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### **COPS/Metro Alliance - StMU Oral Histories with Sister Rita Nealon**

Barbara Ortiz

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## **COPS/Metro Alliance-StMU Oral Histories**

**Narrator:** Sr. Rita Nealon

**Date:** 03/26/2024

**Location:** San Antonio, Texas

**Interview Session:**

**Interviewer:** Barbara Ortiz

**Transcribed By:** Barbara Ortiz

### **Narrator's Biographical Information:**

Sr. Rita Nealon was born in Limerick, Ireland and joined the Holy Spirit Sisters in 1958. She taught at the Little Flower and Holy Cross High Schools in San Antonio for 20 years. Then she spent 25 years in Nayarit, Mexico ministering to communities there. She moved back to the United States, working in El Paso with migrants, and then moving back to San Antonio.

### **Summary of Interview:**

Rita Nealon shares her experiences with COPS/Metro over her years in San Antonio. She talked about COPS success and the key role women played in challenging the status quo and advocating for the needs of their community. She talked about actively working within her community for affordable housing, gun control and voter turnout. She hopes the organization will continue to focus on local issues and empower marginalized communities.

### **Interview Key Terms:**

COPS, COPS/Metro, women, empowerment, voting, gun safety

**Length of Interview:** 00:22:12

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Sr. Rita Nealon by Barbara Ortiz

**Sr. Rita Nealon Interview Index**

<b>Time Stamp</b>	<b>Theme or Topic</b>
03:48	Empowerment of women
09:14	Promoting voting, increasing voter turnout
14:49	Gun safety

### **Sr. Rita Nealon Interview**

Barbara Ortiz 0:00

So this is COPS Oral History Interview. I'm Barbara Ortiz, and I'm interviewing Rita Nealon, on March 26 2024, at the National Archives of the Marianist Province of the United States, at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to interview you tonight and sharing your stories with us. And then I just would like you to state your name and spell. And what was your role in COPS/Metro over your time?

Sr. Rita Nealon 0:32

Okay, I'm a sister. Okay, I'm Sr. Rita Nealon. NEALON. And I haven't been directly involved in COPS/Metro until recently. But I've been hearing about COPS/Metro for the 50 years, it's been around. {Okay}. And companions of mine. In the early years, I didn't pay much attention. I didn't really, I wasn't aware of the good worker that influence they had. {Okay}.

But one, one of the first achievements that I think is key and it was just COPS at that time. When I first came to San Antonio, we had a city council that had two members from the inner city. And the rest of them were all from the rich north side. All the money was going out there. And every city every city council vote was eight, four and two against or two, four, and eight against or whatever. And COPS, and I don't know what year it was, campaigned and got people to go out and vote for dividing the city into ten districts with each district, every one, represented. And that, to me changed the whole face of San Antonio. Now the money had to be allocated to all the and that's when they began to really achieve things.

And the other thing that I think was a key to the success of COPS, is they empowered women. And they got women, ordinary housewives, not much education, some of them not very, what's the word in English {fluent}. And yet, they empower those women to be able to get up there, take a microphone and challenge the mayor. The kind of commissioners decision, the chief police, and they also worked with them in such a way that they had their homework done. They could get up and say now I live on Brasil Street, and even a small shower of rain and we have puddles all over the place and our houses are flooding. And we need a street; we need drainage; we need street paved; we need sidewalks. And it would be three and a half million dollars and we want you to support this. They had all their homework done. They knew exactly what they were talking about. And it was amazing the way I remember when Henry Cisneros was running to be Mayor he had to get up there and say yes. They'd ask him do support, will you support our agenda? They had to say yes or no. {Okay}, if they fudged it a little bit they say that's a wishy washy that doesn't count and they'd embarrassed them so that they make them say yes or no and that was one of the keys to their success was the way they empowered, got the women involved and taught the women how to do it.

Sr. Rita Nealon by Barbara Ortiz

Barbara Ortiz 4:24

so you haven't been involved the entire time but so what were you doing back when it first started, when you were in observation roles?

Sr. Rita Nealon 4:36

Okay, I was high school teacher {okay} for 20 years {where at} I taught at Little Flower{[Oh Okay]}. Which was had a high school at the time. And then I was there for 14 years. {Okay} and then went from there to Holy Cross and taught at Holy Cross for six years.

Barbara Ortiz 4:55

So then your order is?

Sr. Rita Nealon 4:58

Sisters of the Holy Spirit. {okay} so then I spent a few years working in the congregation and then I went to Mexico I spent 25 years in Mexico.

Barbara Ortiz 5:15

OK, teaching or missionary work?

Sr. Rita Nealon 5:20

mostly parish/pastor work. {Okay}. We worked a lot with the [?comunidades eclesiastica?] small Christian communities and a lot of evangelizing with that in Mexico

Barbara Ortiz 5:37

so all over Mexico or were there specific areas?

Sr. Rita Nealon 5:41

Just in Nayarit, {where is that one} Most people don't know. it's on the West Coast. You know Mazatlan is. {Oh, yes}. Okay. You know Puerto Vallarta is. {Yes}. You know, what's in between? That's the state of Nayarit.

Barbara Ortiz 5:52

Okay,

Sr. Rita Nealon 5:54

everybody knows those two but nobody knows the state in between. it's a poor state. And we've worked there in some [was not] dirt poor, poor communities to try to help them be involved in their own lives. The kinds of things we've learn in COPS are very different situation. But then I came back to the states and I spent a few years down in El Paso working with migrants, and so I've only been back in San Antonio now for the last couple of years back and forth. Now I'm permanent here. So I go to all the COPS meetings.

Barbara Ortiz 6:37

So which parish are you kind of attached to right now?

Sr. Rita Nealon by Barbara Ortiz

Sr. Rita Nealon 6:41

current over on the east side Do you know where St. Gerard is? {Yes}. Okay. You know Our Lady of Perpetual Help? Okay, we're really near Our Lady of Perpetual Help {Okay}. Where do you live?

Barbara Ortiz 6:52

I'm out Helotes, is where we live.

Sr. Rita Nealon 6:57

We're just a little, less than a mile from Our Lady of Perpetual Help. {Okay, okay.} We're trying to promote COPS over there because that area is not really committed to COPS/Metro.

Barbara Ortiz 7:12

oh really. Okay. Do you think, What/Why do you think that is?

Sr. Rita Nealon 7:17

Well, I guess they haven't had people. They have other organizations, but they don't have the power of COPS/Metro. Just haven't been motivated enough.

Barbara Ortiz 7:31

So knowing that the power of COPS can bring and it's been almost fifty years now, and the experience that they have and the action that they can do. How do you think you can get that into that community?

Sr. Rita Nealon 7:42

[whoever] I can just move one brick at a time. There, there are needs over there. And housing is a great need right now. People building houses and sell them for half a million dollars. And besides little shacks.

Barbara Ortiz 8:05

Yes, so how do you think is that something that COPS/Metro have worked on as far as that gentrification?

Sr. Rita Nealon 8:16

Well, I heard them talk about it, and they've tried to promote, like the homestead thing and try to get people to, I forget how they do the process, but to get the insurance that their rent is not going, I mean their property value isn't going to go up because somebody builds a half a million dollar house next door. I know COPS has done some of that. It hasn't been a major focus. I don't think

Barbara Ortiz 8:52

I know that the tax abatement as far as like trying to keep it where it's affordable still for those communities. So what are the values or beliefs that drive your involvement in COPS and how do they align with the group's overall mission and goals?

Sr. Rita Nealon by Barbara Ortiz

Sr. Rita Nealon 9:14

I think Justice, Equity is so basic. Now the other thing that COPS is working on, has always been working on, is promoting voting, trying to get people out to vote. And this year they're making an all out effort to promote voting to try to we've done some house to house visits. And not an easy task with locks on the gate and security cameras and mad dogs and all the obstacles. But we did get to a few houses.

And it's, that's a major, major thing. Get people out to vote [there that] changes. It make so much progress, make so many things so much easier. When you're talking about gentrification, they made a major effort over in the Dignowity area around St. Patrick's in that area to try to keep that from happening.

Barbara Ortiz 10:42

What are some of the key issues that you're focused on right now? Since you've returned and becoming more involved in COPS/Metro?

Sr. Rita Nealon 10:52

Well the main thing is the voting. That's probably given most of our energy to, and, trying to promote kind of we're trying to get people to know each other in the neighborhood. So that I think people know each other, they won't be so scared. So there's a big push to promote gun safety.

Barbara Ortiz 11:21

Yes,

Sr. Rita Nealon 11:22

that's a big effort on part of COPS/Metro.

Barbara Ortiz 11:27

Is it something that you stay around to your parish community as far as that work that door to door? Or do all of the groups kind of help all of you know you can go to any of the communities?

Sr. Rita Nealon 11:40

We tried to focus on our own little neighborhood. We did a lot of telephone but gets so few answers.

Barbara Ortiz 11:59

So speaking of that, so what are some other challenges or obstacles that COPS/Metro has faced, that you recall from your earlier days to what you're facing now?

Sr. Rita Nealon 12:11

Well, the earlier days was there were rebel rousers that were just referred to as predominantly Latinas. So there were Mexicans of this, there is already Mexicans. They had that kind of reputation, but now they're very well respected. They tell me that when Toyota was planning to

Sr. Rita Nealon by Barbara Ortiz

come into San Antonio, they talked to COPS before they talked to the city, before they talked to the mayor or city manager. that was the main concern, how would how would they work with COPS. Shows you how powerful they are.

Barbara Ortiz 12:50

A lot of power. So knowing that have you seen any moments of setback or recalling like maybe some past failures of COPS/Metro and how they were able to overcome some of those?

Sr. Rita Nealon 13:13

Well, I think the biggest, I don't want to call it failure, but there this big decline. When they had their 10th anniversary, they packed the participants into the arena downtown. I think 8000 people or something, and not coming up to the 50th it'll probably be two or 3000. So there's that huge drop off. And part of, I heard somebody say lately, I'm not great analyst, but saying the needs aren't as great, people aren't, like people have better streets and they don't have the houses flooding and they don't have mud coming in the door and, the overall, even though this isn't the poorest city in the nation, major city, in general, people are doing better, education is better.

Barbara Ortiz 14:26

So again, those are some perceptions. But again, there's still the need in those communities.

Sr. Rita Nealon 14:34

Oh definitely. The whole gun violence and the gangs, and that kind of thing is that's a huge problem.

Barbara Ortiz 14:44

So are they approaching it from the gun control or from doing something about the gangs?

Sr. Rita Nealon 14:49

Well they're trying, one of the things that they have accomplished is the guns, the city is going, its the city I think, is going to spend a considerable amount of money buying gun safety boxes, because they said a lot of the guns are being used in crimes are stolen out of cars. And so if the people have safe lock boxes, for their guns, and if they had safe lockboxes in for their guns in their house, and the kids wouldn't be getting ahold of them. And another major achievement is the Dignowity Police station over on the southeast side over kind of St. Margaret Mary's area, and that will help alot, there'll be more presence of police in that area.

Barbara Ortiz 15:48

And is that a big deal with COPS?

Sr. Rita Nealon 15:50

Oh, yes, they're the ones that agitated for that. They can achieve more that St. Margaret Mary's is big into COPS, because the priest there is big into COPS. So that helps with a lot. And then if the people are aware and interested they can achieve a lot more.



Sr. Rita Nealon by Barbara Ortiz

Barbara Ortiz 16:17

Absolutely. Absolutely. So is there been any significant movement that you've been part of yet? I know you because you said you've only come back recently, but any milestones that you were able to be part of?

Sr. Rita Nealon 16:36

Well I was part of that the safety boxes for the guns, I was part of that.

Barbara Ortiz 16:42

Okay. Any other ones?

Sr. Rita Nealon 16:45

Meetings. I think we increased the voter turnout a little bit. And, and hopefully we'll increase it a whole lot more by November. Focus on the general election.

Barbara Ortiz 17:05

Yes. And you had mentioned early in the beginning about you know, one of the great things about COPS is the female role and the female empowerment. And so how have they been able to continue that, you know, into these now 50 years?

Sr. Rita Nealon 17:23

Well if you go to meetings the majority of the people who are present are women. And they're the ones that are running the meetings, planning the agenda, like Diane there. She and her husband both. She's more visible at meetings than her husband. And another achievement of COPS is it's just [?] are Catholic, you know in the beginning it was mostly Catholic mostly, And there were Spanish speaking people. You go to a meeting you saw Spanish, with somebody translating and change it, now its the other way around. But that's it. They have more different denominations. Now. Some of the Baptist churches and Presbyterian churches and some of these very eloquent pastors that are powerful speakers.

Barbara Ortiz 18:22

Do you find in those other denominations that also calls to women?

Sr. Rita Nealon 18:27

oh yes, at the [?] Baptist Church there a couple of very powerful women there coming in and they're trying to bring more people with them all the time.

Barbara Ortiz 18:52

So why do you think though, that the movement to really to focus on women empowerment, you know, is that the lasting legacy? Or you know, is that by design, you know, that, you know, that was the key to the future?

Sr. Rita Nealon by Barbara Ortiz

Sr. Rita Nealon 19:08

I'd say it's pretty much by design, because the women stick at it, the men give up too easily. [laughter] Am I sexist? The men get tired and the women keep going.

Barbara Ortiz 19:18

I like that. Probably why it's still around. So, how do you envision the future of COPS/Metro, and its ongoing legacy, you know, so we're about to celebrate 50 years, you know, what's the next 50 gonna look like?

Sr. Rita Nealon 19:53

I wish I were a prophetess. It's hard to say but my hope is that they will continue to focus on local issues and maybe state issues that they know they can, with a pretty good chance of winning. They only take on big things that they can win. And they will continue to be an attractive association that people will continue to, to want to be part of it and keep up the good reputation. And maybe that they'll change the [?] maybe I shouldn't say that on tape. supposedly nonpartisan, but there definitely are for the poor, and to uplift the bottom rung of society. That's a big part of it.

Barbara Ortiz 21:06

Was there any other meaningful experience that you would like to share either a meaningful memory from the past or even in the last couple of years?

Sr. Rita Nealon 21:18

well, I think for me, one of the most exciting to have this accountability with the, with the candidates for election. And in this little room, they get up there and they're demanding \$3 million and get this bridge and this drainage. I think, for me, that's, that's the whole purpose of this organization, to empower the people at the bottom and have them be able to get up and talk with themselves.

Barbara Ortiz 21:56

thank you for your time for your stories. I know we've got more, continue to ask more questions of you and just want to thank you for sharing with us tonight.

Sr. Rita Nealon 22:08

You're welcome.

**Transcription Notes:** This interview was lightly edited as needed for readability which may include inserting paragraph breaks, removing redundant words, or adding clarifying words. Added words or words difficult to decipher typically appear inside brackets [ ]. Simple responses from the interviewer may appear in { } as to not affect the stream of narration.