percent of Marist math majors were in education and became teachers. Now we have more that are in applied math or straight math. They're good, they're can be weak ones but they're can be weak men. So they're not they're an asset, they're not a weakness, they're strong.

21:36 GN: Again changing focus a little bit. What do you think about sports? At Marist is there too much emphasis, too much money in it, or is it appropriate from where you sit. What you see what your take on it?

21:53 CV: There are a lot of students who can afford college by getting a scholarship that's related to sports. So I don't know what percentage overall, but I would if I would dare to guess a third of the students might be in sports maybe thirty percent. They have a good sports program a good advising program, study halls, etc. so it paves the way for the student it teaches them workman ship, team ship. Usually the athletes because it takes up so much the time they have good time management skills. Yeah you have the week ones, which have the weak ones in anything. So there are a lot there is a lot of emphasis on sports. I don't see it as a detriment anymore than another club etc. So I think it's ok.

22:57 GN: And then related to that the music program and the investment that we've put in time and money in music.

23:04 CV: Occasionally those students like if they are in theater. Which isn't exactly music like you mentioned they might be absent at certain times or when there's doing a play etc. But I think music skills are a great asset too.

23:22 GN: Mathematics involved.

23:23 CV: There's math involved, there's commitment involved, there's motivation, it's another interest, and it makes real life people. It's interesting to see how a student who may not like math necessarily can be a superstar in the music program.

23:41 GN: Good. Here's a question what is one of the biggest needs that you see of Marist at this time? What has to be maintained? I mean the campus has to be maintained. We're putting up a new science building that's been a long time coming. So its buildings is it, I don't know?

24:11 CV: I think maintaining the Marist tradition the tradition of the Marist brothers that looks for leadership, service, commitment to one another ethical which can be used in any profession. In this day and age of many different draws on the human being and as we move towards the next generation of Marist college. Leaving our leadership of Dennis and the past and we look to new president. I think we need to brand Marist. As a small liberal arts college that has many bright students who can produce who are intelligent and who do need to learn you know good character skills and the Marist brother taught us that. So for me moving on and keeping the

tradition of the Marist brothers alive as important as we go for to the next. Marist.

25:18 GN: Have you been of any of these listening sessions that the president has search is operating what's your take on that.

25:25 CV: Yes I have been on one of them, two of them and what I just said now was one of the things I said to them then so.

25:38 GN: Well do we need a Ph. D do a need a woman or do we need a man or does it matter to you?

25:43 CV: Well we certainly need a Ph. D. Does it have to be a woman doesn't matter to me? Could it be a woman sure? Someone that can take Marist from where it is moving slowly, absorb what we have here, and look at how we can maintain, and move even better the higher up than we are now.

26:12 GN: Looking at the three Presidents that we had Paul Ambrose, never had college experience. Lines never had and Dennis never had would you think it be most appropriate be a former president coming in here.

26:29 CV: Former President.

26:31 GN: Of a college.

26:32 CV: Yeah. Of course, of a college. Former president may be a former vice president extra a former president. I don't know. I don't know why one president would leave one college and go to another unless it was a bigger college, so possibly a president from maybe a smaller college who has good leadership qualities. I don't know. I always think the devil we know is the devil better than the devil we don't know. Not that Dennis is the devil that's not what I'm saying, but I think it's very hard for change. And I don't know how you pick the right person. But I hope our committee does.

27:19 GN: The pointer here fundamental question the whole thing we're talking about is college is it worth the investment that has to go in for our successful career at college to get through to get through with honors or satisfactory grades. What take you?

27:39 CV: Well certainly it's costly if I had a child at college age now I would encourage them to go to college. Two hundred fifty thousand dollars for college education sounds like a lot to me. I think I would have my child involved some way in financing it either through you know if they had an academic scholarship or athletic scholarship or work study or certainly work in the summer or maybe work part time or work on campus to help supplement the cost of college education. You can't really exist in today's society without a college education. I mean you can either you're an entrepreneur and maybe you don't need to college but college expands your mind. Besides expanding your wallet in the positive sense. It exposes you to other ideas that academic thought, ethics to different things that you need to know and do in life. And you watch yourself grow from when you're a freshman to a senior and on. So I think it helps to choose life mates work mates.

29:03 GN: You have the joy of being here for a good number. Can speak specifically to a number of students that you've seen blossom as it were in there time here.

29:12 CV: Oh yes, lots of them. Some of them were struggling students that had to repeat my class I would say come to two classes. And when they spend the time. And the positive feedback in themselves that they could do math. They were like you wanted to record every word they, said because they were like shining stars to their other Struggling students. I can think of many of them who learned that hard work and asking questions was the way to learn lots of students Lots of Students it's always fun to see that happen it's always satisfying to see it happen?

30:00 GN: I suppose that's one of the reasons you stayed on here for the number you have do you attend to stay more.

30:06 CV: Well I'm here and I guess the answer is yes. If you asked me six or more years ago I would have said no it's time to retire, but actually I'd like teaching mathematics, I like engaging with the young people. I think I contributed to some of their values and they keep me young. There are many resources at Marist I can tap into whether its faculty members and I want to know about a particular problem or interests that I have, I mean where can you go for better people to ask questions than it a college environment. So I didn't know I'd be here that long, but I am actually as long as my health holds out why would I want to retire?

31:03 GN: Well it's not so bad retirement, they pay you to stay home as it were, but you have full the day to do something and so you

can do something like I'm doing come in and talk to teachers who are still active.

31:16 CV: Well that's true, but somehow I involved so I live alone and so I have a lot of time and. I like to be active I'm a doer so I use a lot of my interests and resources of people and facilities at Marist to do other things that you know as you grow into your life you have some ideas about how you can help society and.

31:43 GN: I was going to ask you about that now. Would you be so kind address a few comments to your missionary activity if I can call it that you're working in Ghana etc.?

31:56 CV: So in Ghana, West Africa country located a little above the equator in the central part of West Africa. Is a small country the size of Oregon Ghana never would I have known where it was other than Africa or that I wanted to go there.

31:19 GN: What moved you to go there?

31:21 CV: So the priest in Regina Coeli church in Hyde Park are from Guyana or from Guyana. They are students in the local communities, they minister in the churches that there are in and they're just so endearing that you want to help them so the church gave money to build a nursery school the first priest. The second priest who came was a Marist student and started water for the world. Africa or Ghana has like three important needs education, water, and reducing infant mortality rate. So listening to those I thought how can I help, what can I do? And using some of the resources at Marist. You know you have the people the facilities you have students etc. that catch your enthusiasm and say OK what can I do to? So I have been to Ghana three times, once on a mission with fourteen people to look and see Learn the culture. What the needs digest what I can do. We've brought Marist students to Ghana in the Med Tech and education programs I was part of that.

33:47 GN: Could you say a few works is that a two way street. Are the students that are going there bringing things to the Africans or when they go there. It's really the Africans who are bring things in that wider education to the student or both.

34:04 CV: Both really so the students go just because they're curious and they want to go and the med Tech students did a clinic and the education students did a teaching. So we also bring we've shipped textbooks.

34:21 GN: Is English the basic language.

34:23 CV: English is the basic language so that it was. And it's a free country has a democracy it's been the gem of Africa. It's the first independent nation in Ghana. It's relatively stable. I don't see any unrest. It's a place you could go to. You can speak English to the people. You come back with an appreciation of life in the students are just so grateful for what they have so they have like every place else varying needs in the capital. It's more industrialized more modernize than in the north where electricity may not be as prevalent or there are lights out. There even lights out in the capital so the students learn a lot they go there to teach, to explore, to see another culture to really learn about themselves.

35:26 GN: How long a time are they there.

35:28 CV: About two and a half to three weeks. They're there and unfortunately with Ebola coming last September into the U.S. Marist put Ghana the do not go list for a while. I actually went this summer for a month stayed with a family. Wept like a baby when it was time to leave them because they were so good to me. Involved in funding, building a birthing center in remote area next to the neighboring country Côte d'Ivoire. I am involved was my interest in obsessive compulsive disorder, also known as O.C.D. Bringing a Psychologist here training him giving him a mentorship opportunity. Raising money. Just little things.

36:30 GN: Speak a little bit about the day there do you eat two meals, one meal? Do you sleep at night?

36:39 CV: So it depends really depends where you go and you know alright it's not that different. Especially if you're with the priests. We stayed the Marist students stayed in hotels, they did homes days with families. Then they stay in some of them stayed in like a retreat center others went to another region and it's a dorm facility. You may or may not have water all the time. You may have to use buckets to get washed you may even have air conditioning it depends where you are etc. So you eat three meals a day, of course as a Marist student. It's not American food, it's not McDonald's I've personally have grown to like the Ghana food except I can't eat out

okrow which is green a guwy that's like the only thing I'll say no to. So it depends where you are Gus. So if you're in the north they're cooking over fires. Open fires, outdoors. I call it the outdoor kitchen and little kids are jumping over hot coals with no shoes on. Or you go to the way remote regions and the kids say to you, would you bring me back a pair of shoes when you come again. Or the priests have not worn shoes they're twenty years old that priest that are here Etc. Or you're in known in the city where everything is more modern etc. very congested, very, very congested. Mobile phones are common like any most places. More common than in the U.S. faster development without a landline telephone. So all these opportunities are available for students to see when they travel internationally.

38:44 GN: What you the typical cost for a Marist student to go for the three week period.

38:49 CV: It would depend upon the teacher here at Marist that is interested in taking students to Ghana. So the first year John Peters did it with a history teacher who an African-American Marist history teacher who had been to the university Ghana one semester. So they did that in political science and economics, they did Psychology, they did Education, they did Health care Slash medical technology so that the students that are going to work in health care or become doctors or medical professionals could see what delivery of medicine was and even look at traditional African medicine and what they would do without traditional medicine, without medicine of the Western world we'll call it.

39:44 GN: Has John Scileppi been involved in the program.

39:48 CV: I got John Scileppi to go to Ghana he's been there three times with students. And we are doing ongoing work here at Marist. Other faculty Sherry Dingman is involved in Ghana and doing things. Maureen Fitzgerald-Riker was involved with students in Ghana, education students. Teaching in the classroom living in the remote villages. And some of the students come back so excited. The part that is always amazing is I get phone calls from Gunna when they get back from the teacher they taught with. So lasting relationships, lasting relationships.

40:35 GN: In closing good. Do you have anything more you would like to say I've kind of gone through a sweep of ideas that I had to ask you, but I think what you have said is really valuable and I'd be happy to hear any other comments that you have to make?

40:52 CV: So I guess my only comment would be to thank Marist for all the opportunities it has provided here for the students, for the faculty for the staff for the local community as it's grown over the years through the leadership of Paul Ambrose, Linus Foy, Dennis Murray the prior leadership of the Marist brothers. You know as a training college. The Maryann College. The foresight to plug ahead, keep going to build. I mean you look at the chapel that was built by the Marist brothers and you hear the story of them carrying the beans. Whether that's correct or not.

41:45 GN: Yes it is true you want to see two hands that help build that?

41:55 CV: You know did it Gus. So building that. So all the things that you can do if you put your mind to it. You know you just have to look at how things are done and find what you want to do and find a way to like look at the paradigm change the paradigm figure out how you're going to do whatever you want and not give up. It could never do what I did for Ghana without the Marist community and the support and. You know to go to Guyana and see the Marist computers there with these kids so excited that they can finally have a keyboard in a computer to look at. You know that comes the Marist academic while the technology part to donate those things and Marist is willing to do that so I'm happy I stated Marist I'm happy Marist kept me over all those years. I couldn't be happy every day and there was always old politics but wonderful.

42:56 GN: Well just say Marist had be fortunate to have you and I think you've added a lot to the developers of the college the students if you touch, the spirit and spreading it outside the borders of the USA. So thank you very much.

43:10 CV: You're welcome.