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Elena Rosario '14-Nan McNally Wagner '74

Elena Rosario

Nan McNally Wagner

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Elena Rosario: All right, can you please state your name?

Nan Wagner: I'm Nancy McNally Wagner class of '74.

ER: Awesome, and can you tell me a little bit about why you decided to come to Connecticut College?

NW: Well, my grandfather who was born in 19? Oh gosh, I know, 1898 always talked about Connecticut College for Women because they lived in Middletown and he just thought it was the best, best college and so I grew up hearing that and I just always said I'm gonna go to Connecticut College. I'm gonna go to Connecticut College. And so, when the time came --he had already died years before -- we came to look at Connecticut College- my parents and I came to look at Connecticut College and I just fell in love with it, but I knew nothing about it. I knew nothing about looking for colleges. I didn't know what I wanted. I had no- I had no prior knowledge and I just kept thinking Papa thought this was a great college, so I applied and I loved the campus and I loved the arts center. So, I said this is it! This is it! And we had a great interview and I got accepted, so I came here. So, that was the- you know, I didn't really realize that it was a fine finishing school for young women, you know -- that's what it was originally -- so that was sort of a little bit of a surprise in terms of what the world was turning into at that time, you know, so but, I -I loved the campus and I was not- not really unhappy about it, but it just was like not exactly what I had envisioned about a college.

ER: Can you, like, describe that a little more like what you're talking about since I'm, like, wasn't around at that time.

NW: Well, I think, you know, I- I had more of an idea of say like a state college with a little more, yeah, I came from a public high school and we had you know football teams and rah-rah. I- I was voted the most enthusiastic student in you know my high school so and we had you know cheer teams and, you know, bands, marching bands and all that kind of stuff, so- and I sort of didn't realize that that was not the climate here and, you know, shame on me for not for not doing some more research but- so I also was surprised that I, again came from a public high school, very good public high school and a big public high school, but all of a sudden I was plopped into an environment with very elite private school girls and I was- that was the shock- that was the shock because I did not know, you know, that type of environment at all. So, that was really shocking and they were the type of girls that would like spend all day Friday in curlers

so that we because they were going to go to like the mixer on Saturday. Not- not my kind of, you know- that was a culture shock. So ...

ER: So, you kind of already talked about it, but if there was anything else that you know surprised you while you were here at Conn, that you haven't already mentioned?

NW: Mostly that, mostly that. Also just, you know, just being away from my family was- was shocking and you know be- like when you're living in a house with you know two sisters and a mom and a dad and it's sort of like okay dinner time. Okay, we're gonna do this. Okay, time to go, time to go, we're gonna go to school now. Yeah, and then all of a sudden it's like you're on your own and I mean that's that was surprising to me and that's- but that's pretty common, I think. That was another- being on your own it was and- and my family was very together, you know, very much like okay, you're gonna go here, you're gonna go there, you're gonna do the dishes, you know? It was very scripted kind of so that was a shock

ER: Where did you live on campus?

NW: I lived in Lambdin the first year and everybody- it was really funny people kept saying, "Oh you live in the Complex?" because there was sort of a romanticism about the older buildings in the other end. And I thought I really want to live in one of those older dorms. Oh, they're so romantic. Anyway, I stayed in in the Complex because that's where my friends were and then my junior year I went on a- I went on a- to Italy on a- abroad- it wasn't a year abroad, it was a semester abroad. And when I came back, I went to Freeman and I really didn't like it at all. It was very different. So, I came back for my last year in Morrison. So, I was really happy down there. So mostly in the Plex. Yeah.

ER: Cool. And then can you tell me a little bit about like your residential experiences and, like, what the community was like?

NW: So, I- it was- I really wanted a single room and I knew there were mostly single rooms in the Complex, so -- I don't know why I just was really nervous about sharing a room, I don't know -- and so I did get a single room and I thought that was great, but, you know, I think maybe it might have been fine to have a roommate. And we had a nice community in Lambdin and stuff like that. But as my years went on the best thing was when the boys came, because there was a more- they seemed to- they seemed to be better able to create a group, you know, and I mean I had girlfriends, but there's the cattiness about girls, you know, and it's like oh, word, this is our group and this is your group, but the boys came and the year next after us, '75, was just a big group of fun guys and they were the group they called themselves the brew boys

and I hung out with them and so that was great. It was really great. But they ,you know, they were like, come on, let's all go. That's good, you know? They were more inclusive and I liked that and so that was great. That was great. And I think the Complex also had- added, because then they have the four dorms that were semi-connected so you could, you know, it's just more camaraderie there.

ER: For sure. What did you study or major in?

NW: I started- I came here supposedly as a math major, but I had my eye on Cummings Art Center and I was always- I was always interested in art. So, I ended up as an art major and when I went to Italy, I studied Art, Art History, and Italian. I ended up as an art major.

ER: Awesome, and are there any like memories or classes that kind of stand out to you or professors?

NW: So, I really- I mean, I have to say that overall my experience in the arts here were not outstanding. Like in terms of my art professors, I felt that the that the they were a little bit, like, arrogant, a little bit standoffish, a little bit like I'm better than you are and you're just not that good. You know and I felt that they were not as helpful as I would have liked, you know, or not as encouraging. I mean, there was one professor that actually said to me you just don't draw that well. I can't- I could- I still- still can't get over that, you know, and it's just like could you help me here? You know, this is a printmaking class. It's not a drawing class. I loved Mr. Lukosius he was a- he would- I don't think it- I think he was an adjunct. I'm not sure. Everybody loved him. He was the drawing- he was the drawing professor and I liked him. Yeah, he was all about freedom and everything like that. Bill McCloy, he was the one who was a little bit- well, not- a very arrogant and- but- but what I liked about him was that he- he made us do the printmaking, actually literally the same way Leonardo da Vinci did so that we had to learn -- you know, that he was purist, you know -- we had to learn exactly how he did it first before we used any new technology, which I thought was really interesting. I mean that was historical it was of importance so that we can understand the process and then be able to use even a more modern technique and it, you know, that was fabulous. But so, there are parts of it that were great but you know, I just felt like they were a little bit, like above, you know, felt they were above what they were doing and I thought that was too bad. Yeah.

ER: What kind of activities or groups were you involved in?

NW: So, I was on that- I think that was the first volleyball team they had. I was on volleyball. I used to watch the crew team come in from their late practices because I think they had to take

a bus somewhere. They didn't have crew on our campus. It had- they had to go somewhere else and I used to say God that's I want to- I really wish I could do that. It really looks like great. But, I- I figured you had to know how to do it, you know what I mean? I- I just felt that it was one of those impossible things to just like jump into. So, I never even like looked into it and I was so just dying to do that. So, when I, you know, finally graduated and went home- I live on the water and I used to see people drive by in their cars with, you know, with boats on top of the car. And I finally just I used to run a lot, you know miles every day and I finally just stood in the middle of the street and stopped this car and said, "Stop, stop, stop!" and the guy was like, "What?" "Where do you go? Where do you go? And how do you do this?" He said, "Get in the car. I'll show you," so he took me down to the water put the boat in and he showed me how to row and I bought my own boat and I started rowing and I've been rowing ever since. It's great. I joined a team, I had my own boat, and it was it was like this is what I wanted to do the whole time I was there, you know, but I didn't know how to get into it. And that was one of the things I really regret about my time in Connecticut is I didn't have enough- I didn't know how to, like, ask. I didn't have- and that was just like, you know, me being too- too young or you know, not ready to- not knowing how to go about finding out things. So, that was a regret, but I finally did it, you know?

ER: That's great.

NW: That was fun

ER: What was the campus climate like when you were here?

NW: So, it was right at the end of the Vietnam War there was a lot of- I mean, you didn't feel it here. I didn't feel it here, but we knew what was going on. You know there was, like, a lot of anger, a lot of sadness, but we were so removed. I mean we're just in this like little you know safe place which was you know very nice and stuff like that, and there was- we- I mean, I think the people that- when the boys came, there were some that wanted to create a little bit of unrest. So, one night they were they were posing a protest and I think it would had to do with the war, but the climate here was so gentle that the protest- we took over the chapel and I, somehow, I get caught up in you know, I- I didn't really have- you know, I wasn't I just got caught up in it and we were in the chapel and we're having too much fun to be really, you know, I mean we were serious, but we're having too much fun and- and then we- we marched over to Charles Shain's house with- the president, the old president, and he invited us in and we all sat there and just talked so it was you know, that was our protest. And Shain was a great guy, you know, he was just- he was just a gentle human being and he was understanding and we all just talked it out and you know that was about as violent as anything got, you know? So-

but we were all very aware of, you know, what was going on and- and it was more like this sad ending of this the Vietnam era kind of, you know, so ...

ER: Were there any like controversies or events like on campus not related to like the- the world but just anything that you remember?

NW: No, not really.

ER: Can you tell me a little bit about your life after Conn and, you know, what- you know what some of those- what some of your experiences have been since you graduated?

NW: Well, it was interesting that I stupidly- honestly- I mean I- I really have grown up a lot since I came here and I'd like to say that I was really, you know, well prepared to leave here, but I wasn't and it's not I'm not blaming the College at all, I'm blaming myself. But, you know, you come here and you go I'm gonna be an artist. I'm gonna be an artist And I'm gonna be an art major and I'm gonna do art and then when I leave, I'm gonna be an artist. But how do you be an artist? I look I took printmaking. That was my focus and I loved it and then I left and I went home and I was like, wait a second, I don't have- I don't have a printing press. I don't have lithograph blocks. I don't have big sinks to wash my silkscreen in. I don't have an acid bath. I don't have any of this stuff. I don't have a place even for it. How am I gonna do this, you know, and- and all of a sudden it was almost like an awakening, a rude awakening. I still paint. I still paint. I still do art and everything, but it was just like, wow, you know, yikes, you know. So anyway, I did go into advertising. I did do advertising art, but I graduated, or graduated, I moved into the business end of advertising. I got a master's in business and- because that was you know, that was a way up. Art advertising art is not that lucrative and so I started. I did, you know, business- the business end of advertising for a while and then my- my marriage broke up. I had three little children and I was like, oh my God, you know, help. And so I was lucky enough. I already had in a master's and I- I just quickly at night school got 12 credits in teaching, so I was able to get a teaching job teaching art. So, I taught art for a while, but it was during those times it depended on the funding if you had funding for art, you had art classes if you didn't, I didn't have a job. So, every year it was like are you gonna have art or not? Are you gonna have art or not? Are you gonna have art or not? So, I wrote a grant, a competitive grant, for a computer lab and I won the grant, so I became the IT person in the school and then I continued on and I became in- include- in- in addition to being the IT person at the school. I went on and I became the legal advocate for the Union. So that was what I did for the rest of my career and now I paint with a group and I teach knitting at night. So, you know, I still stayed in the arts- arts.

ER: Awesome. Do you keep in touch with any of your classmates?

NW: I had not for a while because I- a lot of them left the school, like, a lot of the people that I was friends with transferred out- transferred different schools, whatever and- and one ,my best friend or the one that I was mostly in touch with, we had a falling out right before graduation and so we lost contact and more recently actually two years ago mutual contact of ours got in touch with me and said, you know, "Do you- have you spoken to Debbie recently?" and I said, "No not in 43 years," and he said, "Well, she went through, you know, similar something similar to you," when my- my husband left me and I actually kicked him out, but you know, whatever and um, I just knew what a heartache that was and I said, you know, it was a surprise. She was devastated. He said, "You know, she's very upset," whatever and he said, "I'm not telling you what to do, but I'm just gonna give you her contact information if you ever decide ..." you know, he said, "I'm just gonna give it to you." So, I thought about it for a couple of days and I did contact her and you know we've become very good friends again, and we've traveled together and it's- it's very- it's very nice, it's very wonderful and so to come here this weekend was amazing because I just I was like, oh my gosh, I remember you and everybody was so happy and you know like just reconnected. It was so great. It really has been great. So ...

ER: That's awesome. And thinking about the college today, is there something from your experience that you wish students had still around today?

NW: I feel like they have a lot more than we did, you know, I mean, obviously. I think- I mean, not that at the time, I don't I felt like we weren't lacking anything. I can't think of you know- I mean, how can you look into the future and say I wish we had this. I feel like this has grown into such an amazing place. It's really wonderful. Yeah, I can't think of anything that we had.

ER: Is there anything that you know campus- that's happening on campus now that you wish you couldn't have experienced? I know rowing was one, yeah, the things you talked about.

NW: Yes, definitely. Well, I also think the infrastructure has really improved. It's- it's amazing. It's- I mean, I can remember- I mean, I didn't know enough to say this place is shabby or anything like that, but, you know just seeing what has already happened, I was saying, I think, to myself you know, wow this you know, this has really picked up a notch, several notches. It's really great. And I don't -I don't remember thinking that there was going to be an expens- any kind of expansion at that time. I remember thinking this is it. This is it. You know, this is the way it's going to be. I mean, what, we, you know, we- we didn't have any phones we had those like the circular phones and the library was full of books there were no computers we didn't really have computers. We had you know electric typewriters and you know, so we've really- 50 years has made a big difference and it's wonderful. I'd love to come back here.

ER: Yeah, is there anything else that I didn't ask you that you wanted to talk about or mention?

NW: I was impressed with the young people that are here helping out. They're just a lovely bunch of people and I'm impressed by them. That was- that was really something that caught my eye. It's really wonderful.

ER: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for letting me interview you.