

An Interview with
Gail Cassilly

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
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Oral History Program

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PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

Gail Cassilly: My name is Gail Cassilly. I am a sculptor. I am the co-founder of City Museum here in St. Louis, a mother, an educator, a writer, kind of a jack of all trades.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk then about your youth, you know, your family, your parents, your siblings, your neighbors, the people you grew up with around your neighborhood and maybe talk about an elementary or secondary school teacher. Who was it that really said to you, "Gail, you have ability and you can do what you want to do in this world" or not?

Gail Cassilly: Well, I was born in Eerie, Pennsylvania, Polish descent on both sides. My grandparents, maternal and paternal, all came from Poland so we grew up in kind of...in the early years, I was in a Polish neighborhood of Eerie, Pennsylvania and then we moved into what we would call today the suburbs which wasn't really the suburbs but it seemed like that to me. We moved into a different area of town and my dad built a new house for us with his buddies. He was a fireman so they all kind of...everybody exchanged labor and things like that back then. I went to Catholic schools, I have a brother and a sister. My mother was a homemaker. Besides being a fireman, my dad sold beer on the side. He would drive the beer truck home sometimes and we would get rides in the back of the truck with all the beer bottles moving all around with us. So we grew up, it seemed, for as much as a child, there were things about their existence in terms like that, it seemed like a normal, lovely existence until it wasn't and that was when my father died on the job as a fireman when I was 11 years old and it was Easter Sunday and I was staying at my grandmother's that night and I heard my grandfather crying in the middle of the night because a phone call had just come and I actually heard them say, "Salty's dead" and Salty was my dad's nickname because my maiden name is Salawata and we kind of translate that from Polish as meaning salt water so they called my dad Salty. In any event, at 11, I was alone that night because my grandparents left to be with my mother and it was the night before Easter, we were all going to be together as a family. So that changed everything and that made those earlier years that I thought were okay, made them even seem not okay and it was truly the end of childhood but prior to that, when I consider my own life in art now, my professional life, I showed signs of being artistic very early on and my grade school teachers would put me in charge of the bulletin boards and there was a little boy and myself, we would always be the ones to do it

because we could draw the better fish or turtle or whatever it was. So that was already going on prior to that.

Blanche Touhill: Did you realize you had a talent?

Gail Cassilly: You know, again, I don't know, as a child, if I thought of it as a talent. I had an ability. There was another strange thing at play in growing up. I always got this feeling from my mother that because we were Polish, we were inferior in some strange way. It was sort of a silent vibe that said we're not as good and I think it was something that she inherited from her own parents and somehow it filtered through a little bit in my growing up life, although my mother was a very intelligent, attractive woman and there didn't appear to be any reason for her to feel like that but somehow it seemed very ingrained in her and somehow she let that kind of come off and somehow I, for whatever reason, took that on as my own as well and I can't say entirely why that was. So, that goes back to saying why I didn't particularly think I was talented, even though other people seemed to be praising me, and the irony of it is, the first art contest that I ever won was the year right after my dad died...well, it was actually the next Father's Day and the newspaper had an art competition, draw your dad, so I drew my dad. I drew a portrait of my father with a pipe in his mouth because he used to like to smoke a pipe and I won the first prize and I won a little camera and then the newspapers came and they did a little story on me and everything and they had a picture of me sitting at an easel but it was obviously bitter-sweet, you know, that that's what I should have won my first art contest for. But after that my mother then did send me to a little old nun who was down in the city known to give art lessons.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how nice.

Gail Cassilly: So she would take me there on Saturdays and I'd have, like, a two-hour art lesson. So I guess that was the beginning and she probably was truly the one who saw that and did something about it.

Blanche Touhill: Did she go to work then after your father died?

Gail Cassilly: Yes, she had to go back and take night classes to brush up on secretarial skills and she worked full-time. So at the time, I was 11, my sister was 12 ½, my brother was 7, so the three of us were suddenly sort of left on our own. We would prepare the dinner. We would take care of the house.

We would get ourselves to and back from school, do our homework alone, all of those things that we used to have assistance with we didn't anymore so much because she was just barely getting by herself and trying to support us. So it felt tainted and I didn't know anybody else who had lost a father. At that age, it seemed impossible that you would lose your father. My dad was only 40. To me, he seemed old because he was 40 but he was a young man and with no warning, that happened. So I felt like an oddity and I felt like I had to work harder to fit in or to cover up that thing that had happened to us and that somehow seemed shameful, even though he was a hero because he died saving a child in a fire.

Blanche Touhill: Did the child live?

Gail Cassilly: Yes, the child lived. He saved a two-year-old and then he suffocated in the fire, and actually, the firemen drove off without him. They didn't know he was still in the house and that was the second blow because they were supposed to have a buddy system and one fireman was supposed to look out for the other fireman and I don't know what went wrong but something went terribly wrong.

Blanche Touhill: Did you speak Polish?

Gail Cassilly: You know, I think I knew a few words when I was young.

Blanche Touhill: Did you understand it when your grandparents spoke?

Gail Cassilly: Just a couple things. Usually they only did it when they were bickering or arguing or saying something that they didn't want us to hear. But my grandparents definitely spoke a lot of Polish around us.

Blanche Touhill: Now, were they immigrants?

Gail Cassilly: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: The grandparents, your grandparents were immigrants?

Gail Cassilly: Well, my mother's father came over at the age of 14. He left his family and came over all by himself and wound up settling in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Blanche Touhill: And he went to work, I guess?

Gail Cassilly: And he went to work, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And then he met your mother?

Gail Cassilly: Yes, he made his wife.

Blanche Touhill: I mean, his wife, I'm sorry.

Gail Cassilly: Yes, uh-huh, he met his wife. She had already come over. She had come over with her family at a younger age. I think she was only 4 or 5 or something like that, so, yes, then they met and they were both factory workers, raised a family of three children themselves and just very simple folk, basic life.

Blanche Touhill: So you went to elementary school and high school and what did you like in high school? Were you still artistic?

Gail Cassilly: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Did you draw for the paper or anything?

Gail Cassilly: I headed a couple theater productions. It was always different, but at home I'd be carving little pieces of...I would take milk cartons and I'd fill them with Gypsolite, this kind of plaster material and I'd make these little blocks of stone and I would take kitchen knives and things like that and carve it, the stuff that you weren't supposed...and so I started having an interest in...

Blanche Touhill: In sculpture?

Gail Cassilly: ...in sculpting, even on my own, even though I had no idea what I was doing. So I'd make little heads of Jesus and prophets and things like that. So I did that all the time down in the basement, that kind of thing. But in high school, again, the teachers recognized that I had talent. There was never any thought that I would go on and do anything in art because basically there was no thought that I would go on in college. My mother simply couldn't afford it. My sister appeared to be the more academically inclined person in the family so if anybody was going to go, she was going to go and that was it. I was on the secretarial track at school because back then they had those kinds of...you were a commercial student or you were a college-bound student, so I was the shorthand, typing...

Blanche Touhill: ...bookkeeping...

Gail Cassilly: All that stuff, yeah, no foreign languages, no Algebra, nothing like that. So when I did wind up going to college, I had to do remedial work because I wasn't prepared for it and it really wasn't...

Blanche Touhill: Did you go to college right away or did you go off and do other things after high school?

Gail Cassilly: Well, I did something I think that represented a couple things, and that is that I joined the convent, and one was that I was very impressionable in many ways, as are most teens, but a group of missionary nuns came to my high school one time and they were called the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa, known as the White Sisters. That was their nickname because they wore white garbs and they worked solely in Africa and it was mostly an international order. There were about 2,500 sisters when I actually joined and of those, there were only, I think, 40 Americans. So it was a very international, multi-national group of people. They came to the school and I was simply blown away. I thought that this group of women was the most impressive, exotic thing I had ever seen in my life. They came and they played drums, they sang in Swahili, they did this presentation on the missions in Africa and I was just gaga. That was it. From that day on, I said, this is it. I'm not going to be a secretary; I'm going to be a missionary then and I'm going to go to Africa and it was just bang, bang, bang. And another 50 or so girls in the school felt the same way because everybody was just so taken by them but I was the only one...

Blanche Touhill: But you were the one who did it?

Gail Cassilly: I was the one who did it.

Blanche Touhill: Now, was their mother house in America?

Gail Cassilly: They had a training house in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains in Pennsylvania, not far from Erie, just a couple hours away. It was Franklin, Pennsylvania and it was a novitiate, the postulate [inaudible 12:49] the novitiate was located there so any American girls who did join ever were trained right there, not far away from me. So, when I actually joined, it was just a two-hour drive and there I was. Much to my mother's chagrin, I had been plotting this prior to graduation but I never told her that I had any intention of doing this and I started secretly corresponding with a couple of the sisters there and I was ready to go from the day I

graduated but I was only 17 when I graduated and they wanted me to be 19 before I entered. So I actually did have to go get a secretarial job in the end and I think my mother was just hoping I would meet somebody and fall in love and get married and have children and be a normal person, but instead I pursued my dream and at the age of 19, I told my mother I was going to join and I did and they drove me there and left me there and my mother, I don't know what she was thinking at the time but the thought of her daughter going off to Africa, I'm sure was not a dream come true for her, let's put it that way. So I did, I trained there and one year was a year of silence, what they call a year of silence. It was the first year of novitiate and we had taken classes, we started to learn...I had to learn some French because the order was bi-lingual. It was English and French. So I did that. I did African studies. We farmed, we worked the land, we just were a totally independent group of women working together and training and preparing to go to the mission field for whatever job awaited us and it wasn't preaching; it was hands-on work. It was nursing, it was teaching, it was working in the villages with people, just helping with basic needs. It was all of those things. It wasn't like the old-fashioned missionaries that were out there crusading. It was a very different...it was just living with the people, so to speak, living by example, which appealed to me greatly. So, ironically, the way I got to college and the way I got to St. Louis, Missouri, was that when I was done with my training, the sisters really felt that I should have a college education before I went off to Africa and so, though I wasn't trained for college, they arranged that I would be sent to St. Louis, Missouri. They had a few other sisters doing studies here and they arranged Fontbonne College...college at that time, not university...agreed to give me a scholarship. They gave two of us a scholarship and I traveled to St. Louis for the first time in my life, joined the little group of sisters who were living here in an apartment. We had a little apartment in Normandy and I would bicycle to Fontbonne College and I joined the art program there.

Blanche Touhill:

Oh, their art program has always been good, hasn't it?

Gail Cassilly:

Yes, yes, it was headed by Rudy Treenie, a great mentor to me, a great friend. I had to put together a portfolio and be judged like the rest of the students to get in. I never thought I would get in and I did, and I also never thought I'd be studying art, but it was actually the sisters who really saw my artistic skills, I think, and felt that there was a need for me

to do that. I would have thought I was just going to go into social work or something like that because it didn't seem to me that it...it didn't make sense that somebody would go to Africa and teach art but, as it turned out, I wound up in Malawi, and I was in a little village called Lichuni where there was a boarding school for girls, a secondary school for girls and at the time, Malawi was still under the British system of education so a requirement for the school was that they have an art department. So I was trained, literally, and I was sent there to start...

Blanche Touhill: So you had your Bachelor's Degree?

Gail Cassilly: I had my BFA at the time so I was sent to start to organize an art department in this little village school of Lichuni and that's what I did. I printed up a little book...all the materials came from the land. We would dig our own clay; we would quarry our own stone; we would make our own dyes out of roots and vegetables. So all the materials...the girls, my students taught me where to find and how to make a lot of the materials that we did. So we did batik dying; we did all kinds of things. I would write to my mother and she would send me paints and scissors and things like that because we didn't have those things. We would just do what we could but my students were phenomenal. They were really some of the greatest years of my life. I stayed there for three years doing that and the little book I wrote even extended to other schools within the country so that they could use it as well because there was nothing available at the time. This was in the early '70s, 1970's.

Blanche Touhill: How is the country today?

Gail Cassilly: The country, I think, has its fair shares of problems today from a political standpoint. I think there's more strife there than there was before. It's always been a peaceful country but now, from what I understand, with the presidential issues, it's become much more of a problem and that people, I think, are highly dissatisfied. It's one of the poorest countries in the world.

Blanche Touhill: Are the nuns still there?

Gail Cassilly: Yes, they are, uh-huh.

Blanche Touhill: So they still have recruits there going to...?

- Gail Cassilly: They're mostly very old, as with many religious communities, they're dying out. The young people aren't joining. The sisters there are on their last legs literally.
- Blanche Touhill: But they have a school and they have lay teachers or something like that?
- Gail Cassilly: Yes, yeah. When I left, the school was taken over by a local religious community of sisters and it actually became a government school but it was still run basically by some of the local Malawian sisters.
- Blanche Touhill: Was there danger like these poor little girls that were taken recently? Was there every a threat like that?
- Gail Cassilly: No, I never experienced anything like that in Malawi. I did live in Burundi for several months before while I was waiting for my papers from Malawi. I had a very circuitous way of getting to Malawi. I kept having visa problems and so I wound up in Burundi for several months and I was applying to actually stay there when my papers from Malawi finally came through, and there I did experience trouble, that people threw stones at us on a few occasions and things like that. So it was much more of a hostile environment there but Malawi just seemed like the epitome of peace among the people in the villages but I was mostly in villages. I didn't really live in any urban area or anything like that.
- Blanche Touhill: The nuns were really sort of on their own? They had to fish their own food and...
- Gail Cassilly: We were totally on our own, yes, completely.
- Blanche Touhill: And did you enjoy that?
- Gail Cassilly: I loved that. I'm a scrapper and I'm a hands-on person. I love physical work. I love making things from nothing. I like being resourceful and this was the name of the game with this group of women. They were the most impressive group of people that I've ever known in my life, across the board. So they made me who I am, I think, really, because they instilled in me such confidence and trust to tell me that I could be an artist, that I could be an art teacher, to inspire that kind of belief in myself which I never really had before, it changed my life. It took me from the dregs of my father's death, thinking that we were cursed to being somebody who could accomplish something and do something that

nobody from Eerie, Pennsylvania that I knew of, none of my peers had ever dared or dreamt of doing and I did it well and I did it with great love.

Blanche Touhill: So then you come back to the States and where did you go when you came back?

Gail Cassilly: Well, I was with the nuns for 10 years. So I entered the convent at 19. I left the convent at 29. It was more of a crisis of faith than any sort of discontent with the community, per se. It broke my heart to leave Africa and to leave this community of women who had become everything to me. They really were my family but I really left out of respect for them because somehow my faith had waned, my Catholic faith, I should say, and I knew that theirs hadn't and I just felt that it was demeaning to them to try to profess that same degree of belief when I knew I didn't have it any longer. They say faith is a gift and somehow I felt that that gift had been taken from me. I don't quite know how that worked its way out but I didn't leave because I felt like I desired to be married or I wanted children or I wanted to live a different lifestyle. I simply left because I felt like it was the honest thing that I had to do and I respected them too much to stay. So nobody questioned me because they knew, they knew how much I loved them and how much I loved being in Africa. They knew so they knew that it was coming from a different level when I said I had to leave. So, just like that, at 29, those years where all my friends got married, had children, I was returning to the States. I couldn't go back to my home in Eerie. I did visit but I just felt like there was no home there for me anymore. So I went back to the only other place that I knew which was St. Louis where I had done my undergraduate work. I had made friends with a couple professors and I contacted them again, Rudy Treenie, a couple other people were just extremely helpful in helping me set up life. I had never lived on my own. I came back with two suitcases. I had nothing. I think I had \$2000. The community gave me that because I had a sculpture show at Lilongue at the American Embassy before I left the country and I had made all kinds of stone carvings while I was living there and so we had an exhibit and a sale and they all sold so they decided to give me that money to come back and start my life with. Actually, I think it was \$1800 so I had \$1800 and two suitcases when I was 29 years old and nothing else.

Blanche Touhill: When you left the convent and boarded the international flight, were you in your nun's garb?

Gail Cassilly: By then, we had changed a little bit. The garb was very modified so I had, like, a skirt and a blouse and we had a small veil so I took the veil off and basically I had my skirt and my blouse and that's what I came back with. And when I arrived back here, Fontbonne was just getting ready to start their graduate program, a fine arts graduate program. They had never had one before but it was about a year away from starting. So my professors said that I could hang out in the studio, have use of the studio. I went and I got a job bagging groceries at a national grocery store not far from Fontbonne and then one of my professors helped me find an apartment because I had no financial history and I had no references. Everybody found it very interesting that I was a nun, that I had lived in Africa, but nobody thought that that was a very good recommendation as a tenant. So eventually he signed on for me and I got a little place not far from Fontbonne so I could walk. I remember, it was, like, three stories up and had a little teeny fire escape in the back and I would sit there at night and just cry because I missed my community so much and my students and I felt like I had never been in this country before when I came back. I never felt culture shock in Africa. I only felt it when I came back here. I felt as displaced as I could possibly be. I didn't know how to date; I didn't know how to meet a man; I didn't particularly even know that that's what I wanted to do, but I figured the option then was to get married and have children and to pursue my graduate work. So it was just a learning process. It was day by day. I remember buying my groceries. I would work the weekend, night shifts. The stores closed early back then. I don't know if it was 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock but then you'd have a shift that worked after to stock the shelves and things like that and I always volunteered for it because I had no social life because I didn't know anybody to hang out with; I just didn't and the benefit of doing that is so you could buy all the cheap stuff that was rotting on the shelves. It was ready to sell. You could get three pounds of greens and two pounds of pork neck bones for \$2 so that's kind of how I lived. I would buy all of this stuff at the end of the week and that's what I would cook for the whole week, which wasn't a problem for me because that's how we lived in Africa. It was almost like a continuation. It was sort like paying homage to my community. I wanted to eat like they did; I wanted to keep things simple. I would make shelves out of concrete blocks and pieces of wood I would find in the alley. I had

no real furniture, per se. People gave me a bed and I made my own sofa and that's how life began and then my graduate program started.

Blanche Touhill: You were going to get a Master's?

Gail Cassilly: I was getting my Master's.

Blanche Touhill: And MFA, I guess?

Gail Cassilly: An MFA in sculpture again. Then the school gave me a teaching...what's it called...a TA so I started teaching classes.

Blanche Touhill: And you kept your job at the grocery store?

Gail Cassilly: I kept my job at the grocery store. I was teaching classes. I was going to school full-time.

Blanche Touhill: But that would cover your tuition really?

Gail Cassilly: Yes. Well, when it came to my tuition, my mother then stepped in and gave me a little bit of money and that, with the TA, kind of covered most of the tuition. So I didn't wind up with any debt or anything like that. And I would do side jobs. I would do castings. I learned how to make molds for my professor and so when he had a big project, I would work with him and he would pay me a stipend to do that. So it was just, you made a dollar where you could make a dollar. Then a job opened up at John Burroughs School in the Sculpture Department and one of my professors said that I should go apply and I was in the mode where "Well, I'm busy; I'm checking groceries and I'm doing this" and he said, "No, this is a very prestigious school. You should go," and the notion of a prestigious school didn't do much for me. It was like, I don't care. So when I went to the school and I saw they had this beautiful Fine Arts building and they had a whole sculpture studio and they had...it was like, whoa, I had never seen anything like that at a high school level. So I thought, okay, I'll apply for the job and I applied for the job and I got the job. So suddenly I wound up teaching in this very sophisticated school with sophisticated people and it was a real culture shock, once again, for me. My students, many of them came from very wealthy families and I, again, kind of felt...I don't know...sort of displaced but I found it very interesting and I found that it was just a whole different form of education, learning how to interact with my peers there, and actually, it gave me a peer group because

suddenly I had this camaraderie with other teachers there and there were some teachers of my age. That was probably my introduction more into a social life for the first time. But I should also introduce, at this point, that I reconnected with Bob Cassilly who became my husband.

Blanche Touhill: Did you know him before?

Gail Cassilly: Yeah, because we both did our undergraduate work together but I was a nun and he was this young strapping bruiser who took over the Sculpture Department and kind of looked down on every other woman there and kind of ruled the roost, so to speak.

Blanche Touhill: At Fontbonne?

Gail Cassilly: At Fontbonne. So we studied. We were in college for three years together and then I went off to Africa and then he went off and married a fellow student and we had no contact. We had no interest in each other when we were in school together, except to fight for space in the studios and things like that but when I came back and I was lingering in the sculpture studios waiting for the program to start, he, too, came back onto the scene and he went back into the graduate program. So we were both then in the graduate program together at that point in time. And at one point, we started dating and then in 1983 we got married. We wound up adopting two children together in 1985 and '89, Max and Daisy, loves of my life, and started to pursue our own career in the arts together, pooling our talents and our abilities, our financial resources.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get the idea for the museum?

Gail Cassilly: Well, the museum, we started slow. When Bob and I got married, Bob didn't have a job. Our only income at that point was my teaching at John Burroughs but he was a very resourceful person. He had a lot of friends who dealt in salvage and things and they would go and get a bunch of stuff from a building that was being demolished and then they would sell it and make more money and go do the same thing again and then they started investing what little money they made in real estate in Lafayette Square which was a fairly depressed area back then and extremely cheap and we bought, I think it's 14,000 square feet of residential space there for \$7000. This is 34 years ago. Then started developing those, selling them off, so we were kind of accumulating that kind of expertise and then we decided, okay, we're going to...this whole area of the square is in

need of repair and all the architectural ornamentation was falling apart so we started doing that. We started making new models and molds for architectural renovation in the square and other areas. So the next thing you know, we became known as a kind of architectural sculpture company and we had the name of Cassilly & Cassilly. We bought a building right on Lafayette. It was an old grocery store and started production, large-scale production of this kind of thing because nobody was doing it. And that started to become quite successful, not to any enormous financial extent but we were living on it and it was growing, funds were growing and the ultimate goal for Bob more than for myself because I was being a mother at the same time and I was juggling a lot of kettles, but his goal was always something much, much, much bigger. We both felt that this was...and I think I encouraged him to say, "Look, this is a way in. This is a doorway. This architectural stuff, this a doorway into the world of art," because we were never going to be...we didn't aspire to be gallery artists. We wanted it to be something bigger, something more hands-on, more out there, and sure enough, it did. The zoo came along and contacted Bob and said, "We want to re-do...build this living world building and we have all of these ideas for sculpture" so we got that contract to build of those things, the big whales, the squids, the things, and when we started doing that kind of work, our reputation became more national and we wound up doing work for the Dallas Zoo and Planet Hollywood, believe it or not, and all kinds of places like that but the ultimate goal was to be able to do something all our own. What happened was, some of the real estate that we had bought early on happened to be in the proximity of the Botanical Gardens and when the Botanical Gardens did their expansion, they wanted to buy that property. So we sold it at a premium and the money we made from that, we invested into what was known as the International Shoe Building downtown on 15th and Washington Avenue which at that point was owned by Washington University and Washington University simply wanted to get rid of it. So we bought it at a fire sale price and suddenly there we were, owning this 700,000 square foot building in downtown St. Louis that we got for, I don't know, fifty cents a foot or something like that and it was like, whoa, now what do we do? There were a couple tenants in part of the building and so we decided, well, the first thing we're going to do is fix up the front building on Washington Avenue because Washington Avenue was completely abandoned in that area, so

we renovated the exterior of the building, we made it look like something that was happening, we cleaned all the stains off, we replaced spandrels that were missing, we fixed broken windows, we put planter boxes up in the front. Everybody's wondering, what's going on here? There's just like nothing there, and then we started to do the same in the back, off of the Delmar side of the building. We just felt that the thing to do was to attract attention and then we attracted a group of like-minded people who were willing to rent spaces there for art studios, small businesses and other things like that. So we started to accrue rental income and as we did that, we put it into the building. But we determined early on that we were going to keep some of that big back building that was 600,000 in itself, for ourselves and mostly the first floor, which was an old parking garage because we knew that we could put weight or things of any significance in there; there wouldn't be any problem. So we just basically started building with whatever things came our way. Bob was always a scavenger. We were accumulating materials from all kinds of building and things. So the first thing to light in his mind was that we would become an aquarium and that's partially because we had a bunch of big glass panels and things that were sufficient enough to build this.

Blanche Touhill: And there was that man around town that had this aquarium that was trying to...

Gail Cassilly: Yes, and at one point he did join with us. So we started that.

Blanche Touhill: What was his name?

Gail Cassilly: Leonard Suninshine, and we started doing that and then it turned out that we were terrible at taking care of fish. Everything we put in there died and so we thought, okay, this is too much work. So we started making mazes and slides and things connecting, just basically a big...you think of the way kids build with Legos and you just take the pieces, whatever pieces come your way and you start building, and that's basically what happened. It became outlandishly elaborate as time went on, to the point where people in St. Louis, the movers and shakers...I guess it was around 2004 when there was a 2004 group...they wanted to know what was going on downtown because they were very interested in developing the downtown. So they came to see what we were doing and became very interested and wanted to fund us even further so that we could keep doing this. So eventually, in 1997, we opened the doors of

what became known as City Museum. It was a non-profit at the time. I was the director for the first five years and we bought the building in '93 so for those four years, from '93 to '97 we developed what became the beginnings of City Museum. When we opened, we had two floors only.

Blanche Touhill: And you opened in '97?

Gail Cassilly: In '97, as a non-profit. We were funded by many organizations. We wound up getting numerous awards for our work because the next thing you know, it was like a year on the road that we're seeing school buses coming from all over, parking all along Delmar, a sight that had never been seen before and we were off and running. I think we had something like 100,000 people the first year. Last year, 2013, I believe there were over 700,000 people. So it's right up there with the major institutions in the area. It's just grown to be an international point of interest for people. People come from all over the world to see it and wonder why they can't have anything like that and I have to give Bob the credit for that. He was the great mastermind. My hands were dirty all the time. I was always sort of the devil's advocate. Whatever dare-devil-like thing he wanted to do, I would throw every reason in the world why not to do it to make sure he knew what he was doing. It was a good team. We worked well together like that.

Blanche Touhill: So you were really still the artist?

Gail Cassilly: Oh, yeah, I always was.

Blanche Touhill: And he was more of the manager and the marketer?

Gail Cassilly: Oh, no, no, no.

Blanche Touhill: He was the artist too?

Gail Cassilly: Yeah, and we had a whole team of people working with us. There was no way that we did this together. We had people that we had hired on from the time that they were 18 and these people are late 40's now and they're still working at City Museum, so we had a very skilled group of people who worked with us. We had to. The labor-intensiveness of this project, I mean, there is nothing simple. You get salvage materials and the price is good but then the labor of transforming these things is

astronomically high and so we paid out on that end and all the equipment that you would need to do it and stuff like that.

Blanche Touhill: Did you and your husband both do the turtle?

Gail Cassilly: Turtle Park, yeah. We were Cassilly & Cassilly at that time. He did the major part of the work because, I had these two little kids at that point and I was also running the business and everything else that came our way.

Blanche Touhill: But artistically, you were still designing...

Gail Cassilly: Artistically I was involved with it as well, yeah, but he was out there with a crew of people...

Blanche Touhill: Did you do other things around St. Louis artistically during this period?

Gail Cassilly: Oh, you know, there was so much still of the architectural residential and commercial stuff that we were doing on a large scale. There was a lot of that. There was a big lion project in University City that we had done and more zoo work came along.

Blanche Touhill: Did you restore those lions?

Gail Cassilly: Yes, not the ones that you're thinking about.

Blanche Touhill: Where are the others?

Gail Cassilly: The others, they're big musical lions playing instruments, stuff like that and so there was just always something but once the big building came, once that building came, that was it. We were all in on that, doing whatever it took to do that.

Blanche Touhill: Then you separated but did you separate in the business as well?

Gail Cassilly: Well, when we got divorced, unfortunately, divorce does that and so we did, yeah, we had to separate everything and I basically sold my interest in City Museum and Bob took that on and we changed then from what was a not-for-profit organization to become a for-profit organization. It was always hard for him much more than for myself, to work under the guise of a board of directors. He wasn't inclined to have a boss. When we took money from the community to become a non-profit, there were things we had to do and restrictions. We had to give back to the

community and that was the operation that I ran at that point in time, when we were up and running. It was to make sure that we were doing the right thing as a non-profit and sometimes those things rubbed Bob the wrong way because he wanted to do projects when he wanted to do it and he wanted all the available funds to do that but whereas we had to divert money for educational programs and outreach and all kinds of things like that that needed to be done. So, unfortunately...well, I should say, I think the only way the museum would have started and become successful was to go that route, to become a non-profit because it did get us on the map and it got us the initial funds we needed but once Bob made that decision to go for-profit, he could really fly with this thing and just expand in a way that he would not have been able to do the other way. So, in a sense, both sides worked and it took both sides to make it what it is today. My role and my time there was what it was.

Blanche Touhill: So you still have the school buses going?

Gail Cassilly: Oh, very, very much. Yes, it's extremely successful. Both of our kids work there. My daughter, Daisy is actually in construction there now. She's actually doing the hands-on kind of work that her father did. My son's running the Rooftop Café on the top of the museum.

Blanche Touhill: Now, is that the one with the school buses up there?

Gail Cassilly: Yeah, the school buses up there.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get the school buses?

Gail Cassilly: The Ferris Wheel. Well, you got a big enough crane, you can get something up there.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, I see.

Gail Cassilly: You could ask the same about the big Praying Mantis that's up there and a Ferris Wheel and everything else that's up there. So it's all a matter of equipment.

Blanche Touhill: Do they work?

Gail Cassilly: Oh, sure, yeah. This is a crazy season. I was up there the other day with visitors and 7,000 people had gone through that day, in one day. So, you know, and it changed the landscape of downtown St. Louis and it did

jumpstart the redevelopment of the area and I take a little bit of credit for that and Bob takes a lot of credit for that, even though he's not here to get that credit any longer. But I think there's no doubt that that started to bring a mass of people back to the city. You can have as many bars or lofts as you want but when you get an attraction going like that that is 365 days a year practically bringing thousands of people, that's a mass of people that you can't hardly replicate any other way. So, it's a great feeling, to have done that, to have started it.

Blanche Touhill: When you severed your business connection, then you returned to being a sculptress?

Gail Cassilly: I went back to my studio art, yeah. I had never entirely quit doing that but my time was highly limited for that but I had always maintained my studio in my home and I had always maintained some gallery connections and things like that. Once I got myself together after that difficult period, personal period in my life, I went full tilt back into studio work. I started producing a fresh body of work, something I hadn't had time to do and I started exhibiting again in local galleries and having my own showings and things like that and it was back to the studio and I still maintain that. It's always odd to me that people here in the community, they know me as a sculptor, I mean, first and foremost as a sculptor. I went back and I did a little teaching on the side and things like that. Then I actually got back involved in real estate development too and buying distressed properties in the Tower Grove South area, so I've been renovating properties. Like I said before, I'm a very hands-on person and I love getting dirty, I just love getting dirty. So you give me something that looks ugly and abandoned, then I am a happy camper. I will make it...

Blanche Touhill: Well, look at the change in Tower Grove.

Gail Cassilly: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness, in the last 10 years, 15 years?

Gail Cassilly: Yeah, so kind of on a small scale, I'm still doing that sort of renovating and stuff but I'm doing it where I can do it as a one-man show. I could do it myself on my scale with just my guidelines and my artistic eye and my abilities.

Blanche Touhill: Did you find being a woman stopped you at any point?

Gail Cassilly: Never, no, I never did.

Blanche Touhill: Can you explain that in any way?

Gail Cassilly: Well, I think when I joined the missionary group of women, I was with a group of women who could do anything and did do anything and were fearless and that's just the way it was. There was no need to question anything, our abilities. We had one another and we had a purpose and nothing stood in our way.

Blanche Touhill: Well, in St. Louis when you talk about renovating homes, you have to be able to deal with banks, don't you?

Gail Cassilly: No, I would buy...many of them were foreclosure properties, very, very small properties that were distressed enough that I could do it on my own and so it's actually become a side business for me now in my so-called...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, but it's a business really?

Gail Cassilly: Yeah, I manage eight properties, all that I renovated myself and do my studio works, a combination of the two of them completely fills up my days now and it just keeps me, again, in that physical realm of work that I love so much. I never felt as a woman that I couldn't do anything, but, of course, I married a man who felt like he could do everything too and so the partnership...and I have to say that he did as well as this community of women. The other person who gave me the most confidence was Bob Cassilly because his energy was contagious and you just kept getting on the bandwagon with him and he pushed my limits and pushed my limits and pushed my limits and so I did things I never would have thought I was capable of doing and I took risks that I never thought I was capable of taking. So it was that kind of thing.

Blanche Touhill: Did your mother live to see this?

Gail Cassilly: My mother did live to see it.

Blanche Touhill: And what was her conclusion?

Gail Cassilly: Well, you know, she thought, I think, that I had just become a crazy woman when I came back to St. Louis and paired up with Bob but all she wanted for me was happiness as do most parents, and I think she

thought I was happy and she was very surprised when we adopted children but it was something that I really wanted to do together. So she saw it and I think it was just so beyond her comprehension that she just sort of...it was like when I went off to Africa, that was beyond her comprehension too but I think she was very proud of the fact that I broke out of that mold that I think I would have fell into had I stayed in Eerie, Pennsylvania and kind of followed the track that I was put on as a young girl.

Blanche Touhill: And what happened to your brother and sister?

Gail Cassilly: My sister joined the convent also.

Blanche Touhill: A different convent?

Gail Cassilly: Yeah, she joined a local order, the Sisters of St. Joseph, a Diocesan order, extremely different than...

Blanche Touhill: Mainly in teaching?

Gail Cassilly: Yes. Well, and nursing and things like that but it was the local order. It was a group of sisters who taught us in high school and in grade school.

Blanche Touhill: And the St. Joseph at Fontbonne were Carondelet?

Gail Cassilly: Yeah, they're Carondelet. This was different. This was a local of the Diocese but they are related in some way and she stayed as a nun and teaching for 20 years. When she left the convent, she continued to teach in high schools, public high schools and she's retired now, still lives there, in Eerie, Pennsylvania. My brother went into accounting and he now lives in Wilmington, Delaware, has had three children. He was kind of my poor brother, he was so young when my dad died and he was stuck with this household of three women and he was this little seven-year-old. My sister and I probably were not as kind to him as we could have been. So he had to learn how to survive in a whole different way that must have been tough for him.

Blanche Touhill: Well, let me ask a little different vein of question: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what do you think your life would be like?

Gail Cassilly: I think probably one of the main things that I am is resourceful so I suspect that whatever would have come my way I would have dealt with

it and made the best of it. I see myself, for some reason, as having been a farm woman or somebody developing the land and building on the land and, again, just doing something extremely physical and hands-on and just making the absolute most of whatever opportunity or whatever resources were there for me at the time. I don't know that it would have mattered what they were, I just think that that's how I'm wired, is to just...you throw a bunch of something in front of me and I just want to make the most of it, whether it's the leftovers in the refrigerator or a pile of rubble from a building being torn down. I just want to save it. I want to salvage it, I want to save it and I want to make something with it. So I think that's just kind of...

Blanche Touhill: So your artistic nature would have guided you?

Gail Cassilly: Yes, I think so, even without identifying it as that at the time, I think that's just what I would have done.

Blanche Touhill: Do you think you would have been a nun?

Gail Cassilly: No, I don't. I think my father's death had a lot to do with that and kind of that end of a childhood at an early age which made my thinking probably much more serious. I don't know if that's quite the right word but that would have been otherwise and I don't know, I just felt called to be a nun even though the other part of it I think was pure infatuation but the other thing was really believing that I was called to do this. I felt called to Africa. I felt called to leave Erie, Pennsylvania and to go as far away as I could. I didn't think of it as just an exercise in adventure or anything like that. It very much felt like a call from God and I think my leaving felt very much like a call from God as well even though my faith was the question mark at that point but nonetheless, I just felt that it was and when I think now of what that turn in my life did or directed me to, which was to Bob and then to my kids and to a success in art, which is very hard to have and to contributing something to the community which is meaningful, I'm thankful. I'm thankful that I had the occasion to leave and to branch out and do something else and probably being a mother still is probably the most...the biggest gift, the biggest challenge I've ever had and I couldn't have my own children and I think when I decided and kind of forced Bob into considering adoption, taking on that task of finding out how to adopt and to adopt and it was, again, it was that resourcefulness. Nobody was going to deny me children. I mean, my body was going to deny me

children but I was going to find a way. I was going to be resourceful enough and I was going to have those children.

Blanche Touhill: You didn't adopt children of Polish descent, did you?

Gail Cassilly: No, no, we had...

Blanche Touhill: I wondered if you had...

Gail Cassilly: No, we had no say and these were surprise children, wonderfully great surprises.

Blanche Touhill: If you got any awards or anything that really makes you proud and that you treasure, can you think of anything like that?

Gail Cassilly: You know, Bob and I jointly got several awards for the founding of City Museum. We got a Focus St. Louis award. We got the John Polker Levy-Stone Award, the David Francis Society Award. They were all for vision and leadership in founding City Museum. The award for me is always in the making. It's just in the doing. That was the award, the award was going there every day and putting hands to it and making it more exciting and more fulfilling and more successful. So, it was always a surprise to get handed an award because...it was a new experience, I should say and it was very nice but it was nothing compared to the actual making of what we were getting awarded for.

Blanche Touhill: Artistically, is a piece or a series of pieces that you particularly take pride in?

Gail Cassilly: Well, of my own sculpture, I could say that. There's, like, the commercial work and then there's the personal work. I have several personal pieces of work, mostly figurative. My range is from small bronzes to large, over life size pieces but there's probably a half dozen pieces that I have that I look at them and I say, how did I ever do that?

Blanche Touhill: And they're still with you?

Gail Cassilly: They're still with me, yeah. I won't sell those, although I do sell most of the other work. I still marvel, I marvel that I could make those and sometimes I want to say to my mother and my father, "Look, I made that. Your daughter made that," and I feel special for that moment because I think, wow, I had nothing but an idea and there it is and I made that.

Blanche Touhill: So art is, you have the idea first and then you have to make it?

Gail Cassilly: Well, you don't even sometimes have the idea first. I mean, you know, it's like, you go into the studio and you start with a void in terms of ideas sometimes too and you have to kind of think, what is festering? What is growing? What is coming to life in my mind, and then how do you actualize that. So it's this making something out of nothing that you start with every day. Nobody is saying, "Okay, here's your materials and here's the idea and here's the money and here's everything and all you have to do now is make this." I mean, you don't even have any of that as a background. You just walk in and you start and you have to generate the whole thing: the inspiration; the materials; the talent; the money; the time, and sometimes the market, if you need that in order to go on. So it's all about resourcefulness and its discipline. You have to be an incredibly...people have this idea that artists are these kind of fly-by-night, wacko people but, I mean, being an artist is an incredibly disciplined thing because you've got only yourself, really, as your greatest resource.

Blanche Touhill: Do you want to talk about something in the end of this interview?

Gail Cassilly: Well, you know, my life is very full. It's been very full and I'm grateful that it's been able to be full with art because, again, as I mentioned, it's a hard career; it's a hard thing to make a living of and it's a hard thing to just survive sometimes and I've been very blessed and fortunate living in this community, that I've been able to kind of maintain a reputation and a life and it's been very rewarding and I hope to keep doing it until I can't do it anymore.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you very much.

Gail Cassilly: Thank you.