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Interview no. 1694

Helen Santamaria Sister

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee:	<u>Sister Helen SantaMaria, S.L.</u>
Interviewer:	<u>Eva Antone Ross</u>
Project:	<u>Sisters of Loretto 200th Anniversary</u>
Location:	<u>El Paso, Texas</u>
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Her given name Helen E. Santa Maria was born April 18, 1943. Her nun name is Helen Miriam Santa Maria. She is named after her mother and she wanted to keep the name Helen. Her mother is a native El Pasoan. Her father is from Mexico who came to visit his brother in Juarez. He attended a wedding and met her mother. She was 16 and he was 23. She described their meeting at love at first sight. The pair waited for her to graduate from High School, El Paso High School to get married. She graduated in May and the pair married in August. The number 18 played significant for her mother, with her graduation date, wedding date, Helen's birthday and her death was on the 18th. Helen has four brothers and four sisters. Her family had nine siblings in total. At the time of this interview, all of her siblings were living. Her family moved to Roswell, NM and she returned by herself to attend Loretto Academy. She lived with an aunt and uncle for her freshmen and sophomore year. Her parents returned to El Paso and she lived with them her junior and senior year. She said she was a cheerleader as well and a sister told her to enjoy high school before becoming a sister and the lord would tell her if she had a vocation. She graduated as a salutatorian of her class and gave a speech during graduation. She described her childhood as a beautiful childhood and said her family went to church every Sunday. She said Sunday's were devoted to family time. She said she felt close to God growing up. Her father was not happy with her decision to go to the motherhouse. He felt she was too young, especially since she was the eldest of nine children. Her parents ultimately gave her their blessing and she said he went to visit her one weekend and he changed his viewpoint after he saw how happy she was at the motherhouse. She describes her day to day life while at the motherhouse. While she was there they would make trails in the Kentucky woods. She would wear her habit, veil and apron and blaze the trails. She also discusses her accomplishments during her career. Ms. Ross reads a proclamation about the good

works, programs and improvements Sister Santa Maria accomplished in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She also left El Paso area to take care of her parents in Florida. She asked for a sabbatical after her 10-year anniversary of working with the diocese of El Paso. Her brothers built her parents a home and they returned. She also worked as a Chaplin for the ICE processing center on Montana in El Paso. When Loretto Academy was built, it was built with both cultures in mind. The Mexican families wanted their children to learn English but the English speaking families did not feel the same about their children learning Spanish. She also served as President of Loretto. She tells everyone that the religious life is a beautiful life. Although she is uncertain about the future, she said listening to the Lord is key. She is considered young at the time of this interview and she is 67 years old. She has never doubted her vocation and has always loved being a sister. She discusses the Loretto Community with members, who are sisters, and co-members who are not. She also discusses the bi-centennial celebration of the Sisters of Loretto and their plans for the celebration on April 25th.

Length of interview: 164 minutes

Length of Transcript: 35 pages

Eva: This is Eva Antone Ross on the morning of July 24, 2010, and I am anticipating a wonderful interview with Sister Helen Santamaria, El Paso native, and long-time sister of Loretto, and we are sitting in Sister's living room in one of the bungalows, one of the original bungalows that existed long before the great edaphus that so many El Pasoans know as Loretto Academy, and Helen preceded me as a Loretto grad in 1961. I happened not to be with her inside the building of Loretto High School, but I have had many wonderful opportunities to be around her, and we are going to proceed with questions and discussion, and whatever else hits our minds as we kind of create a chronology, and in a way, a reflection on Loretto as a part of El Paso's history, the order itself as it has evolved over this almost 200 years, and the ways that the spirit of Loretto moves forward into the world here in the 21st century. So that is plenty enough introduction, and I am going to just start with some questions, real simple questions.

Helen, what is your full given name, and what is your birth date?

Sister Helen: Helen N for Nistora Santamaria, and my birthday is April the 18th, 1943.

Eva: What was your nun name? I've seen it in print.

Sister Helen: Sister Helen Miriam Santamaria.

Eva: Can you tell me why Miriam happens to be in the name that you took when you took your final vows?

Sister Helen: We could choose our names back then, and we had to give three choices. I wanted my own name, Helen because I am named after my mother, and if there was another nun with that name, Mary Helen, Helen Mary, Maria Helen, Helen Maria, you couldn't take it.

Eva: Right.

Sister Helen: And so the only way I could keep my name was to add Miriam, which is the Jewish form of Mary, and so the sisters suggested that, so that was my first choice, and that way I could keep my own name.

Eva: A really important step because now your great nieces and nephews call you Sister Helen. I know that your family has been in the El Paso-Juarez area for, I suspect, multiple generations, and

so will you just briefly cover how your parents came to this particular pass of the North.

Sister Helen: Okay, my mother is a native El Pasoan. Her mother is from Mexico, and her father was from Germany. He was an immigrant, after the, I guess it was the Prussian War. He had to leave Germany, Russia. At that time he was from Riga. So she was born here. My grandfather had the home built on Lebanon Street, and she was born in that home. Then my father, as a young man left – He was from [inaudible], Mexico, and when he was a young man after he finished school, he came to visit his brother who lived in [inaudible], and went to a wedding, and met my mother, and so it was kind of love at first sight. Mother was 16, and he was 23. She was still in high school, a real jock. She was, at that time, the tennis champion of El Paso, in the high schools. My father was a perfect gentleman, so they just kind of like, how in the world did they get together. My mother fell head over heels for my father, and they waited until she finished high school. She graduated in May.

Eva: From where?

Sister Helen: From El Paso High School, and then they got married in August. She has – We say this, she was born on March the 18th, and she married on August 18th when she was 18, and she had her first child, that was me, on April the 18th, and now we add that she died on April the 18th. So 18 was her number, and she was a golfer, and she often played 18 holes of golf.

Eva: Totally memorable facts, how very nice.

Sister Helen: So they met, and the first year of my life – Of course, I was born in El Paso, but my father was the Maitre D at the Tivoli, which was a club in [inaudible], and so the first year of my life I lived in [inaudible]. When my mother became pregnant with sister, my father realized he had to find a better job, and so they moved to El Paso, and he started to work in a warehouse out in Fort Bliss. He went from there to one of the highest grades, and became an administrator in the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, and then they moved to Spain in the '60s, I was in the convent already. He was over all of the operations in Spain, headquartered in Madrid. So we're very proud of him.

Eva: Absolutely.

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- Sister Helen: Because he actually went from the very, very lowest position to as high as he could go as a civilian.
- Eva: Say the address please, of the house on Lebanon that was your grandparent's home, and then your family's home, I think.
- Sister Helen: 2712 Lebanon.
- Eva: How many brothers and sisters were in that house over time?
- Sister Helen: There were nine of us. I have four brothers and four sisters.
- Eva: And they are all living in the year 2010?
- Sister Helen: Yes, in 2010, they're all living, correct.
- Eva: How many are still in El Paso?
- Sister Helen: There are four of us in El Paso. My brother Ed and Michael own Mountain Vista Builders. They are homebuilders. Ed builds the houses and Michael sells them. My sister, Cee Cee, is the founding director of the First Presbyterian preschool, and she and her family – She has a daughter who will be a freshman at Loretto. She has been there since first grade. She has a son who went to Loretto from the first grade to fourth grade, and graduated from Cathedral.
- Eva: There is Santamaria influence in many areas of city life, is one way to say that. Let me look again. Did you grow up kind of under the shadow of the Loretto Tower, or on a tennis court nearby, or how would you describe your, let's say, up to age 12.
- Sister Helen: The first recollection I have of a sister, was when my mother took me to Saint Joseph's kindergarten, and Sister Mary Vincent DePaul was my kindergarten sister.
- Eva: She happened to have been my kindergarten teacher, too, a fine woman.
- Sister Helen: I just remember seeing her, and just being entranced with her. I went to Saint Joseph's grade school up through fifth grade, taught by the Sisters of Loretto, and then my father was transferred to the Airbase in Roswell, New Mexico, so we all moved to Roswell, New Mexico. I went to the 6th, 7th and 8th grade to Saint Peter's grade school in Roswell, and then in the 8th grade, I had a long talk with my 8th grade sister. She was a sister of Saint Casimir, and
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they were based in Chicago, and I knew they had an aspirancy in Chicago, which was a high school for girls aspiring to be nuns could also go to high school. I told her that I thought I had a vocation, and I wanted to go to Chicago for the aspirancy. She gave me the best advice I've ever received. She said, Helen, go to high school, those are the best years of your life, and if you have a vocation, the Lord will let you know. So I went home to tell my mother and father, reminding them that they had always promised me I could go to Loretto Academy for high school, so they sent me home, and I lived with an aunt and uncle, in the shadow of Loretto Academy. They lived very near here. I lived with them my freshman and sophomore year, and then my family returned to El Paso, to our home on Lebanon, and so I lived at home my junior and senior year, and it really was the best advice. I was very involved in school. I was a good student, became a Sodality Prefect. I was a cheerleader for Cathedral High School, and did all the fun things that kids do. In about March of my senior year, I just realized that it was time for me to get ready to go to the convent. I gave my boyfriend his ring back.

- Eva: Who was your boyfriend, that somewhat sad gentleman I suspect?
- Sister Helen: A very fine, young man, Daniel **Coska**. His two sisters – He had an older sister and a younger sister, and they both went to Loretto Academy. He and I were very compatible. He was a good student. We studied, and just had a wonderful relationship, but I realized that I loved him dearly, but not enough to marry, and that kind of was my signal that it was time.
- Eva: I think I have looked at the records of Loretto Academy, and you were either Valedictorian or Salutatorian, which one of those two?
- Sister Helen: I was the Salutatorian.
- Eva: And I guess you gave a speech.
- Sister Helen: I did. I found it the other day. I can't remember where it is right now.
- Eva: Oh, that's something you have to put in the archives at the Mother House.
- Sister Helen: It's in my handwriting.
- Eva: Yes, yes, yes, by our own hands.

Sister Helen: I remember practicing it with Sister Matthew Maria **Grennen**. She was the principal at that time.

Eva: And I think Danny Coska is a physician, and he has had a life as a doctor on the West Coast. So both of you went on to other extensive and productive lives, but let's just get back to you attended high school here on the Loretto Campus for all four years, had all this enjoyable extracurricular life, and you were the leader. Describe what the sodalities general purpose was because I think many people who will read this won't know what a sodality really was.

Sister Helen: In my day, we had two forms of, I'm gonna use the word government, one was the student government, and they took care of what student governments take care of today, and the other was the sodality, and it really governed the spiritual life of the students. We used to have councils. We had leaders, and met at least once a week in these groups to discuss scripture, or a religious book that we were reading. I remember when I was accepted as a counselor in my junior year, I just remember being thrilled that I was chosen to do this, and the following year I was elected to Sodality Prefect, which was like the Student Council President, but as the whole spiritual dimension.

Eva: Do you think your parents had a profound influence on your deep faith, or it's just always been kind of you and the Lord, side-by-side. How do you perceive that?

Sister Helen: I had a beautiful family life, and we always went to church on Sunday as a family, and on Sundays it was family day. I had to get very special permission to do anything on Sunday that wasn't related to family. I was very holy when I was young.

Eva: I'm glad.

Sister Helen: We lived very close to Our Lady of Guadeloupe, which was a mission at that time, not a parish, and I used to walk from my house up to Our Lady of Guadeloupe.

Eva: Say the address or the street for that.

Sister Helen: Alabama Street.

Eva: On Alabama Street. Okay, I'm sorry to interrupt.

Sister Helen: I would walk up Alabama Street at night, well early in the morning, it was still dark, every morning to go to early Mass. When I think back on those mornings, and looking at the stars right next to the mountain, I always just felt very close to God, at that time. I have to tell you that when I told my parents that I wanted to go to the convent, my father was not a happy camper. He felt I was too young, and the oldest of nine children, maybe I was just trying to get away from all of those responsibilities. I was going to go to Webster College in Saint Louis if I didn't go to the convent, but my mother was very supportive, and calmed my father down, and I was granted permission by my parents. I went to the Mother House in September, and in February I had a surprise visit from my father. He had gone to New York for a conference, and he came to visit me, and they just told me I had a visitor in the parlor, and there was my precious father. We had a weekend together, and it changed his whole viewpoint. He saw how happy I was, and he saw what a beautiful life it was, and so he never had to be convinced after that. It was a real blessing that he got to come visit me there. Then they all came when I made my first vows. In fact, we were lined up to go into the chapel, and here comes a family, a whole big ole' family, and it was my family. They just made it because they drove all the way from El Paso to the Mother House, and the whole family was there.

Eva: Do you remember your high school graduation day, where it was and maybe Bishop Metzgar was the Bishop at that time? Just give some highlights of that graduation day.

Sister Helen: Well, first of all, was the Baccalaureate. We always had our Baccalaureate at Loretto Academy Chapel, and then we processed down the aisle, had a rose that we gave to the Blessed Mother's statue outside of the chapel, and then we processed down into the gym for our graduation, and yes, the Bishop was there.

Eva: And actually, Hilton Young Hall was pretty recently built.

Sister Helen: Correct.

Eva: Because there had been this great expansion of the gymnasium, the swimming pool, and a separate elementary school, so in the early '60s, when you were graduating in '62, there was this brand new, very beautiful place to have the ceremony.

Sister Helen: Correct, and there were 100 students in my class, and it was packed in the gym. When I came to Loretto, the pool, Hilton Young Hall, the new hall, the dining room, were all built, but they

were building the elementary school. The elementary school was on the ground floor of the main building, and we helped move them from the ground floor to the building.

Eva: You carried books and Crayolas, and elementary material that needed to go from point A to point B I guess.

Sister Helen: Correct. So that was exciting.

Eva: The Sisters of Loretto were even beginning to change, anticipating Vatican II, who was the Mother Superior at that time?

Sister Helen: Mother Mary Luke.

Eva: Mother Mary Luke, and her last name is?

Sister Helen: Tobin.

Eva: Did you interact with her when you first were in the Novitiate or as a postulant I guess I should say?

Sister Helen: Absolutely because at that time, the Mother Superior, the Mother General, and her counsel lived at the Mother House, and that's where we went through our formation, so we saw them all the time. Now we didn't necessarily interact with them, but Mother Mary Luke was very well read in Theology and Philosophy and Astrology, so we would have times when she would get us up at like 3:00 in the morning, and we would go out and stargaze with her. She would just show us different constellations in the heavens.

Eva: Why is it so easy to see stars there in Kentucky?

Sister Helen: Well, you are out in the middle of nowhere.

Eva: Oh, the Mother House is – What's the nearest big city to the Mother House?

Sister Helen: Louisville, or you can Springfield, or you could say Bardstown, but Louisville is where you fly into if you are going to go to the Mother House, and then it is about an hour drive South to get to the Mother House.

Eva: From previous interviews, I know there used to be a train that some people rode when they were coming to the Mother House, but you flew?

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- Sister Helen: Yes, I flew from El Paso. There were three of us that were going to the Novitiate, to Louisville, and then I think somebody picked us up. I don't remember riding a train to the Mother House.
- Eva: And who were the other two women with you?
- Sister Helen: Frances Martinez and Linda Joyce, who is Sister Pat Joyce's younger sister, so three of us did go. They have left since. They have married and had their families.
- Eva: Were you at all apprehensive arriving there for the Postulancy?
- Sister Helen: I never was, no. I just knew it was the right thing. I loved the Novitiate. We learned a lot about the order. I loved being in the woods. It was so different. It was just a dramatic difference from the terrain here when we landed in Kentucky with all those trees, the grass, the fireflies, and firebugs. I loved every minute of it, and we were there 2-½ years at the Mother House. During that time, a very good friend of Mother Mary Luke was Thomas Merton, and he used to come over and give his talks.
- Eva: The general public I think doesn't know about him at this point. A few quick sentences maybe about who was this man.
- Sister Helen: He was a monk who had converted to Catholicism, and he was at the Abbey of Gethsemani. He became very famous with his theological writings, his own autobiography, *The Seventh Storey Mountain*, was about his conversion and his life as a monk at Gethsemani.
- Eva: How far away is that?
- Sister Helen: I would say it is maybe a half an hour drive.
- Eva: And it's a Trappist Monastery with the contemplative life.
- Sister Helen: Correct. He, at times of his life, lived in a hermitage, even away from the other Monks. We used to go over there for Mass on occasion, and it was very unusual for him to leave because as you said, they were cloistered, contemplative, but he would come over and visit with Sister Mary Luke, and had the opportunity to speak to us at times. We also were taught once a month by Father Carroll Stuhlmüller, who was at that time, one of the country's foremost scripture scholars, and he came and would spend one full day a month, and teach us scripture. That was just a great privilege
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too. We just came in contact – The Berrigan’s came and visited us, Daniel and Phillip, I think were their names.

Eva: Those were two Jesuit, both writers and I would say political activists, perhaps you would want to disagree?

Sister Helen: No, I was just going to say they were activists, and at that time, a lot with the Viet Nam War going on, and all kinds of things, so we had all kind of wonderful speakers address us, mainly because it was Sister Mary Luke would be the person who would invite them to come, so we were exposed –

Eva: She had a very extensive network, more extensive network than we probably will ever know about.

Sister Helen: True.

Eva: At many levels, philosophical – Many, many places – Say about Mother Luke’s leadership in terms of American nuns. I think that’s an important thing to bring out.

Sister Helen: She was the President of the Leadership –

Eva: Council of Woman Religious, is that the right set of words?

Sister Helen: Yes, LCWR.

Eva: L-C-W-R.

Sister Helen: And while she was President, Vatican II was in session, and she was one of the first women – She was invited to be an observer. In fact, she was on her way to Rome when got word –

Eva: She knew she would get an invitation and she was going to go.

Sister Helen: Well, if she was going to get an invitation.

Eva: By hook or by crook.

Sister Helen: That’s right. She was on a ship going to Europe to head to the Vatican Council when she was informed that she was invited to be an observer, and so it was so exciting when we were at the Mother House because she would come home and talk about everything that was going on. When I was a novice and a postulant, we were always taught, now this is the way we do this now, but it’s not necessarily the way it will be in the future, and so that is what has

colored by vision all my religious life. I feel anything can take place. The change is just natural, and that anything is possible, and I think it came from that because the sisters before that time period, this is the way we do it, we've done it so many years, we'll be doing it for a hundred more years because that's the Church's thinking, but we weren't brought up that way, and of course, we are an American order, so we are a little bit freer in our thinking, and so I always felt – I had one foot in the old Church, and the other foot in the new Church, and so I have a great appreciation for the old Church, but a great love for how things changed and became more in touch with contemporary society in the new Church.

Eva: I see you as a transitional leader and a transformational leader, both at the Mother House, and then here in the El Paso area because you are very well known from your work with the Diocese, teaching, and all of your brothers and sisters know a lot of other people, and so you have quite a network too, maybe in the footsteps of Mother Luke, but I don't know, I also see these two years as transitional, and probably transformational. A lot of things have to come together, and I know probably the least of anybody for sure, at least in this room, about all of that. You talked about your family reacted to the news, and this very long conviction that your life really would be a religious life. I want to ask about your postulant mistress. That person was shaping and experiencing all this interaction and activity at the time of the Vatican II, who was the postulant mistress, and how did you interact intellectually and socially with that person?

Sister Helen: Her name was Sister Karen Madden, and she was a wonderful role model for us, very positive, very uplifting, and she and the novice mistress really companied the council and Sister Mary Luke, so they really knew what the thinking was. They were right on target with what was going on in the Church, and they just kind of communicated that to us. As I said, I was just blissful, and she was a wonderful leader for us, and then passed us on to Sister Helen Jean Seidel, as our novice mistress, and again, they were wonderful women, they were very sensitive and very caring.

Eva: How many young postulants were they dealing with?

Sister Helen: Well, when I went, there were about a hundred of us there. There were three classes, the postulants, there were 43 of us, first-year novices, and second-year novices. It was a huge group of young people living together. Of course, we had all kinds of chores on the farm, because it was a big huge facility.

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- Eva: Talk a little bit about a typical day in October, not in the cold winter, but an October day.
- Sister Helen: Well, I think we got up at 5:00 or 4:45. The bell rang, we all got up, bathed and dressed, and then we were in the chapel by about 5:30 where we had morning prayers, then we had Mass, and then we would have meditation. No, we had morning prayers and meditation Mass, and then we had breakfast. All this was in silence, of course.
- Eva: When did you get to talk on a typical day in the Novitiate?
- Sister Helen: I would say after lunch. We didn't talk during meals, except on special feast days. We were read to. It was either the newspaper or a novel at night, or what was going on. Then after breakfast, our Novice Mistress or our Postulant Mistress would kind of stand in the hallway, and if we need what we called permissions, may I do this, may I do that, or whatever, or if she needed to speak to us, we would just stand in line and get our orders. After breakfast, we all went to do our chores, and then we would go back to the chapel about 11:00, have prayers again, and then go to lunch. After lunch we had what we called recreation, half an hour of recreation. We'd walk from the upper part of the hill down to the highway. We called that walking to the world.
- Eva: Walking to the world. How interesting.
- Sister Helen: And then we would also walk to the cemetery because all of our sisters were buried in the cemetery. It was a beautiful, beautiful setting. We could talk with one another. Then in the afternoon we probably had class.
- Eva: It was socializing and exercise kind of rolled up into one.
- Sister Helen: Whatever. When I was there, we were making trails through the woods. Some afternoons would be the days that we would put on our aprons, and then just get our tools.
- Eva: You were in the Kentucky woods, in a habit as a novice, with an apron on, and what else, maybe a straw hat?
- Sister Helen: No, we had our veils.
- Eva: Your veil worked pretty well for sun protection?
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- Sister Helen: Well we were in the woods, and so it was nice, cool and beautiful with a lot of wild flowers. We were actually blazing this trail through the woods, and I used to love that. Then we'd come home, we'd have vespers, then we'd have supper, and then after supper we would have an hour of recreation. In the springtime we would be gardening. We all had separate areas that we could garden, or we could just sit, we could play volleyball, sometimes we could swim because we had a pool there. There were different things on different days that we could do. Then, the bell would ring at about 8:00, and we'd all go to the chapel, have **[inaudible]**. Then that started the grand silence, where we didn't talk at all until the next morning. We'd get ready and go to bed.
- Eva: I got to go with some sophomores recently to the Mother House, and the property is almost 600 acres, pretty astonishing, and very well managed here in 2010. Could you just explain a little bit about how the farm part of the Mother House got established historically?
- Sister Helen: I don't know how it got started. I know we had a dairy farm there, on the grounds.
- Eva: The order had previously had a dairy?
- Sister Helen: I don't know. I'm sorry, I don't that history.
- Eva: It's okay. That's all right. It's kind of a live and learn questioning thing, it's not on the official list, so let me return to the official list. Kind of describe in detail about the ceremony of final vows, where were you making those promises, and the meaning of that particular day for you, who was there.
- Sister Helen: Okay. All of our families were invited. Everybody at the Mother House was at the ceremony of course. It was our first vows. We made vows seven years in a row, what we call first vows, it would be for a year, and then you would make final vows after the seventh year. So when I made final vows, I was already in St. Louis teaching. My family all came to St. Louis. They were there when I made first vows, and then they came for the final vow.
- Eva: You're gonna get to write a good little outline. This is just part of the interaction, not for this project, but because you're coming almost onto your 50th anniversary, you personally, and all of your classmates of that particular class have always hit these landmarks in the order, so you hold a special treasure and heritage that is very, very unique, I think. Let me get straight.
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Sister Helen: In the ceremony for first vows –

Eva: There at the Mother House?

Sister Helen: Yes, that’s when you got your name, and so –

Eva: Helen Miriam.

Sister Helen: Helen Miriam, yes. Each one of us had our moment at the altar where we said our vow formula, with our new name, and of course, Mother Mary Luke was there, and I’m pretty sure the bishop was there, as well. It was a beautiful, beautiful day, a Mass, of course, and one thing about being at the Novitiate was the music was just out of this world. We sounded like angels all of the time, with many hours, sometimes in the evening for the recreation period, it was our chorus practice. We did recreational singing, but we also practiced the hymns. If it was a feast day, we’d practice hours for the new Mass that we were learning or whatever, and then we always had special – We took lettering, made special bulletin boards, we did all kinds of things.

Eva: In cursive handwriting, or calligraphy?

Sister Helen: Calligraphy. Right. We had classes in calligraphy. It was really helpful because then when we got into the classroom, we could do all of our –

Eva: All of your honorary certificate kind of things.

Sister Helen: Whatever.

Eva: Frances **Retherman**, who taught music, talked about a specific method of music teaching. Can you tell us the name of that?

Sister Helen: It was the Ward method.

Eva: W-a-r-d method?

Sister Helen: Correct.

Eva: And did you teach students to sing, maybe in Spanish using the Ward method?

Sister Helen: No, not at all. Most of my career was in high school, and for some reason or other, my class was never trained in the Ward method.

They kind of had stopped then, but Sister Rose Vincent was the sister that just promoted that whole system. It was a beautiful system, and years later I lived with her in St. Louis, and so she was in charge of the music in that particular convent. Many of the sisters that were trained in the Ward method have always been grateful because it gave them real basic information.

Eva: It's like a good grammar course. It's a good set of musical foundation.

Sister Helen: Correct, correct. I didn't miss it because I didn't teach in grade school.

Eva: Right, right. I personally have never been to the Loretto property in St. Louis. Did you get to pick what you were going to teach? We haven't talked about your degrees, your basic college degrees, and other advanced degrees that you have, so let's just lay that in here.

Sister Helen: Okay. We were sent up to St. Louis to complete our college education at Webster College. When we went to the Mother House, it was Loretto Community College or something like that. I can't remember what exactly, but it was just the beginning of college, so we had 2 years there, and then we finished the other two years in St. Louis at Webster. By the time I entered the Order, they didn't put us into the classroom without a degree. Now, we could choose what area we wanted to go to. I thought I was going to be a Math teacher. I could have been a history teacher. I could have been a religion teacher. The Dean of Students at that time, Sister Rose Maureen, and she went back to her original name later, and became Sister Helen Sanders. She was a language teacher, a foreign language teacher, and so she said to me, Helen, you understand Spanish, we need foreign language teachers, so why don't you teach Spanish. Why don't you go and get that degree. It was fine with me. It didn't make any difference to me. I just knew I was going to be a teacher. So my degree was in Spanish.

Eva: From Webster?

Sister Helen: From Webster College. My BAA is in Spanish. Now because I understood Spanish, more or less, I didn't really speak it because when we were growing up my father was learning English, so English was our first language, not Spanish. So when I got to Webster, they wouldn't let me take any grammar courses. They threw me into immediate advanced courses, culture and literature and all that. I just remember going to the Department Chair, and

just begging her to let me take a first year grammar course. I was having to do term papers and I was just floundering. She wouldn't let me, but she gave me an independent course. I met with her weekly, so I could get grounded. I had taken two years here at Loretto, but it was just not enough to go directly into advanced literature and civilization courses.

Eva: Around your house there are various examples of visits to Spain or interest in Spain, and I know that you've learned about all of the countries where Spanish is the first language, and the Sisters of Loretto have been extensively in Latin America, but where did you first teach Spanish, whatever level of the complicated language, or higher levels of that form, you had mastered by that point. What were your kids like, and how was your first year teaching Spanish?

Sister Helen: My last year of college, my senior year, when I did practice teaching, I went down to Nerinx Hall High School, which is our school, our high school in St. Louis.

Eva: Are those two properties two blocks apart? Is it like here at Loretto, pretty much all within certain street boundaries?

Sister Helen: It's on the same street, but they are separate properties. The college is much larger, and then the high school is right next door. Actually, when Webster was founded, it was founded as a high school and a college, and there were boarders there, but then when we went for North Central accreditation, we were told we had to move the high school out of the college, and so we went down the block, bought an old plantation home there, and that became Nerinx Hall High School. It was the same year that St. Louis University did the same thing. St. Louis University was becoming accredited by the North Central. It's a Jesuit University. They have a high school also, and that's when they moved a little bit further out from the city, and established St. Louis University High School.

Eva: You said before this interview that actually St. Louis residents have many Catholic high schools to choose from. What do you think attracted your students to Nerinx Hall in particular?

Sister Helen: I think the strongest point was that we developed leaders of women, leadership program and fine arts. We were very strong in the fine arts, and we did a lot of recruitment, and we just had a free spirit. Kids that used to come visit us – I used to require when I was principal that they spend at least a day on campus with us, these little 7th and 8th graders.

Eva: The recruiters – You wanted them to get a little dose of the real life of Nerinx?

Sister Helen: Absolutely. I used to say it when I was promoting it. You need to come and feel, listen to the teachers, talk to the students, walk through our halls, eat our cafeteria food, do you feel at home here? Is this where you want to spend the next four years of your life? They had nine choices of girl's private Catholic high schools, and six choices for the boys. It was really important. I never felt I was in competition with all the others. I felt everybody had a designated school, and I wanted them to find out which one was the one they felt drawn to. Many of our students were siblings, or daughters of graduates, but we just had a wonderful, wonderful population there. They came from all over St. Louis. You would think it would be –

Eva: They came on city buses or by car?

Sister Helen: Car, city bus, whatever. Some of them even lived in Illinois because you are right there at the Illinois – You know, Mississippi divides Missouri and Illinois.

Eva: I'm going to try to quickly interweave a little bit of the past, and then this proclamation that I found by accident here on your wall. Did you teach Spanish for like 7 years, 8 years?

Sister Helen: Yes, I was assigned, well I was going to tell you, with practice teaching, I actually went to Nerinx, and I got one of our Sister's Spanish classes. She was working on her Master's at St. Louis University, and so they said, here teach these classes. So, I did. Then I was assigned to Nerinx Hall when I graduated from Webster in '66, and I taught seven years of Spanish. I kind of then felt I needed a change, and after those seven years, I went one year to the inner city, and taught at a grade school, completely different from what I was – Grade school instead of high school children. I was teaching social studies, religion, music, all of that kind of stuff.

Eva: Self-contained classroom?

Sister Helen: I was in the city, where as our school was out in the country. I was with all little Black children, where as Nerinx was a mixture, but not predominantly Black. It was a wonderful experience, but I was in that classroom five minutes and realized I belonged in high school. I only had 15 fifth graders, and I just couldn't keep them

in their seats. The end of that year, we had a wonderful relationship. I fell in love with those children, but at the end of the year that school closed, and consolidated with another Catholic School, so I took that as my sign to go ahead and get my Master's. I got permission to go to Wash U.

Eva: What's Wash U?

Sister Helen: Washington University.

Eva: Which is in St. Louis?

Sister Helen: Correct. I got my Master's in Education in the Teaching of a Foreign Language. When I got my Master's, the sister that had replaced me had left Nerinx, so they just invited me back, so I taught another six years. At the end of the sixth year I said to the Principal. I think I have some administrative skills. I'd like to teach part-time, and then I'll assist with discipline or whatever just to learn, and to see if I can help in Administration. When I got my contract at the end of that year it was for full-time Spanish teacher, so I took it back to the Principal, and said to her Sister, do you remember our conversation? She said, I do Helen, but I need a full-time Spanish teacher, and so I gave her the contract back, and said thank you very much, but I'm gonna go get my degree in Administration.

Eva: And you were free to do that because of some of the changes from Vatican II?

Sister Helen: Right. I just got permission from the Superior. I applied for a scholarship, which I got, and then I went to Washington University and got a second Master's in Educational Administration and Policy Making, and when the end of that year came, that Sister that did not accept me as helping her in administration, she retired, and so I took that as my sign to apply for the Principalship. There were several applicants, and I was accepted.

Eva: What year was that?

Sister Helen: About 1981. Then, I remember thinking – You know, God's way is the right way because when Sister didn't allow me to have some administration time, I thought well, your hard luck, you're losing a good teacher, and I went on to school, and I think had she accepted my offer, I'd probably still be assistant principal.

Eva: Well, I say there were God's hands in every bit of it myself.

Sister Helen: Correct.

Eva: Your days as a teacher were very busy. Your days as a novice were 5 a.m. to 10:00 at night. Did you sometimes feel as if there was just too much to do, and you were on this incredible treadmill, grading papers, administering, getting students involved in certain activities, how did you pace yourself to be able to cope?

Sister Helen: Very poorly. You remember I worked with Club 44 too when I was a teacher. I taught all day. I'd go afterwards and work with the kids, and then all summer, and then when I became Principal, I was not able to do the all summer and all that, and that is when I established the Chapter at Nerinx Hall High School. It was a lot of work, but I was young, and had a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of energy, but it was a lot of work, and I worked from dawn to dusk. It's part of my nature to work all the time. I entered the community for mission to serve, and so that is how I see my life, being involved and doing what I think God has called me to do, so I just do it 24 hours.

Eva: Do you think you are a workaholic?

Sister Helen: I am, and I have really had to learn that you need to take some time for yourself. I was very conscientious about taking two weeks during the summer to go home and visit my parents, and after about the fourth day at home, I woke up and enjoyed my family because I would just be exhausted, and then I went two weeks at Christmas to visit, wherever they were, I would visit them. So I had four weeks for vacation, and then it's just always been that way.

Eva: I recently was at an event that it was a fulfilment of a promise you made for a fund raising in your current activity, being the administrator for Via Maria, and in your house here is your guitar, which you go to classes, and take a little leisure, and you and your community college professors sang beautifully on the porch of your brother's lovely West side home, so I think you are starting to loosen up just a little bit, and I think that is a healthy, healthy thing. This is all privately held opinions, anybody can disagree who wants to. I am going to read this proclamation that I took off your wall here. It is dated June 19th, 1997, and it is from a councilman in St. Louis. Just the straight text:

Where as, Sister Helen Santamaria of Nerinx Hall High School has long worked to better her community in so many ways, having accepted the position of Girl's Director of Club 44, a service

organization in 1969, where she immediately set about to organize summer nursery schools, bus tours, and while always an inspiring presence, Sister Helen consistently was able to find an answer for a hesitant waitress at Club 44's brotherhood dinner, and for the young painters and decorators at the YMCA Club 44 room, and managed to somehow deal with all of the government forms piled in Joe Cole's office, and where as, in addition, Sister Helen helped to organize the Meacham 76 Program, which resulted in street, sewer and housing improvements, and directed tutoring groups in Meacham, Missouri, and coached sometimes winning baseball teams, where as, when one person striving for community improvement has touched so many people's lives in so many ways, it is fitting that the council take notice. Now, therefore, be it resolved by the City Council of St. Louis County as follows:

On behalf of all of the residents of St. Louis County extends its appreciation to Sister Helen Santamaria for working to make the county a better place to live, work, and raise a family, and a certified copy (which I think I hold in my hands) shall be given to her as a permanent testament.

Now, you didn't say that not only did you do this service club, but you also helped with the sewers, so maybe we should put a bit about those things on. I'm going to put this on the wall, and you just talk to the machine.

Sister Helen:

When I was working with Club 44, it was in a county pocket of Black community, and there were no sewers, no sidewalks, and very dilapidated housing. My friend, Joe Cole, who I worked with at Club 44, was hired by St. Louis County to oversee this Meacham 76 Program that really and truly completely revitalized that whole community. We set sewers, and my kids because we had boys and girls, we demolished some of the houses that needed to be demolished, and then we did the sweat equity when the contractors were putting up the new houses, my kids would go in and do some painting or whatever they could do. Then we definitely cleaned up the house when it was done and get it ready for the families to move in, so we were really involved in that whole community project that was very successful. Now, it has apartment complexes, but it is mostly new homes and it is quite lovely. It was a big transformation, and we were a part of all of that.

Eva:

Club 44 was just an idea you had, or was it a replication of some good formula that you had seen someone else use. Talk about Club 44.

Sister Helen: Joe Cole was the founder of Club 44, and he started this program back in the days that Black children could not compete in sports in school, or in YMCAs. They could not swim at any of the pools. So he, in my estimation, was the first outreach worker. He took YMCA programs to the community. He had an old school bus, he'd fill up the bus and go to the downtown Y where there was a pool, and all of the kids would get out of the water, all of the white kids because the Black kids were coming, and they would taken their hour, or they had this softball team that I told you about, a Black team, and we competed against other churches. I was the coach of the Meacham Park First Baptist softball team. So this club took all the programs that these kids could not go to because they were Black, even though the traveling - There were places that we couldn't stay because we had Black children, but towards the end of my working with them, all of that changed.

Eva: The whole country was really – Brown versus the Board of Education had happened in 1954, the Civil Rights Movement, and Martin Luther King, every other human being that helped that come to fruition, the Civil Rights Act of 1963, that might be inaccurate, those things – You were there when things were bubbling like crazy I guess.

Sister Helen: Right, and at that time, there were a lot of Black groups that were angry, but Joe always taught the children to be positive, and he never asked them to do anything that was negative. We hosted this annual dinner, and invited all of our local representatives, Senators.

Eva: The Brotherhood Dinner that's mentioned.

Sister Helen: Later on we called it the Annual Dinner of Love because brotherhood is very masculine, and we wanted to be all-inclusive, and the Attorney General of Missouri always hosted it. He was the emcee like, and he became Governor. Governor John Ashcroft, and even when he was the Governor, he came to our banquet. He didn't service as Master of Ceremonies at that time because he was the Governor, but he came to the dinner, and he sings beautifully and he always sang. He was always a guest performer at our dinner. So Joe helped these young people to know who their elected officials were, and to interact with the whole community. We worked with the Chamber of Commerce. We worked with the Kirkwood Lions. We worked with the Churches. He always wanted those Black children to be in a positive light. He never was like, you owe us this at all. He was a wonderful influence in my life as a young Sister.

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- Eva: Will Joe maybe be attending any of the ceremonies for your anniversary?
- Sister Helen: Oh, if he's alive. He's 92.
- Eva: Well, we're all working hard to stay alive as we journey to jubilee, that's what I suspect.
- Sister Helen: But I am sure if he is up to it, he will be here. He is a co-member of the Sisters of Loretto.
- Eva: Would you say your relationship drew him into co-membership?
- Sister Helen: Oh, very definitely. He knew all of the Sisters. He was very loved and supported in his whole effort. He still goes to visit the sisters at St. Louis.
- Eva: And maybe you will get to see him in September when you get to go for your visit.
- Sister Helen: Absolutely.
- Eva: The question on my paper says, if you changed fields, the question is framed in terms of academic fields within a school setting, but I don't know, did your time in St. Louis kind of come to an abrupt end, or a natural end, that you changed from all of that administrative and leadership role, and very involved with all levels of the community in St. Louis, and now you are back in El Paso, in the bungalow.
- Sister Helen: I had been Principal for seven years, and I just could sense that – I had a checklist, and accomplished the things that I felt I was supposed to do there. I went to the President and said, I've done everything I could do, we have Strong and **Loma**, financially we're good, the curriculum is outstanding, I can stay here forever, but the fire is diminishing within, so I said to her that I think it's time for me to go, and so immediately we started to plan. We announced to the school. I had no idea where I was going. I just – That's how the Lord works with me. Some little signs say it's time to move on, you've done everything I've asked you to do, go to the next thing. I got a call from Sister Anthony Mary, the first President at Loretto Academy, asking me to come and set up a development program, as they didn't have a development person, and I said to her I'm an educator, I don't know anything about raising money and all of that. She said you can come and learn on
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us. So I told her I would think about it, I'd pray and give her a call before the end of the month, which I did. I decided to come home to the Academy, and my parents weren't here but I had some brothers and sisters here. So I did come home. I was development director for two years. I loved it. I did all of the recruiting to bring students to Loretto. I worked with all of the volunteers, alumni, parents, kids, and I used to tell Sister Anthony Mary, you really shouldn't pay me, this is way too much fun. She then resigned and I knew that was the sign that I should put in my hat for presidency, and there were applicants, and I was invited to accept that position.

Eva: Were you interviewed by the School Board?

Sister Helen: Correct, and by the faculty, a unit of their search committee, and there were three applicants at that time. I was the only religious Sister. So anyway, we did that, and after about six years, I really started to wear down, physically, mentally, I was exhausted. It's a big job, and it wasn't my area of expertise. I'm an educator. When you are the President, you have to worry about the cafeteria, buses, raising money, all of that was not my area of expertise, and so I worried a lot. When the sisters noticed that I was kind of wearing down, they asked me to take a summer, and so I did. I left the Academy after school was out in June, and went to St. Louis. I was diagnosed as mildly depressed. I went through therapy and whatever, was ready to come home, and I had called. I left Sister Mary Pat Williams in charge, she was the Vice-President of the corporation, and she said you know what Helen, we are doing fine. We're getting ready to open school, just take your time. An hour later I got a call from our President of the Sisters of Loretto, and she said the same thing. She said, just take your time. After those two phone calls, it was just like a ton of bricks lifted from my shoulders. I took a little bit more time, and then came to the realization that I really needed to move on, that raising money – I do very well recruiting, I do very well promoting Loretto Academy, I feel like I am Loretto Academy.

Eva: I think there are some people in this city that are pretty much of the same opinion.

Sister Helen: That wasn't the problem. The problem was the mechanics of having to worry about so much.

Eva: The day-to-day administration load.

Sister Helen: Yeah, I was fine working with faculty and students, but I had to get out there and raise money, and not nickels and dimes. I had to

raise big money. I remember the last decision I made was whether we were going to spend \$150,000.00 on fiberoptics, are we gonna do it or not. We were trying to get the technology at Loretto Academy. But anyway, when I came home to El Paso, that was in September, I got a call from Father Rick Matty because Bishop Pena had just left the diocese, and Father Rick Matty had this new job. He was the Administrator of the Diocese, the Pastor of a Parish, and he was the Chancellor. He called, and he said Helen, I hear you're available. So we had a couple of meetings, and we decided I would go to help him during this interim, and I took the kind of responsibilities that had nothing to do with finances or raising money or Cannon law. I was responsible for all of the ministries, to oversee all of the ministries, to work with the missionaries, just all that kind of thing. I went on condition that when a new bishop came I would move on. Bishops like to bring their own people. Well, Bishop Ochoa was announced in June and he came, and just expected Father Matty and me to stay. I did stay in that capacity for seven years as vice-chancellor of the diocese. Father Matty then left, and we brought in another Chancellor, and he left shortly afterwards, and so the Bishop realized that I need to relook at my configuration of administration, so we worked on that, and put some people in place, and it just seemed the appropriate time for me to move on. So I did.

Once we got those people in place, I said to Bishop Ochoa, I am going to move on now, I think it's time. My parents had moved back to El Paso, they need me. They were getting ill.

- Eva: Were your parents still in the house on Lebanon Street?
- Sister Helen: Oh, no. They rented that when they went to Spain, and we never went back to that house.
- Eva: As you watched over your elderly parents, and enjoyed your family and life with them and all of their extended children and grandchildren, where were they in residence?
- Sister Helen: They were in residence in Jacksonville, Florida, and then they came home after I left Loretto, just right when I started working at the diocese, they came home to El Paso. My brothers built them a home in the Willows.
- Eva: Oh, how very nice. The Willows is in the upper valley of El Paso.
- Sister Helen: In Saint Matthew's Parish. So then they lived there very well. My mother had a heart attack, bypass surgery, aortic valve

replacement. They just needed extra help. I asked for a sabbatical after my tenure at the diocese. So I did have that year. I was very blessed because I always wanted to make a 30-day spiritual Jesuit exercise retreat, and I got permission for that. So I was gone the month of September to a Jesuit hermitage in Colorado for 30 days. It was a wonderful experience, and then I came back home and cared for my parents. After that year, I had a year of serving as Chaplain at the detention center out here on Montana's ICE Processing Center.

- Eva: The detention center is with immigrants or juveniles, or both?
- Sister Helen: It's with persons who are being detained. They're waiting to be returned to their country of origin. I was the Chaplain. I was working with all religious faiths. My job was to make sure they had the opportunity to exercise their faith. I worked with Muslims, I worked with Catholics, I worked with Protestants, I worked with Hindus, I worked with Buddhists. Whatever was there, I got them what they needed, if they needed services, I tried to find.
- Eva: Did the ICE people come get you? How did you even find out they needed a Chaplain?
- Sister Helen: The Jesuit Refugee Services sponsored Chaplains in several Ice facilities in the United States. There was a main Chaplain here, a Jesuit, and what the Jesuits try to do is fill a void, and their intention is to get that void filled, and then move on. So basically, they were paying the Chaplain, but over time, they worked it out so that all of the Chaplains in all of the facilities were being paid by the Federal Government. The Federal Government paid the Jesuit Refugee Services, and I worked for Jesuit Refugee Services as a Chaplain. This priest knew I was on sabbatical.
- Eva: And here in El Paso, and fluent in Spanish, and adaptable in a wide variety of ways.
- Sister Helen: So he invited me, and I went, and I loved it. Then after that year is when I started working on Via Maria.
- Eva: Via Maria is maybe three years old currently? Three to four years old, and will you talk about where Via Maria is especially in relationship to the US-Mexican border and Sacred Heart Church in the El Paso Segundo body.
- Sister Helen: Right. We are in our fourth year. We opened in 2007. Via Maria is a residence for women who are poor, homeless, and without

children, where they can reside while they transition from crisis to self-sufficiency in a beautiful, safe, supportive and spiritual community. We're located at the border, which is between the two bridges that go to and from Mexico, in one of the poorest zip codes in the country.

Eva: Yes, 79901.

Sister Helen: We're in the shadow of Sacred Heart Parish, the Jesuit Parish. In the '50s they built the building for elderly women who were sleeping on the streets because they had been working in family homes all their lives as maids, and now they're too old to work, they have no family, they're sleeping on the streets. So the Jesuits built this building and housed 25 of these elderly women. The Parish ran that facility for 20 years. In the '70s it was turned over to the diocese, the diocese continued the ministry to the elderly, but added men, and they ran that facility for 30 years. They made improvements on the building. In the early 2000s when I was at the diocese, and oversaw all the ministries.

Eva: As you were vice-chancellor, there was a legal change. Go ahead, tell me about it.

Sister Helen: We were cited by the State. We were told that the facility needed to be licensed. We hired people to help these elderly take showers, and so the State said even if that is all you do, you have to be a licensed facility. When they gave us what was required to become a licensed facility, the price tag was exorbitant, nothing the diocese could ever handle. So we made the decision to close the facility. We very fortunately relocated all 25 residents to other agencies.

Eva: Did some come here to Nazareth Hall?

Sister Helen: I think one or two did. Then I had to tell the Pastor of Sacred Heart that we were closing the facility. He was furious. He was furious that the diocese was going to leave the Segundo Bodio. There were still people sleeping on the street, how could they do it. It was a disgrace, what was the Bishop thinking. So I said to him, you know Father, the diocese doesn't have that kind of money. It's not the diocese's highest priority. The liability is horrendous. We are just fortunate we've never been taken to court when somebody fell and broke a hip. Let's just listen, what is the Holy Spirit telling us how we should use this building. He asked me to help him get it open again, and we did. I joined the El Paso Coalition for the Homeless. We needed to find out who was falling through the cracks in homelessness in El Paso. We sensed it was the

woman without child. It was correct. All of the shelters take women with children as a priority, and so women without children fall to the bottom of the totem pole, and so they really weren't being served, and so that is our ministry.

Eva: The El Paso Opportunity Center is run by a Mr. Tullius and a lot of homeless men are also on that property. You interacted with Mr. Tullius, too. You told me a little bit about this a long time ago. How did he help you identify these women, and is it older women, or are you finding the age group all different levels?

Sister Helen: They are as young as 20 and old as 80. Most of them are in their 30s or 40s. We have 22 women, which is capacity. When I went to see Mr. Tullius, he took me down the alley from his facility to show me an old house that he had just bought for a dollar, and was going to transform it into a home for single women because he said they were coming out of the woodwork, Sister, you all are right on target. They had done a survey that year, called a Point in Time, where we count all of the homeless people on a certain day, at a certain hour, and the number of single women just was off the charts, and so it was designated that particular year as a priority, and that's why Mr. Ray Tullius was doing that.

Eva: It's the Federal Government that routinely sets up this Point in Time survey to count the homeless?

Sister Helen: Right. The HUD requires it of any city that gives Federal Funding. Every two years they require a Point in Time.

Eva: It's kind of an extra census of the homeless.

Sister Helen: Correct. So anyway, that's how we began. We had this building. We refurbished it, and wanted to make it very beautiful for women, so that they would feel welcome, and worthy of being with us. We are in our fourth year of operation. There are six of us on staff. Four are residential aides. They are there in the evenings and the weekends. We have a full-time case manager, Sister **Bloretto**, Sister Mary Margaret Murphy, and then I am the full-time director. The first year we were able to pay the four residential aides. The second year we added Sister Mary Margaret, her salary, and then at the end of the third year, we knew that we had enough salary for a director. So right now, all of our staff are being paid. I'm no longer a volunteer.

Eva: Because of the three vows of poverty, obedience and chastity, maybe the salaries for you and Sister Mary Margaret end up back

in the Sisters of Loretto pot. That's a kind of gross expression perhaps.

Sister Helen: Our check goes directly to the Mother House. In fact, when they got the check for both of us, I got an e-mail from Sister Mary Swain, our treasurer general, and she said, Wow. She was so excited to get such a big check, as compared to zero. It's not a big check, but as compared to zero.

Eva: We're movin on up as they say. I have some questions at the end, and let's see if we can kind of move through some of them. Both of us are El Paso natives. We have lived on the El Paso-Juarez border, me for almost 63 years. You, back and forth, and the question I want to ask you really is how you think living on the border affects Loretto students, whether they're here in 2010, or the 1960s, and then a different question is about how having this outpost at literally the line between Mexico and the United States, the impact of that on the way the thinking and directions of the Order. So let's start maybe with the simpler part. What's so special about us being here on the border, and being what is called a "Loretto Girl".

Sister Helen: Well, I think what is notable is the fact that when Loretto Academy was founded, it was founded for both cultures, as Mother **Praxities**. That was her dream to make sure that – Because we were getting a lot of requests from the families in Mexico, and then you and I both went to Loretto Academy, and to have the Mexican culture integrated, in collaboration with whatever we did. When we were there, they couldn't speak Spanish.

Eva: They got demerits.

Sister Helen: Right. I gave them.

Eva: You gave demerits to people who were speaking Spanish, and then you went out and taught it for eight years steady, and at the highest level you could manage, how about them bananas.

Sister Helen: But anyway, what was so precious was that we always had the Mexican families wanting their daughters to learn the culture in English. I always felt it was a little sad that the Anglo component of El Paso didn't feel as strongly about learning Spanish, and so when I came home as President, my goal was to have them become fluent by 8th grade, so they could take another language in high school because I just couldn't imagine, if you're developing committed Christian women leaders, how can you work in El Paso

and not speak Spanish. It just seemed irresponsible not to prepare your students that way. I feel it is wonderful to be right here on the border. It's the place to be right now. A lot is happening. Granted we have these murders in **Cuados** and hopefully that will prayerfully come to an end in time, however, just being here, and being able to be a presence, a voice, to interact with our families that have come through this educational program. Many of them have come back to El Paso because they can't stay in Cuados at this time. I think it's a prime time to really reevaluate what influence can we have to bring peace, and prosperity, justice to the border community.

Eva: Another value listed in the handbook, respect. Go ahead.

Sister Helen: And so I think because Loretto Academy has been here so long, one thing I discovered immediately when I went out into the community when I came home, you say Loretto Academy, and people listen. They want to hear what you have to say. They value if they see a person is an alumni, a graduate, because they know that person was serious about their education, or at least their family was, and that they should be well prepared in whatever way, not educationally, but morally, spiritually, hopefully. We can't say we've –

Eva: Open to moving themselves forward in whatever their job is forward.

Sister Helen: Correct. I just spoke to the Loretto leaders from our three Loretto schools here, they were visiting at Via Maria, and I told them, they are all seniors. I said good luck, I want you to know your lives will never be the same because you are Loretto women, and you'll go into groups, and people are gonna expect you to take leadership. They know that's what you were groomed for. So be ready for that. I said that's how I got started, and here we are. I said I don't know which one of you is going to found a school, or a home for poor, homeless people.

Eva: Or build a factory in Pakistan or invent some wonderful new medical device.

Sister Helen: Any one of them, and I said that's your gift, and you have hopefully had at least these four years to develop those gifts, to recognize them, because you are going to be held accountable to use them, and that's the same message I give to the women, the homeless women at our place. We all are gifted. We are all responsible for what takes place in this facility. I don't have any

more gifts than you. I've just had a lot of wonderful people help me recognize those gifts, and give me the opportunity to use them. We're here to help you recognize your gifts, so that you can then go forward when you leave here, and start little ideas in your home, or wherever.

Eva: On the table where the machine is, there is a copy of *Go On Your Way*, and a copy of *I am the Way* between the two of us as this interview is taking place, and it's the latest revision of the Constitution and Philosophy statements, and simple canonical law. Maybe you'd like to say a word about *I am the Way*, and the Loretto spirit expressed in *I am the Way*.

Sister Helen: Well, it's not exactly new because it was adopted in '97, so that's what, 13 years, that we've had it, but it is new when you think in terms of 200 years. This little booklet embodies our charism.

Eva: What is charism? I have no idea. That's a new vocabulary for the day.

Sister Helen: Charism is your special trade, or Hallmark. What distinguishes you. There are a lot of religious orders.

Eva: As an order.

Sister Helen: As an order, right, and so when we talk about Sisters of Loretto, we talk about an American-founded order, we talk about pioneers, we talk about risk-takers, we talk about educators, and not just formal education, but in every way. We talk about leadership, especially of women, we talk about working for justice and peace, so when you put all that together, that really develops, embodies the charism of the Sisters of Loretto, so that when you are talking to a Sister of Loretto, you are gonna sense something different from when you talk to a Sister of Incarnate Word, or a Franciscan Sister because from our founding, this is our heritage. This is what we passed on.

Eva: Spell the word of the day for me please.

Sister Helen: C-h-a-r-i-s-m.

Eva: Charism, and that's actually out of canonical law, or just maybe straight out English.

Sister Helen: No, it's what we've always used. What is significant about our *I am the Way* is that it is very spiritual how it is written. It doesn't

follow a normal format of a government document, and it has the approval of every Sister of Loretto that was living in 1997 because we went through a process of writing, rewriting, and rewriting. We, as Sisters of Loretto are very collaborative, and we try to make sure that everybody – That we reach a consensus, and it takes time.

Eva: How long did it take, would you say, to get this document to be acceptable to, I'm gonna say almost 600 nuns, more or less.

Sister Helen: At that time, maybe. Right now, we're down to 200, but I don't know it. I just know it was odd nauseam.

Eva: It took a long time to get *I am the Way* in black and white, multiple revisions. Odd nauseam, she says.

Sister Helen: But what's nice about it is that you have one side of the page maybe the thing about mission, but then on the left side, you'll have quotes from Scripture or you might have a quote from Charles Nerinx, like "you must all be united and pull the same way, you must consult with one another, and carry on everything the best you can." Anyway, so this is our document, and it embodies everything it means to be a Sister of Loretto.

Eva: Pretty nice that it was right here for us to put the tape recorder down on, a little piece of bedrock. I want to make a point of asking about two historic events, the Assassination of President Kennedy, where were you, who was with you, what impact it had immediately, and then, you and I both have lived through the 9-1-1- attack on our Nation, and Loretto Academy, we were right on the border for both of those events, and the border feels everything first, and in a very, very dynamic way, so let's just let you talk about those. Where were you when President Kennedy, the first Catholic President of the United States died?

Sister Helen: I was at the Novitiate in Loretto, Kentucky, and I was in a big community room by myself sewing, because we used to have little sewing projects, in what we called the pink room, and somebody walked in the door, and said President Kennedy was just assassinated. I'll never forget that. None of us will ever forget where we were at that moment, and when you are at the Mother House, you don't watch television, except for maybe a special event. Well, were like the rest of the Nation. We were given permission to have that television on, and we watched everything. It was quite unusual at that time.

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- Eva: I thought maybe you were either in a classroom as a first year teacher or something like that.
- Sister Helen: No, I was still in the Novitiate. Then 9-1-1, well I was here at the Academy, and actually, I turned on my radio. I listen to the radio, NPR, every morning, and heard something about something at the World Trade, that it was on fire or whatever, and I thought, I wonder what is going on, so I went into the community room to turn on the television to see if I could get better information, and as I turned it on, I actually saw that second plane going to the tower. I mean everybody has seen that, but it was happening at that moment, and then everything else, the whole thing about closing the borders, no flying, all that.
- Eva: All of our response financially, militarily, and intellectually to folks are perhaps not so aligned with some of what we try to foster. You said the community room, and I was having a hard time knowing where that is on the property.
- Sister Helen: At the Mother House?
- Eva: Oh, you were in the community room at the Mother House? Not at Kennedy's time, at the time of 9-1-1.
- Sister Helen: It's on the third floor where we had a television.
- Eva: Oh, okay. You were in el convento?
- Sister Helen: Yes.
- Eva: Oh, okay. I haven't been on the third floor yet. This is such a wonderful opportunity to be in this bungalow, and in your home, and in your heart. Some of the final questions are, what would you say to a young person this year to talk about what is attractive about the religious life in the 21st century, living a life somewhat similar to yours, all the almost 50 years of it.
- Sister Helen: Well, I always tell anybody that it's a beautiful life. There are many, many blessings, and I feel I don't know what the future will bring. It does not disturb me. I feel that today we really just need to listen to what the Dear Lord is telling us about the future. I almost feel that it is not right to pray for religious vocations.
- Eva: Oh wow, that's an interesting idea for you to say to me.
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Sister Helen: I am going to be excommunicated, but I feel that we are trying to tell God what to do, and I feel we are not listening, not paying attention to the time because really honestly right now, why would anybody want to come to an old community – community of old people. I am considered young, and I'm 67 years old. Something's wrong with this picture. So I just feel we are not being attentive to what the Dear Lord is wanting us to do. We gotta take the next step. Now, with the Sisters of Loretto, we have what we call the Loretto Community, and it is vowed members and the co-members. My vision says we should – the community is the highest ruling body. There's this little section that are vowed Sisters, and then there is this section that are co-members, but this body up here, I think we call it the community forum now, is a mixture of co-members and vowed members, and it just seems to me that's how we should see ourselves. We still see ourselves as Sisters of Loretto being the decision makers, the more important component of this community, and yes we still have canonical ties, and I think when anything relates to Cannon law, then that group of Sisters, there's about 200 of us maybe, well then we have to be involved in making that decision, but every other decision should be a community decision, because we don't want our co-members to be tied down to Cannon law, it's not possible. We're bigger than Cannon law.

Eva: You're bigger than Cannon law.

Sister Helen: That's how I look at it. So I didn't really answer your question. I don't know the answer.

Eva: Like I said, my impression from doing these interviews is that – You know, we formulate a beginning set of questions. I try to stick with them, and then the uniqueness of the individual interviewee, and hopefully the interaction is good for both, and leaves a good historic record what might have been going on, at least in our own two experiences. Now, the order is preparing for this, they call it Journey to Jubilee. They have used that phrase for a really long time, back 25 years ago, there was a logo Journey to Jubilee, and I don't know why the word journey was selected, and in my head, there is a day when everybody who possibly can get there is gonna be on the grounds of the Mother House. That will include vowed and co-members, a very long thought process of ceremonies, religious readings, and places for everybody to physically be. There's a massive logistics task that is being worked out, not to mention a spiritual task, and intellectual task. For me, it's kind of a point in time, but do you see all of it as a journey. What is so special about – For me, it's a big damn deal,

this one day, getting all the people there, all the thought processes, all the books written, all the lists made of every nun that ever signed up to be a Sister of Loretto, so respond to that.

Sister Helen: Are you asking me about the journey?

Eva: I guess I am. Take what direction you want to go with it.

Sister Helen: The way I look at it is, we are anticipating this marvelous 200-year anniversary. It's gonna last the whole year.

Eva: A whole year's worth of celebration and thought.

Sister Helen: Wherever we're located there will be something going on, and in order to get there, you have to plan, and that's what this journey is, from the very beginning, instead of waiting until the last minute to get something done. We are journeying together, getting there, trying to put all the pieces together, and you're a very important part of that piece for us here in El Paso, and then there will be that day of April 25th, which is considered our Foundation Day. That will be a big day.

Eva: I don't know if the bell will stay on the tower from ringing. That's my – I'd be pulling on the bell a lot.

Sister Helen: Well I'm sure the bell will ring at the Mother House, but unfortunately we won't be here at our sites, on that day, the Sisters of Loretto, most of us will be gone.

Eva: We're anticipating the week before a pretty big birthday bash. That's the current title, but I'm sure they'll have other expression. Go ahead, I'm sorry to interrupt.

Sister Helen: That's really – I think I'm finished. I just see it as really taking the time, in order to get a lot of participation, and a lot of input on what this day should be, and mean, and it's really being respectful of the past, with all of the people that have preceded us, and here we are, you know, it's our turn to make this a great event, a great affair, and to invite – and we're still a small little order, but it's very clear that we need to have a greater contribution. We've been around for 200 years, so think of all the connections that have taken place, not just here, or in the United States, but all over the world because every single student or anybody that's worked with a Sister of Loretto has that little piece of us, and is making a difference someplace, something that somebody said, or whatever. So I guess we say on April 25th, hey we made it to 200.

Eva: That's right, in spite of depression, in spite of plagues, in spite of rushing rivers, in spite of our own weaknesses, we've made it this far, and what a thing to rejoice about.

Sister Helen: Absolutely.

Eva: Let's quit there. Is there one more thing, anything you want to say? I want to give you a lot of time if you so choose.

Sister Helen: I just want to re-say what a beautiful life this is, that I've never doubted my vocation, and I think that God has been at the center of it at all times, and I have always loved being a Sister of Loretto.

Eva: We'll let it end with that statement.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 164 minutes