

An Interview with
Sister Gabriella Rogenski

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.

- Blanche Touhill: Would you introduce yourself?
- Sr. Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, Blanche, I'm Sister Gabriella Rogenski and I'm a Sister of Divine Providence and have been in the order for 60 years, this year, I'm celebrating an anniversary.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, congratulations.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Thank you very much.
- Blanche Touhill: Sister, would you talk about your early life: your childhood; your brothers; your sisters; your mother and father; your grandparents; the children you played with. Did any of them say to you you have a certain ability and you should really think about working that ability and using that ability in the future?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I am from a Polish family, both parents and I have three brothers and myself so I was an only girl. I found it very difficult to be the only girl because I had to keep up with the boys and be a tomboy first. So I felt like I had a lot of competition there. As far as my grade school experience, was with the Catholic school and we had sisters in the Catholic school from our order, Divine Providence, and I always thought they were very strict and so I would watch them when they were not teaching, like, after school and then I found the humanness of the sisters to be more important to me than the strictness that they had to have in the classroom. And they always said the strictness was because of discipline. And so my grade school years were like that. I got encouragement from the sister that was in the choir and I was always in the choir and I loved music. In those days, we had Latin and we had to read everything in Latin and so she encouraged me and said I did a good job. Then later on, in high school, I had to make a decision. In our area, we did not have a Catholic high school. We had public high schools. The closest high school that was Catholic was pretty far away. So at that time, our Sisters of Divine Providence had retreats in Normandy, close by, and I would go to those retreats every year. It was, like, three days and I would meet other girls that were interested and so I struck up friendships with those girls and kept them during the years. And so I went to high school then at Mount Providence in the Candidacy which was the beginning of

sisters' education if you wanted to become a Sister of Divine Providence.

Blanche Touhill: So you didn't go to the public school.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: No.

Blanche Touhill: You went to this other opportunity.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right.

Blanche Touhill: Which provided a high school diploma but it also provided a training ground or an introduction to the religious life?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, it did.

Blanche Touhill: Did you stay there?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: The first year we had...three times we could go home and it was Thanksgiving, Christmas and then for summer. After the summer, we had to make another decision: If you wanted to enter the postulancy which was the more serious part of religious life, then you entered that and you were given this black habit to wear already. So I was 15 and I did that. My father made me promise, if I ever wanted to change or come home, he made sure to tell me, "You are always welcome and don't stay if you don't like it." I promised him I would do that. So I entered the convent. The first day I entered the convent was the hottest day in St. Louis history. I think it was in 1954, 105 in the shade and wearing the long black habit was atrocious, to say the least so I promised myself I'd go home the next day. The next day came and we were given so many things to do, I forgot all about it. So, of course, those days we had no air conditioning. We had fans in the chapel and most, we depended upon the windows and the breezes that came in. But we found ourselves praying to sit near a fan in the chapel because we were assigned places in the chapel. So that was a relief, when we could get near a fan. So, high school was more training in religious life too because I loved literature in high school and I loved the stories in classical literature, like *A Tale of Two Cities*, all of the...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, we did read the classics, didn't we, in those days?

- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, we did, Shakespeare and...wonderful. So that kind of was my leaning. I really enjoyed that. At that time, I did not know anything about drawing or I had never touched clay until I got to college and in college...
- Blanche Touhill: Stop there. So, really, your junior/senior year, you lived on the premise...
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: And you continued your high school work but you also were inquiring into the religious life.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right, very much.
- Blanche Touhill: How did your family react? Your father said it was all right but you had to understand you could come home any time you wanted to.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: And how about your brothers, how did they react?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: My brothers told me I'd be home in two weeks because they said, "You won't be able to keep quiet." We had a rule of silence and spoke only an hour after lunch and an hour after dinner. So that was their take on religious life at that time and it was hard. It was hard to keep quiet but we did make the most of the recreation we did have so that also helped.
- Blanche Touhill: Is the order an American order or where was it founded?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: We were founded in Germany in 1851 by our Bishop William Emmanuel Von Kettler who was a prominent bishop in Germany, Meinst, Germany at the time and previous to his priesthood, he was a lawyer and a politician. So he had a real working knowledge of what was going on in Germany at the time.
- Blanche Touhill: What was the goal of your order?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: The goal of the order was to teach young women out in the country who were not getting an education and children that were forced in labor, in coal mines. At that time, they really needed an education and to be available to go to school.

- Blanche Touhill: And how did they provide that? Was it after work or was it trying to get the child labor laws changed or how did they accomplish that education of the child labor?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Well, Bishop Kettler tried to get the labor laws changed.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, is this in Germany or the United States?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: This was Germany first, yes. We were also hospital sisters because there were accidents in those workplaces and people were sent home, of course, no insurance at that time. They were sent home if they were injured and so our sisters went from house to house and took care of the people that were injured or sick or elderly. So it was a two-fold service.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, then, when did they come to America?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: We came to America when Kaiser Bill was in the process of his government of closing all Catholic schools.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, I did not know that the Kaiser did that.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes. We had kindergartens and schools established and he was closing everything.
- Blanche Touhill: Was that the '80s and the '90s?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yeah, I think it was the late '80s. We were then called to Bishop Kettler and Mother Marie was our first foundress.
- Blanche Touhill: So she decided to come?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: She went to the bishop and asked what to do.
- Blanche Touhill: Because the schools were closing?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right, yeah, it was very difficult.
- Blanche Touhill: And he said, "Go to America"?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: He first thought about it and he said, "You are to go to America" and sent our German sisters over to the United States.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, where were they centered in the United States?

- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: At first, we came into Louisiana, I believe, and a bishop or a priest was supposed to meet the sisters there and did not on time so they decided to go further up north.
- Blanche Touhill: So they went up to Mississippi?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: They came into New Orleans and went up?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Went up to the Mississippi and started in Ohio, Dungannon, Ohio, and that was their first established school. Then, from there, they found themselves in Pennsylvania.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, did they teach in German?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: They taught the German communities, yes, and in those days, German was taught in the schools and along with English. So it was two-fold.
- Blanche Touhill: So the nuns had to learn English?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right, mm-hmm. So that's the way we were established.
- Blanche Touhill: And then they slowly spread out throughout the United States?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: That's right.
- Blanche Touhill: Are they all over the United States or were they at one time?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Pretty much, yes, and we're in Puerto Rico also and Korea, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, I didn't mean to interrupt but I sort of wondered. But your family was saying, "Yes, you can try it..." ...
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: ..."but don't get nervous if you want to come home. Everybody welcomes you home"?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right. I felt very good about that.
- Blanche Touhill: But you did like it?

- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I did, especially after that first day was over when it was so hot and getting used to the black habits. They were wool so it was very difficult.
- Blanche Touhill: Let me ask one other question because I'm interested in how people play. Did you play with your brothers? How did you play in those days?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: As a child, I played with my brothers because, like I said, I had to be a tomboy first and of course, they were into baseball so I had to learn baseball, not with a softball, with a hard ball. So I came out with many...a black eye, et cetera. However, I learned a lot and I learned how to use a catcher's mitt and et cetera. So I felt very good about baseball. I enjoyed it.
- Blanche Touhill: So they took you with them?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes. So in the convent also, we played and during our recreation, we also played ball, softball, because we were really kids growing up. We were, like, 15, 16 years old and enjoyed that a lot and we were allowed to do that which was a great sport.
- Blanche Touhill: How many were in your first novitiate class?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: There were nine of us, and various areas they were from. One was from California; two from Southern Missouri, Jefferson City area, Western Missouri, and one from Lowell, Massachusetts.
- Blanche Touhill: So was this a novitiate?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Of all of the nuns?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness, yes, okay. And how many finished and became nuns?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Well, we all finished as nuns. We have temporary vows first, for the first five years and so all nine of us did the temporary vows but as the years went, after two years, some people left. After three years, a few more and I'm the only one left now.

- Blanche Touhill: Of the nine?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Of the nine.
- Blanche Touhill: But some of them died as nuns?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: So what happened to you then? Did you go to college right away or did you go to teach?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: We were sent to Marillac College and we were the first class sent to Marillac College because at that point, it was being established as a Sister Formation College.
- Blanche Touhill: But had other orders of nuns as well, didn't it?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: And so who owned the property, the Daughters of Charity?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: The Daughters of Charity and we were the first order and the Franciscan Sisters were the second order that the Daughters of Charity grouped together to start the Formation College. So we were given an education, as long as we contributed two or three sisters who would be professors. So it was like an exchange. We were in the first class and that was in 1957. I was 17 years old and the first class I ever took was Mental Hygiene; second class was Logic, and so you had to take whatever they offered.
- Blanche Touhill: Sure, because it was so small?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right, and then, I went only in the summers to school.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Because we were given service to teach during the year and so when I was teaching, I did not go to college but in the Catholic Church, the school system was set up, as long as you were working on your college degree, you could teach. So, doing that, I went to school only in the summers so I was in the first class and I was in the last class.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness, yes.

- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: For Sister Formation College.
- Blanche Touhill: When was the last class?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: 1972. So I guess I spanned that whole area.
- Blanche Touhill: And the university bought that property?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: That's right, mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: And then, that was the end of the college?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Mm-hmm, that's true, yes. So that's the big foundation of how those two areas merged.
- Blanche Touhill: And what school did you teach?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: At first, I went to St. John's School in Imperial, Missouri and I taught there for three years. I started with the primary grades. I was taught or prepared to teach 3rd and 4th grade but at the last minute, one of our sisters was pulled out to finish her college and so they gave me 1st and 2nd grade which meant I had to print my charts all over again for reading classes, et cetera. However, I found it very good to teach young children.
- Blanche Touhill: You liked to teach?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I did, and I also learned at that time that I...the assignments I did with students, I was very creative with them because I wanted them to learn to appreciate being creative and I would do certain things like, I would put an ink blot on their paper and have them fold the paper and whatever turned up, I would ask them to write a story about it.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, how nice!
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: And so that gave them the freedom to write about anything. And, of course, in the primary grades, it was like one sentence or so, yes. But later on, people could build up on that skill, which was fun. So I did a lot of creativity with students.
- Blanche Touhill: You were teaching at a time when the women's movement was really beginning to become public.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Did you educate the girls differently because of that?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I ran into a snag teaching with that very question, the girls and the boys and it was in St. Louis at North American Mouters Parish that I taught a group of girls in 5th grade and I enjoyed 5th and 6th grade. At that time we had team teaching. One day my girls got together and cornered me and they said, "We need to talk to you, Sister," and I said, "Oh, okay." So I grouped them together and we went to talk and I said, "And what is this about?" and one of them had the courage to say to me, "You are calling on the boys more than you are the girls." And I was shocked. I was not aware that I was doing that. Of course, you know how...

Blanche Touhill: I do. You're a teacher and you get into a certain pattern...

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: You do, and I stopped to think and I said, "You know, you're right." It was the first time I admitted this to the student body, that I was doing this. Usually teachers stood kind of aloof and said, "Oh, no, I don't do that," but it was true. So I said, "I have to tell you something..." ...and I said, "We were taught, when we were teaching school, if we could get the boys interested, then the girls would come along and it would be less disciplinary problem" and I said, "That is what I was doing and I, unknowingly, was passing up..." ...and these girls were quiet, smart and intelligent, very capable of a lot of things. And so they drew my attention to another facet of paying attention equally to both groups of students.

Blanche Touhill: So you had to change your Modus Operandi?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, I did, and I think that was the first time I was confronted by students and I thought, well, I could really learn from this. I could really learn from what they see that's being done and needs to be changed. So I considered it to be a privilege that they really came to me.

Blanche Touhill: Well, see, I think that too because they wouldn't have come to you if they didn't like or respect you, so that showed that they

didn't feel that you would jump down their throats or ignore them and that's the great compliment of all?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Correct, yes, and if I was not approachable, they would never have said that to me. One of the things I had noticed from being younger, when I had such strict teachers in school, I made it a point to tell myself, if I ever became a teacher, that I would be approachable and human and I think that's one of...

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that wonderful.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yeah, that was very good for me to think about.

Blanche Touhill: Now, did they give you other ideas later?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Oh, yes.

Blanche Touhill: And what other ideas did they give you?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Probably, they wanted to do plays and be more creative and I enjoyed that part and I, unknowingly, enjoyed different kinds of challenges that they would give and appreciated that part.

Blanche Touhill: Now, did you tell the other sisters what happened?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: No, I didn't, not at first, no. I think it's only later on, after I quit teaching, that I even started talking about it.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you don't think about it. You're in the midst of it and you don't think about it?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: That's right, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And then later you get some perspective.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Mm-hmm, true.

Blanche Touhill: I wondered about math and science?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Math and science, I shied away from math. At that time we were teaching in groups and I taught...we were team teaching and I taught more of the language arts.

Blanche Touhill: And then somebody else concentrated on the math and science?

- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yeah. I did like math but I always told myself, my oldest brother was good in math so that was his thing, and so I had to find my own thing.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: So I did that.
- Blanche Touhill: So you taught school for how many years?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Oh, 25 years.
- Blanche Touhill: And always in that 5th/6th grade?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: No, I really went up and down the scale. I started with primary grades first and went all the way up to 7th and 8th. What I enjoyed in 7th and 8th grade was geography, civics and political science work, challenging the students to read newspapers and to be acquainted with the political system so they knew what was going on and could become good voters later on.
- Blanche Touhill: Were you part of that Post-Dispatch or the Globe Democrat? I forget which paper did...
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: The Post-Dispatch.
- Blanche Touhill: They used to give out newspapers to...
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: ...and the Globe.
- Blanche Touhill: ...the schools.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: That's right. That was very good.
- Blanche Touhill: It was an excellent idea.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Excellent idea and I gave a quiz every morning and they would groan at me every time. However, I thought it was very good and one of my students came to me years later and I was there for St. John's in Imperial, Missouri for another occasion of celebration and she came up to me and she said, "Sister, I am going to be a teacher like you because I liked history." History or civics and geography was very good.

Blanche Touhill: So after the 25 years, then what was your calling? What did you do?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I was given the opportunity, when I went to Marillac College, I met this sister who was a Daughter of Charity. One of the courses I had to take, to get a teaching degree, was Art in the Elementary School and it was Sister Maria Leebach who was teaching that course and she gave us things to do and she said, "Look at the person across the table from you and just take your pen on this piece of paper and just see what you can put down without lifting your pen." I had never done anything like that before but the sister across the table from me was a sister of...she had a habit that was very unusual and so I was trying to capture those shapes and so I did and then Sister Maria came around to see what we did and then she took my paper and held it up and she said, "This is what I was asking you to do." It was contour drawing and I didn't even know the name of what that meant but it was fun to do and I enjoyed it and from that time on, I thought, oh, this is wonderful. Then another assignment she gave us was clay. We each had a batch of clay to make something and bring it back to class. So I had found in a Life Magazine a hand that was reaching up for strength or courage. Actually, it was a Native American hand and so I duplicated that hand as much as I could anatomically and brought it in for my assignment and that's when Sister Maria said, "You need to do some work in sculpture." And I was alarmed and I said, "Well, I've been asking to go to art school for eight years but my provincial is the one who has to say yes, I can go." So she called my provincial, Sister Mary William at the time and she told her I should be going to take some art classes. Then Mother Mary William, at the time, gave me the chance to go to Fontbonne University and to study under Rudy Torrini.

Blanche Touhill: And they have a wonderful art program, had have it for years.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, they do, yes. And Rudy Torrini was my first teacher in sculpture and I took painting and drawing, et cetera and I had to decide whether to major in painting or sculpture.

Blanche Touhill: And what did you choose?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I took sculpture because it was three-dimensional and I wanted to feel the different shapes and, yeah, bring those more live off of the page.

Blanche Touhill: So what did you do with that degree?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: That degree led me to go to Colorado. One of our sisters there...we were working with Mexican-American women and they were very poor. We were in the area called Center, Colorado which is at the very center of the state and it's a very poor area where course barley is grown during the summer and potatoes during the winter and so the women that worked, had second jobs, were either working in the fields and also in the potato cellars sorting potatoes. And when that job was finished and their income wasn't there and Sister Alice was an excellent person to notice that the people there could use a second income so she had organized an embroidery workshop and a weaving workshop so that the native talents of these women could be utilized for them to make extra money on the side, in between harvesting. So she asked me if I would go to Colorado and teach the ladies something about design so when they finished their embroidery workshop, they could design evening woolen skirts that were embroidered very heavily with a design that was native to the area. So I went and I enjoyed that so much. We created so many different kinds of skirts and they were beautiful and the women created their designs from what they knew, from the potato plants that flowered in the fields, and some of them even put the potatoes at the bottom of the skirt and stuffed them after they were embroidered so it would give a little weight to the skirt. Some did the flowers only of the potato plant, in various stages. Some did barley, fields of barley, what they decided to create and always...I learned a lot from them and they hopefully learned a lot from myself. I went with the idea that their colors were so bright, we needed to tone them down and, at the same time, I found out why their colors were so bright, because in Colorado, the sun is out all the time and so every color seems a lot brighter than it would for us perhaps here in the Midwest so they taught me to enjoy the bright colors and it's how you put them together that makes a difference. So we had quite a few demonstrations and

we went to different places to show what skirts were there and how they were constructed. We gave a demonstration at the Denver Art Museum in the Textile Department. We had woolen embroidery on woolen skirts so that it was not a problem of shrinkage when the skirts were cleaned or anything like that. And then, later on, we moved to silk. So it was wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: And the women earned more money?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: They did.

Blanche Touhill: And does that still exist today?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: No, it doesn't. It was our aim to give it back to the local people. So we could stay there and organize it and get the ball going and for a long time it was going very well.

Blanche Touhill: Are the women still digging the potatoes or has...

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, and some have, of course, died, passed on, so the old-timers have gone on and hopefully the younger ones are doing embroidery at home and enjoying what they can because the talent was just native raw talent and it was wonderful, especially weaving. We also did a workshop in weaving where the wool was carted and we dyed our own wool outside. We had an old church that we used as a center and it was called the San Juan Art Center.

Blanche Touhill: Now, when you go off on projects like that, the order supports you?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Well, this is what happened: Sister Alice wrote for grants.

Blanche Touhill: And she was successful?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: She was very successful in getting grants. We were trying to promote the historic Hispanic arts which were native to people and to get that funded so that the ladies would not forget what they had known. So, weaving also, we dyed our own wool in the fields and the ladies knew all of the plants to pick for different colors and we would boil those plants outside in the yard and then we would put our yarn in and dye it.

Blanche Touhill: And so, where did you go after that?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: After that, I came back here to St. Louis and stayed at our mother house and worked on...we had a newspaper that was put out monthly and I worked on that. In between time, I was going back and forth to take care of my parents who were getting older. My father had congestive heart and then later on, my mother had a brain tumor. So my father passed away at 75 and my mother, two years later of glioblastoma, brain tumor at 77. So I took care of my mother for four months. My father only lasted a week after he came back from the hospital. So I learned a lot there also because I was always afraid of nursing or being afraid of doing the wrong thing but the hospice nurse was so good. She helped me to be able to take care of my mother and my Franciscan brother, he came home from Alaska to help me also. So Mom lived four months and we just did what we could and it was very peaceful. So I was glad we had that chance to be alone with her.

Blanche Touhill: Indeed.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, to enjoy her while we could, yes.

Blanche Touhill: So then, what was next?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: After that, I was director of our mother house for two years as a Superior there and, really, I did a lot with the older sisters there. I was really interested in how they were getting along. We didn't have an infirmary, as such, because we only had, like, three or four sisters at a time in bed, but I learned there also, from our nurses, to take care of people and to, you know, make them happy while we could and help them to get out of bed. I worked with one of the sisters who was getting over a stroke and doing her exercises every day was a big item. So, yeah, little by little. Then after that...let's see...I was teaching too, I was teaching religion classes in between.

Blanche Touhill: At Incarnate Word?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: No, not at Incarnate Word, at St. Christopher's in Florissant and so I was doing that and then I needed to get a job that paid some money because, by this time, the community was getting smaller and smaller because women were not entering the community any longer. There were much more things to offer young women

than when we were young. So, consequently, women had choices more than we did and did not enter the community so therefore, our income was getting smaller and smaller. So I was told to get a job. So I did, I looked in the paper and I tried to figure out what I wanted to do and I thought, hmm, I could babysit, perhaps, but what I really wanted to do, I wanted to be a floral designer because I thought that would be closer to being a sculptor. I would call it "floral sculpting."

Blanche Touhill: So did you do that?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I went to Dierberg's.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And they hired you?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And how long were you there?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I was there nine years.

Blanche Touhill: Nine years?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, and I loved it and I loved especially doing the funeral work because it was large and looked like sculpture to me. The people were wonderful that I worked with and I still keep in contact with those same ladies that still work there, and men, wonderful, because they had a good spirit. Then after that, I was going to our mother house in Pittsburgh for a meeting and I fell at Lambert Airport and I had broken my ankle and I thought, well, it's just okay. My first thing is I deny it first and then I worry about it later. So I said to the nurse, "Just give me two banks of ice and I'll just keep going to Pittsburgh," which I did and by that time, when I got off of the plane, the ankle was so huge, I knew it was broken then and so the stewardess helped me off the plane and so we went right to the hospital to get that x-rayed and it was broken. So I stayed there until it was healed, which was about five weeks and

then I was ready to come home to St. Louis and I had a brain seizure.

Blanche Touhill:

Oh, my!

Sister Gabriella Rogenski:

And I did not know what that was except I remembered my mother having one and I thought, well, I don't know what's happening to me. And so I went to the hospital to get that checked out and the doctor said, "I'm going to do two things, do a blood test and give you a CT scan so by 8:30 in the evening, he came back and said, "You have a tumor and it's a meningioma. It's on the top left of your skull and it needs to come out and I said, "Why does it need to come out?" because I asked all the questions I needed to ask and then he was saying, "It's too close to the center of your brain where the blood vessel is" so he said, "It needs to come out soon." So I asked him if I could do one more thing, go home and visit everybody and then come back because I went into surgery in Pittsburgh. One of the sisters knew Dr. Joseph Maroon who did meningioma tumors and he had done them for years. So I trusted that. I'm glad I did because he was very good.

Blanche Touhill:

And he got it?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski:

He did and 95% was gone and so he said "It'll take 20 years before you have any other problem and by then you'll die of something else." I said, "Thank you very much." So it was an experience and so I figured I was given extra time to live because I didn't know, when I went into surgery, what was going to happen nor did I know what I would be able to do after that. I was having trouble with my whole right side, it was paralyzed, especially my foot, my leg, my hands. I was trying to feed myself and the fork would go way over and I couldn't punch in the numbers on the telephone so I told my brother, "If I don't call you, it's because I can't get the numbers. So call me first." So, little stuff like that but I had to do the therapy. The therapy was so important. I said, "What to do with my right foot because this is my driving foot?" He said, "Sit on the edge of your bed and tell your brain to tell your foot to move," and I did that. I did that very unbelievably and it did happen. It just started to move. So I was very lucky.

- Blanche Touhill: Yes, you were.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: And when I came back from Pittsburgh, I wanted to continue my therapy on the right side so I went back to Fontbonne University to work in sculpture.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: And it was a circular therapy for me, that I could go back and work with clay and wax and learn again how to use that gift. And so I was very grateful for that.
- Blanche Touhill: If you had been born 50 years beforehand, earlier, what would your life have been like? Would it be different?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I think my life would have been very different.
- Blanche Touhill: You do?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I do.
- Blanche Touhill: What do you think would have happened?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I think I would have been expected to be a housewife and to raise children and to be domestic. My mother always took care of my dad, made sure his meals were there at the right time because his work, he had two jobs and it was a big thing for us to eat at 4:30 in the evening.
- Blanche Touhill: So he could eat with you?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, and then after that, he went to his second job because he worked for Brown Shoe Company during the day. My example was my mother always being solicitous to my father and even if that had been 50 years before that, my grandmother was doing the same thing and so I figure I would have been in that same category.
- Blanche Touhill: So you wouldn't have been a nun?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Probably not. I probably would have been...if I was interested in the arts, I probably would have been a sewer or seamstress and my mother was an excellent seamstress because of that gift and

she was a great baker too for that reason. And my dad had hobbies. He used to make belts and, before I even knew the word “macramé” he was already doing that.

Blanche Touhill: With the leather?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, and also with the cords.

Blanche Touhill: So you would have found your artistic expression in home, domestic kinds of arts.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I think so.

Blanche Touhill: Or you might have sewed for the neighborhood...

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right.

Blanche Touhill: ...or something of that nature.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right, I think so.

Blanche Touhill: Or the church or something?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: That’s right, or doing quilting as church...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, that’s right. Now, what about, have you received an award that you’re particularly proud of?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Nuns were supposed to be quiet and unassuming. I guess the award that...I guess I’m proudest of being in Colorado for those nine years and to have designed the logo for the Art Center and the brochure I think was very important to me. And then going to Dierberg’s and taking the floral design and getting a certificate there for that was important to me. I enjoyed that a lot. Also, there are no awards for people that take care of parents that are dying and I thought I would be so afraid of that that I would not want to do that ever but when called upon to do it, I found that I really learned a lot. I learned more about my mother that way.

Blanche Touhill: What do you think is the theme of your life? If you’d have to say what is the theme, is it...well, obviously it’s service to others. I mean, obviously you’ve had that thread through your life but what is the theme?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: To be creative and show others the value of creativity, I think that would be very important to me.

Blanche Touhill: And you had a natural inclination for it.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And then you used that in your schools and then you used that in Colorado?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right.

Blanche Touhill: So it has popped up consistently.

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, and reflecting back, I'm now working on a wood carving at Fontbonne University and wood carving, I just love it and the only connection I have to wood carving, as a child, when I would get angry at my brothers, I would flop onto the bed and just cry but my mother and father's bed was one of these with the back, that had the large wood carving and I would run my hand over all of that and I didn't know what I was doing at the time, but that was giving me...it would calm me down, for one thing, but it was so soothing to me, to enjoy those shapes and the beauty of that.

Blanche Touhill: Now, being a nun, did that help you to become creative?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Ah, I think so. I was interested in the liturgy a lot, our mass that we have and how we look at the seasons of the year and I was on the Arch Dioceses Commission for liturgical art for nine years also and I was in a committee that worked on that and when the changes came through Vatican II, I was very interested in that, making the prayers that we say more easily understood, moving from the Latin, of course, to the English, was a big thing for me.

Blanche Touhill: Do you think the changes in the church have been good for the church?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I do.

Blanche Touhill: Why do you think that?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I think they've been very good for the church, number one, just for understanding what you're praying about, and number two, I

think the different pastors have different ways of celebrating or praying with people and I think we're allowed to now appreciate that difference in each one and then, also to pass that on to younger people.

- Blanche Touhill: Did the nunnery change when the women began to change in America?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I think we began to change a lot in the '60s.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you help make the change?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I think so.
- Blanche Touhill: The nuns?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I think so.
- Blanche Touhill: And the schools.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: Why would you say they did?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Because we went from not being able to listen to the news or radio or TV, we went from not being able to read the newspaper to being more consciously aware and being in tune with the world. Before we were separated from the world and looked upon that as not holy but when John the 23rd opened Vatican Council, he made sure to tell everybody that God created the world and because it was created by God, its good and so we need to learn from what we see and what we hear and from one another and that that is holy also. So instead of sitting in judgment about, "You're not following this rule or that rule or that rule," it moved to "Oh, how do you love your neighbor?" that counts, how do you help people that need help. That's what it's all about because in the end we'll be judged by love.
- Blanche Touhill: I always thought that the nuns made a great contribution to the American society, particularly in schools and hospitals and really taking care of the needy and I think, as the nunneries attract fewer and fewer women, I think that contribution is going to go away. What would you say?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yeah. There is a fear of that, yes. We are very much aware of that only I think now it's going to change somewhat because in every congregation now, we have associate membership.

Blanche Touhill: What does that mean?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Women who have enjoyed knowing us and knowing our spirit and how we serve others, be they married or divorced or wanting to work with children or hospitals, they also can contribute or follow...keep our spirit going. So when we think about all the people that we have lost and have died and only fewer members coming, I think it's going to be that laypeople who really care about our spirit will continue that in some way. That's very positive and I think that is going to change some way but that's okay. God is not afraid of change.

Blanche Touhill: But you think that spirit is needed and it will last?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, I do.

Blanche Touhill: Into the hands of people who are not religious but who are laypeople...

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: That's right.

Blanche Touhill: ...but still have that quality about themselves?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Right and who remember our service, our historical contribution to the poor and the needy and those in pain, yes. I think that will continue.

Blanche Touhill: Now, where do you live now?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I live now in Florissant, Missouri in a house which is called Providence House and I call it the "Bed and Breakfast for the Sisters of Divine Providence" because any sister who comes in from Pittsburgh or any other area who wants to attend a meeting, can stay at our house and I love to cook so I will cook for them and make sure that they feel at home and enjoy the house so I enjoy that a lot.

Blanche Touhill: So the community still exists?

- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, mm-hmm, and our headquarters is now in Pittsburgh. We used to have our mother house in Normandy and because of finances, we lost that. So we pulled together and a lot of communities are doing that now, merging together.
- Blanche Touhill: Do you have a special retirement home for your nuns or do you...once again, have you merged with other orders to provide that service?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: We, at this point, looked for a place for our sisters that were growing older in this particular area of Missouri and Illinois and have our sisters at St. Clare's Villa in Alton, Illinois and so that is one choice for us. Another choice is in Pittsburgh. Our sisters, we have an infirmary in Pittsburgh, like, 24 beds and we can also choose to go there, depending on how our needs are at that time. So that's very helpful to know what our choices are.
- Blanche Touhill: Are you going to celebrate your 60th anniversary?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: When are you going to celebrate that?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I did in June and I also did in August. We have our assembly meeting in August and all of the sisters from all over come home for that. So we did that again in August. So that's wonderful and I'm sure I will celebrate all year. It's worth it.
- Blanche Touhill: It's worth it.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yeah, really. I never thought I would live this long, but wonderful.
- Blanche Touhill: But you have and you look very young.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Thank you, thank you, and I will be 75 next week.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, wonderful.
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yeah. It's great.
- Blanche Touhill: Is there anything else you want to talk about in these remaining minutes?

- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I think the experience I had in Southern Colorado with the Hispanic women was very important to me because it was a chance for the women to have their own freedom outside of the home and to have also an income that was something that they could use for their own needs and their families' needs so that it gave them an opportunity to be acknowledged for the gifts that they had. For instance, they are very artistic, very creative and this was an avenue to do embroidery and to express themselves. I have seen so many of those women with such a low self-esteem be able to get up and explain to people what they were doing and it was such a wonderful experience, to see that happen, and they could do it in Spanish and in English. So that was even better and I think that was a great reward, just to see that happen.
- Blanche Touhill: Is that element of the Mexican-American still there?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, it is.
- Blanche Touhill: The agricultural worker?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: And the family...
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: ...are still with a hierarchical structure?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: More in terms of political structure that holds them down, only now it's also been my experience that some of those same women who were in the art category or art center with us have now become mayors of the city, have had more expressions of their own self-esteem and confidence and knowledge of the political system and can really be there for others.
- Blanche Touhill: And are their daughters getting more education?
- Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I'm not sure. I'm thinking it has to go that way because their daughters, of course, would see what they have done and would want some of their freedom, for one thing, some of their experiences, yes, and I also worked with high school students at

that time on the side and I had several high school students that were very good with the arts.

Blanche Touhill: Mexican-American?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And what did they want for their future?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I don't know how they ended up but I would hope that they would aim for something...that we give them more liberty, more freedom and express their own creative work.

Blanche Touhill: Are there generation after generation in the fields or are they a couple generations and then they get to school and they leave the fields?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: I think it's both. I think if they stay in that area, they will be considered field workers and even in the schools, that was a very difficult thing.

Blanche Touhill: Because they couldn't attend school, I guess?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: They could but mostly there as a disparity between the white and the Mexican, to put it bluntly and so they always looked upon the children as agrarian workers and really forbade them to speak Spanish in school until one of our sisters got to be principal of the school and she interspersed the bilingual education into the school, which was very healthy for everyone.

Blanche Touhill: Did your creativity help you to make the changes in the world that occurred while you were living?

Sister Gabriella Rogenski: Yes, I think so. I think because creativity gives you a chance to grapple with change and I might say this tongue-in-cheek because I'm getting older and the older I get, I don't want so much change but I think creativity lends you to see the beauty in change and that change can bring about more beauty.

Sr. Gabriella Rogenski 11-5-2014