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COPS/Metro Alliance - StMU Oral Histories with Sister Gabriella Lohan

Gabriella Parra

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COPS/Metro Alliance-StMU Oral Histories

Narrator: Sister Gabriella Lohan

Date: 3/26/2024

Location: San Antonio, TX

Interview Session: 1 of 1

Interviewer: Gabriella Parra

Transcribed By: Gabriella Parra

Narrator's Biographical Information:

Sister Gabriella Lohan is a Holy Spirit Sister and leader with COPS/Metro Alliance. Originally from Ireland, she moved to San Antonio with the Holy Spirit Sisters after graduating from high school. She has a background in education, having been a teacher and a principal. She has supported many COPS initiatives involving education.

Summary of Interview:

Sister Gabriella Lohan discusses her background in education. She explains how she became involved with COPS and some initiatives she has worked on. She discusses what she has experienced in her time with COPS.

Interview Key Terms:

COPS

Education

Alliance Schools

Project West

Holy Spirit Sisters

National training

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Sister Gabriella Lohan by Gabriella Parra

Sister Gabriella Lohan's Interview

Gabriella Parra 0:01

Okay. So today we are here at the Marianist Archives. And my name is Gabriella Parra. I am a history major here. And would you like to introduce yourself?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 0:13

I'm Sister Gabriella Lohan, a Holy Spirit sister. I studied at St. Mary's at one time, I didn't get my degree here. But I got all my theology here. And I got my degrees at Our Lady of the Lake, my first degree at Our Lady of the Lake.

Gabriella Parra 0:28

Amazing. What was that degree in?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 0:32

Education with a minor in music.

Gabriella Parra 0:34

Gotcha. Amazing. And you said you were from Ireland.

Sister Gabriella Lohan 0:42

I'm from Ireland.

Gabriella Parra 0:43

How did you end up here [in San Antonio]?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 0:46

Well the Holy Spirit sisters had a reception house in the small town where I lived in Ireland. And while I didn't go to school to those sisters... I went to the Ursulines. When I was through with high school, finished high school, I asked them if I could join them. And my parents didn't like it. But they let me come.

Gabriella Parra 1:15

Amazing. And you came to San Antonio right away?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 1:19

I came to San Antonio. And some of the first people I met because we went into school right away, began our theology right away, were the Brothers of Mary. Brother [unknown], oh, a lot of those theology teachers, Montague, many of them are my teachers.

Sister Gabriella Lohan by Gabriella Parra

Gabriella Parra 1:42

Got you. And, you said you studied theology? Did you also say you studied education?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 1:50

Yes.

Gabriella Parra 1:52

Let's see... what, what drew you to education?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 1:56

Elementary education, I studied elementary education, with all the basics that the children would learn in elementary school. Geography, history, English, and all that.

Gabriella Parra 2:08

And why were you interested in studying that?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 2:11

Well to tell you the truth, it was what many of the sisters were going into, and we were elementary school teachers. And we had elementary schools, we were teaching in elementary schools.

Gabriella Parra 2:24

And then how did you become involved with COPS?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 2:25

Well, after 10 years teaching, I became a principal for 21 years. The last nine of which I was at Little Flower School here in San Antonio. And they were changing the way children learned [and I couldn't] resist it. And I knew that if I wanted to really keep up with education, I would have to go back to school... I was a school principal. And if I were going to be teaching teachers how to get into this new system of child-centered education, I thought that it would be smarter to let one of my coworkers study to become a principal. And I would go to something else. I didn't want to start all over again to go back and get a master's in child-centered education. I could read a bit about it, but that wouldn't be giving my heart and soul to it.

And so I became the general treasurer of my congregation in 1989, I believe. I did a year of internship with the then current treasurer and went over to St. Philip's and got some economics and counting and bookkeeping, and a lot of that was required. I didn't get a degree in how to run the treasurer's office, like economics and investing and all that kind of stuff.

Sister Gabriella Lohan by Gabriella Parra

And then, you know, started with... my superior at the time Sister Monica was just getting involved in Metro Alliance, which joined COPS subsequently. And she said to me, I want you to get into... get interested in COPS and what they're doing and get the congregation in with you. They were already in... would, you know, work with the congregation to really get interested in the social justice issues of the city. And so I [unknown]... took me a little while to get into it. I found that there were no elementary school, let me tell you. No Little Flower Elementary School, by any means. But I got into it and began to like it and went down and took national training and just began to enjoy it. And then the first issue, which I think is why you're here, the first issue that I got involved in was Project QUEST. And so, [unknown].

Gabriella Parra 5:31

Can you tell me about Project QUEST?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 5:32

Well, you probably know the story about how Levi Strauss closed, which a lot of Mexican women had jobs there. I think 1200 and then [unknown]. And so the pastor of that parish that was close where the plant was, that people came to and said there was just nobody day or we had no work, the women have no work. And so he took that issue to COPS and COPS... Ernie Cortes, a brilliant man said, well, let's study and see how we get jobs for them, and how we will have our own training project to get it done.

And so they began. They did the research, you know, now I forget all the people that came in here to San Antonio, but some of the leaders went up there, the John School of... at University of Texas and... Thurgood Marshall and some people like that came in here and taught the COPS leaders how to put a jobs training program in place! And this was a professional jobs training program. And then while that group were doing that, learning how to do it, learning how to put in place, learning how to get students, learning how to kind of run a university, another group were going after how we will find the money. So public money was the way to go. And I had told your friend who was here a couple of minutes ago, that's where I learned what power is. COPS is a power organization. You know what power is? Will I tell you?

Gabriella Parra 7:39

Yes, you tell me. [Laughs]

Sister Gabriella Lohan 7:41

Power is the ability to act. And power is the ability to get others to act. So they went up after [Governor] Ann Richards, they went to the city of San Antonio, they went to the federal government. Clinton was in at the time, and they said, we need the money. This is what we're going to be doing with it. And we need it and the city of San Antonio needs it. And so we're here to... they didn't say we're here to collect it but we're here to tell you that we need it! They got the

Sister Gabriella Lohan by Gabriella Parra

money and then set up the offices and set up... Hired people to run the office and all that kind of thing.

But I was going to tell you, the first time I saw the leaders go to City Hall to look for money... I had been a principal at Little Flower just previously, and I struggled so much to get, collect tuition, get a little bit of tuition together, get a little bit of fundraising done. You know. I saw them say at Judge [Nelson] Wolff, [the former mayor of San Antonio], we need... the leaders are here to ask you are you going to give us that \$12,000 dollar- that 2 million dollars. And we had bused in eight busloads of people just to stand in front of him. That's power. Power of the people.

Gabriella Parra 9:15
Definitely.

Sister Gabriella Lohan 9:17

And he looked around and he saw the crowd. And he said that... he didn't say, yes, we'll give it to you. He said, I think we can. And let me tell you, we got it. And that's the kind of power that COPS is.

Gabriella Parra 9:37

So you mentioned that you went to national training.

Sister Gabriella Lohan 9:40

I did.

Gabriella Parra 9:41

What was that like?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 9:43

For me it was a whole new experience. I never had had that at the Universalist. I never had had it in the Church. This was real conversation about real issues. Poor people and what rich people could do if they were probably, properly trained. And everybody has a good heart. And, and the organization, the IAF, taught us how to talk to people, how to be in conversation with people about really important issues, and how to study democracy and teach democracy, to people who were in Congress who didn't know what it was about. Many don't know what democracy is about. They think democracy is one class of people. Democracy is about families, about schools, about jobs, about a lot of things.

Gabriella Parra 11:00

How did you use both your national training and your schooling and education in university within your career in COPS?

Sister Gabriella Lohan by Gabriella Parra

Sister Gabriella Lohan 11:11

Well, that's an interesting question. And I don't know how I used it. But I'll give you an... I think I had the philosophical background, and the education, the professional education background, if that's what you'd say, but I got the professional education in COPS too. But I think like I had the book learning, that's the thing I had. I had the book learning in college, but I got the experiential learning in COPS. And when I taught children, I taught them book learning. But I got the experiential learning in COPS.

Gabriella Parra 12:03

What, what initiatives within COPS have you been a part of that are related to education and training?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 12:10

Well, the Alliance schools. Now, we have not persevered with that in COPS, but in... When Judge Wolff was ...was mayor, he financed a lot of that. And that was about... I can't remember everything specifically. Because we didn't stay with it long enough. That... A lot of that was about engaging parents. And to me, it was a very helpful, a very useful theory. Getting parents to parent teacher conferences, teaching parents how to teach their children. It was teaching teachers how to teach each other. I don't know why we call them the Alliance schools and Alliance I think is a group of schools, but we call them the Alliance schools, and maybe to differentiate... differentiate them from many other kinds of schools. But it was a very constructive and...

And that time, we brought... You know, there are some great national educators that we were engaged [with]. Dr. Cornel West was one. We would bring those teachers. And I would go I mean, I said we brought the teachers, we brought ourselves. We need the education just as bad as the parents did and just as bad as the teachers did. But we organized the parents to help their teachers. And not only just to help their teachers but cooperate with their teachers. It wasn't a matter of, I'm helping her. It wasn't like cutting paper and that kind of thing, and putting up bulletin boards. This was about learning how a child learns, helping a teacher to teach a parent how a child learns. Now, it took a lot of people to do that. I didn't do it all. The parent had to learn how to do it, the teacher had to learn how to do it, I had to learn how to do it. COPS/Metro... COPS leaders had to learn how to do it. But it was a very helpful negotiation, education kind of thing.

Gabriella Parra 14:39

That's amazing.

Sister Gabriella Lohan 14:41

And allowing parents to have decision making, to be decision makers in their children's learning.

Sister Gabriella Lohan by Gabriella Parra

Gabriella Parra 14:50

What about for the future? What are you passionate about that you'd like to see COPS get involved with?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 14:57

What I think one of the things is schools. And that is in the near future. That's an absolute necessity in the near future. The second thing, I think that there are some people who have not gotten their share of the pie. And in terms of wages and financial security, and having the capacity, I think I would like to see this myself, and I'm kind of thinking about it. For instance, I know in my neighborhood, not too many adults have capital in the bank. And I think that would be... If there was some way... I know, on the north side, you know, every man, woman and child has money in the bank, children too. But where I live, I live on the east side, they don't have that capacity. And I think that is something I would like to see where there would be more equitable distribution of wealth. In what we call the lower class. The upper class have lots. I think every class is the same. But in what we, the nomenclature, I'm stuck for the word. I think that people do not have... I mean, they can't get a plumbing job with a contractor, because they have no capital to bring to the table. So that's what I think I would like COPS to get involved in.

Gabriella Parra 16:35

Do you have any ideas of what kind of change... what it would look like to take steps towards that change?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 17:03

Well there would probably... Maybe legislation would have to change. I don't know. But I think wages have to change. Education. You know, I just think of my own country in Ireland. We didn't have secondary education in Ireland until 1966, free secondary education. We didn't have it. Any child that got through elementary school had to go into a technical school or something. But in 1966, legislation was passed by a highly regarded man now, that said there should be free education for every child, free secondary education. Well, as soon as they got it, they went like that. I heard Dan Rather said many, many years ago, that the tech companies were going to Ireland in droves. Ireland now is either the first or second per capita, richest country in the world. That was because they got educated. And then I suppose they have the natural intelligence to save. They didn't save enough. I keep saying. [Laughs] The news didn't get to my family yet! [Laughs] But, I mean, the last... There's a magazine called the International Financial Times or something like that. And that is... Singapore I think... it's either Singapore or Ireland are first and second. So what was your question?

Gabriella Parra 18:53

Sister Gabriella Lohan by Gabriella Parra

I forgot as well. Oh, it was what kind of changes? What kind of steps do you think we need to take towards that change?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 19:00

Well that's the change. Education is key. I believe education is the key. And languages, another thing. Of course, every child here has... many children here are bilingual. But they're teaching German, French and Japanese and everything in the schools in Ireland now. Because they have to travel, you know, they have to be able to talk to everybody if they're going to maintain their , you know, their state... their status. When I mean status I mean to their economic status.

Gabriella Parra 19:39

And within San Antonio, what changes would you like to see in our education system?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 19:45

Well, I don't really know. And I don't think vouchers are the answers, though. Vouchers are one. Every child does... Of course, according to Horace Mann, every child... The state has the obligation to educate every child, no matter what school they educate them in. And so I tend to think that we might destroy the public school if we give vouchers to the private schools to the IDEA [schools] and all the charter schools and all that. But it might have to be done. I don't know. We're going into the future and the future is different from the present.

Gabriella Parra 20:37

And what differences have you seen COPS make in the community?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 20:42

God! What difference have I seen! I've seen the difference it made in myself. And of course, Cortes that we just talked about. I know the difference he made in my life right... Because he's theologian, advisor, teacher, critic, critiquer, all that. A philosopher, reader. So he has made a tremendous change in my life.

Gabriella Parra 21:25

Well, that was all my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Sister Gabriella Lohan 21:29

I don't think so. I think we've done very well.

Gabriella Parra 21:34

Amazing. Thank you so much for talking to me.

Sister Gabriella Lohan 21:36

Sister Gabriella Lohan by Gabriella Parra

Excuse me.

Gabriella Parra 21:37

Thank you so much.

Sister Gabriella Lohan 21:38

Oh, you're welcome. 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.