

Blanche Touhill: Would you introduce yourself?

Edith Cunnane: Yes, I'm Edith Cunnane and I was born in Philadelphia but I'm now a member of the St. Louis community.

Blanche Touhill: And would you talk about your early life: maybe your parents or your brothers or sisters or uncles, somebody who inspired you: your elementary or secondary school teachers, who urged you to recognize that you had abilities and that you could do things for the society?

Edith Cunnane: I should start by saying I was born in right before the boomer babies and my dad was in the service at the time in World War II. I'm the oldest of five children but there's a little bit of a gap between myself and my brother that's five years younger. I'm one of five children and I only have one sister. I have three brothers, two of whom are, unfortunately, deceased. The fun part is having the sister who was born when I was 20 and my mother was probably about 42 or 43 but we would go out and everyone would say to me, "What a beautiful baby," and my mother would be frosted but now, my parents are long gone but I always thought of my sister, Maureen, as almost my child, my oldest child. As she was turning 50 last year, I said to myself, I don't think I can give her advice anymore, although I was talking to her on the phone last night and gave her a lot of advice. I was born in an Irish Catholic home in Philadelphia and there was an awful lot of influence of Irish. Both of my grandparents were from Ireland and there were a lot of celebrations, particularly on St. Patrick's Day: the fiddler and just fun. So I was pretty aware of my Irish heritage. As I was growing up, I was well aware...my father, thank goodness...in Ireland in the beginning, and many Irish Americans believe that your son should be educated, get a college education but not your daughters and fortunately for me, I had an uncle who was a priest who was superintendent of Catholic schools in Philadelphia and probably his influence on my father, there was no question that I was going to go to college. That was probably...from the time I was fairly young, that expectation was there. Now, getting there was a different story because we did not have a lot of money but my dad and I, we lived out in the suburbs of Philadelphia in a small area and they had a little bank and he and I went to the bank and he co-signed a loan for me and that enabled me to go to school. What happened was, I had to pick a school that I could get there by public transportation or hop a ride with one of my

friends. So I didn't go that far away. I went to Immaculata College then; it's now Immaculata University. It was an all-girls Catholic school at the time, probably 1,000 girls. Now it's co-ed and, as I said, now it's a "university" and I know the president now and I'm really proud of what the school has become. I was proud of what it was but I'm proud of what it accomplishes today.

Blanche Touhill: When you were born, did your father go overseas or something? Was there a space when you didn't see him or was he always around?

Edith Cunnane: Well, when he was in the service, he was...actually, he was not sent overseas but he was sent to some places where my mother and I could not go. So I sort of remember him being in and out for two, two-and-a-half years but part of the time...in fact, he had one assignment where he ended up in Ft. Myers and we were able to live on Ft. Myers Beach in a little tiny cabin which is long gone now. So, yeah, I did see him although when that happened, I don't remember him that much except when we went through a hurricane. I remember him being there then.

Blanche Touhill: But you knew him?

Edith Cunnane: Oh, yes, and he was always really the influence on my life. He started from nothing. In fact, he was an orphan at a very young age and he and his brother were very close and fortunately some relatives took them in. But he was determined that he...maybe because he was an orphan...he decided at an early age that he had an entrepreneurial spirit and he started a little business out of our house. So he was around a lot then and I still look back, my mother was his bookkeeper and it was a small furniture type of operation. I remember, we lived in a row home and I still remember we'd play around the boxes in the basement and that was a tiny basement. But anyway, I watched him and I also watched with my father, one of the most important things was, all through my life, even through college, he had a passion for the poor and it was very often he would come home for dinner and he'd introduce someone to us and say, "Tom needs a good meal tonight so I thought I'd bring him home" and my mother always had...with five children particularly, you always have more than you need but there was...it went on as long as I lived there. When he died, it was amazing, he was a man who worked hard but he wasn't a man who...he didn't even like to speak outside of work. He had a great personality but he was a very humble person and when he died, at his

funeral, the wake, you would have expected maybe 100 people, 150 people and it was a rainy night in a small funeral home and we were there what seemed forever. There were hundreds and hundreds of people that came and so many of them said, "You don't know me but this is what your father did for me," and it was just an amazing thing. When we went to the church the next day, it was the same way; it was packed. I knew about some of these things because one of the things I did after I graduated was teach at an inner city public school and I would come home and tell stories and he would say, "Well, I'll send milk for a while to that family." So I knew about some things that he did but I certainly didn't know the majority of things that he did for people.

Blanche Touhill: That's a wonderful story.

Edith Cunnane: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Really, it's very touching. Did he work through organizations or did he just work on his own?

Edith Cunnane: He just worked on his own. He would meet people every day and the community that was near us had a lot of poverty and because he had this little store...it was really a cute thing...people could come in...in the beginning, women didn't drive in the '40s, so he would have a route where every day he would go to a different area of the city, knock on doors. Women would buy a table or a lamp and they'd have a little book and it would be a dollar each week until \$15 and you had your lamp or your end table or whatever. So he met a lot of people that way, in this small store in this community, which I say, had not a lot of...there was a lot of poverty there. And he was just a very humble person.

Blanche Touhill: Did he complain about people not paying their bills?

Edith Cunnane: Oh, no, no, I don't remember anything like that, no, and I'm sure there were a lot of people that couldn't pay.

Blanche Touhill: And did you have a big extended family?

Edith Cunnane: Yes, we did, on both sides.

Blanche Touhill: And they visited and you visited them?

Edith Cunnane: Yes, and my mother's mother, my grandmother, moved in with us for the last, probably 15 years of her life. I was gone out of the house but I really admired the fact that they had her for the 15 years until the day she died. They worked their schedule around her, although my mother was one of seven girls and she would say to her sisters, "I am glad to do this but I want to go away for a few weeks to a shore..." ...they had a little house down in Ocean City, New Jersey, and she'd say, "You each have to take a week and come and live in our house," but other than that...but they were growing up, her sisters and great aunts. In fact, the great aunts lived with us for a while too. We finally had this big old rambling house, probably 50, 60 years old, and we were all very close to these aunts. My mother got sick when I was at a young age and she was in and out of the hospital and these aunts, great aunts, they never married and they had a great influence also on our life. They loved us so much. If we had a bruise, they were the first ones to put a little iodine on. You had these red marks all over. They were always checking. So they moved in and out when they got older too. My father's family was...although he was an orphan, he had a sister too, a brother and a sister and the sister had a large family too and many Sunday nights they were at our house for dinner or we were at their house. His brother that became a priest, came on weekends and stayed with us after he said mass and he brought lots of priests over so we had a very extended family, and you know, maybe my uncle also...not influenced my father so much but probably he also told my father of people who needed help. So that could also have influenced him. But he influenced me the most because he told me from a young age that I would be going on to school. Now, the funny part was, I wanted to major in psychology and he said to me, "Edith, I want you to take elementary education also because you will eventually get married, you will have children and you won't work while you have children but if you become a teacher, you can be in school the same time your children are in school." That did not happen but I always worked full-time but that was the reason for the elementary education degree. I did teach for three or four or...five years, I think.

Blanche Touhill: Were there other opportunities at that time to be lawyers or doctors or...

Edith Cunnane: No, not really. I look back at my class and I think one person out of the class of 2 or 300, maybe a few became lawyers. I did have a sister-in-law who went to the same college, Immaculata, and I didn't know her

because she was five years older, she graduated, though; she went on scholarship and she graduated first in her class and went on to medical school, graduated first in her class and then became a well known physician in Philadelphia. But she was the exception. There were very few doctors or any real professional because most of them...again, at a Catholic girls' college, same idea: a lot of elementary education majors and they taught, a lot of my friends, either taught or got married right away. That was another expectation.

Blanche Touhill: Do you have a life certificate to teach in the State of Pennsylvania?

Edith Cunnane: No, I don't think so. I just let it go.

Blanche Touhill: That's what I'm saying, is if you wanted to go teach, would you have to take a course or a test or something?

Edith Cunnane: Probably...oh, yeah, for sure.

Blanche Touhill: When you were in this community and then you built friends in elementary and secondary and particularly in college, are you friendly with any of them today?

Edith Cunnane: Oh, yes. In fact, there were 15 of us that sort of were a group. As we got to college, we all brought a friend or two with us. Most of the people at the college that I knew in high school could not afford to go away to school and so I had a friend or two that went to the same college. Someone else had a friend or two, it was an intermingling of friends so, as I said, there was, like, 15 of us and pretty close. We have weekends probably almost once a year, every other year for a weekend and each year we pick...mostly Philadelphia but sometimes other communities. I have a home in Naples. They came down there for four or five days one time. In fact, my best friend, I just talked to two days ago. So, yes, we still have a bond and we're going to have our 50<sup>th</sup> reunion in the spring, hard to believe, so, yes, I still have a lot of college friends, not that I could talk to them that often but we e-mail; we have group e-mails so everyone knows what's going on with every other family. It's very nice.

Blanche Touhill: Does your family, the remnants of it, are they still in that area?

Edith Cunnane: All of my relatives, which I now only have a brother and sister, but their families, they're all in Philadelphia and my husband's siblings, with the

exception of one, also live in the Philadelphia area. It was never expected that we would move. I never expected that we would move but my husband had an opportunity that was too good to pass up in Chicago so we moved there but it was very interesting, my father said to me...I said, "Well, it will be a few years. It will be a good experience" and he said, "Edith, I don't think you'll ever be back," and he was right and that's probably true today of many people who move away. They don't come back.

Blanche Touhill: When you moved away, did you call home once a week?

Edith Cunnane: Oh, more than that, again, because I was so...I talked to my father the most. We were so extremely close, although I talked to my mother too but they were always available if I wanted to talk because I think I was homesick the first two years, as you would if you were...

Blanche Touhill: And did you go back and forth for the holidays?

Edith Cunnane: Oh, yeah, absolutely and our children went back. We didn't leave Philadelphia until our children were about four and six, something like that...four and six.

Blanche Touhill: So they knew their family?

Edith Cunnane: They knew their cousins. They were all the same age. Actually, our children, when I think back, so many families each year take a vacation someplace else. Our vacation was to drive back from wherever we lived and spend two weeks with family, on both sides, and to this day, they're close with their cousins.

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that wonderful.

Edith Cunnane: Yeah, it is, considering the distance and there is an age disparity because I married before my siblings did. By the way, I did not marry right out of college as so many...

Blanche Touhill: Talk about that: Did you go to work?

Edith Cunnane: Yeah, I taught for the five years. I also...

Blanche Touhill: At the Philadelphia Public Schools?

Edith Cunnane: I started in the Catholic school system...and you'll enjoy this...I found out, after the first year...I was in a high school; they needed a teacher in the Catholic high school down the road, so I took the job. I was making \$3,000 a year. Somehow, because it was men teachers, women teachers, it was a co-ed high school, I somehow found out that the men were making \$4,000 a year. So I went to the principal's office and asked why was I making \$3,000 and so-and-so making \$4,000 and he said, "Well, the philosophy here is that most men are raising a family." Well, I'm real friendly with all these men who are single and have no intention of getting married, so I can't believe I did this today, but I organized enough women that we actually had a picket line and...I can't believe I did it...the following year we were making \$4,000 a year also.

Blanche Touhill: Did that occur all through the Archdiocese? Was it an Archdiocese or was it just a single school that made that decision?

Edith Cunnane: No, I don't know but I suspect within a short period of time, word of that would get out. It's too long ago. I don't remember it but I know in our school, which was a very large high school, that all the...we had a lot of nuns teaching there but we also had a lot of the laypeople. So that's probably one of the funnier experiences of my first job.

Blanche Touhill: When they settled...or they just didn't settle? The next year they just raised the salary quietly?

Edith Cunnane: Yeah, oh, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: So they solved it in a peaceful way?

Edith Cunnane: Yes, and we weren't out that long, probably three or four days. I don't think we were on a highway. I don't think they wanted us too long out there, yes, they agreed.

Blanche Touhill: Now, did the men march with you or just the women?

Edith Cunnane: No, they may have sympathized with us.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I'm sure they did.

Edith Cunnane: Yeah, but no, it was just the women teachers, and now that I think about it, some of them were from a few other schools so I'm really not sure how that worked out.

Blanche Touhill: Did any students join you?

Edith Cunnane: No, I don't think so.

Blanche Touhill: It was really a professional calling of attention that there was an inequity?

Edith Cunnane: Yes, yes.

Blanche Touhill: So you taught in the schools. Then what happened?

Edith Cunnane: Well, I met my husband when I was about four years out of school. I was 25 and he was 30 and so it didn't take us too long to know that this was the right thing to do. In fact, we only knew each other seven months before we got married. My father still kept saying, "What's his name?" and more importantly, "Is it Irish?" My husband is 100% Irish but Cunnane didn't sound too Irish to him. My maiden name was McGary. So anyway, they became good friends and I continued to teach for a few more years. That's when I switched from the Catholic school system to the public school system. I went into the inner city community. It was very interesting there too. I went to the worst part of the city and it was so bad that the police...we would go so far to a parking lot and the police would escort us into the schools. Again, being young, you didn't worry as much as you probably should have because there was a lot of violence.

Blanche Touhill: Did you teach elementary or secondary?

Edith Cunnane: Then I started teaching elementary and second grade. My biggest recollection from that is, when there were parent/teacher conferences, no one would show up. I mean, you'd just end up with a book, reading and you'd wait an hour or two and literally no one would show up.

Blanche Touhill: Did they show up in the Catholic schools?

Edith Cunnane: Yeah, they did, but the Catholic school was a suburb, it was in the suburbs but I suspect probably in the city, there probably would have been much better participation. So that was the beginning of my career. I've really jumped through a few different careers but when we ended up here in St. Louis...

Blanche Touhill: So you were teaching when you moved to Chicago?

Edith Cunnane: Mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: And then when you moved to Chicago, how many children did you have?

Edith Cunnane: I only have two children, they were four and six and I had always worked, even after they were born and none of my friends worked and that was interesting too because I graduated in '64 and as they had children, they all stayed at home and, even though they were friends, there was some, like, "Why are you doing this? Why are you continuing to work?" and I just felt...maybe because I was 25 when I got married, we didn't have a child for three years...not that we wanted to wait but we didn't have a child for three years and when we did...so I'm 28, I'm used to working...oh, we moved to California at one point and I worked there, and again, a funny story: They hired me because they needed teachers for the immigrant students whose parents worked in the fields and so on and, of course, they didn't speak English and I didn't speak Spanish so that was a very interesting experience. There was a lot of finger pointing and whatever. But I never stopped working after we had children and some of my friends were not reticent in saying, "Why are you working now?" and that "You should be home with your children." So when I moved to Chicago, I thought to myself, well maybe I'm just so used to...now I'm 35 and I just said, you know, maybe I don't know how not to work, so I stayed home for a year and realized that, no, I just had this need to continue to do something that I thought was worthwhile.

Blanche Touhill: And your children were in school?

Edith Cunnane: My children were in school. Our son was in first grade when we moved but, again, I was very lucky, after I had my first child, I wanted both my children to get quality care so I was looking in the community after three months and I found this older Irish woman, I later found she was in her 60's and her whole life, she took care of children and they didn't call them nannies in those days but whatever, and I just got very lucky. She thought her vocation in life was to work with children until the youngest went to first grade and it just so happened, she was about to leave a family. This woman was wonderful. She was the one that taught them how to...she would be there early in the morning. They would get breakfast like you wouldn't believe: scrambled eggs; bacon, anything they wanted, and she would talk to them as if they were adults. She believed in fresh air so they took healthy walks every day but she's the one that taught them to tie their shoelaces; she potty-trained them, and, again,

because I guess the era I was in, when I would come home, you had this big guilt so you had to be the super mom too. So my children had the best of all worlds and this woman did not clean. I did my own cleaning and so on so her full attention was on the children. So our children were never neglected at all. In fact, as I said, I think they had the best of both worlds.

Blanche Touhill: When you moved, you had to leave the woman, but the children were older by then?

Edith Cunnane: Yeah, they were a little bit older. They both were starting school but I still thought...one was in pre-school, I guess, still and I just thought, let's stay home for a year and...am I working because I'm so used to working or am I working because I want to work, and I found out that I was working because I wanted to work.

Blanche Touhill: Now, you were probably aware of poverty every place you taught, weren't you?

Edith Cunnane: Very aware, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: You moved to California and when you were in Philadelphia.

Edith Cunnane: Right.

Blanche Touhill: And then, did you teach in Chicago?

Edith Cunnane: Well, I took that year off and we only were there about a year-and-a-half. When I was there, I was volunteering in schools.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about your volunteering...well, volunteering in the schools is not...

Edith Cunnane: No, no.

Blanche Touhill: No, that's different than...that's maybe room mother and things like that.

Edith Cunnane: Right, yeah. I spent a lot of time tutoring and things like that, and again, we were in a small community but we were there about a year-and-a-half and my husband was recruited to General Dynamics which was headquartered here in St. Louis and when I got here, the first thing I decided was to go back to school. I had some graduate credits and that was interesting too, I applied to Washington University but they wouldn't accept my credits so I ended up going to Webster and had a wonderful

experience there. They accepted my credits. I did take one or two courses at the social work school at Wash U but my degree came from...

Blanche Touhill: What was your degree?

Edith Cunnane: In social work.

Blanche Touhill: From Webster?

Edith Cunnane: Yeah, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Did you ever work in social work?

Edith Cunnane: I did and once again, that was interesting. I wanted to do what they called EAP, Employee Assistance Program where you worked in industry because, again, I was really more business-oriented but I knew I didn't know anything about alcohol and drugs and that was a lot of what you do if you go into a company and into their EAP program. So when I graduated, I got a job at DePaul Hospital and they had an in-patient alcohol and drug rehab program. I was there about a year. I was full-time and a younger man came in and he had a part-time job and, I'd say, a year, year-and-a-half into that...it was a good experience; I really never left it at that point, and here one day, a promotion came up and this gentleman who was working part-time was given the promotion and I was just livid. So I went there and I went to the head of the company that ran the alcohol and drug unit and their explanation was that there were many more men in the unit than there were women and this man would identify with them, and I had had no problem identifying with these men until this job came up and so I was thinking about leaving but my job also took me downtown a lot for meetings and I would go downtown...this was early '80s, maybe '81...'82, and I kept seeing people out on the street and I couldn't understand they were out on the street and I worked a four-day, ten hour day so I had Fridays off and I started going downtown and trying to find out why there were people out on the street. I just assumed...why isn't someone doing something about that?

Blanche Touhill: Did you talk to the men or the people on the street or what?

Edith Cunnane: I did two things: I talked to them. In fact, that was probably the greatest influence...a very cold day, these men were...I don't want to say they were huddled; I don't want to be too dramatic about it...they were all

together and it was obvious they were homeless. One of them had a grocery cart; one of them had a big bag, I guess it had clothes in it, and I said, "Why are you outside on a day like today?" It was about 10 degrees and he looked me in the eye and he said, "Lady, where do you think I'm welcome today?" and that really gave me more impetus to...but I went to the police; I went to churches; I went to...there were shelters, I went to the shelters and their explanation was, why they weren't doing something, is "We have only the money...it's most important that people have a place to sleep at night and we don't want it to become a home for people," but no one was figuring out, to the best of my knowledge, no one was figuring it out. Then I started to find out who these people were and they were the mentally ill, for the most part. Some of them were women who had been prostitutes and then had been discarded; they were people that had lost everything through alcohol and drugs, and just women who married very young and didn't have the skills for jobs particularly and lost their housing. So it was a variety of people and after I gathered enough information, I had to figure out how to do something about it and I decided that the Catholic community wasn't doing anything; none of the...

Blanche Touhill: When you went to, say, the churches, how did that respond?

Edith Cunnane: Well, they just told me basically that they would give them sandwiches or whatever and actually, a few of the churches downtown, like to take in women, and babies particularly, at night, but again, nothing during the day. Part of the problem with the mentally ill and why it's becoming such a problem was in the '70s, when the drugs became available, it was deemed inhumane to keep people hospitalized. We had a hospital here in town that was called State Hospital and...

Blanche Touhill: On Arsenal?

Edith Cunnane: Right. I'm not sure what it is today or if it's empty but what I found out there was, again, there was a push by the state, I guess, and the federal government, you shouldn't keep these people once they're on these drugs that control their mental health; they should go out in the community. They were supposed to have community services that were supposed to help them get housed. They were supposed to have people that would make sure they took their drugs and that didn't happen, probably because there wasn't enough money. So that was one of the

reasons. There were more mentally ill people out on the street than any other population. So I got all my facts together. I'd only been in town about three years, didn't know anyone particularly but I did know one woman who volunteered at Catholic Charities. I told her what I wanted to do, I wanted to do something about it, the different populations and their needs, so she introduced me to the head of Catholic Charities, a man by the name of Monsignor Slattery and he listened. He gave me an audience; he listened and I basically said, "I think the Catholic church should be involved," and he decided it was the right thing to do and I said, "I need a building; I need something but it has to be somewhere near downtown because people can't walk that far," and he did help me find a school, St. Patrick's School that was closed. He found people that would help me clean it up and then he found people that would put some partitions up in it and people that would...old, old carpet that was coming out of office buildings, orange carpet, and the furniture that was being discarded from the offices and so on. I decided the mentally ill were the first that should be dealt with and I was very lucky. I was always lucky when I was at St. Patrick's. I really believe God guided this. My daughter was on the soccer team and I realized that the head of State Hospital's daughter was on the same team so I made sure that I sat in the bleachers, right next to him and he told me, he was the one that told me the problem and he was getting some heat from the city and, knowing that he was really having problems, he said, "I will give you two psychiatric social workers." He said, "We've had one or two out on the street at night but" he said, "they don't know...at night, they find the people and by the morning, the people are gone and walking around and they're not even remem..."...a lot of them didn't even know the time of day, let alone meeting someone a few hours from them where they could do things with them. So, that was the first program and I said, "If you give me the social workers, I'll find food and clothing and so on." So that's how it started.

Blanche Touhill: How did you find the food and clothing?

Edith Cunnane: I think I just started putting the word out to friends and the friends came from different churches and so on; had trouble finding underwear but other than that, you could find old coats and that was a problem too, but someone started a coat drive for me in the fall because people can't keep their coats during the summer; they can't carry them around so by the

next fall, you needed a new coat for them. So there were clothing drives and we started off with the food with, an organization gave me a microwave and there was a company, Landshire, that would give me the sandwiches that came out of their machines. The only problem with that was some of them were moldy, so all day long, someone's looking at the sandwiches and the ones that were good, putting them in the microwave so people ate all day but we started to get so many people within a few months that I knew that wasn't going to work. You asked me earlier about going home. I did go home, I knew I had to figure something better out. I was really worried about it and I went home and it was Christmas and I was in my kitchen and my mother and father, they were teasing each other. One was saying, "It's time to make a casserole," and my mother said, "Neil, it's your turn to make it this month," and he said, "Oh, you make it" and it was sort of going back and forth and I said, "What are you talking about?" and they said, "Well, we signed up for a program where our church makes 30 or 40 casseroles, we take them to a location and one woman takes them downtown to actually a shelter, not programs." We were never a shelter. We've always been program-oriented at St. Patrick's. So I was on the phone with that man. Within an hour...it was a Christian brother that ran it and he was very kind and he explained that he had...they weren't all Catholic but he had these 40 different groups that would make 30 different casseroles, different ones every day and he told me where he got the big foil pans that you can put the casseroles in because each one had to serve at least 30 people, and recipes, so everyone would make the same casserole for that day. So I went back and now it's January. Again, I don't know anyone. I don't know the churches so I go back to Monsignor Slattery and I said, "Will you write a letter for me to all the churches, the pastors and I'll write it for you but what the theme will be, 'How would you like a Lenten project that will last all year?'" We were not open on the weekends at that point so I needed 20 groups for the five days a week and we put a postcard in the letter, "If you're interested, send that postcard" and once again, I needed 20 and we got 20 postcards back, out of 82 letters, and I had a friend who was a nutritionist and she put together the menus and the rest there is history. Today, my daughter runs...we still call it "the casserole program," and there are probably 2,500 to 3,000 individuals who make food because now we have a lot of satellite operations, homes for mentally ill and so on. So, we needed about 30,000 casseroles...not all of them make

a casserole. Some make salads; some collect bread or whatever but there are 3,000. That's a nice thing too, our children were young and when they were off from school, they would have to come down with me and so at an early age, maybe 10 and 12, they were working in the clothing room; they were serving food, and they both stayed involved through high school. They went away to college. My daughter particularly was very sensitive to St. Patrick's. From the moment she came back, she organized a young people's group and young adults. In fact, one of the young men who was in that group is now the executive director of St. Patrick's.

Blanche Touhill: Who is that?

Edith Cunnane: Tom Edling. His father was president at one point so that had some influence too but it was a very active young person's group. I don't think (Gloria?) ever didn't work there, I mean, work in the sense, today she is there...she would like to be there full-time. She works for my husband now but she's down there a couple times a week. She does more than just run the casserole program. Our son wasn't active for a while but about seven or eight years ago, he got involved in a golf tournament that we ran which is our biggest source of income...

Blanche Touhill: Talk about when you decided that you had to give these people jobs to allow them to reenter the society. How did that come about?

Edith Cunnane: Well, that was interesting too. You knew you had to do that, either from the mentally ill, right up to, a lot of people who were in recovery, to women who, again, needed to get work and, again, I'm thinking, I didn't have the ability to run any of these and I didn't want to. I just wanted to get these living skills, for example, GED...I kept looking for different resources, but again...I gave a talk on a Sunday at a church and it was about giving of your talent and time and I gave a few examples about St. Patrick's Center and one of them was, we needed to start an employment program and the next day, a gentleman shows up, literally, at the door and he said, "I have just retired from my own employment agency that I ran for 40 years and I will spend a few months getting you started," and he did that by using two of our homeless people and two neighborhood women that were coming over to the center, and he taught them how to be employment counselors, to look for jobs, and I had said to him, "How many jobs do you think you could fill for us in a

year?" and he said, "Probably 60...65" and he filled about 150 the first year and he never left, which was even better.

Blanche Touhill: And what was his name?

Edith Cunnane: Burt Walker.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.

Edith Cunnane: Do you know him?

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Edith Cunnane: So he was there for several, several years and it was a thriving agency by the time...we mostly hired people who had gone through programs at the center but at that point, they were...oh, I was paying them \$4 an hour to start with and then, as we...

Blanche Touhill: Out of your own money?

Edith Cunnane: Out of St. Patrick's money.

Blanche Touhill: But how did you have money from St. Patrick's? You raised money?

Edith Cunnane: I raised money. A lot of what I did after a while was raising money.

Blanche Touhill: And you used to have those galas?

Edith Cunnane: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And I assume that brought in some money every...

Edith Cunnane: Yeah. In fact, the first year, when I first opened in January of '83, Monsignor gave me \$25,000 and I realized in a very short period of time, that wasn't going to take me very far because electricity and so on. I was a volunteer and I got other people to volunteer, but still, you have to pay the bills and so on. I went back to him and he said, "Oh, don't worry about it. I'm going to have a party on St. Patrick's Center at the Missouri Athletic Club and I'm going to get all my Irish friends to come," and we did raise about \$50,000...\$75,000 the first year and that went on for years and years. It did stop as people got older and so on, the people that had been coming for years.

Blanche Touhill: What's the most you ever raised at one of those dinners?

Edith Cunnane: Probably about \$100,000 and in the meantime...there are two funny stories: Monsignor recruited people to form a board the first year, but most people just did it because they were friends of his and really didn't have that much of an interest. So within two years, we had new people on there. But one of them called me one day and said, "I play golf with a number of friends and we go away for a weekend and we all throw so much money in and play two days of golf but we decided this past year, why don't we throw a little bit more money and give it into a charity," and he said, "Right away I thought of you" and he said, "What do you think?" and I said, "Ah, that would be wonderful." So it was up in the Ozarks. We went up, we did all the work, we made \$4,000. It was called The Swing and Swear Tournament. After a year or two, I said...for \$6,000, I think, the second year, I said, "We need to bring it back to St. Louis and we need to change the name," so it became The Irish Open. This is the kind of thing that kept happening. More and more people would come and say, "I can do this" or "I can do that" and so that was really my job, to administrate, to make sure that I kept bringing in programs, but also the money to make sure that I could fund a program. There was cost to all the programs. The one other funny story, I'll tell you quickly, is my daughter...as I said, the underwear was a big problem. One night when she was 13, we were out to somewhere and we came home and she was asleep but there was a pad of paper beside her on the bed and I picked it up and it said, "Dear So-and-So, I am Corey Cunnane. My mother runs St. Patrick's Center for the Homeless in St. Louis..." ...blah, blah, blah and it goes down "and I see ads on TV saying that your company, Fruit of the Loom, your underwear has to get past Inspector 12. Well, could I have all the underwear that doesn't pass Inspector 12?" and she signed the letter...she started by saying, "I'm 13 years old..." ...and then she signed that "I would like to hear from you, Corey Cunnane." We never did hear from them but that was one...I still have the letter. It was so much fun. So it is a family affair, even today. St. Patrick's became like a third child.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about two things: one is, how did you get into that restaurant business?

Edith Cunnane: Well, we had more people then working; we kept increasing. State Hospital, for a long time, was so successful, they kept giving me more people and one of the people they gave me came to me after probably '88 and said, "We're really having a problem. We get these people stable

but we can't get them into jobs because they have no work history and we have to keep an eye on them," and I kept thinking about it and I thought, where is there a variety of jobs? So I thought, food industry and I kept thinking about that. So I went to the head of Pasta House Company, I said, "What would you think about a restaurant?" First he told me I was crazy and then he said, "Well, maybe it's not such a bad idea. We're always looking for entry level positions and so are other people in the industry." So for a year...his name was John Ferrara and he and I looked everywhere. It had to be in the city; it had to be close to the center and, again, these things are, like, all miracles: Monsignor Slattery, again, at this point he was just such a fan of the center. He was down there a lot, with the poor and he'd sit and eat with them and so on. He was a great man. So he was looking. He's calling all his friends, "You have to help me find something." He died on July 4<sup>th</sup> of 1990 and I got a call later in the afternoon from a man who was doing a lot of redevelopment and his name was Paul McKee and I knew him and he said, "Are you still looking for a restaurant?" and I said, "Yes," and he said, "Well, I just evicted someone from the restaurant on 11<sup>th</sup> Street," which was, like, six blocks from us. So the next day, John Ferrara and I went down and we met with him in this beautiful, quaint, old brick...just a lot of brick and so on and everything was there: the tables were there; the silverware was still there and he told me then it was going to be \$1800 a month...why I say July 4<sup>th</sup>, all I could think of after I heard the Monsignor died at 10:00 o'clock and five hours later, I get this call, on a holiday. I'm like, he's already working from up there. The next day, Paul McKee told me it was going to be \$1800 and I'm like, "Oh, I don't have any money like that" and he said, "Well, do you have tax credits?" and I said, "Oh, I have plenty of tax credits from the state," and he said, "I'll take the tax credits." He ended up donating the building and I'm sure he got tax credits for that. It was a three-story, it had some offices above, and then donated the building across the street and we put the employment agency there. But this sort of gradually happened.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about St. Patrick's today?

Edith Cunnane: When I left, it was about a million-dollar agency. Today it's a 14 million dollar agency. When I was still there, Sverdrup Corporation was moving their headquarters. They decided that maybe they would donate it. They weren't having any luck selling it and so we were able to move and

gradually fix it up. We did a capital campaign and so we had the room to grow more and become much more sophisticated.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about that sophistication. What services do they offer?

Edith Cunnane: The wonderful part is they still have kept the basics: the employment; living skills and the beginning part of bringing people in and getting them through the programs. We do childcare now too, anything...job training now, we do a lot of job training, and I say "we." I'm still real involved down there but not on a daily basis but wherever I can help. So it's much more sophisticated. They get a lot of grants from, like, Homeless Veterans, they get some government grants from them. They've gotten a lot of grants from the state so they can do a lot more than I was able to do, much more sophisticated, and they vary. I mean, with the economy now, they're probably not a 14-million operation. I left when it was about a million and it's a lot more today.

Blanche Touhill: What kind of awards have you gotten in your life?

Edith Cunnane: Well, I've gotten several, some that stand out to me, would be the United Nations Human Rights Award; the Woman of Achievement St Louis award. I'm very partial to the fact that you honored me with an Honorary Doctor's Degree from the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: Well, we were honored, I must tell you; we were honored as well. Talk a little bit about, if you had been born 50 years before, would you have led the same life or what kind of life would you have led?

Edith Cunnane: I would have just probably have been a mother, raising children and that was a full-time job, by the way, in those days because there were no cars. Your children walked to school. They came home for lunch. You made their clothing a lot of times, you sewed their clothing. It was a full-time job so I'm sure if I had married, that's what I would have been doing. There weren't too many single women, although two of my aunts were single. They worked at a bank and when the deposits came in, one of them did the "M's" and one...they had ledgers and one did the M's and one did the N's. They were both single so they did work. You know, you'd be at home. You wouldn't go to college, for sure. You would finish high school but...

Blanche Touhill: How did you happen to join the International Women's Forum?

Edith Cunnane: I really was invited to. I was told about it. That was another honor, to be asked to join an organization of women who were at the top of their field. It was just quite an honor and I leaped at it, to be honest with you. So that was probably in the early '90s or late '80s, whenever and it's been a wonderful experience for me, especially in the earlier years because there was a lot of good advice. I could call someone as a resource because a lot of them were so...part of our community, they were able...I'd say, "I need this" or "Can you help me with that?" and they were able to open a lot of doors for me, and just the companionship and other women who had probably had their struggles in getting to where they were, and there were struggles. There were struggles and there continues, I think, to be struggles but here are women that got past the barriers and to today, I so enjoy their company.

Blanche Touhill: Did your father ever come to St. Louis and look at St. Patrick's Center?

Edith Cunnane: No, he was aware of it. In fact, again, I told you of his generosity. I needed a sofa and two chairs just if people came in and I told him that and he figured out how to get the sofa and the two chairs out to me and later on, down in the program for the mentally ill, I needed some type of leather...not real leather but vinyl sofas so that people had places to sit and they had to be dark vinyl, for various reasons, because they were obviously going to get beat up and, again, he found some kind of resource and got out probably 20 sofas and chairs to me, but he died very young. He died at 66 and my mother got out the following year and she lived into the 90's so she got to see it. I got an award called the St. Louis Award just as I was leaving town and she came out for that. She was very proud of it.

Blanche Touhill: And your sister, had she come out?

Edith Cunnane: She came out for it too, yeah. They were the only family that ever came out, but, yeah, they were both proud of the fact.

Blanche Touhill: Now, I know you ran for the county council and was that an experience?

Edith Cunnane: That was quite an experience. We had to move to Washington so I left the center and, you know, it was probably time because it was time for a change. I was a builder, a grower but it needed more stability of what we had done so it didn't upset me terribly and moved to Washington. I've worked for Congressman Talent who's now Senator Talent, helped him

get started. He was just moving there, came back here, I got a call, even actually as I was moving back here, from Terry Jones from the university here and he said, "I'm on the board of an organization called Confluence" who worked on regional problems, identifying them and so I worked there for a year or so and convinced them, with fellow member of the Forum, Carolyn Losos, that she ran Leadership St. Louis and we both agreed that the two should be together. We presented it to both our boards.

Blanche Touhill: And they merged?

Edith Cunnane: And they merged and then I went on to the council. I worked for Congressman Talent but I had no political ambitions or anything like that but he called me in '97 and he said, "I need you to run for this position" and I'm like, "No, I don't think so." He said, "Oh, it's just part-time," and I talked to a member of the Forum, I can't think of her last name, Ellen Carnahan

Blanche Touhill: Yes, she had been on the county council.

Edith Cunnane: I think she was the first woman.

Blanche Touhill: No, I think Betty Van Um was the first woman.

Edith Cunnane: Oh, Betty, that's right; you're right, and then Ellen and she told me it would be more work than part-time but she encouraged me to do it and so I did it and it was a special election; I finished that term, I stayed on for one more term. It was good. I think everyone should do a little public service.

Blanche Touhill: But I must say, I always think of you with St. Patrick's.

Edith Cunnane: And that's more my identity.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, that is your identity and what you did was just remarkable. So thank you.

Edith Cunnane: It was all an accident.

Blanche Touhill: But you carried it out.

Edith Cunnane: Yes.

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Blanche Touhill: You carried it out. Thank you very much.

Edith Cunnane: Thank you.