

Oral History Interview with Mary Batinich
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow
October 4, 2008

[Start: 00:00:00]

JS: Today is October 4th, 2008. We're doing oral history interviews for the Milwaukee-Downer reunion. We're in Briggs Hall 424. Could you please state your name?

MB: Mary Smilanich Batinich.

JS: What year did you graduate from Milwaukee-Downer?

MB: Well, I didn't graduate from here. I'm the class of '58 but I went back to the University of Minnesota. My dad was very ill and I reluctantly had to go home. But I did. He died shortly thereafter and I'm glad I went.

JS: What did you get your degree in?

MB: Child development. So, although I studied occupational therapy here and studied it there also but switched to child development because, are you interested in a little more history, because at Downer it was a 5 year program. It was the only place in the country, I think, where you could get a degree in occupational therapy with a Bachelor of Arts degree. I wanted to study the liberal arts, you know, history, literature etc. You couldn't do that in 4 years so at any other college that I checked out you got a Bachelor of Science degree and very few liberal arts courses. So that's why at Downer so many of the classes had a five year program.

JS: Why did you choose to attend Milwaukee-Downer?

MB: Well, for the reason I just explained.

JS: What was the transition like, going from high school to college?

MB: It wasn't bad for me because I lived on the campus of the University of Minnesota so I had enough of big college, big universities. I loved the smallness of Downer. And all women, that was fabulous.

JS: What were you're first impressions of Milwaukee-Downer, upon arriving as a freshman?

MB: It was friendliness and fun and some of the women that I still remember, we were all very close. I was kind of in an unusual place because I was totally scholarship, we had no money, my father was very ill and my parents were both teachers, so I worked for my room and board at a home off campus. So I was really neither a city girl nor a dorm girl. But everybody was very friendly and apparently I even hear things now that I missed. But I had to work for my room and board so I had to live off campus. But it wasn't cliquish, I have no idea who lived off campus and who didn't, really. Everyone was just really friendly and to this day they are bright, accomplished, wonderful.

JS: What were some of the traditions that you participated in, like the Hat Hunt?

MB: I did the Hat Hunt as much as I could, I had these responsibilities. I worked about 3 hours a night, so 15 hours and all day Saturday. So that would have been another 8 hours. So I worked 20-28 hours a week. So I really crammed everything into the daytime. There were times when I would walk back was 6 or 8 blocks. I participated in things at night. I was on the debate team and did a bunch of other stuff. I really loved the school, the setting was fabulous.

JS: In addition to the debate club, what were some of the other activities that you did?

MB: Hat Hunt, I remember the Hat Hunt and golf, I played golf. I was just talking with Carol Holmes today about playing golf. I rowed a little bit, I crewed somewhat but I didn't have the time because I had to work all day Saturday. But I don't think I missed a whole lot. Lantern night, caroling was wonderful. One of the more interesting things I've been thinking about is what happened at Downer actually led to what I did the rest of my life. Students in occupational therapy, we had to do some training in Milwaukee Children's Hospital, as part of our curriculum. I was so impressed with that because my mother was a hospital teacher at Kinney Institute in Minneapolis, for the Minneapolis public schools. I worked a lot with handicapped kids and my own father was paralyzed on one side. Thus the OT interest. Back in Minnesota, I realized we didn't have a children's hospital and so I got very involved in helping build a children's hospital and ended up being on their board for 15 years. I was head of the association of about 1500 women when the hospital opened and we just celebrated our 50th anniversary of the beginning of the association. So it had been started a couple of years before I joined. We raised virtually 8-10 million dollars before it was even open. That's why we were even allowed to have it and now it's a premier institution, Children's Hospital, it's one of the best in the country. So now I'm on the board of what's called Children's Surgery International and we do the medical missions to Peru, Ghana, Liberia, Mexico and I'll be going on my 4th or 5th and final one in January. But I'm on their board and I raise funds for them, then I do all the logistics down there, find the hospitals, get the patients. We do over 100 surgeries in a week, cleft lips, palates, facial, neurological type surgery. So it all kind of grew out of my Downer classes and the Children's Hospital experience here in Milwaukee.

[00:06:25]

JS: Do you think that being in leadership roles at Milwaukee-Downer and, since there were no men on campus, the women did everything, do you think that prepared you for the leadership roles?

MB: Absolutely! No question. I mean we could do anything and in fact we were encouraged to do anything and we had to do everything. There was no choice. In fact, Dr. Dart was my French professor and after Downer merged with Lawrence, she did tell me one day it just broke her heart when the same girls at Downer had to merge into Lawrence, she said the dynamics were so different at the time. Women are much more liberated now and women, young girls, I can see this with my granddaughters, they just don't put up with chauvinistic behavior. But Dr. Dart told me it was just heart-breaking to see those same girls at Downer leaving everything, coming here and just sitting like little Ms. Pitty-Pat with glasses and everything because you didn't want to appear either too butch or too aggressive or too anything. Downer girls were so different than the Lawrence girls, not that they all weren't beautiful

young women in the '60s but she said that she couldn't believe it. So, I suppose that did happen a bit but I would hope that it came, sought its own level at some point.

JS: Speaking of Ms. Dart, who were some of the professors that really influenced you at Milwaukee-Downer?

MB: You know, isn't it awful that I can't remember a lot of them. A wonderful art professor and I can't remember his name, I recognize his face. Isn't that funny? I have a very good memory but I sure can't remember his name. I had a wonderful speech teacher and I can't remember, isn't that terrible? I lost my chem test quite a while ago, I did a move, and I would love to go back and see, do a little research. But I sure remember Dr. Dart. The reason I remember Dr. Dart so well was because I was the only freshman at Downer who had not had two years of a foreign language. And I did very well in all my classes except French. I had never heard 'conjugate' ever and I remember that first day of class and I almost died. My mother's mother was French, so that helped but it was awful, excruciating experience. She was very patient but can you imagine going to college at that level, everything else I did very well in. I got an A in calculus and a D in French and my father said 'that's impossible.' Then I did better the second semester, thank god, but it was just awful. But everything else was fabulous. I just had a wonderful time. Certainly it prepared me to be intellectually curious the rest of my life.

JS: Were there mixers on campus where boys would come in from other Milwaukee schools?

MB: Yeah, I remember Milwaukee School of Engineering and some Marquette boys. But I had a boyfriend in the army so I wasn't real interested in campus life. And I worked so hard that I would do whatever I had to do on campus and then walk home and got dinner ready and did the dishes and so forth. By the time I did all that it was late and dark and I didn't want to walk back. We had some things, though, we had teas. The head chaperone, I can't remember her name, she made us, she taught us how to get in and out of cars, as lady would do that. We had high teas. We had to wear gloves and we all had to wear skirts, no pants in class. She would say "You can always tell a Downer girl" compared to the girls next door and I'd think *don't be a snob*. She was but she tried to teach us nice manners and we all had to learn how to drink tea and entertain properly. That's held me in good stead around the world.

[00:11:29]

JS: Well, living in Milwaukee, were there a lot of opportunities to go out and do activities in the city?

MB: I didn't do a lot because, again, I lived off campus and worked, but I went to Serbian events with my uncle who was there. And I went to an Episcopal church, St. Mark's I think it was. The family I lived with, the doctor was a wonderful man, the mother was menopausal and a horrible crab. Two daughters still lived at home, the sons were at college, but the two daughters lived at home and one of the daughters, the younger one was just delightful. The older one was a hypochondriac. The mother would get mad at me because the younger daughter wanted to be with me more than her older sister. I would say "Look, I'm not doing anything other than being myself and I can't help if Margaret is always sick, if Margaret is always indulged and Charlotte prefers me. I'm trying very hard to walk this delicate line but don't blame me for problems in your family." I had to be real clear about that but the doctor, he was adorable. He

was a Rhodes Scholar and he was the medical director of North American Mutual. Whenever there was a question about a word, he'd say "Let's see what the Oxford dictionary has to say." It was a typical old German family. Dad sat here and mom down there and the food was all prepared and he dished up the food and I'd clean up the dishes. I was part of the family, I was not treated as a maid, for sure. I was treated a bright young college student and they'd had other Downer girls there. One day I came home, right after New Year's, after Christmas break and he said "Well what did you hear today?" They were Congregationalist so he thought the Episcopal Church was rather fascinating. "What did you find out today in church?" "Well," I said "I found out that today was the feast of the epiphany." "What does that mean?" I tried to explain, "We shall look in the Oxford dictionary." He always had a twinkle in his eye, the words were always something between this and this and he would always say "Ah, here it is. Epiphany between Episcopal and epileptic." He would always tease me about being an Episcopalian, so between the hospital where I worked and the college where we had events and them and I would go see my uncle's family on Sunday, that was pretty busy.

JS: Yeah, that was a full schedule.

MB: But I still managed to play a little golf, little rowing, the Hat Hunt, that sort of thing.

JS: I was wondering if you could tell me something about the work you've done with oral history programs.

MB: I've always been interested in history, my father was a history teacher and my mother, who just died this summer, was 100+. Mom wanted to do her memoirs and so she started writing and she had a series of Christmas letters from 1954 forward. They were called Yule logs and she collected them. But she wanted to do her history before then. She was after all a pioneer, her parents were homesteaders and she had total recall and had fine writing as a teacher, first an elementary teacher and then a primary teacher in the hospital. She started hand writing it and she would hire a series of students from the University of Minnesota to input into a computer and they would get disinterested or whatever. So finally, I was kind of, sort of computer literate (but not totally) and I kept losing things and didn't quite understand it all. I wouldn't save things, in those days nothing was saved automatically. She said, "I think I'm going to die before I get this done." I said, "Well, let me help." She would write and I would input it, and then I had a friend. I paid her to add a little sparkle and edit it but it is pretty much the way she wrote it. Then I had somebody else format it, and I'm a great picture-taker so I had many, many pictures from my archives and mom's and we added those. It's really quite a wonderful book. It's in the Library of Congress, Minnesota State Historical Society. So that was fascinating and then, Alex's Mary Ellen Batinich's book, my husband's late wife, that was fascinating. So now I'm just interested in getting Alex's story, his family's story done, and my family for that matter but I'm a lot younger than Alex.

[00:16:32]

JS: Well, we're almost out of time. I was going to ask, how did attending Downer, attending an all-women's college prepare you for after graduation and benefit you throughout your life?

MB: It's benefited me in many ways. It's given me, for one thing, I think it's always been in my favor, I'm probably a lot less diplomatic than I used to be as I get older. But at Downer we certainly, on the debate team and all the mulling over that you do in that tutorial process, it may be my personality but I just don't take a lot of nonsense from anybody. You really know your subject, you shoot from the hip but you also take no prisoners if necessary. That definitely has helped me in some of my volunteer work and business work. I just don't put up with any nonsense, never have. It has definitely made me a better parent, very much so. Do you have children?

JS: No, I don't.

MB: Kids are desperate for rules and regulations and stick to it. I think that that's one of the things I got at Downer. Nurturing is you don't, there are ways to be pretty precise about things and still have a lot of room for compromise and mediation, but you don't back down. You can always learn and always compromise, but if you know something is not right, don't go along with it. I think it made me more decisive, clear on certain things. That leadership experience has served me well in heading other organizations. Much better organized as far as getting things done, doing it and making the plan and getting it done, that sort of thing has helped. Another thing which very much benefited us all was the small classes. That's why the Lawrence experience is so good. Did you go to Lawrence? No, you're from California.

JS: Yeah, I worked out in California. I went to UW Milwaukee.

MB: Did you? See, that was our campus.

JS: Yes, it is a very beautiful campus.

MB: So I've been thinking about that whole experience of living off campus and I don't think I lost a lot. I mean, it would have been fun to have that experience but, you know, I had that experience in camp and going away here and there and traveling. I've done nothing but travel since then. Because then I founded an educational travel company. For 30-some years I've taken tours all over the world. I know I've been to Israel 16 times and Europe probably 200, I would guess. Eight or tenth trip to Russia. I've been to Peru many times on these medical missions. I think that the other thing that it gave me was a real sense of self confidence. I used to be so nervous, speaking in front of a group that I would just... One time I was introducing a man, this was when I was in junior high or high school, my father was in the Red Cross during the war and I had to introduce a man who was with the Red Cross. We were showing the treasure chests we made during the Second World War that we sent to the Netherlands. We put in combs and brushes and toothpaste and whatever, wash clothes. I had to stand up in front of this auditorium full of people and show what was in it and I was so nervous that my hands started shaking and I could see behind me my hand against the purple drape, shaking. I tried to calm down when along came the man that I had to introduce who was the speaker and instead of introducing Max Karl, I introduced him as Karl Marx. So the speech class that I had at Downer didn't hurt either. It just gives you confidence, gives you self-confidence and I'm glad that I had that experience. I try to get my granddaughters to go to a women's college but there aren't that many anymore. There's St. Kate's and that's integrated with St. Thomas and you know. But there's still a wonderful feeling of being able to do

anything. When you get out into the world and hit the glass ceiling at least you can fight for your rights without being considered too aggressive or too anything. So I think I've done pretty well without killing anybody in the process as I would like to on occasion.

[End: 00:21:40]