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Rose Oliveira-Leslie Fenn '69

Rose Oliveira

Leslie Fenn

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Rose Oliveira: Okay, so today is Friday, May 31st, 2019. I am Rose Oliveira, the Linda Lear Special Collections Librarian.

Leslie Fenn: And I'm Leslie Fenn, class of 69.

RO: Awesome. So, why did you decide to come to Conn?

LF: Originally, I- partly because my mom's oldest sister, and my three sisters and I had had a favorite aunt and she had been here and she- she majored in French and English, I think, both.

RO: Oh wow, she must have ...

LF: Very special lady. I could go on and on.

RO: So she had a good experience here?

LF: Yeah, she had a good experience and in those days everybody had robes and both I and a cousin of mine, came here got to wear her robe when we graduated. It was very ...

RO: That's so special.

LF: A nice thing, yeah. Beautiful.

RO: Is there anything that surprised you about the College during your time at Conn, the college experience?

LF: Well, I don't think I knew anything about expectations. I guess the main thing that surprised me was, I was, you know, focused on science at the time. I had planned to go to medical school and I got here and I couldn't get enough philosophy, religion, and Shakespeare and I mean I just, my mind sort of exploded with what liberal arts had to offer. I have since teased some of the- my colleagues, because in a liberal arts college, the nonscience majors don't get enough science. And I, you know, I don't know if you noticed C.P. Snow's book, *Two Cultures in the Scientific Revolution*, but there- I- I've talked about that with folks and they, you know, agree that those of us who went to a liberal arts college in science actually got liberal arts and I think it's actually stood me well, basically.

RO: What did you do after Conn?

LF: I- I stayed on for half an hour, I mean half a summer, and- and did the summer high school that Barrie Shepherd offered to inner-city kids. He had been a very important person in my life. I- I'd come in here as a drummer and played timpani in the orchestra, but then I started singing in the- in the chorus and then choir and- and Barrie arrived and started talking sense to all of us. I, you know, read his- read and reread his sermons and stuff like that. I remember reading Scripture for Bill Coffin once, who changed the Scripture right before the service, after I'd practiced. First I think time I 'dever read in public, I think. I don't read well. So, I had to read about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. So that was one surprise that- that day. And then he teased me—he in his thick Brooklyn accent. He teased me about my diction, Bill did. So, what was the original question? Danced away from it.

RO: Oh, what- what you- what after Conn.

LF: So, after that summer, I had already applied to the Peace Corps and I was called to the Peace Corps. I had wanted to go to Africa. I ended up in the South Pacific, teaching science and biology for- and I was there for three years and I stayed on for an extra half year to study the marine organisms within walking distance of the schools on this little 9-mile island. We were developing a curriculum for the region and the biology of the region was somewhat variable. They had already done some work in Fiji to do chemistry and physics with local stuff, so I wrote a- a book that we published with a lot of drawings of local organisms, talked to the old ladies, got the Tongan names for them. It was a place called Tonga, which is southwest of Samoa and part of Polynesia. And so then I came back and did an extra year at Connecticut, because I had done a little too much anti- anti-war work while I was an undergrad and needed to kind of beef up my cv or- or whatever we call it these days. So, then I- and then I did a year in VISTA in Virginia and by then I had state residency so I went to Medical College of Virginia in Richmond. After a year I had a National Health Service Corps grant, which was good, because I started medical school on food stamps. But I didn't come out with a bunch of loans, like everybody does now. I had my undergrad loans, which ended up getting deferred for forever. I'd been in Lazrus when I was here, which was a co-op dorm the and liked that. So the after med school I went to Cambridge. Did three years as- studied residency in primary-care medicine, practiced as a National Health Service Corps doc in Dorchester and elsewhere and eventually did a second residency in my fifties in psychiatry. My last job, it was—I just retired last June—my last job was working in the county jails in Hampden County. There's a few things in between.

RO: Right, sounds like a fascinating life.

I've had a very, very nice life and- and a lot of good people—my mom didn't die until she was 99, or- she was still yelling at the Red Sox a couple weeks before she died, because they were having a terrible season.

RO: Well, you mentioned your- your activism on campus and, you know, '69 was such a pivotal year and, you know, coeducation, so much happening in the country. What was your experience here at Conn? What was the campus like?

LF: Well, I was probably in a gradual process of coming out in those days, which was not something that was doable, really. I had a very close friend—well, several—Beth Brereton was also an activist and- and—now Smith, seen her for the first time in a while because I did know her in Boston—but the most important person was Susan Johnson, not- not romantic friends, but- but Susan Johnson was a junior when, she might have been a year behind us when I was a junior, and she brought- she did a conference, I think it was mentioned in the lunch today, about African-American women. She brought Constance Baker Motley, Eleanor Holmes Norton, and Barbara Jordan to campus. And both of our moms came and—Susan was from the projects of New Haven—and between the Vietnam War and- and those issues and the lack of representation on campus, it was a pretty big deal. And there was another gal, Beth reminded me her name. There's a picture of her marching with Dick Gregory in the book they made. Anyway, I just, you know, I had brought Malcom X's autobiography home from high school, my mom read it and both she and dad—she probably just shared it with him, because he didn't read much—but they went from being Eisenhower Republicans to writing in Dick Gregory. I mean, it- for her it was, like, really a big deal, because she's gone to school in, yeah, because she'd gone to school in Hartford and there were lots of Black kids but it never- she never got a chance to know what they went home to and not enough, you know, and the kids are sitting together at their lunch table as is still happening. It's, you know, gotten worse because of the safety issues, or- or the perceived safety issues, but nowadays I think it's actually worse, in a way because people have contact that's bad in some settings. I can't tell if it's worse or not. I do know, though, that- that there's certainly more- there is certainly more mass incarceration than we had when we were in schools, but a lot of that has to do with, you know, all of the cocaine stuff mixed up with Iran-Contra, which is really what happened.

RO: What- what were- what were- how did you- did- so did coming to Conn engage- engage you in those? Or were you already- I mean, it sounds like you already ...

LF: Yes. Well, I had some of it. I- I had to work during schooltime in high school, but I worked summers, but I had friends who went to the Highlander Folk Camp and Pete Seeger's kids were in my school. It was a tiny little, funky, pinko school in Vermont that somebody gave me a scholarship to, which was an incredible opportunity and- and so there was that influence. And these- these peers who were going down to, you know, Woody Guthrie's camp and getting

themselves arrested, you know, and- and singing songs over the radios of the policemen who were taking them to jail, you know, it was a big deal and- and, you know, and some of the songs that were being sung at the, you know, Sykes thing today, justice to me has, you know, it's always been an issue and, you know, and now we're struggling with justice in the environment. My dad barely made it through high school. He was a country boy and pretty much blue collar and, yeah, his church was going out and sitting under a tree and watching for squirrels, and storing them in the freezer to make squirrel pie. And, you know, he taught me my woodworking skills, which is one of the things I do for play. Mom taught me gardening. I was lucky, I was the second of four girls and I got- I got a lot from him, but we're all very different and- and, you know, two are great artists, whatever. I don't know if that ...

RO: Yeah, that about answers it. You had mentioned you were in the process of coming out while you were at Conn.

LF: Well, yeah, I had attractions of one sort or another. I think I considered myself bisexual for years even after that. And then, I mean, there was- there was a guy in the Yale chorus, because I was singing for the last two years and he was- he was interesting and it was nice to tour and stuff like that, but, yeah, as one- as one of the biologists on campus, I was- I was- I remembered distinctly that I helped some of the other girls, women, you know, not get caught up in- in sexual situations that were not going to be good for them at mixers and stuff like that. And I don't think I had any- any real, heavy-duty sexual experiences except in summers- there was one guy from Choate- but, you know, so it wasn't something that I had a lot of experience of, but a lot of knowledge, interestingly enough. And, yeah, I mean, I think I taught everybody I knew how to use a Tampax. I would stand outside the stalls. And then- and then, you know, a few years later I had some important relationships and since then I've three twelve-year relationships. My last partner is still a very close friend and together we have- we have nine grandchildren that we're still- I mean, I- we helped take care of them when they were babies and I just spent time with a bunch of them who were back from college and stuff like that and my current partner's here with me today and they're actually kind of fond of each other. So it's, you know, women kind of know how to do stuff.

RO: But so, there was never really any kind of support though on the campus on the Conn ...

LF: None whatsoever. Just- just getting support for racial justice was a big deal. I remember Jewel Plummer Cobb was hired as a dean and when I came back that year after Peace Corps, I did chemistry and- organic chemistry and physics and I played tennis with her a couple of times. I spent a fair amount of time with Bonnie Wheeler- we like Mexican food- and- and Dean Noyes, who was a great support and the- the- I was practically the only woman who spoke up in class, which was a big disappointment. And, I mean, it was really kind of heartbreaking, because, again, the whole justice logic thing, it made sense to be coed, but, you know, now- now I live in

the territory of Mount Holyoke and Smith and they're wonderful schools and they've managed to survive and, you know, I think Connecticut could have too. Plus, of course, I've got good friends who have their kids at Wesleyan and the switchback of that, so, I mean, I don't really know. Times have changed. Unfortunately, it changed into being tons more complicated for everybody. I mean, somebody who was- I had friends who were gender-fluid and, you know, they're going through all this craziness about- about pronouns and I'm like, "I didn't have to do that." I, you know, I had a lot of support from my family and, you know, I just didn't happen to meet any men who made sense and, you know, I probably- I've got a lot of guy socialization, but I- it never occurred to me that I was doing a trans thing. But I was- I was a tomboy. That's what happened in my generation. And- and, you know, yeah, mom had to drag me to the Army-Navy store just to put clothes on me, but nobody made a big deal of it in the same way and I-, you know, some of my friends who are calling themselves "they," which makes life complicated, and are in lot of pain in some cases. I'm sad for them. And it will change. It will get better.

RO: With the coeducation, what was that experience like for you? Were you- did the school poll you? Did you- I mean what were your thoughts at the time? It sounds like now you're thinking ...

LF: Well, I- I don't think I paid that much attention. I mean, I didn't fuss about it. I was- I was trying to get back into academics. I know that I stopped being president of six things and, you know, the- the whole war thing, so that I, you know, I had a 4.0 average the last semester, because I, you know, I would get jealous of the people going to the library because I was stuck with other stuff and- and very passionate about it. So, the politics of that change probably didn't penetrate because I was out- more out in the world and stuff. I remember I came back from Peace Corps and one of the reasons was my father was trying not to pay his taxes and I had seen a couple of professors, you know, lose more property than they had intended to by- by the same route and- and I thought, you know, and I was loving what I was doing, but I was also thinking about med school and stuff like that. And I had- I had met a woman here on the campus that summer who had come from Bryn Mawr with a double major in Chemistry and English and she was Biafran. She was an Ibo tribeswoman who every male in her family was fighting in the Biafran war at that time. And she was raising money for the way by drumming. In fact, she taught me to drum. We- we went over the the School of the Dance and we were working on congas and stuff like that. I still have a conga drum. I'd been a drummer for a while and she also wrote a book of poems that my mother sold and- because I illustrated it for her and I- I had begun to wonder if I was smart enough to go to med school because of all this other stuff I was doing and I had trouble in a seminar in- in my senior year and the person who ran the seminar and the person who ran the seminar was the major person who wrote the recommendations for med school and the- the real reason was that I was, you know, spread out, but also I had- I tended not to ask for help. I was what I sometimes call counterdependent. I didn't have a lot of help growing up for a few logical childhood, even infantile, reasons, so I just, you know, yanked on

my bootstraps and took care of myself to the extent that—and probably some of the help I got was not good help; so I didn't, you know, I didn't trust help—so I didn't go to somebody and say, “I don't know how to do it. How do I write this thing?” basically. And- and then I met this gal who was a good friend while I was, of all things, teaching art history, which I knew absolutely nothing about and she's teaching Elements of African Culture and Modern African Literature and I'm learning about Chinua Achebe and loving it and- and I- I thought “Huh, I can do this. She's smart, but I'm smart too.” And eventually, I had to pound on the doors a little, because I didn't look good on paper.

RO: It seems like you went pretty far. So, do- do you keep in touch with your classmates? Were you close with the people you ...

LF: Just a couple. Just a couple. There are a lot of people who recognize me here in the class and I didn't set foot on the campus for 45 years, so Beth Brereton, close. A couple of other people, some that I—I remember that five year when I came back and there were several people that I, you know, had great conversations with, but I'd simply been too busy, you know, and pulled in a lot of different directions.

RO: Right, it seemed like you went very far.

LF: And, yeah, and I think that- and also, my- my last partner and I spent a lot of time in several different sort of meditation cultures. We spent four Januaries in a row in India. And meditation's an important thing and it's- it probably made it possible to do that second residency, because I had a totally different attitude toward sleep deprivation, among other things.

RO: Really? You could handle ...

LF: People- people who meditate don't need as much sleep. And, you know, especially in India, we would chant for like 24 hours and- and a lot of different stuff. I- we did savor work too. I remember I was in charge of the kitchen one year and this was for over 1,000 people and I- I got up at three o'clock in the morning. I had to handle a kitchen full of people speaking six different languages. It was fascinating. Yeah, teaching a handful of Japanese women how to chop was really something.

RO: Beautiful.

LF: Yeah, I was lucky.

RO: So, we have just a few more minutes, so in thinking about college today is there something from your experience that you wish students could have? Is there something happening on campus now that you wish you could have experienced? That you know about.

LF: Well, it looks as though there's certainly better openness about, you know, gay and lesbian folks. I've been looking at the stuff around drugs that they've talked about. I hope there's stuff about trauma because I do know out in the world where addiction is such a crucial issue, there's not enough attention to trauma, which is the foundation of addiction for everybody. I like to say to my residents, how many angry diaper changes do you think it takes for a kid to start feeling bad about themselves. And there's far too much liquor in this reunion, I've seen, so it's like, "Hello?" I mean, I was glad to see a twelve-step program. But- but it also- there's not enough attention to the environmental issues. I had to search for- for soy milk this morning. There were these little packages of half-and-half, thank you. Heavy carbon footprint in those things. And I- I- I haven't spoken to anybody about it, but I will, because I tend to- I had a funny experience at lunch. Beth and I were sitting together, she had just arrived, and she has been running a foundation and is shy compared to me. She said, "Could you get me the salt and pepper?" And it's not far, but I had to- so I stood up and I grabbed it and I said, "You may remember that I'm not shy." And she said, "I wondered if you'd changed." I said, "Don't be silly. We get older and we get worse." And, anyway, so I- I- I'm a little concerned that I've seen some really good stuff, like the recycle place where everything under the sun, in one place where I saw it, and the bathrooms and stuff like that, but I think we all have a long way to go. I think there's some young man talking about "Why meat?" because there's still far too many of us killing animals and it doesn't make any sense. We're also raising them and- so that stuff I- I- and it was only one woman who raised the issue of the environment today in the discussion that we had over here and she's doing a land trust, which is great, but it's only a part of the puzzle. And I'm talking to everybody about Buttigieg because I think he's the only logical candidate who's running, frankly. I also recommended a book to the library, because it's a woman's who's doing- I mean, there's so much. There's just so much. I can't, you know, I know there's really good stuff going on here, thankfully. And my partner's been in higher education for over 30 years. So, fitness, low-carbon footprint, mega versions of it, because we're- none of it matters unless the planet survives. And I'm not sure it will.

RO: I'm also very ...

LF: Yeah. I mean anybody who's paying attention- my- my sister, who just won her seat-she's eleven months younger than me-on the select board of a little town in Massachusetts, for years has had a- a thing on her bulletin board that says, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." And I don't always express myself about it in the- in the most productive way, but I think my friend Beth is better about it. I'm going to try to find a niche. Right now we're helping with some foster kids who've been terribly damaged. We've been made honorary grandparents

for one of my best friend's new baby, who's just plain delicious. First thing I did out of my retirement was to make a little free library. All just get greedy and show you a picture of it. And I- Judy's the curator of it, my partner. That's my mom. And I made the- the windows to match the house.

RO: That's awesome. Wow. Did you construct the whole thing?

LF: Yeah, made it from scratch.

RO: That's all full of books.

LF: Yeah, and I made the- the windows so they match on the inside and the outside. Here's the early version of one of the windows. I had a lot of fun. It took a while. But, we have an old Victorian in Springfield near a 600-acre park, which is a wonderful thing. And- and the second floor we no longer rent. The top floor we're renting and- and the second floor we turned the kitchen into my woodshop. So that and gardening I'm trying to hang on to, because I kind of burned out on work over the years. Easily done in community mental health centers.

RO: It's a big burden. Oh yeah, so I think we're at the 30-minute mark, so thank you so much for adding your voice to this collection.

LF: My pleasure. I didn't get to write for the book, which was one reason why I especially wanted to do this. I missed the deadline.

RO: Well, I'm glad you were able to participate in this.

LF: I'd like to make the term lifeline, somehow. I guess it doesn't have the same- as deadline.