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

Kensley Dieckow

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# COPS/Metro Alliance-StMU Oral Histories

**Narrator:** Sr. Gabriella Lohan

**Date:** 03/26/2024

**Location:** Interviewed in San Antonio, Texas

**Interview Session:** 1 of 1

**Interviewer:** Kensley Dieckow

**Transcribed By:** Kensley Dieckow

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

Sister Gabriella Lohan, a Holy Spirit Sister originally from Ireland, has been a member of COPS/Metro Alliance (Communities Organized for Public Service) since its merger in 1990. Sister Lohan came to Texas at just 19 years old where she went on to get her Bachelor's and Master's degrees and principal certification. Prior to joining COPS / Metro, she served as the principal of Little Flower School for 21 years. Sister Lohan has long advocated for equitable education opportunities and currently chairs the board for Project QUEST.

## **Summary of Interview:**

In the oral history interview of Sr. Gabriella Lohan, she discusses San Antonio's social and political history, as well as the role COPS / Metro Alliance has played in reaching marginalized communities across the city. Over time, COPS / Metro has adapted to new issues like education and fair banking, reflecting changing community needs while staying true to its core mission of empowering citizens and promoting democracy. Throughout the interview, Sr. Lohan explored the role her faith has played throughout her life's work in social justice.

## **Interview Key Terms:**

COPS / Metro Alliance (Communities Organized for Public Service)

Sisters of the Holy Spirit

Little Flower School

Project QUEST

Jobs Training

IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation)

Social Justice

Fair Banking

Education

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**Are the consent forms complete?** Yes

Sr. Gabriella Lohan by Kensley Dieckow

**Sr. Gabriella Lohan Interview Index**

<b>Time Stamp</b>	<b>Theme or Topic</b>
00:35	Background and Project Quest
06:21	The Catholic Church and Social Justice
11:32	Personal and Local Impact
17:22	COPS Mission
20:54	Proudest Moments

### **Sr. Gabriella Lohan Interview**

Kensley Dieckow 0:00

This is the COPS oral history interview with Kensley Dieckow interviewing Gabriella Lohan, do you say Lohan or Lohan? [Yes] Lohan, 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. So thank you so much again, for giving me and my classmates the opportunity to interview you. Would you first like to start off by stating your name and then your role within COPS?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 0:35

Excuse me, because I have, I'm taking some kind of medicine from my throat. And it's causing me to have problems speaking. But I'm a Holy Spirit sister. I came to school here myself at St. Mary's. Didn't get my degree here. But I came to school, took English and Math and Theology, a lot of Theology. I got my first degree at Our Lady of the Lake University. But the question again, please

Kensley Dieckow 1:10

Your role in COPS. Just to kind of set the scene of who you are.

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 1:14

Well actually, I'm a leader with COPS / Metro Alliance. COPS was founded in 1974. On the.. it was mostly Catholic and Hispanic. And Metro Alliance.. And yes, Metro Alliance was founded over on the east side of San Antonio, about 20 years later. And it was different churches, a multitude of churches. And we hold a Spirit Sisters, who are great friends of the Brothers of Mary I might add. But we live over there [East San Antonio]. And so we were part of Metro Alliance. And so about 10 years after that, maybe 30 years after COPS was founded, and 10 years after Metro Alliance was founded. We became COPS / Metro. We merged.

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 1:47

And I got into it in 1990. I was Principal at Little Flower School for 21 years before that. And after I was through with Little Flower, I came, I became treasurer of the congregation. And then I.. My superior told me that justice belonged in my office. The congregation sees, you know, where justice was monitored, and our practice of justice was monitored in the treasurer's office. And so that was, I think, for her to get me into COPS / Metro. Now, the first thing where I cut my teeth was on... Do you want me to tell the story?

Kensley Dieckow 3:11

Go ahead!

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 3:12

Where I cut my teeth was [indiscernible], COPS are a power organization. We believe in power of people and power of money, not public money, but the power of money we raise ourselves. So the first big action I was in was in front of City Hall, when we were asking for \$2 million from the city to start a jobs training program, which is now Project QUEST. It has just put... educated 12,000 people into good jobs, higher wage jobs, jobs with career paths, jobs with benefits, jobs

Sr. Gabriella Lohan by Kensley Dieckow

with good wages. And it was very exciting for me. It really was exciting. And I was just new in the organization. I was watching all of the people and I was watching the politicians. They came out in front, on City Hall, and we were going we they.. this was all...

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 4:24

They [COPS] all practiced this. What they were going to say and do. And so, and they had bus loads of people in. Bus loads of people. I think there were 8 bus loads of people and 50 in a bus. And had that in front of City Hall to be determined, that they were determined to show City Hall that they had the power to run this jobs training program. And I will never forget this. They asked for \$2 million and I said "\$2 million?...", and I was a principal at Little Flower School! And I had been selling tacos on a Sunday, to try to make a few dollars to pay the teachers. And I said this is where I want to be. This is the kind of power I want to have. To bring people to God, to bring people to the church, to feed people, to put bread on the table for people, to put wages in the bank for people. And so that's how I got into COPS and Metro.

Kensley Dieckow 5:44

So I know you said that the church that you were involved with was also involved with COPS. Was anyone else involved with...?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 5:52

No the church actually wasn't. I had left the church. [Oh, you did] I hadn't left the church, but I had left my job left. No Little Flower had not yet come into project.. COPS / Metro.

Kensley Dieckow 6:03

So was there anyone else in your personal life, maybe family members or friends that you were involved in COPS whenever you first joined?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 6:14

No. When I left Ireland, I'm a Holy Spirit sister. Where's the... [referencing the recorder]?

Kensley Dieckow 6:20

Yes. They're both.

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 6:21

When I left Ireland, I left Ireland at 19 years of age after I finished high school to become a Holy Spirit Sister here in Texas. And here I am now at 50 [when she first became involved with COPS]. I had done a lot of other things, you know, gone to school, got my Master's, got my Bachelor's and my Master's and certification to be a principal and all that. But it wasn't until I got to the IAF [Industrial Areas Foundation] into and met Ernie Cortez, that I really realized the social justice of the church is best taught in community organizing. That's where I have seen it best taught.

Kensley Dieckow 7:10

What issues were you most passionate about when you first joined COPS? I know you talked about putting food on the table. You know, mobilizing..

Sr. Gabriella Lohan by Kensley Dieckow

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 7:18

Well I was always interested in social justice. My congregation were founded for the em.. in [1888], for the emancipation... For the education of the newly emancipated African Americans in 1888. So you can imagine how long my community has had a thrust toward social justice. So my... But I came from a home from my mother and father who taught us that everybody was equal and that everybody... There should be equity in the way the goods, the goods of the world are divided. So I knew that from home, I knew that, and I knew that from the Sisters. I went to the Ursulines to school and I knew that from them that, you know, that everybody's a child of God.

Kensley Dieckow 8:13

Mhmm. Okay, so in what ways has COPS remained consistent or the same from when you first got involved in the organization?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 8:27

Well it couldn't remain the same because the city [San Antonio] has not remained the same. Number one, [indiscernible] still a lot of poor people. It's the area where I have given my greatest attention is helping the poor. People poorer than myself. And so, but I have to say there's still poverty. But it has changed. The government has not become more charitable. But there are more programs now for poor people. Than there were when I was young.

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 9:16

There's still not equitable justice by any means. But for that reason, COPS cont... COPS continues to organize now around different issues. For instance, about... around police patrol, police fighting crime and things. About helping the elderly access their... I wouldn't say they're so secured as much, but as their benefits. It Isn't... I'll make that more clear.

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 10:00

When COPS first started, you know, they had to clean up the drainage and the streets. You've heard that before. You've seen those movies. Well, they're all cleaned up now. What they work on now is education, payday lending, fair banking systems, hospital care, you know, you see that it works on different issues. But it isn't that... it doesn't mean it isn't still working very hard. But it's a different... And there's a different kind of people in COPS now. When I first entered COPS, let me tell you, we were all poor. But people now have been able to get jobs and... or some people have. Now, there's... This is a complicated issue. There are still people who need, but they need different things. One of the things they don't need now, is better drainage. They need better education. Do I make myself clear?

Kensley Dieckow 10:00

Yes, perfectly. [Okay.] So, how have you grown as a person? Or what have you learned about yourself from your involvement in COPS?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 11:32

Let me tell you, I cannot, I cannot tell you what I have learned from the organizers. And some of them have less education than I have. But there's a sense of integrity in them, in the organizers. There's a sense of authenticity in them. Which really makes a difference. They're well, many of

Sr. Gabriella Lohan by Kensley Dieckow

them are very, very well educated. But I like the ones with the... I like all of them. They're all very, very good. But the thing that stands out to me about all of them, there's a certain integrity that they have. That is important to me.

Kensley Dieckow 12:26

Do you want to maybe elaborate on that a little bit more?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 12:29

Well, I don't know if it's the training they get, or what it is. But they are people of integrity. Do you know what integrity means? A truthfulness to yourself. And a truthfulness to the public. I find that's how the organizers are. The people who teach us are, it isn't that they know [indiscernible] the scripture. It that, what they know they put to terrific use.

Kensley Dieckow 13:05

And it's also that they fully believe in what they're doing.

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 13:08

And they fully believe in what they're doing. They do. They fully believe in what they're doing. And they don't kid themselves. They're not perfect.

Kensley Dieckow 13:20

Do you ever proudest moment from working with COPS?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 13:27

Well I do. I have a lot of proudest moments. Give me a chance [referencing looking through her notes]. Well my proudest moment to tell you the truth, is when I realized what I've learned and what I've been able to accomplish. I did great, great work for my own congregation. And I learned how to do it from COPS. I've heard how to approach public officials. And I've learned how to teach others how to approach public officials, and not to be afraid to approach public officials for what you truly believe, you have a right to. Now my private... I'll come back to that.

Kensley Dieckow 14:27

Okay, no worries. So, was there ever a time where you interacted with people or groups that were opposing COPS?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 14:39

Yes.

Kensley Dieckow 14:40

What was that experience like?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 14:42

It didn't bother me one bit. I told them get over.

Kensley Dieckow 14:46

I like that. Was there ever like a specific, I don't know instance of you know, a time where?

Sr. Gabriella Lohan by Kensley Dieckow

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 14:53

No, there was never an instance of vulgarity or violence or anything. No, no, no, no, no, never.

Kensley Dieckow 15:03

Just more rumblings.

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 15:04

Just more rumblings. They're[COPS] too loud, or they[COPS] don't give anyone a chance, or that kind of thing. I heard this story about them, or I heard that story about them. Or I heard that they don't listen or that they're shouting and... See, when COPS started... What's your first name, again?

Kensley Dieckow 15:06

Kensley

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 15:11

Kensley, when the COPS started, they really had to shout, to get listened to. They would went to somebody to ask for something, or going to a public official to ask for something. And the attitude is like, Who are you? Why are you here? And the COPS, leaders attitude would be, I'm here because I'm a citizen, I have a right to be here, and you know part of the city goes [indiscernible] to me. You probably have heard about when COPS first started, that they were [indiscernible], that they were at large districts. And so on the South Side, we had no representation at City Hall. On the East Side, we had no representation at City Hall. And the West Side, there was no representation at City Hall, all the council people came from the North Side. And so there was no... They weren't adequately represented. And so of course, they shouted. Because you wouldn't be heard if you didn't shout. And you'd be told to be nice and quiet. But that's another way they have changed. That isn't necessary now, because they have been taught how to approach City Hall, how to approach businesses, how to approach the school district, how to approach the hospital district. They know how to ask.

Kensley Dieckow 17:08

So I want to be able to give you the opportunity to go talk to some of the other interviewers. But where would you like to see COPS slash COPS / Metro 50 years from now? Or what do you think that they need to do in order to ensure they...

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 17:22

They need to follow the signs of the times. They need to see where the need is. They need to do research. They need to, excuse me, they need to continue to do what they're doing, just do it more deeply. We're now in a, as you can hear everybody say, we're in a listening mode. Like the Pope says, We have to listen. We need to listen to the signs of the times and listen to what's going on in the country. Listen to what's going on in politics. It's very painful right now to tell you the truth, very painful, but we must always teach democracy. What COPS should be doing, and have been doing, is teach democracy. Where, and we all sense, where people sit down in conversation, and talk about their needs of themselves and their families. Get with three or four more of their neighbors, talk with those. And then talk to those who can, not help them, but those who can



Sr. Gabriella Lohan by Kensley Dieckow

guide them. Those who have control of the city resources, can share with them and can listen to them and understand. It's very necessary for people to not... COPS / Metro are not looking for help. They're looking to get to the table, to be helpful.

Kensley Dieckow 19:10

That's really, that's like a really good way to finish it with, you know, the goals of COPS and, you know, making sure that it stays authentic to its core [Yes] for what it's meant to do from the beginning and doesn't stray too far off... It adapts. Yes, adapts. But doesn't lose its purpose.

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 19:31

Things have to change. Things have to change. We can't be... Like look, just communication. There's not going to be newspapers for too long more. We're going to have to learn... And there won't be computers for too long more either I'd say \*laughing\*. So we have to learn the new technology or the new lack of technology. We have to learn that. But we always have to stay true to what, I don't wish to say the gospel because there are several gospels, or several Bibles, to what our faith calls us to, whatever our faith is. We have to be true to that and true to the American ideals too.

Kensley Dieckow 20:30

So, I know that you needed some more time to think about a proudest moment, but was there just any moment maybe that you'd want to reflect on? That, you know, maybe it... Was it your involvement in an event? Was it maybe, you know, something that you wish that you could have been a part of? Maybe, you know, just a....

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 20:54

Listen, I have been so proud of so many... For instance, Project QUEST. Bringing that... Just to go to when they have a luncheon or something and I go to it. I can't believe it. They're all moments for me. When I hear what the people who went into pro-.... I worked at Project QUEST, all my life in COPS. And just to see, they're coming out with... We had a lady who's mother-in-law taught, teaches, who works in... She's a CNA at Our House [ministry]. And her son, a policeman married a girl who went through Project QUEST. I mean she built a house right, I don't know how many hundred thousand dollars, out in Stone Oak. Now, riches is not the end of COPS by any means. But that she learned so much, and raises her children, takes good care of them, know so much, and teaches others how to share their wealth. And that... I'm always proud when I sit at a gala table one of those, you know [indiscernible], and hear what... [indiscernible] COPS puts back into the city. You know, what the wages of our workers puts back into the city. I just am amazed that we have done so well. And every time I hear something like that, or every time I hear of a new person going into Project QUEST, or going into COPS, coming to join COPS. I'm thoroughly delighted.

Kensley Dieckow 22:56

Well. Thank you so much. Again, my instructor's gonna reach out to the COPS organizers to make sure that y'all have access to the transcript of the interview. And then I think that we're going to do some podcasts talking more about our research on COPS, including y'all's oral histories. Okay, so thank you so much again, it was lovely meeting you.

Sr. Gabriella Lohan by Kensley Dieckow

Sr. Gabriella Lohan 23:19  
And I apologize that my throat...

**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.