



## TRANSCRIPTION COVER SHEET

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**Interviewee(s):** MARY FARMER

**Interviewer(s):** CHRISTOPHER ALLISON

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This is an oral history interview with **MARY FARMER**. It is being conducted on **JUNE 11<sup>th</sup> 2022** at **DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY** and concerns **Farmer's time of being a student at Rosary College (now Dominican University) she is class of 1971**. The interviewer is **CHRIS ALLISON**. This interview is a part of the **INSTITUTIONAL LEGACY PROJECT**. This interview has been **RELEASED**. Documentation of permissions is included in the **MCGREAL ZOTERO 'INSTITUTIONAL SAGA PROJECT' LIBRARY > ORAL HISTORIES** record.

## Interview 7 - Mary Farmer

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### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

1960s, 1970s, LGBTQ+ experiences, Dominican sisters, class leadership, Georgetown University, Vietnam War, student protests, anti-war movements, teach-ins, lesbians, adult sports, feminist bookstores, Furies Collective, consciousness raising.

### SPEAKERS

Mary Farmer, Christopher Allison

**Christopher Allison** 00:00

Hey, I'm Chris Allison, Director of the McGreal Center, and this is June 11, 2022. And I'm with—

**Mary Farmer** 00:12

—Mary Farmer, class of 1971. History major.

**Christopher Allison** 00:18

Wonderful.

**Mary Farmer** 00:19

And...I think the first thing that I would say is that attending Rosary changed my life...had a lot to do with making me the person I still am today at age 73. So, I'll talk a bit, personally, about what it was like to come here and to meet the Dominican nuns. We obviously had lay teachers as well, but I dare say that the Dominican nuns—who were here at that time—had a great impact on all of us as young women. And we all came from— at that point, there were a lot of young women who attended the school who did not live on campus. And we referred to those friends of ours, and fellow students, as commuters. And then the group of us who was lucky enough to have the resources to actually live on campus were from varied backgrounds...I would say mostly Catholic, educated in Catholic institutions, and different class backgrounds and experiences, for sure. Although at that time, there was very little self-knowledge or self-reflection about class, for instance. So, I came from a co-institutional high school, which means that it had men and women. And— but we were not in class together. Which, for me, was a real opportunity to gain more self-confidence and be able to speak up in class. I needed that space. And I was very aware of that. And, so, when I said about trying to choose for myself where I might like to go to college, that was an important consideration for me. And the experience of being here had a lot to do with me becoming a more vocal leader, a better student, a better writer, a better organizer, a better thinker. And that in large part was due to my classmates. I was part of an extraordinary class of women. And two—and I'll just name a few, and I'm sure I'll leave out a few—the— some of the professors that I had changed me. Sister Albertus Magnus is the first that I would— I would say.

**Christopher Allison** 04:07

She's come up a lot today.

**Mary Farmer** 04:09

She was— I don't even know that she was the chair of the History Department when I was here, but she was a force of nature. And she was— had extremely high standards for her students in terms of their discipline, doing your work and the quality of the writing that we turned in. And in the course of four years, I— I was certainly not able to live up to most of those standards my freshman year. I had to just work, work, work, work to keep my head above water. She was not mean or impatient, but she also wasn't gonna alter her standards. And I learned a lot from her about being a person and primarily a thinker. And I learned a lot of history from her. Sister Thomasine taught me economics—economics was my minor—and...completely different personality. But again, same generation as Sister Albertus Magnus, but a different kind of personality. And with her also, I just learned so much about how the world works...from money and/or financial and financial policy perspective, and it was fun. So, I truly enjoyed my classes with her. And again, I looked up to both of them as role models. I had many, many other good teachers, as Sister Fredericus has taught me philosophy, and encouraged us to figure out our own process for thinking things through. It's not anything that I had ever experienced before in my life. And it was a very important, informative exposure to her. And I also— I also felt

empowered to take leadership. So, I was sophomore class president, senior class president and key person just in organizing our class. And my college experience is settled in the time period that included the Vietnam War, the work and assassination of Martin Luther King, and perhaps the very beginnings of the second wave of feminism. So, there was a lot going on. And I took a break my junior year. There was the opportunity back then for three or four history or political science majors to go and study for a year at Georgetown University. So, I took that opportunity, along with two of my classmates, and that too changed the trajectory of my life. I'm still in Washington, DC.

**Christopher Allison** 08:06

Oh, you— really? Yeah, ok.

**Mary Farmer** 08:07

Yes. So, why I wanted to do that was I was interested in seeing another city. But when I looked at the catalog of classes that I might be able to choose from, I mean, Georgetown is just a much larger institution. It's not better, but it's a much larger institution. So, I was able to take some ECON classes and some classes particularly in American history—which was my favorite—that I just wouldn't have access to at Rosary. So that was— that was wonderful from the student perspective, and from a social and political perspective. That was the year of the invasion of Cambodia, the killing of students at Kent State, and the big anti-war mob[ilization]. And, so, there were teach-ins and protests and seemed like 24/7 learning. I made a lot of friends among the young men at Georgetown. And that was great, also. And then I returned to Rosary for my senior year. And this is— this just occurred to me. I don't know if it was our senior year—I think it probably was—that we convinced the administration to let us— I think what we did was take the month off that we had between Christmas and the beginning of the winter term to do a big, like, a teach-in. So, we organize that and worked and studied together on issues of the day. Now, that's my recollection. It just occurred to me that we had done that—earlier today, I remembered it. So, my life opened up, coming here. From thinking intellectual, social perspective, and made lots of friends. And we worked together. And— and that was— I learned how to write—to really write. I did not know how to write. And I learned how to organize my notes and some very basic things that I did not know how to do when I got here. Many, many of my fellow students were way ahead of me in that regard. But I— I learned those things here and it was a very important thing. I also learned to speak up because this was a school, really, by, for, and about women. And for some of us, that is a critical component for our development—not all young women—but for some, and for me, that was true. I have not spoken about this particular issue, but I think it's time. The Dominicans, in my opinion, were liberally educated. My recollection is— is that many of them were educated in big state institutions that were the best places for their field of study. So, they were worldly in a way that the nuns who taught me as a younger woman were not. And that— that was really helpful to have their perspective, which was also some shaped by being out in the world more. And still a very Catholic institution, but there— there was that added

whatever experience and what we did not scratch the surface of much— there was the beginning— the beginning discussions of feminism, and I mean, we actually were speaking up and organizing, and writing about—and whatever—as young feminists, even if we didn't know it. And certainly, many of the— the nuns, they may not have called themselves feminists, but they were. But what— what we didn't have was any recognition of or analysis of lesbianism. So, I needed some help there. And there was none. Everything needed to be closeted. And again, all of it was beneath the surface. Any discussion of any kind of gender identification or sexuality— bisexuality was not discussed. So, either from a historical or—I don't know what to say—literary perspective? Or just the nuts and bolts of what those— the beginnings or the further development of those movements, and that's too bad. And it was very hard on me personally, very hard on me personally. I doubt that I was the only one. And I have held my tongue for all these years—just in terms of acknowledging my struggles and pointing out that it would have been good to have even pastoral counseling. But anything available to those of us who were struggling with that piece of ourselves. And I have no idea what the situation is on campus these days. I believe there's some sort of gay and lesbian and questioning and— organization and I assume that means people can be out with no—

**Christopher Allison** 15:35

I would say so, yeah.

**Mary Farmer** 15:36

—with no fear of reprisal. That was not my— that was not my experience. And like I said, that was difficult. And I, for instance, I— I think it— it drove a wedge between me in my alma mater—a place that I truly loved. I couldn't be me. More— I was in more dread the second half of my college career here. And— and it left a very bad taste in my mouth. I had no one to talk to. And so, it made me wonder—question—somewhat the value of my experience here because that was such a glaring deficiency. And I did move back to Washington, DC—came up very shortly thereafter. Yeah, in the arms of one of the biggest, most vocal, lesbian feminist communities in the country at that time. And that's where I was nurtured on that particular—educated—did struggle around my own sexuality. So, there should have been support and there are maybe should have been support for other particular things, issues that people were having. I mean, I don't know that— that there was any support for young women who had issues with depression. That's another thing I can think of, you know, pretty— pretty broad. So, I point that out. I am entirely grateful for my education as student, a thinker, a person, a woman, but that is a glaring lack. I didn't feel like it was safe to talk about to my peers, to any of my teachers or counselors. And I believe it— that accurately reflects the Catholic Church's teaching at that time—and I understand that—but this place was more complex and encompassing than the institution of the Church.

**Christopher Allison** 18:44

Yeah. Which goes back to what you were saying about the worldliness of the women who had taught you. Had been—

**Mary Farmer** 18:49

Yeah, yeah.

**Christopher Allison** 18:51

—out in the world or—

**Mary Farmer** 18:53

Yeah.

**Christopher Allison** 18:51

Wait, I don't mean worldly in a negative—

**Mary Farmer** 18:55

Yeah, no, I know what you mean. Yeah, that's what I mean by it too—something positive. Not— not just nuns in class with them—or just other women—having teachers who had, you know, more out-there ideas—whatever their subject matter is—that— that's my— that's my assumption of their education and it didn't carry through. And I say that thinking of all of the young people who passed through after me who were in the same category, and hoping that now there is some real dialogue and ability for people to coalesce in whatever ways they want, and have someone to talk to. I—from what I understand—I watched this place. What's going on here? And I— it looks to me like there are many young Latinas and Latinos who attend whose parents are most likely strict Catholic, as were mine, and so they have nowhere to go often as well, even in times that—quote, unquote—are more liberal. So that is important to me. And I don't— that is important to me. And that that is my message. The other thing—I don't know where we are in terms of time, I don't want to run over—but I was— what I was gonna say is—and a couple people mentioned it today—was talking about the divide between commuters and the residential students

**Christopher Allison** 20:55

Yeah, we talked about that earlier with several people.

**Mary Farmer** 20:58

Yeah, yes—and we failed. I mean, I was one of the leaders of our class, okay? And so, I didn't— I didn't— I didn't think about it. We didn't talk about it. And so—I'm not blaming us—but there was a real loss then of— of possible connection and relation. And so, I— I hope that something, you know, tangible and direct is being done to address any of that. I don't know if there is, but I hope that there is because that does not— that does not contribute to making the student body a complete community. Some people feel less than.

**Christopher Allison** 22:02

They're just flying in, flying out.

**Mary Farmer** 22:03

Right. Don't want to take up too much space—you know, that's the message, you know. So—

**Christopher Allison** 22:12

Yeah, and I wish I had— I know it's an ongoing issue across higher education. And I— I've only been here for two years—and I've been teaching during COVID—so it's not normal, but— but I agree with you, I think it's a serious challenge that we shouldn't be— I feel like commuters shouldn't feel like they have a lesser than college experience because they're commuters.

**Mary Farmer** 22:32

Right, that they're less any part of this college community.

**Christopher Allison** 22:35

Right—less connected to people— [overlapping, inaudible]

**Mary Farmer** 22:36

Yes. Right. Right, right.

**Christopher Allison** 22:38

—you talk about the friends you made, and that was huge for my experience as well. So, can I ask— thank you so much for sharing all that, and especially about, you know, sexuality issues in the 70s here, and so forth. One question I have as follow up is, you know, if you had turned to somebody, you know, counselor, minister, whatever, and said, “Hey, this is where I’m at. You know, can I talk to you about?” What do you think would have happened? When you mentioned you were scared of that, but what— what— I mean, you probably thought about it a little bit about, like, what are the ramifications?

**Mary Farmer** 23:23

I don't think it would have been well received. I don't know if I would then have been watched or something like that.

**Christopher Allison** 23:34

Ok, under surveillance, somehow.

**Mary Farmer** 23:35

I mean, right. I don't think I would have gotten any help. I'm just— I'm just trying to do a scan. There are several of my teachers that it would have just been out of the question.

**Christopher Allison** 23:53

Really?

**Mary Farmer** 23:54

Yes. So out of the question. And others— I think that they would have felt they couldn't act or support because of their position here in school. That— that homosexuality was— was a sin was against the Church's teachings and so...no.



**Christopher Allison** 24:27

Yeah, sure, sure. Like, even if you found a sympathetic ear, as a virtue of their position at the University you felt like you would not be given the opportunity to engage with that very much?

**Mary Farmer** 24:43

Right, right. Maybe I would have gotten one hearing and I don't know what I would have gotten—a “there, there” or, “I'm sorry you struggling with this, but I can't help you.” I don't know. I don't know.

**Christopher Allison** 24:57

And after you graduated, how did that—you don't have to answer this if this too personal—but I was just curious about— how did you— you talked about being in DC and being in this really strong kind of lesbian community— was that immediately after graduation?

**Mary Farmer** 25:13

Well, I— I went literally the day after I graduated. I borrowed my father's car and drove out there. I lived out in the burbs—because that's all I could afford for a couple of years—and I would see there— I saw certain things. I saw women from *Off Our Backs*, the very old and trusted feminist newspaper, and I don't know if I ever had the guts to buy one, but I probably did. And there was— there was no gay bookstore then, there was no women's bookstore— like feminist bookstore. There was a— what would they have called it back then? I don't know... a progressive bookstore, maybe, that had the— forward thinking people, the earliest feminists, Marxist— Marxist Socialists. I don't know if there was any—specifically—writing about sexuality, but— and periodicals. And I stumbled upon it. And that's where I got some of my first reading material that helped me along. Like, I got *The First Sex* there and *Dialectic of Sex*, and—

**Christopher Allison** 26:43

Mhm—you jumped right in.

**Mary Farmer** 26:45

—and stuff like that. You know, which just like, practically made my head spin my— you know, on top of my shoulders. And I then just— completely fortuitously, now, this didn't happen— this happened, probably, about— I got to the bookstores maybe a year and a half after I got there

and was spending more time in the city. And then probably at about the two year mark—maybe a little earlier—I was big jock. I mean, that was the other thing that was disappointing— was that there was no opportunity here— I was a really good basketball player and all we could do was play women's rules basketball—and I don't know that we really had a team and whatever—but that's less problematic. It would have been better if it had been something else but— but, I called Adult Sports in Washington, DC—which was the DC recreation department—they had a whole—they still do—but they had a whole incredible adult sports program for men and women year-round. Basketball and fast-pitch softball, predominantly. Real games, real umpires, real competition. I called to see if somebody might have a spot on their basketball team for me. And I ended up on the biggest dyke team that you could, just by the luck of the draw. Those women were the women of the Furies Collective. I don't know if you know what that is.

**Christopher Allison** 28:22

I do, I do.

**Mary Farmer** 28:23

Okay, that's who I landed in the middle of. And then off I went. Yeah, they educated me. They teased me and then they educated me. And then I took over the feminist bookstore for 20 years. That's what I did. I'd still be there if I could have made— if I could make a living, I would.

**Christopher Allison** 28:53

[inaudible]

**Mary Farmer** 28:56

There's a very fine one still alive in this— in this city.

**Christopher Allison** 28:59

Yes, there is, there is. But, to your point, I mean, that was such a crucial community center to have those bookstores available for people who are— who are thinking about alternative, you know, were thinking through, whatever—

**Mary Farmer** 29:13

Right, right. Right. Right. Right. Economics, abortion, childcare, all of it.

**Christopher Allison** 29:24

That's great. Well thank you for sharing all that. Is there any kind of other final part of things you want to leave to the record— historical record?

**Mary Farmer** 29:34

I am— I'm very grateful and appreciative for my education here. Period. There are some changes. I wish something— a few things had been different. I hope things have changed now— if not, I hope they will. I am grateful for my education. It had a lot to do with the woman I am today and the things that I've done in my life.

**Christopher Allison** 30:04

Mhm, mhm, that's great. I appreciate—

**Mary Farmer** 30:09

You got a card?

**Christopher Allison** 30:10

I do!