

LEHMAN COLLEGE

"WAVES INTERVIEWS"

INTERVIEW WITH NANCY CASTELLANO

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PRODUCER: LEHMAN COLLEGE MEDIA RELATIONS

MEDIA ID: NANCY CASTELLANO FOR TRANSCRIPTION.MOV

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:00:06:00 Where were you from, originally? Can you tell us about it?

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:00:10:00 New Jersey-- Essex County, New Jersey.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:00:14:00 And-- can you tell us where you were at in your life, what emotionally, mentally when you decided to join the wave?

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:00:20:00 I was at a point in my life where I was-- waiting to be 20 years old. You had to be 20 to join the WAVES. I was in college. I was totally unattached. Came from wonderful family. Saw all the recruiting posters. And just wanted to get in and help in the worst way. And I think, most

of the WAVES-- joined for patriotic reasons.

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Women accepted for voluntary emergency service. It was very, very difficult to get it started. There could be a long story on that. I won't (?) go all through it. But-- women-- prestigious college women-- women's college educators were the ones responsible for starting the WAVES. And worked with Eleanor Roosevelt, who was the First Lady at that time.

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It was a time that-- women didn't work, for the most part and-- definitely married women didn't work. You know, might have been some married women in the WAVES, you could be. It was very, very-- unusual. And so, the men were very chauvinistic.

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The admirals-- top government figures and so on, were very chauvinistic about-- having women in their Navy. But we finally got the permission-- on-- and the act was passed. Signed by Roosevelt

on July 30th, 1942. It had to be a few months later before Hunter started because now they had to get everything together, 'cause these men delayed so long after Pearl Harbor and so on-- that-- you know, just took time to get everything started.

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They did try-- to have the training in a-- teacher's college in Iowa. It didn't work out for a lot of reasons. It was too rural. Who would really want to go there? It wouldn't attract people for recruiting. You see New York in the background on this recruiting poster.

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It had to be New York. And so, after searching-- through New York at the various colleges, they picked out Hunter. One of the women who started the WAVES was-- she was-- connected with Barnard College. She was a personal friend of Fiorello La Guardia, the mayor. And also, a very good friend of-- President Shuster of Hunter College. And so Hunter was selected as the sight for the

training.

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Worked out very well. Everything was there for the marching and everything else. The only thing missing was the-- living quarters. There were no living quarters. And so they literally-- dumped out-- the-- Hunter special-- war-time law-- that was passed. They-- it was like eminent domain, you hear about today.

00:04:02:00

They-- commandeered-- the government commandeered 18 apartment houses all around the Bronx. They're still there. I was there last week. And I identified a couple of them where I stayed. I was in three or four different ones. Anyway, 'cause they kind of moved us around.

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And-- the people had to get out in three weeks. So I guess there was some unhappiness with that. We had a very rough start. But believe me, we proved ourselves. And-- the WAVES are-- were a wonderful organization. And Mildred McAfee-- was

the-- was the president of Wellesley College.

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And she-- she took a leave of absence and became the-- the commander of the WAVES. And she did a wonderful job. She worked in Washington the whole time with-- some of those admirals. And they gave her a very tough time, from everything I've heard. But she didn't let us feel that.

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She did everything right for us. Whatever the men had, we had. I'm talking about, like, entertainment. And whatever goodies there were, we had also. She took them literally. 'Cause they-- they must've said-- you know, "The women have to do everything the men did-- do." You know, "They have to do what the men do."

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She said, "Okay, if they have to do what the men do, then they're gonna get the good things that the men get, too." So, we were very well treated. We could go to New York shows. Not at boot camp, but-- afterward. We could go to New

York shows. At 90 Church Street, gets tickets. I saw *Oklahoma* and some of the other shows in New York. We'd get free tickets. We were treated very, very well.

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00:06:04:00

Well, of course we were in a war. Hitler and Mussolini were plundering Europe. And then Pearl Harbor happened. But they were starting to work on the idea of women being in the Navy, before Pearl Harbor. Once Pearl Harbor happened, it became imperative that women be in the Navy. Problem with the men-- I call it-- powers that be, was-- that they-- they wanted us to be an auxiliary. That would be okay, the way the Yeomen (F) were in World War I. But they were not actually in the Navy. And they could only be typist, nothing else. We-- we were ready now, for people in a-- women in aviation and in-- decoding, cryptography, that kind of thing.

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And-- we had to prove ourselves. The men-- felt

that-- we weren't capable of doing it. And one of these women who was the dean of Barnard, really worked very hard at the fact that women could be trained to do whatever the men did. And she had-- her name was Virginia Gildersleeve. And she-- she had this-- this theme all through-- this time-- when they were trying to get the-- the women admitted.

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She had this-- she preached this theme that-- "We can win the war with trained brains." That was it, "trained brains." To have enough-- that the nation must turn to its women. And she finally got it through. It's very, very difficult. We got off to a rough start, but we did such an excellent job. Mildred McAfee did such an excellent job, that within a year, we had 27,000 women who had released men for duty in the Pacific. So, we certainly made a very big contribution to World War II.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:08:08:00

And what about-- government-- you know,

official's reaction to Mildred Mc-- McAfee's--
position?

NANCY CASTELLANO:

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Well, from what I heard, they gave her-- they did not give her an easy time. I don't know about government officials. The Navy officials did not give her an easy time, kinda resented her in Washington. But she was such-- a wonderful woman that she-- you know-- it didn't matter. She got everything through. The government officials, I think-- finally-- accepted the fact that the women were doing a good job.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:08:44:00

And what sort of sacrifices did you guys have to make in order to be--

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:08:49:00

There were no sacrifices. We-- we-- we had a wonderful time. We were comfortable. Our quarters were meager, but clean, decent. Our food-- was cafeteria style. But it was excellent. And-- we were well-fed, we were well-rested. We were well-treated.

00:09:10:00 Our uniforms were designed by a French designer named Doucet. And they were elegant, elegant uniforms. Well, you see the white one, here. The white one was not government issue. We had to buy that one. But most of us did. But-- did-- the Navy uniform was exactly like that. It very, very snappy. And it's the still the same uniform they wear today.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:09:33:00 I understand that Mildred McAfee was really-- she really wanted her WAVES to be well-groomed. Why was that so important?

MALE VOICE:

00:09:42:00 She wanted us to be extremely attractive-- and-- the-- the uniform always had to be perfect or you were told you were out of uniform if, you know, the tie was crooked or a button was unbuttoned or anything like that. We had to be extremely well-groomed.

00:10:01:00 She-- wanted us to use make-up and nail polish

and all that kind of thing. And-- we did, you know, within limits. The hair was not supposed to touch the collar. But-- we had a beauty parlor right-- right at Hunter, in Davis Hall. There was a beauty parlor there. It was called, "WAVES for the WAVES." (CHUCKLE)

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And-- mostly, it was to cut the hair. Because regardless of-- all the information we were given before we went in-- as to how long the hair should be, we did have girls come in with hair down their backs or tied in a pony tail or something like that. And it-- it could not be. It would-- it would just ruin the uniform.

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The uniform was designed, as I said, French designed, to make every woman look good. Every figure looked good. I never knew-- I never knew a fat WAVE (CHUCKLE) or a WAVE that didn't look elegant in that uniform. We were very proud of that. When we marched 3,500 strong up Fifth Avenue on time for-- a war lone (?) parade, I

have a picture of that on one of my boards, here.

00:11:14:00

I mean, we really looked elegant. I wanna tell you, with the white hat tops, white gloves. And you know, marching up, everybody in step, of course. Because we trained everybody to be in step. It was quite a sight. And I can tell you that people applauded, people saluted, men took their hats off, held them over their hearts. It was very thrilling.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:11:35:00

Can you tell us about the-- what you remember at the Hunter campus. You can talk about the buildings. I know you mentioned a few of them. What took place in those buildings?

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:11:45:00

We had classes in one of the buildings. That was-- I know I taught in-- kind of an auditorium. I-- I don't-- remember which building it was. But there was a small auditorium with a balcony. And I taught 240 girls at a time. And what I taught was Naval History, Naval Vocabulary. You

just were indoctrinating them to be Navy.

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It was very important. We realized it when we went, for the first time, into the outside world. They would have one weekend where they had an afternoon or something on the weekend-- where they could go down in their uniform into New York City. Most of those girls had not been to New York. And that was a big thrill.

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But we would-- they would go down into New York City and-- it-- it was a bit of a shock, the first time. The first time I went down-- and I-- I knew New York a little bit. But it was just a shock to-- suddenly be in the real world again, the civilian world.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:12:48:00

What do you remember about the borough, the Bronx? I know-- you guys weren't allowed to go with the certainly-- reserves a certain limit.

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:12:55:00

No, we didn't go outside the limits of the-- of

the station. The whole station was treated as a ship, including the King's Bridge Armory and so on. So, we don't go-- didn't go-- well, when I was ship's company, which means when I was actually stationed there, yes, I went over to Forden (PH) Road to a Chinese laundry to do my shirts and things like that. But that's about all I remember of the Bronx. I think once I walked over to the Grand Concourse and Alexander's was over there. But we had-- we really had no input into the Bronx itself.

00:13:41:00

I was there two weeks ago. Friends of mine-- and I hadn't been there for 63 years.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:13:46:00

Wow.

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:13:46:00

And I loved it. And-- friends of mine-- I-- I drove in across the George Washington Bridge. And then, friends-- I went to a friend's house in the Bronx. And then, they drove me from there over to Hunter. I met-- I mean, to Lehman. I

met with your president and some of your other officials. And it was just-- it was trip down memory lane. It was lovely. I mean, it had changed. But I could identify everything.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:14:11:00 Can you describe a typical day for a WAVE-- in the WAVES?

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:14:15:00 Typical day, we got up at what they call the-- I think was 06:00, that's 6:00 in the morning. And got dressed. And we-- they called it "mustering." We mustered, which meant gather outside on the street. I was-- when I was at boot, I was on University Avenue in one of the buildings there. And-- you know, we lined up. And a person like myself called everybody to attention, got everybody together. And-- and we laughed and joked until we were, you know, in formation.

00:14:46:00 And then, we marched to hup, two, three, four. That's how we marched down the streets and over

to-- I think it's-- the hall where the cafeteria was, I think was Student Hall. I think that's your music hall, now. I'm not sure which building. But I think that was it. It was the farthest one, I know, over-- farthest to the east.

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:15:35:00 They were. They-- they were older than I, too. 'Cause I was only 20. And one of the reasons-- I just asked about being an officer. And they said, "Oh well, you can't be." This is at the recruiting station. "You can't be an officer because you'll be working with girls older than you are." And that's exactly what I wound up doing anyway. But as long as I had more Navy experience, they treated me like I was fine.

00:16:01:00 (OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

00:16:02:00 (BREAK IN TAPE)

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:16:13:00 Did you-- think at any moment that you guys were gonna be a part of history? 'Cause as I mentioned before, this is very historical, what

you guys are doing.

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:16:21:00

I don't know that we thought that. But we knew we were playing a valuable role. I don't know if we thought in terms of-- of history. But it was World War II and we knew we were very needed. You know, a lot of girls had-- brothers who were in the service.

00:16:36:00

A lot of people had lost people in the service. And you know, this is happening every day. You know, the way things are now. The only thing I-- I can tell you is-- if any war was a good war, World War II was a good war. The attitudes were not like today. I mean, it was something that had to be. We-- we had to have our men there. And-- we-- we couldn't-- even drafting them, we couldn't get enough men. So, the women went in. For every woman that joined, it was like-- drafting a man. And he would go overseas.

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Well, first of all, I-- I felt like the war was

gonna on forever-- it was endless. Until the atom bomb was dropped and it stopped just like that, which is a wonderful thing. The word "Emergency" was the key word because that's the way the act read.

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That we were only to be in-- you know, they-- we were only to be in the real Navy-- the Naval Reserve for the duration of the war. And-- once-- act actually reads this way. Once the war was over-- within six months, we would-- we would be out. And that is the way it worked.

00:18:12:00

Now, though, they were sorry, these men. 'Cause a lot of the men never came home. They needed us in those jobs. They begged us to stay in. We had the option to stay in. Ella Frasier (PH) is one, who-- who did-- stay in for awhile. But most of us felt-- I know I felt that we had done our job. That we had done what we came for.

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And now, we were ready to get on with our life.

It wasn't that we were dying to leave. But for me, there were no more-- I loved training the recruits. There were no more recruits. There was no more recruiting. (WHISPER) So, what was I gonna do? I didn't want some desk job somewhere. So, I-- I-- I went out when I could get out.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:18:51:00 What did you do after that? After the war?

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:18:53:00 I was a teacher for 43 years. I taught English-- Junior High School English.

00:19:37:00 But-- there were no men. There were definitely no men at Hunter. Well-- the-- the Navy band was at Hunter. I think we had something like 14 men at Hunter. But-- there-- there may have been a few men at the other stations. But the whole idea was that the women were replacing the men. So, the men were going overseas.

00:20:07:00 I'm sure this is one of-- of any young girl's ideas. We thought it would be exciting. We

though it would be glamorous. Well, a lot of things that we thought, besides just patriotism, I'm sure. But, I think, mainly we wanted to do what we could do and show that women could do it.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:20:26:00

Were there any rules against that?

NANCY CASTELLANO:

00:20:28:00

Oh no. Mildred McAfee, in fact-- I've read, really-- I didn't-- never knew the woman, of course-- really encouraged-- you know, relationships. Especially, you know, she wanted the girls to get married. If you got married, the Navy paid for your wedding.

TANISIA MORRIS:

00:20:47:00

Interesting.

NANCY CASTELLANO:

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I mean, if you got married on-- on the station. And I think one of our-- our WAVES did. Not necessarily to a service person.

* * *END OF AUDIO* * *

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *

