

An Interview with
Mary O'Reilly

at *The* Historical Society of Missouri St. Louis
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interviewed by Dr. Blanche Touhill
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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.

Blanche Touhill: Would you introduce yourself?

Mary O'Reilly: Mary O'Reilly.

Blanche Touhill: Mary, talk about your childhood: your mother; your father; where you were born; your siblings; neighborhood kids; your elementary school; your secondary school. In other words, what was the environment in which you grew up and how did that help shape your future, and what I'm really looking for is, what did you want to do in those days, if you knew and did somebody say that to you, like, "Mary, you have a great talent for art" or "Mary, you have a great talent for politics"? In other words, talk a little bit about your early life.

Mary O'Reilly: I was born here in St. Louis. My family and my grandparents all lived in Parkview which is a neighborhood just north of Washington University. My grandmother lived two blocks in another direction. My entire family was nearby. It was wonderful, it was really wonderful. There were many, many children on the street. The Sissler boys lived in Parkview who were all baseball players. They used to have pick-up games on the wide part of the street when I was a child. Who else lived there?

Blanche Touhill: Did you play in those games?

Mary O'Reilly: No. We played a lot of Red Rover, Red Rover, send so-and-so over and things like that. We went out in the morning and were called in in the evening by a dinner bell or a Boson's whistle; I think my mother had at one point. Nobody worried about us, curiously. Everybody worries about their children these days.

Blanche Touhill: Did you play with both boys and girls?

Mary O'Reilly: Oh, yes. I have a younger brother and an older sister and we were all out there mixed. I went to walk to St. Rock's School, elementary school. We walked home every day for lunch, listened to two 15-minute soap operas.

Blanche Touhill: Helen Trent?

Mary O'Reilly: Helen Trent or Gal Sunday or something like that, walked back to school. I was just telling them that I have surprisingly few memories about being in school at St. Rock's. I remember walking to and from; I remember

church; I remember singing in the choir; I remember two nuns who traumatized me, but I really don't remember much about the school which I find very interesting.

Blanche Touhill: Did they teach art?

Mary O'Reilly: No, not in any real way, just kindergarten kind of stuff. I went from there to John Burroughs School in the 7th grade and it was sort of chosen for me. My sister had gone to, was already a student at Villa du Chain. One of the reasons my parents sent me to John Burroughs School is they had a very strong art department and I had already exhibited some interest in art and I enjoyed it very much and it was really sort of my thing because my brother and sister had other strengths and I'm the middle child so it was kind of my way to be me. There was a family down the street, the Shayen family and the mother of the family was Jean Shayen, a young mother at that time, was interested in portraiture and she was making pastel portraits and starting out in a career as a portrait artist and I was one of her early subjects that she was practicing. I still have that portrait somewhere. And that sort of lodged in my brain.

Blanche Touhill: Did she sell these?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, she eventually had a long, flourishing career as a portrait artist here in St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: And what happened to her paintings? Do you know?

Mary O'Reilly: Well, she's gone now. She moved to Villa...what do they call it...Marie de Ville?

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Mary O'Reilly: And she had a large exhibit of her work that she had borrowed back from families who had the portraits in their homes and it was wonderful to see. So I assume most of them belong to families, people who commissioned her. She was kind enough, when I moved back to St. Louis in 2001, as she was getting out of doing that work, to refer people to me.

Blanche Touhill: How nice.

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, that was very nice. Where am I?

Blanche Touhill: You're talking about, you enjoyed art and school didn't teach very much.

Mary O'Reilly: The elementary school didn't teach much, although we lived near Forest Park and I spent a great deal of time at the art museum and took classes as a child.

Blanche Touhill: Did you walk there yourself?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes. Eventually I took some classes even at Washington University's art school as a high school student. We were not allowed to take life classes, young girls, or I wasn't anyway. I had a facility for getting a likeness and I enjoyed doing that so it sort of led me into what I've done most of my life.

Blanche Touhill: When you went to Burroughs and they had an art department, was it a good art department?

Mary O'Reilly: It was a very good art department but we never painted with anything other than what we now call poster paints and we did linoleum block cuts, printing. That was about the limit of what we did and when I got into the Rhode Island School of Design and arrived there as a freshman, I was somewhat dumfounded to see the extent of the mediums and the processes, et cetera that the other students were already familiar with. How I got in, I'll never know but I did.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get into the...because I would think you'd have to submit a portfolio or something?

Mary O'Reilly: Back in those days, what happened was I submitted an application and they sent the outlines of an examination that I had to take. I did not go there. I was put in a room by myself at John Burroughs School and they told me what I was supposed to do. What I remember it included was to draw a straight-backed wooden chair in three different positions and then they turned it around the opposite way from the last position or they didn't actually; they said, "Imagine it turned around in the opposite position of the last position it was in and draw that from your imagination." That was the extent of it. Obviously we had recommendations from the instructors and as I remember it, they kind of left us to follow our own instincts with a little guidance here and there but there wasn't a lot of hands-on instruction as I remember it. It was a while ago.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it was a while ago. Did your brothers and sisters, were they artistic?

Mary O'Reilly: Well, it wasn't their interest and in recent years, my sister, who has been a professional writer most of her adult life or working life, was having trouble with writer's block and I had gone back to school, to New York University when I was working on completing my undergraduate degree which I had not done and I became very, very interested in Chinese brush painting as a spiritual exercise and all that. It's a fascinating topic, but anyway, she was reading my papers and she was living in New York at that time, got very interested in that and she got the notion that maybe if she started drawing, it would unlock her and so she did start drawing and I had interviewed a Chinese master artist who had moved from China to New York who was a master of the brush painting technique, a lovely man, and so she went and met him and took a couple of classes with him. She took some figure drawing classes at the National Academy and she is now a very accomplished artist, particularly in printmaking. This took me a while to get used to because that was my thing but I got used to it and I applauded her, said, "You're enjoying it. You're happy doing it. Do it." And so she does that very well. It hasn't really helped unlock her but that's okay. She's discovered quite a wealth of talent in there. My brother has woodworking talent and things like that and he can paint a mean picture when he's motivated. My mother's father died when she was 18 and he had been a veterinarian who worked for the federal government helping to set up the meat grading system around the country. So my mother had gone to 13 grammar schools.

Blanche Touhill: Because she traveled with the family?

Mary O'Reilly: The family traveled around the country. This is very, very rare. My mother was born in 1905. Families didn't move around like that unless they were escaping the Dustbowl or something terrible. Anyway, she had two younger brothers, five and ten years younger than she was. Her mother had had an 8th grade education. When my grandfather, who I never met, died, they got a small government pension or pay-out. It wasn't even a pension. They got no pension. They got a death benefit and there was no money so my mother, who had started college, dropped out and went to work to support her family, which she did up to and through the Depression and, as my sister once said, "Nobody ever said to her, 'wow, look what you did!' They all said, 'Oh, poor Mary Margaret, look what you had to do,'" which is probably absolutely true and sad.

Blanche Touhill: Well, both are true.

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, exactly. Well, it certainly was true that she did something remarkable but it's probably also true that no one ever applauded her.

Blanche Touhill: And her mother probably couldn't work.

Mary O'Reilly: Well, eventually she was the hostess in the tearoom at Van de Vert's for a long time, when I was a child.

Blanche Touhill: Well, that was a lovely surrounding actually.

Mary O'Reilly: It was beautiful. I remember going there and thoroughly enjoying it. Anyway, my mother had some drawing skill but it was not something she had the opportunity to develop very much and my father's mother, I think she was the generation where ladies learned to paint little watercolors which she did quite nicely but it wasn't really a family undertaking, art.

Blanche Touhill: Were you always drawing as a child?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes. I was telling somebody the other day, we lived in a house in Parkview that had a stairwell that went up several stories and I had spent my childhood occasionally drawing on the walls, little tiny pencil drawings that I thought were hidden. Why, I have no idea but I did. And my mother knew this was happening but never really said much except to "Hand me that pink wallpaper cleaner stuff."

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I remember that. What was the name of that cleaner?

Mary O'Reilly: I can't remember what it was called. It had a particular smell. It may come to us.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and that's how you cleaned the wallpaper.

Mary O'Reilly: Exactly, and it worked very nicely. But they were changing the wallpaper in the stairwell, about to start that and Mother said one day, "Mary, go ask all your friends to come over," and she gave us each a black crayon and said, "Have a ball."

Blanche Touhill: How wonderful.

Mary O'Reilly: And then they took it all down or I don't remember whether we drew on the wallpaper that was coming down or on the wall that would be under the wallpaper but kind of got it out of our system. I think I did that for my own children years later.

Blanche Touhill: I bet they were thrilled.

Mary O'Reilly: It was really fun. I don't think anybody took any pictures. That's too bad.

Blanche Touhill: And that was the era of the Kodak Brownie, wasn't it? Did you have a Brownie?

Mary O'Reilly: I think I did as a child, yeah. Then a little later we had cameras with flash cubes. Remember flash cubes?

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I do.

Mary O'Reilly: I had the pleasure of seeing Elvis Presley at the old Keil Opera House, 1957 or something, with five other classmates from Burroughs. Nobody remembers being there but I know I was there. Anyway, somebody's father had gotten us tickets in the second row from the stage.

Blanche Touhill: And did you take his picture?

Mary O'Reilly: It was the most terrifying experience I think I've ever had in my life. The place was absolutely packed, mostly with teenage girls with crinolines and here we were, these very carefully raised young people and there were all these opening acts and they went through their bit and then they were finished and then this gold shoe appeared, the toe of a gold shoe appeared by the side of the presidium and bedlam broke out: screaming like you've never heard in your life. I'm sure it was like that for Frank Sinatra and the Beatles later and so on...and flash cubes, nothing but flash cubes and screaming. Elvis came out in his gold lame suit, pulled the microphone up as far as it would go and pulled it down and sort of made love to the microphone and he was apparently singing but he could have been telling us all to go jump in a lake. You couldn't hear a thing. People were behind him apparently making music. Anyway, I'm sorry; the flash cubes reminded me of it. I saw that very same suit in Memphis. I went down there for the only time six years ago or so and went to Graceland, which was a hoot.

Blanche Touhill: I went to Graceland.

Mary O'Reilly: And there was that suit in the case.

Blanche Touhill: And I missed Elvis. He was obviously around but I had my mind on other things.

Mary O'Reilly: Much more serious.

Blanche Touhill: I think I was making a living, as a matter of fact.

Mary O'Reilly: Yeah, something like that.

Blanche Touhill: But I did go to Graceland because we were down in Memphis and I was with my niece and great niece and they said, "Let's go to Elvis" and I said yes and it's something to see.

Mary O'Reilly: It was a hoot, it really was a hoot.

Blanche Touhill: I don't know how long it will last.

Mary O'Reilly: I don't, either.

Blanche Touhill: But it was...

Mary O'Reilly: You're glad you went.

Blanche Touhill: It was remarkable. I'm glad I went. Well, go back then. You went to Burroughs and how was Burroughs? I know you have no memory of St. Rock's. Did you have any memory of Burroughs?

Mary O'Reilly: I have many memories of Burroughs, yes. I was there for six years and there were only 50, 52 of us in my class together for six years with a few coming and going but those are the formative years in your life in many ways, I think, and so...

Blanche Touhill: I think middle school is very important.

Mary O'Reilly: Yeah, junior high school, yeah. We're mostly all still quite close friends.

Blanche Touhill: Really?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Boys and girls or just the girls?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, boys and girls, yeah. There were a few teachers there who probably should have been brought up [laughter]. Well, anyway, but mostly it's a wonderful school. It's certainly exploded in recent years.

Blanche Touhill: But to have 52 students in a class at Burroughs, that's a big group at that time.

Mary O'Reilly: Well, it was...

Blanche Touhill: ...normal?

Mary O'Reilly: We were possibly one of the smaller ones, by just a few at that time. The classes weren't large. There were 300 overall students, I think...is that right? Six classes so...

Blanche Touhill: What was Villa like in those days? Your sister was there. Did that have about the same class, 52?

Mary O'Reilly: She was four years ahead of me and I went to things like the Maypole and stuff and watched her play hockey.

Blanche Touhill: They still have the Maypole. But I bet Burroughs does too.

Mary O'Reilly: They never had a Maypole.

Blanche Touhill: They never had the Maypole?

Mary O'Reilly: Burroughs started as this very progressive institution, keep you close to the earth and simplicity and all this stuff and nobody got, at least at that time, singled out for awards. So we were all very egalitarian and John Burroughs, who was a naturalist, was the inspiration. So they were trying to keep it simple and now when most of us my age go back and look at the school as it's become and all the cars in the parking lots, it's different.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get there, on the bus?

Mary O'Reilly: You know, it's funny, I really can't remember. They ran a bus that our parents paid for, a yellow school bus for a couple of years but that's all and it was not when I first started. We rode the streetcar because the streetcar ran right behind my house.

Blanche Touhill: That's right.

Mary O'Reilly: Rode it out to Clayton...

Blanche Touhill: Forest Park Boulevard, isn't it?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, Forest Park Parkway. It was Millbrook Parkway at that point. And they had stopped running the 04 just before I started at Burroughs which went right by Burroughs so before my time, that's how people got to school and I don't know how I got from...I can't remember how I got from Clayton to John Burroughs School. Eventually we all sort of took turns borrowing our parents' car and carpooling each other. A few people had chauffeurs.

Blanche Touhill: So your mother knew you were interested in art because that's why she let you draw on the walls.

Mary O'Reilly: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And she probably encouraged you. Did she buy you paper and pencil or art...

Mary O'Reilly: My father used to bring home paper from his job.

Blanche Touhill: The back of things?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, we'd draw on the back of paper and we had crayons. My mother had a brother who was quite talented and he, sadly, died when I was 13 but before that, he would sit and play with paper and crayons. I must have had little beginning watercolor sets and so on. But one thing, my grandfather, my father's father was a doctor and I remember him giving me a doctor's kit for a birthday when I was seven, I think, so maybe they had other ambitions for me. However, science and math are not my strong suits. I don't remember getting...I don't know.

Blanche Touhill: Were you the president of your class...I don't think girls were the presidents of the classes but were you...

Mary O'Reilly: You know, I don't remember that we had a president of the class. I think I served on the...

Blanche Touhill: ...the student council or something?

Mary O'Reilly: ...there was a literary magazine. I was on that, the Yearbook Committee; there was a newsletter, newspaper thing. I was on all those things. What else did I do? I designed the Christmas pageant one year. There's a thing,

they still do it. They have a tableau at the end of the Christmas pageant. I don't think they call it "Christmas pageant" anymore but...

Blanche Touhill: They probably call it the holiday pageant.

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, probably. I won that year for that design and something else I did...

Blanche Touhill: So your ability was recognized?

Mary O'Reilly: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And when you said you wanted to go to the School of Design, everybody understood that would be where you belonged.

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, except that Burroughs kids didn't go straight to art school. Two of us did in my class.

Blanche Touhill: Where did they go?

Mary O'Reilly: Well, you had to go to regular college first and then transferred or go later but RISD has the advantage of being a degree school. The other girl who went to art school went to the Boston Museum School which does not confer degrees, at least it didn't then which was frowned on. This is a preparatory school. We were being readied to go to regular colleges, universities.

Blanche Touhill: So you went off to the School of Design in Providence, right?

Mary O'Reilly: Providence.

Blanche Touhill: How did you like Providence?

Mary O'Reilly: I liked it very much. It was at that time, in the process of restoring its Benefit Street which is...do you know Providence at all?

Blanche Touhill: Just a bit. I visited Brown University.

Mary O'Reilly: Okay. Well, RISD, Rhode Island School of Design, is slightly down the hill from Brown. They're in the same...you can walk from one to the other. But Benefit Street, which sort of circles the hill at waist level, is where the Rhode Island School of Design is, up and down and around. And there were many beautiful 18th century houses along Benefit Street which had been let fall into disrepair.

- Blanche Touhill: Who lived in those, the students?
- Mary O'Reilly: Some of them were student housing because they didn't provide housing for upper level students or any boys. They had to find apartments.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you have hours that you had to be in?
- Mary O'Reilly: Well, the girls had a dorm.
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah, but did they have hours?
- Mary O'Reilly: Oh, yes, we had a curfew, definitely.
- Blanche Touhill: And you could only go out so many nights a week or anything like that?
- Mary O'Reilly: No, I don't remember that. No, you just had to keep up with your work.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, artists have to go back to the design studio, don't they? Don't they work all hours?
- Mary O'Reilly: We did, although I was only there two years. Then I got married and had three children. But while I was there, there were places to work in the dorms. There were work rooms and a lot of stuff was done there. I'm sure the upper classmen, for instance, painting students, painting majors, would be working in the larger painting studios for long hours and the architecture students and stuff like that.
- Blanche Touhill: If you graduated from such a school, did you get a job right away in the industry or were you on your own going out into the world?
- Mary O'Reilly: What's interesting to me is that portraiture which is the thing...I actually was an illustration major but portraiture was something I was always very interested in. They did not teach it and they kind of frowned on it and they do now. I always thought that was interesting because it is a professional school. It's training people to get jobs, except possibly the painting students and the sculpture students. My ex-husband, for instance, was a graphic design major. So he got a job right out of school with Proctor & Gamble, in their graphics department which was essentially their package design department.
- Blanche Touhill: And where did you go live when he got the job with Proctor & Gamble?

Mary O'Reilly: Cincinnati, yeah. We lived there for about seven years, had two children there.

Blanche Touhill: How did you like Cincinnati?

Mary O'Reilly: Cincinnati is quite a nice small city. It reminds me of St. Louis in many ways. It's got a German heritage, on the river.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful art museum.

Mary O'Reilly: Wonderful art museum, wonderful zoo. It's more conservative, which helped them in some ways because they kind of waited for all the other cities in the country to blow it on their urban redevelopment and then they did it very well except that, just like every other city pretty much, they dislodged whole communities of people but that's a whole other topic.

Blanche Touhill: When you were in Cincinnati, did you do portraits?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, I pretty much always have done portraits.

Blanche Touhill: I mean, did you get paid for it?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, I saw it as a pretty good way to make some money and do something I loved while being at home pretty much. So that worked out well.

Blanche Touhill: And then, where did you live after Cincinnati?

Mary O'Reilly: We went back to Connecticut. My husband was from Connecticut and several men who had worked at Proctor & Gamble had taken their...what did they call it, you got vested after 11 years and they had money they could take out and leave the company and they went back to Connecticut and started another marketing firm of their own. I guess marketing is the best way to call it, and after a few years, they asked Walter to come back and run their art department. So we moved to Connecticut.

Blanche Touhill: Is that what you did?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, with graphics, package design, all that kind of stuff. So that's applied art, right, professional art. So we moved to Connecticut and that's where my kids' primarily grew up.

Blanche Touhill: And you still didn't work? You were doing portraits?

- Mary O'Reilly: Well, I worked doing portraits, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, you worked doing portraits, but I mean, you didn't go to an office 9:00 to 5:00 or something like that?
- Mary O'Reilly: No. Eventually, I did get a job because my husband and three other men decided to start their own off-shoot marketing business and that was kind of tough going for a while. So I got a part-time job running a social service agency in the town we lived in, being the hands-on manager sort of thing, of this agency that was set up by the town to attempt to help families keep their children off drugs. That's when this was...it was the peak of everybody's panicking.
- Blanche Touhill: What years were they?
- Mary O'Reilly: The early '70s. I learned a lot about how you can't keep your kids off drugs. You can only help them try to deal with the world around them but I did that for about five years, I think.
- Blanche Touhill: Had you volunteered in anything like that before?
- Mary O'Reilly: I had been a member of the League of Women Voters and done a lot of volunteering with my children's schools and we belonged to a tennis club that I was the social director for, all that kind of stuff. What else did I do...? ...Too many things over the years.
- Blanche Touhill: But you were basically a stay-at-home mom that did portraits as people came along?
- Mary O'Reilly: Yes. I had shows.
- Blanche Touhill: Until you got the job in the agency?
- Mary O'Reilly: When I continued to do portraits, yes. They never have stopped. Did I do anything else? I went to work for a friend who had a liquor store for a while to earn the money to take my husband to Paris for his 40th birthday.
- Blanche Touhill: What fun. Did you have a good time?
- Mary O'Reilly: We had a very good time.

- Blanche Touhill: Well, how was marketing in those days? Was that the beginning of the advertising agencies or were there always...
- Mary O'Reilly: Oh, no, that was the heyday of the advertising agencies. It was the time that the show Madmen is all about, which was essentially my life. I find it very hard to watch that show.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, I can understand that.
- Mary O'Reilly: But it was definitely the heyday of the ad agency.
- Blanche Touhill: Did government, prior to that heyday of marketing, did government...I know that Hitler's associates sold the people, worked on getting the people to buy into...
- Mary O'Reilly: ...propaganda?
- Blanche Touhill: ...propaganda. Did the government, prior to that time, use a lot of propaganda or did that big propaganda, the spin that people talk about, did that really start out of that marketing heyday or do you remember?
- Mary O'Reilly: Well, if it did, we were unaware of it. I don't think it was the way it is now.
- Blanche Touhill: You do?
- Mary O'Reilly: I don't think it was the way it is now.
- Blanche Touhill: No, I don't think it was either and I was looking at the Madmen and it talked about "ring around the collar," and...
- Mary O'Reilly: They were just trying to sell products.
- Blanche Touhill: They were selling products but I often think, knowing that Hitler tried to do that and then I thought...well, I sometimes think the government, the American government sort of looks for what is the spin going to be.
- Mary O'Reilly: I think they did it during the Second World War.
- Blanche Touhill: They did do it the Second World War because Roosevelt was known to have called the movie people and say he needed a film on the army and things like that.
- Mary O'Reilly: Sure, they're certainly not above doing that.

Blanche Touhill: No, but it just seems to me today to be...it permeates the society, I think.

Mary O'Reilly: Yeah, that's interesting. The ad business is not what it used to be. They're still advertising out there and there are still some very successful, good agencies out there but it's not...we have a son who's in that business and it's not easy. In fact, he's not in it anymore. It's just changed.

Blanche Touhill: People aren't hiring or they have them in their own corporation?

Mary O'Reilly: I don't really know. I think it's just times change. I don't really know. That's interesting.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I know that St. Louis used to be 17th in PR firms in the nation.

Mary O'Reilly: Really?

Blanche Touhill: And I'm sure that it's no longer because I don't hear about those small little companies that used to be around so maybe they just all merged into big companies.

Mary O'Reilly: Probably, PAC-Man is at it, like banks. We're now pushing...what are they...tech start-ups? What's the phrase for the entrepreneurial start-up companies? But that would be interesting to talk to somebody about. I used to know people here who have been in that field for a long time.

Blanche Touhill: But your husband was the graphic artist, really, or the manager?

Mary O'Reilly: Both.

Blanche Touhill: And you never wanted to go into that business?

Mary O'Reilly: No.

Blanche Touhill: So when did you get your degree?

Mary O'Reilly: In 1989.

Blanche Touhill: Why did you decide to go back?

Mary O'Reilly: Well, my children had all graduated from college. I was no longer married. I thought, there's something I'm sorry I didn't do so I decided to finish that for my own sake.

Blanche Touhill: Where did you go?

- Mary O'Reilly: I went to New York University and got a degree in art history.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, really?
- Mary O'Reilly: Really.
- Blanche Touhill: It makes sense but I just thought maybe you'd say art but it was art history.
- Mary O'Reilly: No, I'd been doing art all my life and taking classes at the Art Students League and the National Gallery, every place under the sun, and teaching art. I did teach always, come to think of it.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you?
- Mary O'Reilly: Yeah. I just wanted to go get the degree and do it for my own sake and for my own pleasure.
- Blanche Touhill: So you never wanted to work in a museum?
- Mary O'Reilly: I did that later, and art galleries and frame shops and so on. Well, after I was divorced, also doing portraits the whole time. But I loved going to school at New York University. I loved it. I loved everything about it. I loved getting grades. I loved it. If I could have managed it, I'd have just kept going. I even liked commuting into New York.
- Blanche Touhill: How long of a trip was it, an hour or something?
- Mary O'Reilly: Depending on the weather and so on, yeah, about an hour to an hour-and-a-half because I had to go from Connecticut to Grand Central...
- Blanche Touhill: And then you'd take the subway?
- Mary O'Reilly: Yeah...to Greenwich Village, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: So you were on the Greenwich Village campus, yes. I lived in that NYU building in Greenwich, across from the park for years, 33 Washington Square.
- Mary O'Reilly: I know just where it is. Okay, pretty nice.
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah, it was a residence for law students and my husband had gone to his graduate program there so I knew that neighborhood well, loved it.
- Mary O'Reilly: It's a little different.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, it was different.

Mary O'Reilly: Changed again but...

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, it was constantly changing.

Mary O'Reilly: It's New York.

Blanche Touhill: How many portraits have you made of people, roughly?

Mary O'Reilly: I have no idea, hundreds.

Blanche Touhill: On average, maybe four a year?

Mary O'Reilly: Oh, no, it depends. Some mediums are quicker. I work in pastels and watercolors and oils and crayon and some of them don't take as long as others but I'm my own worst enemy as far as getting them done. No, I probably did nine to ten a year. Part of the issue is getting sittings and I work from photographs, which I started out not doing because it was considered really a mortal sin until I started doing two-year-olds.

Blanche Touhill: They move so much.

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, it's impossible unless you work really quick and it's just a sketch which can be charming too but it's difficult to work from photographs because you tend to overwork it. You lose the freshness that's what you want. On the other hand...this is for your visual record...if someone's sitting...I mean you do want the end product to look like somebody's actually sat for you so this isn't good but if someone sits for even 20 minutes...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, I see, yes.

Mary O'Reilly: It's not pretty so if you get a picture of a pleasant expression...

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Do you take the picture?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, then it's probably going to be a happier result.

Blanche Touhill: When you go to paint somebody, do you try to figure out who they are?

Mary O'Reilly: That's why I like to visit with them and take the pictures myself, yes. If I don't already know them, especially a child, but anybody, yes, and I may want to see them again, more than once. Now, this is all fine unless it's a

deceased person or someone living in Hong Kong or something. Anyway, so I've done all that.

Blanche Touhill: Well now, I know you have an interest in politics so how did you get interested in politics?

Mary O'Reilly: Paying attention. I did actually start...as I said, I was a member of the League of Women Voters in the town in Connecticut we lived in. It was quite a small town. I was on the Democratic town committee, now that you've reminded me. I was on their nominating committee. I became a state certified election polling place moderator which is non-partisan. I was raised in a Republican family here in St. Louis and the first time I voted was in Ohio and you didn't have to declare a party. You could just vote, at least at that time you didn't. I think that's probably different now. But when I moved to Connecticut and I went to register to vote, they said, "Well, if you don't..." ...because I thought of myself as an independent..."If you don't pick a party, you cannot vote in the primaries" and you've cut your nose off to spite your face because you can't help with selecting the candidates. So I looked around and I realized there were, at that time, 87 registered Democrats in the town we lived in.

Blanche Touhill: And how many Republicans?

Mary O'Reilly: And many, many more and since I have always been for the underdog, I registered as a Democrat, figuring they could use a few more numbers and I have to say, I've never regretted it since.

Blanche Touhill: Did your brother and sister become Democrats as they got older?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, we're all Democrats. Our parents were somewhat stunned but they were polite and we never talked about things like that anyway. My brother was an aide to Michael Dukakis in Massachusetts and has been very active in Massachusetts Democratic politics most of his life and is a ferocious Democrat and my sister...I'm not sure when she declared affiliation but she was very, very active in the women's movement in the '70s and Democrats are more friendly to women's causes than Republicans. So we're all good Democrats.

Blanche Touhill: Do you call each other up and talk constantly about who's running?

Mary O'Reilly: Or e-mail or, "What do you think is happening now?" I was thinking about this yesterday, that many years ago, when I was married and we were living in Connecticut and she was in New York, she was visiting me one day and this had to be the early '70s and she saw that I had been sent by Bloomingdale's a credit card, unrequested. They had just sent me a credit card, "Mrs." She was beside herself because at that time she was not married and she was unable to get credit anywhere. Remember those days?

Blanche Touhill: I do. I was going to say; initially they didn't send credit cards to women. They sent them to...

Mary O'Reilly: ...to their husbands. Well, this came in his name but it was for "Mrs." And my sister was gainfully employed at that time and rather well known and she could not get credit because she wasn't married. My, how times have changed...

Blanche Touhill: I used to travel with traveler's checks because I didn't have a credit card...

Mary O'Reilly: Wow.

Blanche Touhill: ...and I would pay the hotel bill, if I was traveling on business, I would just pay it with traveler's checks. So I was delighted when I could finally get a credit card.

Mary O'Reilly: In your own name.

Blanche Touhill: In my own name. But to go on to politics and I know you're interested in the women's movement. How did you get interested in that, the same way that you were seeing what was going on in the society?

Mary O'Reilly: And my sister kind of dragged me. Well, I'm a woman. I have a daughter. Now I have daughters-in-law and you look around and you see this is strange. Well, you know, the '70s were a time of turmoil, upheaval, re-thinking everything. It must have been horrifying for our parents.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, I don't know about that. I don't necessarily...I think my family was delighted.

Mary O'Reilly: Oh, good.

Blanche Touhill: Well, with the civil rights bill in 1964.

- Mary O'Reilly: Well, yeah, sure, but the anti-war and the drugs and all this stuff...
- Blanche Touhill: Well, I think the American public changed. I think when the war started they were for it and then I think, as it went along and as the young people began to say they didn't want to go and they didn't understand why other people...why they were there...
- Mary O'Reilly: Were dying for this, right.
- Blanche Touhill: And then I think they did change public opinion in this country.
- Mary O'Reilly: They did.
- Blanche Touhill: It took a while but they did it and they did affect policy.
- Mary O'Reilly: Yup.
- Blanche Touhill: In the same way as the women's movement. When the women's movement came, there were a lot of things that changed without the law. I mean, they needed the law to change but there was the feeling that the American society had to move over and let women contribute.
- Mary O'Reilly: At least up to a point, right?
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, yes, yes.
- Mary O'Reilly: We're still working on it.
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah, it's a work in progress. Did your mother talk about the vote, getting the vote at all?
- Mary O'Reilly: I was just talking to somebody about that this morning. I realized my mother was 15 when they...
- Blanche Touhill: Well, but that was an age you would know what was going on.
- Mary O'Reilly: Oh, absolutely, and I never talked to her about it, I'm really sorry to say. I wonder if my sister did. It had to be a big deal.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, it was a big deal in St. Louis.
- Mary O'Reilly: It was a big deal for everybody.
- Blanche Touhill: The women that paraded, they had the white dresses and the gold sash, yeah.

- Mary O'Reilly: It was a huge deal.
- Blanche Touhill: My mother was so affected by it. She never missed an election, the primary or...
- Mary O'Reilly: Nor should she have. Good for her.
- Blanche Touhill: But it was just one of those things that I think because she was a young woman, denied the vote and then when it came...
- Mary O'Reilly: She knew how important it was.
- Blanche Touhill: She knew how important it was.
- Mary O'Reilly: Well, how can we get young women today to realize that?
- Blanche Touhill: Well, I think that's the problem with history. If you don't know history, then you take...
- Mary O'Reilly: You're doomed to re-live it, right?
- Blanche Touhill: Well, what was it in the women's movement, did you have friends that were in it that you talked to, other than your brother and your sister, because your push is for equal rights. Your whole personality is equal rights.
- Mary O'Reilly: Is it? Oh, good, equal rights for everybody. Well, as I said, my sister was very much in the thick of it and made me aware, possibly in ways I might not have been otherwise.
- Blanche Touhill: How did she get into it? She lived on the East Coast?
- Mary O'Reilly: She lived in Washington, then New York, or vice versa, I've forgotten now, and she had two marriages. Anyway, she was a journalist.
- Blanche Touhill: Did she make her living by journalism?
- Mary O'Reilly: Yes, and she had a newspaper column...I don't remember which came first but at any rate, she worked for Time Magazine as a contributing editor, for New York Magazine, she was one of the first...when they started the magazine, she was on their roster. And then New York Magazine spun off Ms. Magazine and Jane, my sister, wrote the article that was the cover story for the first issue of Ms. Magazine. It's called *Click: The Housewife's Moment of Truth* which was about, you have a

husband, you have kids and you do the laundry and you fold it neatly and put it in a basket and you put it on the stairs so that someone will carry it upstairs and after three days, you realize it's still sitting there and nobody's carried it upstairs and everybody's...click, something's wrong with this picture, those kinds of little details of life and you read something like that and you think, yeah. Of course, I have to say for my ex-husband, his mother had raised him to know how to do housework and how to cook as well as cut the grass and stuff like that so I have no quibble with that and I raised my sons to know how to do that. But it was unusual.

Blanche Touhill: It was unusual.

Mary O'Reilly: It was very unusual.

Blanche Touhill: Men didn't even push the baby carriage.

Mary O'Reilly: No, they didn't. They didn't want to hold the baby. It was ridiculous. I love seeing young husbands and fathers now because they're very much co-parenting that baby that they're carrying on their chest. It's great. Anyway, you just began to be more aware of the reality of your world and what was expected of you and what you were not allowed to do or say or the jobs that certainly you're never going to be able to have, that job, you silly woman, even if you wanted it.

Blanche Touhill: And were trained for it.

Mary O'Reilly: Exactly. How are we doing?

Blanche Touhill: We're doing fine.

Mary O'Reilly: Okay. So how do you ease into it? And then Jane, through all those jobs, got to be a good friend of Gloria Steinem so those people were all on the front lines.

Blanche Touhill: And she would call you and talk about them?

Mary O'Reilly: Well, one time she asked me to hold a party in Connecticut. She wanted to come and interview people for a story. I've forgotten what the story was so I did that and, yeah, we were involved with each other and I was paying attention and reading her things and she was asking me what life was like in suburban Connecticut, because it certainly was different than

Manhattan. It was interesting to watch the other young mothers and wives in our circle begin to sort of wake up, not that it was an overnight change but it was a realization of other possibilities.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I remember the offering of assertiveness training courses.

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, well, and consciousness-raising sessions.

Blanche Touhill: Who delivered those courses in your town, the librarian?

Mary O'Reilly: I don't remember formal courses. I sort of remember people just deciding to get together and talk about the assumptions they'd been raised with and the things they were questioning. A lot of marriages didn't last.

Blanche Touhill: They did not.

Mary O'Reilly: Yeah, in that period and others were strengthened. I think it depended on the maturity of the husbands or maybe the way the women presented it or dealt with it also. Some of the women went a little nuts.

Blanche Touhill: In your husband's business, did they hire women?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, there were women but it was kind of a Madmen world. I'm trying to think if there were...I don't remember women on an equal plane. There were designers...

Blanche Touhill: So they wouldn't get the title and they wouldn't get the money but they had a job and they were contributing?

Mary O'Reilly: Right, kept in their place.

Blanche Touhill: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what do you think your life would be like?

Mary O'Reilly: It would have been very circumscribed, probably. I was not by nature a game changer. I would have been a housewife and mother and club woman and all the things I essentially am but with considerable differences now.

Blanche Touhill: Would you have been a portraitist...what do you call it?

Mary O'Reilly: A portrait painter. I might have been but it would have been considered a sweet little pastime, I think. Maybe, I don't know.

- Blanche Touhill: Would you have charged? Would you have been able to charge?
- Mary O'Reilly: I probably wouldn't have been able to charge. Who knows? I might have decided to join the suffragettes and the Women's Christian Temperance Union and be a hell-raiser. It's possible.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, it is possible.
- Mary O'Reilly: Yes, I might have. I'd like to think I would have. I probably would have eventually in some way. I'm not real good at sitting back and smiling pretty, am I?
- Blanche Touhill: No, you aren't. You may look that way but you're not that way.
- Mary O'Reilly: For very long, anyway. I like things peaceful, I'm a Libra, but I'm willing to fight.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, you are. What about awards, have you gotten any award or won a prize or...
- Mary O'Reilly: I've gotten many awards for painting, not necessarily portraiture and I've been juried into some pretty prestigious shows. So I guess I have to admit I'm taken fairly seriously at what I've done all these years.
- Blanche Touhill: So you're proud of your work?
- Mary O'Reilly: Yeah. It's funny, it's just sort of who I am. I guess I should see it more positively.
- Blanche Touhill: I was going to say, are there many women who are in portrait drawings?
- Mary O'Reilly: It's always been something women were...it was a nice little thing for women to do and there have been some outstanding women portrait painters.
- Blanche Touhill: Do you have trouble selling your work in galleries?
- Mary O'Reilly: I don't even do that anymore. I did. I have had people representing me. I guess I'm fortunate enough that word of mouth has kept me busy. Your work hanging on someone's wall is your best advertising and your best PR, which is why you never let it go out of your house if they're not 100% happy. In recent history, most of my work has come from referrals. So that's that, if that makes sense.

- Blanche Touhill: Do you want to talk about your children? I know you talk sometimes about your granddaughter and how her life is very...she leads a modern life.
- Mary O'Reilly: That's a good way to put it. Well, she's 16 going on 17. She's a very good student and she plays the violin and she's with the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra, also the Clayton High School orchestra and currently she's out at the University of Missouri in Columbia with the Missouri Scholars three-week program, which I'd never heard of before.
- Blanche Touhill: What is that?
- Mary O'Reilly: It's for students who have completed their sophomore years in high school, from all over the state and apparently they have to be recommended by their schools. She's one of three from her class at Clayton High School. I looked it up online and there are something like 360 young people from all over the state. She was very excited because she gets to live in a dorm. She gets to take classes she's interested in and not have to worry about grades. I think it will be a very good experience for her and the other two students are friends of hers so that's nice.
- Blanche Touhill: Is it both boys and girls?
- Mary O'Reilly: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: And does she think she's going to major in music or is it something else?
- Mary O'Reilly: No. She says, "I don't want to be a violinist." I think her goal is getting into the best school. I keep saying, "Maddie, it's good to enjoy your life along the way as well as thinking every minute of everything you do preparing you for the best school."
- Blanche Touhill: So she hasn't made up...
- Mary O'Reilly: She thinks she's interested in journalism. I think I told you that and I suggested she ask some people about the state of journalism.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, that's right.
- Mary O'Reilly: Which I do know some young people who are in journalism who say it's evolving and it's kind of exciting and it's going in different directions. It's not at all dead. So we'll see but I think you suggested that if she studies journalism, she will learn to write and write clearly and that's all good.

Blanche Touhill: And quick.

Mary O'Reilly: And quickly, yeah, under the gun, as it were, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Which is very hard to do.

Mary O'Reilly: It certainly is. It's terrible.

Blanche Touhill: And she went to Hong Kong?

Mary O'Reilly: She did. You remembered that, yeah. That was a year ago, I think.

Blanche Touhill: And she went by herself.

Mary O'Reilly: She went by herself for a week. Her mom and step-father drove her up to Chicago and made sure she got on the plane which was a non-stop to Hong Kong. She was 15 when she did that. She went to visit a family they knew so this was not as dangerous as it sounded. I would still have been recovering from jetlag after a week but she is young. She had a wonderful time. She doesn't think she necessarily wants to stay in this country eventually.

Blanche Touhill: So she has a global perspective.

Mary O'Reilly: It makes me sad...yes. It's interesting. She's an interesting young woman.

Blanche Touhill: And she reads Ms. Magazine.

Mary O'Reilly: She may. I'm not sure about that.

Blanche Touhill: I think you said to me once that she read Ms. Magazine or she knew of Ms. Magazine.

Mary O'Reilly: She knew of Ms. Magazine which a great many young women don't.

Blanche Touhill: No.

Mary O'Reilly: Which surprises me, and they don't know who Gloria Steinem is.

Blanche Touhill: How is she different than what you were at that age?

Mary O'Reilly: She's much more self-assured than I was at that age and she had a couple of boyfriends early on who, it was not a good experience and so she backed away from that whole thing and now she's feeling a little better about maybe pursuing that if it comes along with a likely candidate. So

that was good, I thought. She's got a complicated family life but it's a very loving and supportive family life so that's good. She's generally much more self-assured and confident of her brains, I think. I didn't know I was smart for a long time. She knows she's smart.

Blanche Touhill: Is she different than her mother at that age?

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, also more self-assured than her mother was at that age, yeah, interesting.

Blanche Touhill: And is she interested in politics and the women's movement?

Mary O'Reilly: My daughter...oh, my granddaughter, yes. She went and marched with me last year in the pride parade.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful.

Mary O'Reilly: Yes, we had a good time. Yes, she is, in the abstract anyway, she does pay attention and she is interested and she's certainly aware of women's rights and realities and possibilities and so on.

Blanche Touhill: More so than her friends?

Mary O'Reilly: I don't think so. Her friends are a pretty savvy group. Many of them are from Asian families. So I'm not sure about that.

Blanche Touhill: Well, that is a big difference from your youth and your daughter's youth.

Mary O'Reilly: It certainly is, yes, much more diverse group of friends, which is wonderful. I actually, at John Burroughs School, was one of...they had a quota for Catholics and Jews when I was there. There were no black students. We didn't know that until later that there was a quota.

Blanche Touhill: So you qualified.

Mary O'Reilly: That's different too now at John Burroughs School so that's good.

Blanche Touhill: I had a friend who worked for the University of Virginia. She was a woman who was hired from here and she went down and she found out that the University of Virginia...now this was the '60s...they had a quota for women faculty.

Mary O'Reilly: Right.

Blanche Touhill: And so she left.

Mary O'Reilly: Oh, good for her.

Blanche Touhill: She came back here. She was worried that when she went up for tenure six years later or whatever it would be, that maybe there was another quota and she didn't want to...

Mary O'Reilly: She wouldn't get it.

Blanche Touhill: She would have wasted her efforts so she came back here, got tenure...

Mary O'Reilly: Oh, good.

Blanche Touhill: ...and moved along.

Mary O'Reilly: Well, my sister's on the committee for Equality of Women at Harvard. They've been fighting that battle for a long time.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, but she went to Radcliffe.

Mary O'Reilly: She went to Radcliffe, right. So this is a lot of her friends who went to Radcliffe and younger women who went to Harvard, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Actually, I knew a woman who had a Ph.D. from...now, I'm not sure whether her Ph.D. was Radcliffe or Harvard but she used to study in the Harvard library and the women Ph.D. candidates had to sit at a certain table.

Mary O'Reilly: Mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: You forget those things.

Mary O'Reilly: Exactly.

Blanche Touhill: It was there...

Mary O'Reilly: ...but you had your place.

Blanche Touhill: You had your place.

Mary O'Reilly: If you were allowed in at all.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, that's right, yeah. It was hard. They probably had a quota. Well, I shouldn't say that because I don't know. What do you think of the Wednesday Club?

Mary O'Reilly: I'm a fourth generation member of the Wednesday Club and I think the Wednesday Club used to do many wonderful and important things in the City of St. Louis and since it's no longer in the city, I think it's a very nice women's group.

Blanche Touhill: And I want to congratulate you for getting scholarships for UMSL students from the Wednesday Club restored. They had taken them away...

Mary O'Reilly: Thank you. I wish they could be restored to their full...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, but you got them back so, on behalf...

Mary O'Reilly: It was my pleasure.

Blanche Touhill: ...behalf of the University of Missouri-St. Louis, we thank you.

Mary O'Reilly: Thank you.