

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

**Sister Carol Ann
Elya, O.P.**

Oral History of Sister Carol Ann Elya, O.P.

conducted by

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and filmed by

Edward Feldman

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Interviewer: *Today is June 27, 2013, and we're in the chapel of St. Rose de Lima Hospital in Henderson, Nevada. My name is Anne Marie Hamilton-Brehm and our cameraman is Ed Feldman. We're interviewing Sister Carol Ann Elya as part of the Henderson Oral History Project of the Henderson Libraries. Thank you so much for participating Sister Carol.*

Sr. Carol: You're welcome.

Interviewer: *I'd like to begin by hearing a little bit about when and where you were born and raised and what your family was like.*

Sr. Carol: I was born in Muskegon, Michigan, in 1943. My dad was in the service, so my mother moved to Munising, Michigan, with me, which was where she was from. And Munising is right on Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, so that's where I went to school and that's where I got my education. And when I was a senior in high school, I decided it would either be the military or work and one of the Sisters was talking to me one day and she said, "Did you ever consider being a nun?" And I said, "No." And fifty-one years later, here I am. I have one brother, one sister, my parents are both deceased now. My sister lives in Wisconsin; my brother lives in Boulder City—I mean in Bullhead City. That's about it.

Interviewer: *So you initially didn't ever think about becoming a nun, but then you did. What led you to consider the vocation?*

Sr. Carol: Well, I thought if I went in the military, I was stuck for four years, but if I went in the convent and didn't like it, I could leave.

Interviewer: *[laughter] But you liked it.*

Sr. Carol: I liked it.

Interviewer: *What did you like about it?*

Sr. Carol: Well, I liked the joy and the spirit of the nuns. The nuns that I grew up with in Munising were always—I mean they'd play with us, they—and this was after school. They would play softball with us. In the wintertime, they ice skated with us. So we saw them in a whole different light than in the classroom. And I think that made a big difference to me.

Interviewer: *And did that—is that what inspired you to become a teacher?*

Sr. Carol: Yes, besides I was really good in sports, and so I wanted to be a—I wanted to do something in physical education. And at the beginning of my teaching career, I taught first grade, and I got—when I got my first degree, my bachelor's degree, it was in Education, and I was asked if I wanted to get my master's degree in Social Studies, in History. And I said, "I really don't. I really would like to get it in Physical Education." And after a couple of tries to put that past people in Adrian who were not so sure Sisters should be teaching PE because they didn't feel that that was where we were needed at the time. And so I had to kind of defend my reasons for wanting to do that. And one of the reasons that I told them that I would like to do Physical Education is because there are a lot of students who are not good academic students, but they do have a lot of physical abilities and they should be tapped too. And so I said, "Why not have a Sister who is a Physical Education teacher and can do those things?" So then the community let me go on and get my degree, and so I have my master's in Physical Education from Northern Michigan University, and I taught Physical Education in grade schools and high schools for at least forty years or close to it.

Interviewer: *Wow. But you also taught History.*

Sr. Carol: I taught History in high school, so when I went into high school in 1990 I became a History teacher, taught World History and I taught Physical Education and Girls' Weight Training.

Interviewer: *Oh, wow.*

Sr. Carol: And I was a coach. I coached basketball and track, softball, even flag football, golf. So just about anything that you can coach, I coached because I coached both in junior high and high schools.

Interviewer: *Wow, that's great. What a career. And I've heard that you taught on an Indian Reservation too.*

Sr. Carol: Yes, I did. I taught on the Navajo Reservation. I taught up at St. Michael's, Arizona. I taught there from 1990 to 1993. While I was there, we were fortunate enough to win the championship in basketball.

Interviewer: *Right.*

Sr. Carol: Down at the America West Arena in Phoenix and that was a really good experience for me.

Interviewer: *Wow. Did you get a trophy for that?*

Sr. Carol: We did and the kids that I taught and coached there went on to do that twice more after I left there.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Sr. Carol: They were just really good basketball players.

Interviewer: *What a legacy. But so then you were assigned to teach at the Reservation?*

Sr. Carol: No, I really wasn't. I chose to go there because by then we had open placement, which means that you can suggest where you want to go to work and if there aren't any really big problems with it, then usually you get to do that. And so I suggested that I try the Reservation and so I went to St. Michael's. And I probably would have stayed there, but then my mother died. And when my mother died, my dad came to live with me, so—and he had Parkinson's disease and he could not take the weather there. It was very cold in Northern Arizona and so we moved down to Phoenix. And that's when I started teaching at Bourgade High School there.

Interviewer: *And how did you end up coming to Henderson?*

Sr. Carol: Well, it's a long story, but one day I was up here, I brought another Sister here for a meeting and when we were coming in the back door, the sprinklers were broken and they were shooting all over the place and I got Sister Michael and I said, "Someday I'm going to come here and I'm going to fix these sprinklers." And she said, "I wish you would." And I think I was prophetic because at the end of 2003 school year, the school I was working at decided that I was not going to coach anymore because they were getting new people. And so I said, well, if I'm not going to coach, I'm not going to teach either. So I came here.

Interviewer: *And I'm sure that St. Rose has really benefitted from you being here.*

Sr. Carol: Well, I've converted from a teacher to a painter.

Interviewer: *[laughter] So you're real handy.*

Sr. Carol: Well, I used to do this stuff just for fun. I used to paint things, I'd build things out of my own carpentry shop. So it's not something that was foreign to me so it wasn't that big a change really.

Interviewer: *How did you get into carpentry?*

Sr. Carol: Oh, both my grandpas were carpenters and my uncles are carpenters, so I just kind of would watch and I learned a lot and then I read a lot of books on how to do different things and I just liked to work with wood.

Interviewer: *What are some of your projects that you've worked on?*

Sr. Carol: Well, I've built my own bedroom set.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Sr. Carol: I've built my own entertainment center. I built whirligigs. I don't know if you know what whirligigs are.

Interviewer: *Are they those things that you—*

Sr. Carol: They're wind toys.

Interviewer: *Yeah, that you kind of let go.*

Sr. Carol: You put them on a pole and they turn around in the wind and the propeller operates them.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay. For gardens?*

Sr. Carol: Some of them are, yeah. The one that I built for my brother recently is an old guy cranking a car.

Interviewer: *How funny.*

Sr. Carol: So when the wind blows, he cranks his car. So I build those. I built one with wind chimes, just a lot of different little things. I used to build things for the gift shop in Adrian but they closed the gift shop so I never do that anymore. So it's just the kind of stuff I used to do on the side just for fun.

Interviewer: *I'm surprised you're not selling things out of the gift shop here.*

Sr. Carol: Well, I thought about that. Maybe if I ever retire I'll do it.

Interviewer: *[laughter] Right. So I also hear that you're quite a cook.*

Sr. Carol: Well, that's debatable. Last night I had Sister Michael and Sister Phyllis over and I made them burnt offerings. I told her I was going to treat her like a god.

Interviewer: *[laughter]*

Sr. Carol: I was barbecuing something and the stuff I marinated in caught fire, so it got more than just—

Interviewer: *Flambé. [laughter] That's really great. Oh well. What was your first assignment when you came to St. Rose?*

Sr. Carol: When I came here?

Interviewer: *Yeah.*

Sr. Carol: Well, when I came here, I was assigned to the Engineering Division—and it was all guys, and it still is—and I wasn't really sure what I was going to be doing. I did a little bit of carpentry work at the beginning, fixing doors and stuff like that. And then the fellow that was the head painter here at the time said, "Are you interested in painting at all?" And I said, "Well, I can paint." I said I could do that. So he says, "Well, you can work with me then and we'll paint." So he taught me a lot of little tricks that I didn't know. Taught me how to do a lot of things that make it a lot easier and taught me how to patch walls, taught me how to texture and do all the things you have to do to be a good painter because that's what he said to me, he said, "What kind of a painter do you want to be? Do you want to be a painter or a good painter?" I said well whatever I do I want to do it well, so I'm going to learn everything you can

teach me. So he was here probably a year and a half with me, maybe two. And during the time I worked with him I learned a ton of things that just really helped, you know. And now I do everything by myself.

Interviewer: *Wow. And what are you working on right now?*

Sr. Carol: I'm painting the ICU and then I have a whole bunch of projects after that.

Interviewer: *How much—do you measure that in square footage of painting or like how big is that project?*

Sr. Carol: No, it's a unit. It's a whole unit, so it's like—it would be like in your house having a storeroom, a kitchen, two bathrooms, ten bedrooms, and a desk area. That's what it is. That's what I'm painting.

Interviewer: *You're painting a mansion.*

Sr. Carol: Yes.

Interviewer: *[laughter]*

Sr. Carol: So it's not, you know it's not anything little. It takes a long time to get it all done.

Interviewer: *Yeah. I'm sure. How far are you into the project?*

Sr. Carol: Well, I've got almost all the painting done. I still have to put acker down on the walls.

Acker gum is like—it would be like putting in wainscoting.

Interviewer: *Oh, yeah.*

Sr. Carol: Okay, that's got to go on the walls yet. I've got to do all the baseboard. So it'll take me a while.

Interviewer: *It sounds like it. It sounds like a project. What was Henderson like when you first moved here and how has it changed over the years?*

Sr. Carol: Well, when I first came here, the first time I came to Henderson was in 1982 and I remember it because I was with another Sister. We were coming in from California and she had been here before and I never had, and so I said, well—because she said, “We’ll go to the hospital because then we can visit with the nuns.” And I said, “Oh, that would be fun.” So we were coming in on 15 and I said to her, “Well how am I going to know where the hospital is? I don’t have any,” I said, “I don’t know where it is on the map or anything.” And she said, “Oh, you’ll be able to see it.” I thought, see it! [laughter] Is it that big, you know? And at the time, it was true. You could see the hospital from the edge of the Strip on Boulder Highway. You could see it.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Sr. Carol: And so we just headed for it. And when I came back here in 2000, I think was the first time I came back here after that, and the thing was so built up, it was hard to believe. Because, number one, you had to look for the hospital, and number two, there were all the freeways that weren’t here before. And so it was just really a different experience.

Interviewer: *I bet. What are some of the memorable events that you’ve seen happen at St. Rose?*

Sr. Carol: Well, at St. Rose the one thing that I really liked about this campus is everybody knows everybody and everybody’s friendly. I mean that’s been my experience. You know, people say hello to you and talk to you and it makes you feel like you’re really at home. That was the first thing I felt about this campus and that’s the way I still feel about it. And then I think the experiences that we have here—for instance there was a water drive a couple weeks

ago for the homeless—and the generosity of the people who work here. I think it was like 350 cases of water we got.

Interviewer: *Wow, that's great.*

Sr. Carol: You know, so I think it's a team. I think people here are a team and that's what I like about it.

Interviewer: *Everybody works together.*

Sr. Carol: Right.

Interviewer: *That's neat. You help a lot of people.*

Sr. Carol: Right and no problem is impossible to solve. You just kind of have that. And at this hospital, being as old as it is—it will be what, sixty-five years old? In '17, it will be seventy years old. This is an old building and the oldest part of it—I mean you run into problems that you probably wouldn't run into anywhere else because of the age of the building itself. But if you walk through these halls, you wouldn't be able to tell that, because people have made do with what we have. We've learned how to fix problems that maybe other people wouldn't have. We're working with older equipment and we keep it maintained, and all of that stuff takes time and it takes patience but it also takes cooperation. I think that's a big thing here.

Interviewer: *Yeah, I noticed that when I took a tour of the hospital, it seemed very modern in spite of the fact that it had started out in the forties and there's only a few places in the really old parts that you can tell because of the tininess of the hallways and what was here before. I think that's neat. What is your typical day like?*

Sr. Carol: Well, I start at six in the morning. I usually come in and check my work orders, see what I have to do. Then I go to the paint shop and get all my stuff together and if it's patching a

wall then I'll take sheet rock and plaster and everything else to go patch the wall first, and then I go back and get texture, and later on I sand it and texture it, and then I paint it. Sometimes it's like this project. Sometimes what happens is that I'll get all my stuff together and go to the area where I'm going to work and I'll start rotating down everything, which means everything. It means the pictures, it means the Cal-Stat dispensers, it means the soap dispensers, it means Sharps containers, it might be pictures, it might—and all the cover plates for all the electrical come off. Everything comes off so that when it's all painted and it's all put back together you don't have the problem of somebody coming along a little later and saying, "Well, we don't want this on the wall," and then you've got a wall that's half-painted.

Interviewer: *Or like some of the houses I've seen where they painted over the outlet so you can't plug things in.*

Sr. Carol: Yeah, right, right, so all of that stuff takes time and that's what I usually do first. And like in this project I'm working on now, which is painting all these hallways in the ICU, I started out on one side and I just took everything off the wall all the way around until I got to the corner and I painted all of that twice. And I paint it twice because the first time is good but the second comes out twice as nice, you know.

Interviewer: *Twice as nice, yeah.*

Sr. Carol: So anyway it always looks better if you paint it a couple of times, so that's what I do. And then I put everything back on that side and then I take everything off the other side.

Interviewer: *And you're painting by hand, right, not with a sprayer?*

Sr. Carol: Right. And a lot of times, you can't make a lot of noise and so you try and work quietly nearby patients who are really sick.

Interviewer: *Yeah.*

Sr. Carol: And, yeah, it's a big job. And then after you finish painting, you have to put everything back, and so that's what takes a lot of time. That's why this ICU project, for instance, last week, three weeks already and I've probably got two more weeks to go.

Interviewer: *You really have to plan your work every day because you have to make sure you leave yourself enough time to pack everything up.*

Sr. Carol: Right.

Interviewer: *Yeah. What do you like most about working for St. Rose?*

Sr. Carol: Well, I like the guys I work with and I like the fact that the Sisters are here. Because our other two sister campuses only have one Sister at each campus and de Lima has lots of us.

Interviewer: *How many do you think?*

Sr. Carol: Here?

Interviewer: *Yeah.*

Sr. Carol: Well, we have Sister Michael, Sister Phyllis, Sister Janice, myself, Sister Grace, so that's five right there. And then we have the Sisters that come in once in a while and visit, so we get to see them. And everybody—this place is like a magnet. Everybody knows when they come from out of town that there are Sisters here, so they come over here.

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Sr. Carol: So that's what I like about it.

Interviewer: *This is the happening place. [laughter]*

Sr. Carol: This is it. This is the mother ship.

Interviewer: *The mother ship.*

Sr. Carol: She leaks, but she's still the mother ship.

Interviewer: *[laughter]* That's great. What advice would give to someone considering a vocation as a nun that you wish somebody would have told you when you were first considering the vocation?

Sr. Carol: Well, I guess maybe if I was to tell somebody else, I'd say for one thing, you need to make sure it's really what you want to do because there's nothing worse than a crabby nun. And secondly, I would say, if it's a young person, I would say, "You're going to have the most fun you've ever had," because that's been my experience. I've lived with about—I've probably in my fifty-one years, I've probably lived with sixty or seventy different women.

Interviewer: *Wow. You've known a lot of people.*

Sr. Carol: Right. And I have been all over the country. I taught in—let's see—I taught in Illinois, Michigan, Florida, Iowa, California, Arizona, and now I'm here. And every place I was, I met fantastic people and there's not a lot of people who can say that. And then you have—it's been a very, very good experience.

Interviewer: *Well and that's what I've heard a lot of you say is that, in your Order especially, there's this joy.*

Sr. Carol: That's right. We can laugh about lots of things. In fact, when we're having breakfast sometimes people come over and say, "You're having just too much fun."

Interviewer: *[laughter]*

Sr. Carol: Or they'll come over to find out what we're laughing about.

Interviewer: *Yeah. [laughter] How is being a nun today different than in the past? How are things changed?*

Sr. Carol: Well, we were more regimented I think in the past. We were assigned at one point where—when I first entered, you were assigned, so you packed up all your stuff before you left wherever you were for the summer, because you didn't know if you were going back or not.

Interviewer: *And that was back in the '60s, right?*

Sr. Carol: Right. And you got, you got day you were in, and you went to summer school and then on August 4th, you went to watch hall, and they drew a little card with your name on it and told where you were going. And sometimes it was back where you were, but most of the time it wasn't. And so you were kind of thrown into a job maybe that you weren't expecting to get thrown into, or you were sent somewhere where you didn't know you would ever be going, like maybe you were sent to the Philippines or maybe you were sent to the Dominican Republic or maybe you were sent to California and you were from Florida. Or maybe you were sent to Florida and you were from California. You never knew where you were going to end up.

Interviewer: *What do you think was the reason for that? Why did they shuffle people around like that?*

Sr. Carol: Well, because when you're religious you don't really—you're not your own—you know, you don't control your destiny; you have a vow of obedience. You go where you're asked to go. And nowadays, I think we see that a little differently. We still have that vow, but I think it has become more meaningful to us because now you pick your poison in a sense. You pick where you're going to go, but you're also mandated to follow the rule and do what you're supposed to do. So you're more on your own, you do it. You're not being scrutinized as much as you were before, and so I think in a sense that the vows that we take—poverty, chastity, and obedience—mean more now maybe than they did then because the enforcer is yourself. You

know? So you're not depending on a superior to say, "You need to do this," or "You can't do this."

Interviewer: *Right.*

Sr. Carol: So I think the vows are more meaningful now than they used to be even though we have open placement pretty much where we feel we should go. It's more now a matter of doing some deep thinking about where you're going and why you want to go there.

Interviewer: *You take on more personal responsibility.*

Sr. Carol: That's right. So it's not like having Mother say, "Well, I want you to do this," or "I want you to go here and I want you to do this."

Interviewer: *Do you think that's contributed to—has had some positive benefits? I mean, you say that because you're more personally responsible that maybe you put more into your work or you're doing work that you're better able to do from the outset?*

Sr. Carol: Well, I think it matured us, made us grow up, made us say to ourselves, "Hey, why am I doing this? This is what I really should be doing. This is what I really think that we ought to be doing as a community." And I think it's been a more realistic way of life. You know, and I think that, well I think work is another thing. I think you're either a worker or you're not. You know some people work hard and some people hardly work. And that's what I think. You know, I think that most of the nuns I know have always worked very hard. You know, like—she [Sister Michael] doesn't like me saying this probably, but Michael is one of my idols because, you know, she's still running around at her age and I've seen people retired way, way, way before her and she's still willing to put out and do and she's here every day, more than I am. So I think

that's the thing that keeps us together. That's the glue. And I think as a group, the Adrians have always kind of been frontrunners. You know, the movers and the shakers. [laughter]

Interviewer: *Problem solvers.*

Sr. Carol: Yeah, well, some people don't like the way we operate, but I do.

Interviewer: *[laughter] What do you mean?*

Sr. Carol: Well, because some people would think we're too progressive.

Interviewer: *In what aspects are you progressive? Is it just the fact that you get to choose your assignments?*

Sr. Carol: No, we have Sisters who are frontrunners in justice and peace initiatives. And we have Sisters who've been willing to go different places in the world and do things. We have a whole group of nuns that participate in Nuns Build in New Orleans, where I do that every year. It's a bunch of Sisters who live together and rebuild the houses for the people who lost them in Katrina.

Interviewer: *That's really great.*

Sr. Carol: And I mean we've done—we've been doing that stuff for years. It's nothing new for us, you know. So some people see us as a little bit too progressive, which is fine.

Interviewer: *That's their opinion. [laughter]*

Sr. Carol: That's their opinion.

Interviewer: *What do you enjoy most about living and working in Henderson?*

Sr. Carol: Well, I like living here just because it's, as I said, it's like a community. The nuns are here. I mean, where else could I go today and find a place where I can roll out of bed and be at work in two minutes? [laughter]

Interviewer: *Right, because you all live right behind the hospital.*

Sr. Carol: Because I live on Church Street right behind the hospital, you know. And I did drive thirteen miles every day back and forth to the school I was teaching in in Phoenix.

Interviewer: *Oh, yeah. Phoenix is terrible.*

Sr. Carol: And you get in traffic that after school, after coaching, it was always a traffic deal and it took me an hour to get home, and then we got here, I thought, “Wow, I can be at work in two minutes.” And then the other thing is, you know, you see the different Sisters. They’re all hanging around somewhere and you see them all the time. So I like it; that’s why I like working here.

Interviewer: *What else would you like to share about your experience in Henderson or at St. Rose that we haven’t talked about?*

Sr. Carol: Well, St. Rose has given most of its employees, or all of its employees I should say, a lot of opportunities for growth. They have all kinds of different programs that you can be involved in if you want to be. And for instance, if you wanted to be in Curves, which is a gym type thing, you can do that. They provide for entertainment. They have star performers; if you’re considered a star performer by your peers, then they give you a reward. Sometimes it’s a concert, sometimes it’s a—like for instance, they had the [unclear: Blue Sig] Stallions. That was one of the things that people got to see. The hospital provides a lot of things for us, and these pins that I have, that’s what they give you as a star performer.

Interviewer: *Oh, wow. Neat.*

Sr. Carol: And some them, you see a lot of people around here who have a lanyard around their neck and it's full of them. So they've been a star performer that many times and most of the time it's their peers that are voting for them.

Interviewer: *I had one last question for you. I'm interested to know how you chose your name when you entered the Order.*

Sr. Carol: Well, my name was John Bernadette, and my brother's name is John, so I took his name, but then there was already a John Bernard and my favorite uncle's name was Bernard, and so I took Bernadette. So I was John Bernadette.

Interviewer: *But now you go by Sister Carol.*

Sr. Carol: Right. That was my given name when I was baptized. And actually I'm named after my dad's grandmother. Her name was Carrie but in the Catholic Church when I was baptized, there was no Saint Carrie, so it had to be Carol.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Sr. Carol: So that's how that happened.

Interviewer: *Well, that's neat. Is there anything else that you want to tell us about, any stories that you have?*

Sr. Carol: No, I think that's probably about it. I think you've heard enough about being a UPer and all the good things.

Interviewer: *Well, it was so great to talk with you this afternoon, Sister Carol.*

Sr. Carol: Well thank you very much and we appreciate what the library's doing for us too.

Interviewer: *Well, thank you. We enjoy hosting your collection.*

Sr. Carol: Well, I looked at it. I looked at the Web site and it's really good.

Interviewer: *Well, good.*

Sr. Carol: And especially like the pictures of the older Sisters who are here and information about all the growth of the hospital. I think that's really, really interesting. And I think Henderson should be proud of this place, because they have supported this hospital through all these years, thick and thin and everything else and it's still here, which is a—I think, you know, a plus for Henderson.

Interviewer: *And I think the State of Nevada also appreciates St. Rose. Yeah.*

Sr. Carol: Anyway, thank you.

Interviewer: *Thanks.*