

Interviewee: Sr. Francis del Marmol
Interviewers: Samantha Bigg and Stephen Mulligan
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Abstract: Sr. Francis del Marmol was born in New Orleans, LA on December 8, 1924. She moved to Worcester about ten years ago to live on the Assumption College campus with her community of sisters. Sr. Francis attended Newcomb College at Tulane University where she studied medicine. She moved around the country running her own anesthesia department in various hospitals. She later joined the convent and became a nun. She was soon sent off to Africa where she opened her own dispensary. Upon coming back to the United States she was eager to learn and update her medical knowledge. Since then, she has arrived on the Assumption College campus where she volunteers at the D'Alzon Library. In this interview, she discusses the role of education in her life, as well as her work experiences before and after becoming a nun. She emphasizes the role religion has played in her life. Sr. Francis also spends time talking about how important her time in Africa was.

SB: We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, politics, and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with all of the above. Thank you for your help with this important project.

SM: Alright, the first question is- first I'm going to ask about your general family and Worcester and the first question [accidental recording over tape]

Sr. F: Sister Francis is my sister name because I'm a nun and I've been since 1975 and-I have only been in Worcester since they opened the house here on campus.

SM: And your maiden name?

Sr. F: del Marmol

SM: Okay. And when were you born?

Sr. F: Eighth of December, 1924.

SM: Okay. And have you ever married?

Sr. F: No.

SM: Do you have any children?

Sr. F: No.

SM: What cultures/ethnicities do you identify with or your family background?

Sr. F: Spanish- European Spanish.

SM: Okay, and where have you lived during your life?

Sr. F: [laughs] I started in New Orleans (_____???) And since that time I have lived and worked in Rwanda, Africa; Ivory Coast, Africa; Denver, Colorado; Paris, this is just the places I have stayed a long time, three years in Africa and another [laughs] and another town (_____???) and I worked in Paris, and in Jerusalem.

SM: If you were not born in Worcester when did you arrive and how did you come to live in Worcester?

Sr. F: I came with my community about ten years ago.

SM: Where do you live in the city now? And have you lived in multiple areas?

Sr. Fr: Yup, I was in North Carolina six years, Worcester about ten years.

SM: Yeah, and do you live on the...

Sr. F: We have a house across Old English Road, from Assumption College.

SM: Alright. Do you have any other family members that live in this area?

Sr. F: No.

SM: What challenges do you think the city still faces, and what would you change about the city?

Sr. F: Ten years is not long enough to really know [laughs].

SM: Have you seen any changes in Worcester over the time you've lived here?

Sr. F: No because my life is pretty...

SB: What about changes on the campus?

Sr. F: Oh the campus, it's much more beautiful from when we came. I mean it really gets prettier and prettier. But other than that, between the library and the house I'm not a wanderer. [laughs]

SM: Is there anything, like any characteristics of Worcester that to you make it what it is?

Sr. F: I have never lived in as small a city, but everybody seems to know everybody. And it's...it's a comfortable place, mentally. It's certainly rich intellectually; politically.

SM: What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally? Do they like it here?

Sr. F: I guess I don't know enough people off campus, because I got immediately involved in stuff. But I...a lot of them who come from other places like it a lot.

SM: Alright.

SB: So now we're moving on to questions about education, about your education in your life. So, where did you attend school?

Sr. F: Tulane.

SB: Tulane University?

Sr. F: Yeah. Yeah.

SB: And what did you study?

Sr. F: Medicine.

SB: Medicine...

Sr. F: College and medicine.

SB: So you went to medical school there too?

Sr. F: Mhmm..

SB: What were the challenges you faced in your education especially since you went to medical school as a woman?

Sr. F: I guess it was kind of special because I was practically born on the campus. We lived around (___??) about 200 feet from (___??) and I was born in a little house down the street so I was part of them. So I knew everybody and everybody knew me [laughs] ‘til I got old enough to know them. So that gave me the grace of having a professor tell me on campus when I got there, ‘Don’t call me Uncle Dan on campus! Do you mind?’ [laughs] Just you know, act like a student.

SB: Did you face any challenges though being a woman in medical school, or working your way through college during that time?

Sr. F: Not special problems. There were a lot of challenges to meet every time I went to class You know (___??) and Sullivan every year and once a year [we go out to Gilbert and Sullivan ??]

SB: After you finished your formal education what did you see as your options?

Sr. F: Went out and practiced.

SB: Went out and practiced medicine?

Sr. F: Yeah. I did my internship at that hospital they’re in the process of tearing down.[St. Vincent Hospital]

SB: And what support networks and mentoring have been important to you throughout your, like, experience with education?

Sr. F: It wasn’t much of a (___??) everybody was my mentor on campus because I knew them all [laughs]. And they were all contributing. But I think it has become much more, become much more personal unless you’re in trouble.

SB: How were girls treated when you attended school, in college or medical school?

Sr. F: It was pretty equal. My favorite memory is that the men students at Tulane used to fight to get registered in the chemistry department at Newcomb which was the women’s school. ‘Cause ours was better.

SB: So at the university it was split which schools...

Sr. F: There was Newcomb College which was across the street from the rest of the campus and they really started a lot more mixing right about when I got there. If you liked what they were teaching over at the girl’s school, so it worked both ways...

SB: The next questions are going to be moving on to work experiences. So, obviously you said you worked outside the home correct?

Sr. F: Hmm?

SB: You worked outside the home?

Sr. F: Oh yes.

SB: Okay. And it says, if you worked outside the home for wages, when did you begin working and what did you do?

Sr. F: After...I went to North Carolina and ran an anesthesia department. Back in Colorado, same thing. Then I decided to some more studying because medicine had changed a little bit. Medicine got very complicated. And so I went to New York and worked at Saint Vincent's. Then...[laughs] I can't figure out which came first. Because very shortly after that I entered the convent and was immediately sent to Africa; opened my own dispensary and worked there for a year.

SB: What kind of work did you when you were in Africa?

Sr. F: If you have any idea what to do, you do it. I mean it was really- we started out with no running water, no electricity, and one nurse and everything was in French, that didn't help, that was the challenge. That's how I got to Belgium. Had to go to Belgium, learn French, pass the exams. You have to have the exams to...to get a license- a visa. They're smart enough to know if you and the nurses that are working with have only French in common you, cause you can kill someone [laughs]. Yeah that was very...very exciting. Went to Belgium for two years to learn French for real and then I went to Rwanda. And then that...a missionary dispensary... (____???) Kids eight, six years old would walk in 'I think it's broke' you know they didn't even cry. From there, I went to Ivory Coast and ran the government dispensary. And then I came back here. And that's where the challenge is. When you come back to the states and you're out of date for what they're doing in the states, [laughs] you have to go back to studying again. I don't think- I think there are very few things that move forward as fast as medicine, you see something new every day that you have to learn about.

SB: So after you returned to the states what did you do?

Sr. F: Well the first thing I did was look for a place to learn something [laughs] so I worked in a couple hospitals in Philadelphia because that's where our main house is. And... they weren't looking for a specialist so I kind of went from one department to another, learned all I could, then went to New York and studied a little psychiatry because there was more of that [laughs] here than in...than in Africa. So I was picking up licenses all around, about six licenses [laughs]. But I had to do some heavy reading and that was really- you know the basic thing, the basic thing (____??). Otherwise, I [like studying??].

SB: What has all this work you've done, you've done an extensive amount of work, what has it meant to you?

Sr. F: It was...it was my life. And so I had to find where I was going to fit with what I had picked up... here in the states. Because you can't- if you move from one city to another you may well have to pass all your exams all over again and on subjects you haven't touched in years.

SB: The next question is what were your primary responsibilities in terms of housework? Now I know you said you were in Africa so I'm sure...

Sr. F: Well, in Africa, as here, as in anywhere, we live in a community, there are five, six, ten of us and everybody does her turn. The cooking, the cleaning, decide who's going to do what at the beginning of the year, like in a big family. [Laughs]

SB: How have you been able to balance your different priorities, responsibilities, roles and all the interests you've had in your life? How are you able to balance it all?

Sr. F: [laughs] I mean if it's there and it needs doing, then you can do it. If you try, if you go and say I need to study some more. I think by the time you get to that age you know what your limits are and the people you live with know what your limits are.

SB: How would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path? The costs and benefits of choosing what you chose.

Sr. F: In medicine?

SB: With medicine, or anything, with becoming a sister.

Sr. F: Well it's sort of like getting married, but you marry into a community. And I've always lived in a community of at least six, and it's your family, it becomes your family. It tries to help you through what you need, it's the support, and you try to love them back.

SB: Would you say there were any costs or benefits in your path of medicine?

Sr. F: Well I was surprised at how well they fitted me in because most of them were teachers, and had a completely different, you know, schedule. But it doesn't really, except my...the hours sometimes change around.

SB: How would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path? The costs and benefits to your personal life that your choices have brought you.

Sr. F: What do you mean by choices?

SB: It's kind of the same question but asking how would characterize the personal...oh I think I already asked you that one...the same question. It's the same question sorry about that. Okay, is there anything else you would like to say about your work experience?

Sr. F: Well, one of the most interesting experiences is when I got to Worcester. I came and they said "get on the campus somehow!" [laughs] So I went to...what is it called... the office where they give out jobs and when I got through, you know she asked her usual questions, and when she got to the languages and found out I had Spanish, French and English she said "Oh! The [French] Institute." So I started in the [French] Institute and through the Institute I met (_____) And from the Institute I ended up knowing the library people well and then we swapped a couple people who wanted to work in the Institute and in the library. So it's- I think life is like that. You know, the people you meet and the things that you let your curiosity take you, you discover "Hey, I fit in with the people well over here". I fit here better, whether it's an office or any kind of a job. And people, people who are already in a group working are usually very friendly. To kind of- let you- give you time to get used to it. And I must say I have never worked with a group as well as the library, the paid [laughs] and the non-paid. I have never seen people who work together...and really care about each other and they never seem to- they get mad about things, but I've never seen one deliberately hurt- even though they know all- all of each other's weaknesses and... Last- a couple years ago, one of the women had a long cancer treatment. She always found somebody to help her, you know. Really- it's ten, twelve people who are really- and relationships that are very special. And except in certain hospitals where I've worked where the nurse groups are like that, you know the staff, it's rare. I wonder what it's like in a store [laughs].

SB: It's not the same in a store [laughs]

Sr. F: But there- I'm sure- in every group there are people who kind of, ease your way a little bit. Who tell you the truth about what you're doing and whether you're cheating on the- on the responsibilities in the group. They teach you everything about life.

SM: Alright, we're going to move on to politics and community involvement questions.

Sr. F: Oooo! [laughs]

SM: So, do you consider yourself active politically?

Sr. F: I was out of the country so long, that it's been an experience just to be able to vote. And we have a Japanese sister in our community now, who became an American citizen last year, and I cried she was so happy! It was just- you feel all the stuff that you take for granted- so much of the stuff that you take for granted, when you see somebody move into the hard way...

SM: Obviously you've done volunteer work here in the library, have you been involved in other volunteer work or community work, other groups have you worked with?

Sr. F: No, because before I was- I was (____??) and its- they just you know, when you're my age [laughs] they were willing to teach me what they could teach me...

SM: Alright. What role has religion played in your life?

Sr. F: It's been very important. All of us went to boarding- not boarding, to parish school with Benedict XVI! I belong to three or four choirs now, because those sisters put the- put the notes in my head. And we used to read music on the (____??), and it was thanks to the fact that they were German, and they had fled Germany during the war. And so in Germany I- they had a technique for teaching me to read music. And I should think of that when it think of when I think of bad things that turn good for somebody- and then you discover there's a lot of that in life, if you let it. It's been awhile though [laughs] and wonderful. I never would have gotten to Africa and Europe and all the rest of it if not a nun. I'm sure I'd be working somewhere in the states in the first place.

SB: Alright the next questions are on health, how have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

Sr. F: Really, surprisingly little. My father died of- well he contracted TB while I was in medical school and that was when education was (____??) and having someone really sick, He got better though. We've all been very healthy we don't seem to have inherited anything [laughs]. I got sent back here with hepatitis that was when I was in Florida. I just suddenly couldn't breathe so that put me on vacation for six months, and I had the privilege of living in the coming of havoc in Cuba, all the professionals who could fled Cuba. We had a doctor for (____??), well that was when I had the hepatitis, and he was running one of those carts with IV's for people, he was running all over the hospital and then I asked him how he felt about that and he said "I'm one the lucky ones because most of my fellow professionals aren't as lucky". And I asked him well what do you mean? "I'm working here and I have access to the library." Again all the things we take for granted. "And I'm really getting good in English, so that I can pass my boards in dentistry". And he was- the diploma I have is valid, international valid and it gives you that feeling that you know there's never anything bad enough, that the Lord can't pick out something good, thanks to something really bad. And it's also a lesson every time you get sick or you're taken care of by somebody just the little things that we take for granted, and how spoiled we are in the States. Be in a place where you don't have a phone and the nearest doctor is four hundred miles down the road, [laughs], keep praying thanks for your good health. I guess that's the kind of thing that religion does, you discover the things that you complain to yourself about and all people have to put up with in life.

SB: And what has you're been experience been in accessing quality and affordable healthcare?

Sr. F: Well I was one of the in guys [laughs] you asked, well like I say it's one of those things we take for granted and they get complicated. And I've seen a lot working together, you know a

doctor in Ohio, who knows somebody somewhere else gets you to them because you know, because you can't afford the ones who are here. Its different-it's very different, from one part of the states to another or one part of the city. But I think a lot of people (____??). And like I say and most of it we just take for granted, the food the water I mean when you see people trying to get the water clean so that we can give it to kids in the middle of Africa, it makes you start to give thanks [laughs] for things that you thought were just normal. And even jobs, I've seen a couple of people who have a friend, who has a friend and send it to, a connection, there are a lot of things they are very loose about in the United States, and don't -don't mind masking, it makes a big difference, people lose their job and ask and they say you know I used to know a guy and they go to the trouble of finding him for you. A lot (____??) it reminds me of downstairs, [the interview was taken in the third floor of the library, and she volunteers on the first floor of the library] they said "ooo three languages that's good- that's good we can use you".

SB: So we're coming to the conclusion of the interview, so we're going to ask some general questions. How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life, and do you have any regrets about them?

Sr. F: If that's knowing that somebody (____??), is ever forgiving and there's just no way to say that. And if he can get at you, he'll make you better so that you can make it better for someone else. But what is there to do on this earth if not that, [laughs].

SM: Based on your life experience what advice would give to women of today and future generations?

Sr. F: If you're sure you can't do it, ask God, cause if he only (____??). There's too much in life that we can't do, you just can't, but if you're somebody somewhere (____??) puts you in this situation then ask Him for the answer, even if you're sorry you did this one (____??). I think that's when I learned from the Benedict, my boarding school, they came running in and changed the life of a lot of kids. Between (____??) and they might fight over what my church says, and what yours doesn't [laughs]. I feel so sorry for the people who haven't found God.

SM: Do you feel that you have left behind any legacy or impact on people?

Sr. F: No, I mean, not that much. I've, especially here I'm just a little church woman working in the library. And when I had to go 400 miles to have a tooth pulled I thought, oh my gosh, you know a lot of this is really unbelievable (____??). I left because it started really getting bad.

SB: So you went there during the time that the big civil war was there?

Sr. F: It was- it was beginning and the Belgium's were still there because there was a Belgium, not colony but after the Second World War, or the First World War. When Germany lost, Belgium took over you know the helping, (____??) and more from other countries around that area. And the Belgium's were so rich, you know they couldn't stop them [laughs] they did the

things that needed to be done, and that's why Congo and Rwanda are- they're rich countries, with all sorts of just-just you know country (____??) and land and ...but there were always people from outside they got a hold of and they got to get themselves a radio station and they started saying look what's happening here, look what's happening there why don't you go up, and that-that was when I thought, oh my God, I wish they had never found radio you know, because you could start fights but if you start fights with (____??). The Belgium's did everything they could, but then you know.... I don't even remember how now, the Belgium's left I wish they had finished [laughs] and that's when you see the good and the evil that (____??). The first president of the Congo, of Rwanda was a school teacher and he- you know we elected him, we made a flag sowed an R on it. And when he became president the first thing he did, (____??) [laughs]. The first thing he did was call in all on the teachers in the country, that the Belgium's had been paying at the Belgium rate, and they were the richest people in the country [laughs], and he said to them "a democracy with people that can't read and write, or read is a joke. We need more schools, we need more professors" He said, "you have been making a totally unreasonable salary, I am asking you to work double groups, everything you were doing before [laughs] you're going to have twice as many". He said, "and the other thing is, most of you all of you, we need you in the government and it won't be held against you if you want a job in the government" (____??). Give people a chance to educate themselves and inform themselves. The Bishop did the same thing, she said," Look I can't-I'll never have enough preachers to take care of these people, they have to read", and said "The first six months of catechism is not catechism but reading and writing". Writing, we can get around it, somebody can do it for you, but reading. But if I can't speak to these people on paper I can't do my job. Of all the teachers they had in the country-for me that was- this is what Rwandans were like, really, only one. It meant cutting back their salaries, and doing double work, and one man quit. He said they offered-a bank offered him a job or something [laughs]. It teaches you a lot and that's one reason I pat them on the head when kids come and sign up for...

Sr. F: [laughs] You are patient people!

All: [laughs]

SM: I can't believe we went through a whole tape already. It flew right by.

SB: I know.

SM: Now that we are working to tell a full story of the history of women that has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include? Basically is there anything about like -women's history or something that people don't really talk too much about that you'd like to acknowledge in the interview ?

Sr. F: For all of us I guess, when you really know yourself and you know your limits and you don't hold your limits against the next guy's and so much (____??). They had to be or thought they had to be so aggressive, yeah I always think of the first day in med school they had a

microscope in front of me, I never used one and I was kind of playing around with it, and I looked up and I said “hey Doc !” [laughs] A friendly first hello, I can’t see anything and he came over and the next four years were like that. Hey, I don’t understand anything the professor said to me did you? Yeah come on! And vice a versa did you understand what he said today? What do you think about this? This is the relationships were you know, you’re just another person, you’re not a -you know a female, or threatens me or something. And I think it works both ways! And those who have seen people fight very hard for something, that maybe you knew that (____??) you feel like telling them you know it’s OK, it’s OK to be a girl, it’s OK don’t be scared to ask. And yet I saw my mom, she told me about this afterwards, she had a (____??). And they were both teaching (____??). You know that’s the kind of thing you can get away with but there was no hate, and when you take it personally then you can’t judge, you can’t possibly relate to any of it. But there’s always an explanation from the back, you know in the past. I didn’t have any sisters I just had brothers, I was the baby and I was everybody’s favorite [laughs]. Well that’s what- you know as they say Pauncho is your, that’s the kind of things they say to kids, Pauncho is your father’s favorite, Arthur is your mother’s favorite, who’s favorite are you ? And I always answered EVERYBODIES ! [laughs] It’s the boys that taught me that because they didn’t play themselves against each other but it was because each one had a- was a favorite of somebody. Well think about it, I mean you see somebody who is nobodies favorite, you can do something about it, and it’s for life.

SM: This is the last question of the interview! We were just wondering is there anyone else you think we should interview and talk to be a part of the women’s oral history project?

Sr. F: Professor Fisher, yeah I have found her, you know she is so open, and she must have had some really interesting experiences. She’s just good!

SB: Is there anything else, any other stories you thought of along the way that you’d like to share before the conclusion of the interview?

Sr. F: oooo [laughs] I guess got tired of waiting for Rwanda. I had my burial place picked up and everything, I never wanted to leave.

SB: You never wanted to leave Rwanda?

Sr. F: No. It was like leaving among the Greeks you hear about and read about. The way they raised their kids, the way they had, they have reasons for what they do! And it was always for the other guy (____??) I’m so cut off from everything that I had lived before, that [laughs] you know it’s other people’s (____??).

SB: Well thank you very much for participating in the interview, it was very interesting!

Sr.F: You're very patient, I'm not a thinker and I'm not a writer so I can't even write decent letters, I'm just a you know person who talks [laughs]. And that's from my two brothers they treated me like a princess.

SB: That's the way brothers should be!

Sr. F: One was a (____?) and he died in Sri Lanka after 50 years of (____?) and the other was (____?) He hated it but he did it well.