

Interviewee: Sister Nuala Cotter  
Interviewers: Griffin McGrail and Patrick Cannon  
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Transcriber: Griffin McGrail



Worcester Women's Oral History Project

Overseen by Dr. Carl Robert Keyes, Assumption College

**Abstract:** Sister Nuala Cotter is an Irish-American who was born on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1955. As a child, she lived in Tuckahoe, New York. Her father was a teacher and her mother developed Multiple Sclerosis. She helped take care of her mother, which forced her to grow up faster than she would have liked. She attended Mount Saint Ursula High School, followed by the College of New Rochelle, University of Pennsylvania, and Saint Michaels College. Sister Nuala arrived in Worcester in 1989 to join the Assumption Sisters. In this interview she discusses the community of the Assumption Sisters, her relationship with God, and her life as a professor. She currently is a Theology and English professor at Assumption College and lives on Old English Road, right next to the campus. She elaborates on the prideful people of Worcester and her experiences with the city. She believes it is a special place that is already capable of a lot, but she still offers some advice for how the city can continue to grow and flourish.

**GM:** We are completing a citywide oral history 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, and politics/community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with work and religion. Thank you for your help with this important project. Do we have permission to record Sister Nuala Cotter's oral history on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012?

**NC:** Yes, you do, my first name is pronounced "New-la."

**GM:** Sorry, [laughs] I'll try to remember that.

**PC:** What is your full name?

**NC:** My full name is Nuala Cotter.

**GM:** When were you born?

**NC:** I was born February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1955.

**PC:** What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with, or in other words, your family background?

**NC:** All of my grandparents came from Ireland, so I see myself as an Irish American.

**GM:** Tell me about your parents.

**NC:** My dad was born in 1921 his name was Joe. He was a schoolteacher in New York City, he taught English, he was a soldier in World War II. My mother was born in 1930, her name was Mary. She also was a teacher very briefly before she married my dad. She was an unusual Catholic Irish girl of her era because she decided to go to a public university, Hunter College in the Bronx, New York, instead of to a Catholic college. She did not really work outside of our home for too long, maybe a little bit when I was getting to be a little older. Unfortunately, she developed Multiple Sclerosis and became very incapacitated and died when I was in my mid-teens.

**PC:** Where have you lived during your life?

**NC:** I lived for the first 22 years of my life in Tuckahoe, New York, which is small town about 20 miles north of the Bronx boarder. I lived after that, I lived at home when I went to college. Then after I finished at the College of New Rochelle in New Rochelle, New York, I went to live in West Philadelphia where I studied at the University of Pennsylvania. I lived in Philadelphia in various places; in West Philadelphia from 1977 to 1989. After that I moved here to Worcester to enter the Religious of the Assumption, the Assumption Sisters. I've lived here in Worcester pretty much ever since with one big chunk of two and a half years when I was in my initial formation period. I lived in Belgium, and I lived in a small village in Belgium and then I lived in Brussels. So other than that I have lived here in Worcester for the last 23 years or so, become completely converted to New England. I was a Yankees fan I confess it, now I am a true blue Sox fan.

**GM:** [Laughs] As a child what was your neighborhood like generally?

**NC:** It was mostly, it was all single-family houses. The houses were fairly old; there was a good bit of land between the houses, but not as big say as the area around here. I'd say it would be more like, oh I don't know around Elm Park, that kind of area. The mothers pretty much stayed home and the dads went to work. There were a lot of children, I guess we were all baby boomers [laughs] and it was fairly sort of ordinary more than anything else.

**PC:** What difficult transitions did you go through in moving from childhood to adulthood?

**NC:** As I mentioned before, my mother was very ill and so she, she kind of—she lived with us throughout her entire illness, but she became less and less able to take care of herself, to actually to speak, to walk. So I'd say that the most difficult transition that I had

to make was very quick. I had to grow up from being a kid to being an adult without a whole lot of “teenitude.” There wasn’t a whole lot of time to be a teenager, since I had to help. I have one other, one sister, and that’s the two of us. So we helped to cook dinner, we helped to keep the house clean, go shopping, take care of mom, all of that. So it was—sometimes I feel a little sad. We missed quite a bit of our teen years, but I think it’s balanced out now. We were lucky too because my mother’s mother lived not far away from us; she moved deliberately from her apartment in the Bronx to a small apartment near our house and so she would come out and take care of her daughter, my mother and certainly look after us too. So we, yea, I would say that the transition was to go from being a child to being a young adult without too much time [laughs] in between.

**GM:** What memories do you have of significant historical events that took place when you were growing up?

**NC:** I think one of the first memories that I have that is of a significant event is going with my dad into the voting booth in 19, I guess it would be 1960, when he voted for JFK [John F. Kennedy] and he said to me, “Look at what I am doing here, I am voting for an Irish Catholic, pay attention.” So I remember that very well, and I most certainly remember exactly where I was, I was in the third grade when we learned that the president had been shot. And I remember my teacher bursting into tears and then, I think it was a Friday, and I had Brownies or something afterward and I don’t think I was aware that he had been killed until I got to, or he had died, until I got to Brownies. Then we learned that, and I don’t know the meeting continued. And I remember my dad came to pick us up, and he said, “Do you know the name of our new president?” And I remember saying to him very clearly, “YES, Lyndon Baines Johnson!” you know, like that? So then I remember watching the funeral on TV, watching my grandfather who was a pretty tough old Irishman in tears. And also watching, can this really be true? Did I really watch live as Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald as they were taking him, you know, from one jail to another? I mean that was on TV. Was I actually watching when that happened? I’m not sure, but it seems to me that maybe I was. So that’s one thing I remember. I also—seems like a lot of assassinations, boys, but I also remember very well the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and how I, we lived in an area that had a park way between us and school. So it was like a two-lane highway each way, with a median strip in the middle and in those days the county would send a police officers to cross the children that had to go to the other side. And I remember Officer Dan said to me “Well, I see that Martin Luther King has been shot!” And I was shocked that anybody would talk about Martin Luther King this way. I understood very well what he meant. So I remember that and then, of course, I remember, what several months later was it or, yea it was just a few months later when Bobby Kennedy was shot as well and just thinking to myself, wow this is what happens, can this really be true? [The other thing I am worried about is I feeling maybe there is another class that comes in here, I feel there is somebody waiting, maybe we should stop and move on.]

**GM:** Picking up where we left off.

**NC:** Right. I don't want to talk too much about assassinations. There are a number of other ones, but I do think it is interesting to tell you about how, in school, when I was a child, that was the time of the Cuban missile crisis. And I didn't hear anything about that from my parents, but I remember very clearly how we would have drills just in case something would happen. And what we would do is we would all go out into the hall and we would face the wall and crouch down and put our hands over our heads. So that when Mr. Khrushchev would bomb Annunciation School in Tuckahoe, New York, we would be safe. So even now I think how absurd, but any rate that is what we did in those days and it was a time, but I think, as children, my sister and I had very little awareness of what was going on outside. It was those assassinations that began to, to break the world into us and it was then that I began and especially with the King [Martin Luther King] and Bobby Kennedy assassinations, then I began to read the newspaper every day. So I was in the seventh grade then.

**PC:** When you were not at home, where did you usually spend your time?

**NC:** I was home a lot, but in school pretty much. We lived about a mile from school, so I walked to school from the time I was in the fourth grade. I insisted that I was well able to walk or ride my bike to school and one of the big pleasure in the afternoon after school would be to walk home with some other kids and just chat as you went along. I think my life was pretty much, at least in my elementary school days, it was obviously like most children, it was connected to home. We didn't have lessons to go to or extra school, extra activities outside except for scouts. Then when I was in high school I went to high school in the Bronx, a Catholic girls high school in the Bronx. So that was a bit of a, you couldn't walk there. My dad taught at a high school in the city system nearby, so he would often drop us off and so I was there. But at that time my mother was already quite ill, so I didn't spend a lot of time in extra-curricular things. I didn't, I think I had a pretty dull childhood and teenager, you know, like some people say we did this we did that, I didn't do those things.

**GM:** Are there any particular areas of Worcester where you spend a lot of time?

**NC:** Now?

**GM:** Yes.

**NC:** Well the place that I perhaps spend the most time now is in the Saint Peters area in the Main South part of town, because that's where my religious community has a project. We have a project of—our lay volunteer organization has its headquarters in our house on Vineyard Street. I live here on Old English Road, but we have a house on Vineyard Street, our lay volunteers live there. We're connected with Saint Peter's-Saint Andrews Church. So I feel as though that's my parish; that's where I know people and I feel very comfortable down there, even though I live on the affluent west side. I enjoy going down

to the south side and sort of having a real life, so that's where I would say I spend more time than any other place, other than Assumption.

**PC:** Do you have any hobbies or do any leisure activities that take you outside of the home?

**NC:** [laughs] Not too many, I think I'm not such an ordinary, a normal person in that I'm a sister. And so a lot of my life is not, I'm not really so free to do this that or the other thing. My time tends to be a bit regulated. Not because there is someone standing over me with a stick, but because our life is regular; it is run by a rule. So you know, today for example, we prayed together in the house at 6:45. then I ate breakfast. Then I prayed, I ate breakfast, I came down here, I said morning prayer with the brothers. Then I came in and I taught at 8:30. Then I was in my office until one o'clock. Then I taught at one. Then I taught at 2:30, here you are, ok? Then at five o'clock we'll have Mass and then at 5:30 we'll have vespers and then I'll go home and watch the news and we'll eat together. And then, you know, we'll spend some time together and finally we'll pray one more time, seems like a lot, and I'll go to bed, you know like that's my day. So the hobbies and things like that, I love to watch birds, I enjoy helping around the garden that kind of thing, but I don't have something that's going to cost me a lot of money or take me somewhere that most the time I can't even afford, the money or the time to go.

**GM:** When did you arrive in Worcester [Massachusetts] and how did, how did you come to live in Worcester?

**NC:** I arrived here on August 22, 1989. I came to join the Assumption Sisters. I had been living in West Philadelphia for 12 years, I had asked to join the sisters and they said to me, "Well would you mind going to Worcester [Massachusetts]?" I was like, "No, I wouldn't mind that." So I came up here for that purpose and the first full year I was what they call a postulant, so I kept my car and I paid rent to the sisters and I had a job and my job was I worked part time at Clark University [Massachusetts] and part time here. And then as time went on, of course, that changes, but at the beginning that was the reason I came.

**PC:** Where do you live in the city now? Have you lived in multiple areas of the city?

**NC:** No, I have lived pretty much the entire time here at 11 Old English Road, which is just on the other side of the campus. When I first arrived in '89, we were still living at 21 Otsego Road, which is also on this side of town, but we were lucky enough finally to find a house where we could just walk to school instead of having to drive. One of the major missions of our community is to collaborate with the Assumptionists [order of priests at Assumption College] and to work with young people at Assumption College which was a Godsend for us. So that's where I live.

**GM:** Do any family members live in the same area?

**NC:** No.

**GM:** And what challenges do you think the city still faces? What would you change about the city?

**NC:** Well I think a big challenge that this city faces is figuring out how to welcome immigrants. I think it's already doing a decent job in many ways, but, for example, our community has a project of ESL [English as a Second Language] at Saint Peters and it's just two mornings a week and it probably serves about 35 to 40 people. Now those people come they want to learn, we have all volunteer teachers who help them. They work so hard, but they also, these people are also working. I mean I'm talking about the students are working other jobs; they have children. They really make a big effort but it's very hard to learn another language, as I'm sure you know. And so it seems to me that one thing that the city needs is to have more places like our ESL program. And yet you hear people say, "Oh they don't care, they don't want to learn." Well that's just not true. So I would say that that is a huge, huge issue for our city. How will we welcome immigrants in the future?

**PC:** What changes have you seen in Worcester over time?

**NC:** I see a lot more Africans here. Again, on sort of the immigrant theme. When I first came here in 1989, I came from West Philadelphia, which is a heavily, Philadelphia is a heavily African-American city and I lived in a heavily African-American district. I lived in a fairly poor area. I came here and I moved of course to the west side of town, which is the most affluent part, but I worked at the Little Sisters of the Assumption who lived, who worked down in Green Island [Worcester]. And there was the first time that I actually met poor white people. I was already in my mid-thirties, and I was surprised. People who were illiterate and who were as white as I was, I mean I don't know how else to say that. So one of the things I've noticed in Worcester in the last twenty some odd years, is an increase first of all in immigrants, an increase in dark faces, people of color and especially people of African descent. When I first came I don't think there were very many at all. So I realize that I am kind of, I'm rambling a little bit there, but I was struck when I first came by the poverty of white people, which was something new to me.

**GM:** What distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

**NC:** I'd say the people. I like, like the Worcester people that I know and I really, it's not just Main South folks, but there is a wonderful sense of we're from "woo-stah" and you know there is a kind of humorousness or a comic sense of many, many people that I've met from Worcester. I don't think Worcester people take themselves too seriously. I think that they are proud of where they come from, they don't like it when people say, "Oh yea, Boston!" like nah uh. They have their own specific ways of talking like I love it when somebody will start talking to me about how they went and bought a pound of hamburger.

You know where I come from we say hamburger for the meat and the sandwich you know, but here it's hamburg. And there are other little Worcester dialect things, but I see a city that you know lost a lot of it's, it's industry and had struggled for a long time to find other ways to survive. It's more than a bedroom community; that's one of the things I admire about Worcester. It continues, even though people say, "Oh you're a suburb, your metro west," but Worcester I think has an identity, despite the fact that every time the Boston people think of us, it's to come out to see some horrific crime or because there is a lot of snow. I mean those are the two reasons that Worcester is paid attention too and yet I think it's an interesting place. When I think about all the different ethnic groups that manage to live here now, in relative peace, the fact that it's, I mean here again I realize that this side of the city is, is different. But you figure Worcester homicide rate, despite the fact that we're the second largest city in New England, is quite low. Maybe it's a little too high this year already, but on the whole it's pretty low. I think there is something to be said for the, the city, they must be doing something's right, you know even though a lot of people complain so much, "Oh ada-da-da-da" but something must be happening correctly.

**PC:** What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been, generally?

**NC:** Well you know as a nun, I don't know that I can really speak to that too well. I'm a woman [laughs], but my experiences are different from mothers, from wives, from the people who have to deal with the city bureaucracy. My guess is that they have been mostly people who have tried very hard to make a living for their family, to make a home for their families, that they have lived very much in neighborhoods and that that is one of, also a key thing about Worcester that you identify with a neighborhood. And that you, you know those people your whole life. Sometimes when I have talked to some people from Worcester, especially women and I realize they have been here forever and their children live nearby and intend to continue to, and I think that wasn't what was really going to happen with me or my sister. You know, that somehow, whether it was 'cause we were getting a different kind of education, or because the New York City area was so more expensive, I don't know, but both of us kind of went away from, from Tuckahoe to make our life. I feel a little envy sometimes when you know, you hear about all these people and they're living, I don't know, within twenty minutes of each other. That can, of course, that can be insular too. There is a funny story of a sister, not one of our sisters, but a sister from a congregation that was actually founded here I believe in Worcester. And one day she was talking about a nephew of hers and he, he was going to be marrying a girl from outside. Now our congregation, my congregation is international. I live at the moment with a sister from the Philippine's, a sister for Lithuania, two from Philadelphia, and I was born in New York and I lived with Vietnamese, Africans all the type. So this sister has lived all her life in Worcester, with one moment where she was out, and she said, "Well my nephew is marrying a girl from outside, a foreigner. Oh, what kind of a foreigner would that be? Oh well she's from Milton [laughs]. So she had the grace to laugh about that, but you can be a little insular here if you're not careful.

**GM:** What are the names of the schools that you have attended?

**NC:** I went to Annunciation Elementary School, or grammar school I guess we call it. I went to the Academy of Mount Saint Ursula in the Bronx, New York. I went to the College of New Rochelle, in New Rochelle, New York. I went to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. And then in Brussels I went to Latitude Le Tue j Leac, in Brussels, and then I went to Saint Michaels College in Winooski, or whatever it is up there in Vermont, during the summers to get a Master's Degree in theology.

**PC:** How were girls treated when you were in school?

**NC:** Well I think we were somewhat restrained. If we're talking about being in schools, especially elementary school, you know boys could get away with more hell and all of that than girls. I didn't really want to get away with too much. I had a very nice relationship with my mother and father and I didn't want to shame them, but I noticed that yes you could do more if you were a boy, than if you were a girl. On the other hand, they got more roughed up than girls, you know, so I remember certain people, you know, getting a few licks with a yardstick, not very hard, but that didn't happen to girls, you know? That kind of thing.

**GM:** What were your most significant extracurricular involvements?

**NC:** Well again, when I was in high school I really didn't have any. That was a very tough time for our family. When I was in college I worked on the college newspaper and I enjoyed that very much because by that time my mother had passed away. I had my own car, I lived at home and I had things I had to do at home but I could hang around, and so I enjoyed that very much. I liked that a whole lot. That was one very good thing, and of course the other thing and this goes back to a question you said, "Where did you hangout?" I forgot to say, I also worked in the summers at a scout camp, in Mayapach New York, Rock Hill Camp. And from, I went there from 1966 until 1975, then I took some time off, then I went again as a, well I was a counselor already, but I went again one more time in 1980, but that was perhaps the best extra-curricular thing [laughs] it was just in the summer rather than, than in the school year, but to camp out and have fun and be away from home was just wonderful.

**PC:** Did you attend and graduate from college and what program did you study and what, you know, years were you there?

**NC:** Yea, yea, so I went to the College of New Rochelle [New York], I started in 1973, I graduated in 1977. I have a Bachelor's Degree in English. And then I could just continue, I have a Master's Degree from the University of Pennsylvania in English that was awarded in, I guess in '78. And then I have a Ph.D. from Penn [University of Pennsylvania] that was awarded in 1984. And then I got a Master's Degree in theology



from Saint Michael's, I think that I finished that in, I can't remember, '98 or '99 [laughs]. So that was a kind of thing where you went to summer school.

**GM:** What were your challenges in education?

**NC:** I think I was a fairly smart kid, but I don't know if I was a very creative kid. It took me a while to learn to have confidence, to write about things that I was interested in, rather than things I perceived my teachers wanted to hear. I was very good at handling, you know, if they would set you a question, you know, we used to kid that all the questions were like, "as literature, as in life da-da-da-da-da." I was very good at answering those kinds of questions, but when I think back on it I see like they could have pushed me, to kind of answer that question and nothing else. Luckily there were some wonderful people in my life who encouraged me to, you know, be more myself. And that took me a while because I think because of the way that I was growing up, the responsibilities I had, I was very suspicious of cutting loose for anything, even in writing, things like that, but eventually I began to learn how to do that. And I would say that was the biggest challenge to, to write something that I wanted to write and really it wasn't until I was writing my Ph.D. dissertation that I finally learned how to do that, I mean I wouldn't say it's the greatest dissertation ever, certainly not. But at least it was something that I felt like I was actually creating something rather than just responding to a prompt, you know?

**PC:** Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

**NC:** Yea, well by that time as a Ph.D. [Doctor of Philosophy], you know like everybody was thinking, people in our, my sort of friends, my circle, we were all thinking we wanted to be you know professors in colleges. But in the early 1980's there was quite a glut of professors, might be again, but in those days it seemed like it was very, very hard to even get a look in at a college and, [clears her throat] excuse me. So at the beginning I tried, you know I made resumes and sent out letters and I received a few interviews, but nothing really came of that. At the same time I continued to work as an adjunct at Penn [University of Pennsylvania] and then I got hired by Temple University. So I got work, I got work usually as a composition teacher, you know. Then I got work at Haverford College, but I wasn't, I didn't, have a whole lot of direction because I was mostly, I was satisfied with sort of keeping the roof over my head, bringing the groceries. Eventually I bought a car; I didn't have a great many needs and so you know I sort of, I think it was lucky that I finally realized I want to answer this call from God because otherwise I think I'm kind of like aimless all my life. Once I did that, the aimlessness began to disappear, there was something else.

**GM:** What support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

**NC:** Well I would say that certain, certain people helped me when I was in college and encouraged me. I really was psychologically, I think, I was kind of beaten up by the

experience of the death of my mother and a long illness and all of that. And as Irish people, you know, we didn't ask for help; we didn't talk about those things, you know there was no, you know, nowadays I see an awful lot of emotions. Well, we didn't have emotions back in those days [laughs], you know it's not that long ago, its only forty years ago, but you know we were much more restrained as a nation I think [laughs] and certainly as a family than people are today. And so at any rate all of which is to say there were some people who helped me, some teachers, especially at New Rochelle. Then later on I made some very good friends, especially when I went to grad school. I was lucky. Usually when you go to grad school, you know, you're so involved in the grad-schooling part that you don't really make the friends. Well I'd say the people I met in graduate school and around the graduate school experience are the ones that are still my friends today and so I was very lucky with that. And then I met the Religious of the Assumption and, boys, that has been the big mentoring for me. I'm happy to say it.

**PC:** Do you do a lot of work outside of the house?

**NC:** Well I work here [laughs]. I feel like that is a lot of work [laughs].

**GM:** When did you begin working and what do you do now?

**NC:** Well I began working the second year of being a graduate student, so 1978. I had my own class to teach. I was not a teacher's assistant; I was a teacher that was how they managed to handle that. And so they just kind of threw you into it and said, "Here you'll teach Intro to Lit." Oh good, lucky students, they were only five years younger than I was. So that was '78 and pretty much I worked that kind of job until I entered religious life, I took a little time off to learn about being a nun and all of that and I returned, after I returned from Brussels, I returned here in 1995 and I have been working here ever since full time.

**PC:** How did you come to do this work?

**NC:** Well, I think part of it was just accident, you know [laughs] where it was just like well, my dad did this. I liked it; it was something I knew, you know, I thought I knew. And you know, I knew school [laughs] so I was able to, oh well, I could still go to school and I could do that and I like to read and I like to talk about books and you know, that kind of thing. I don't think it was, I didn't feel like I had a divine calling to be an English professor or theology, I just kind of backed into it. You know sometimes again when I listen to people talk about how they came to something, it seems like they really had plans. I don't think I had too many plans, I just kind of responded to what happened. And what happened was I didn't flunk out of graduate school. Where as you know people who entered with me, they didn't necessarily flunk out but they got married or they had children, things like that so they couldn't continue. Where as I could continue, there was nothing else to do, so I just continued.

**GM:** What has this work meant to you?

**NC:** It's meant a lot, in a sense that I've, I've learned a lot from doing it first of all, an awful lot from doing it. And I also have, I have gotten to meet an awful lot of great people; the students, my faculty, my colleagues, I get to read all the time. It's a perfect life for a person who is quite extraverted in one sense but also likes to go away and shut the door and read. And it feels like it's a useful life. It feels also from a point of view of an Assumption Sister, our major sort of point, the reason why we're here, what we call our charism, is the education of young people. Well it's something that I do and get paid to do and that feels great.

**GM:** How time consuming is it to be a professor at a college institution?

**NC:** I think it's fairly time consuming. Let's see, we teach here at Assumption, we teach seven courses a year. So four, for me its four in the fall and three in the spring. Recently I have been taking a slightly reduced load. So right now I am doing three and three. But if I were back on my normal schedule it would be three, four and three, that's the one first thing. So you figure that you might have one course that you can double up, like say two Bibles [courses], and then you're going to have two other courses as well, so you might have three preps. And if you're going to ask the students to read, you know thirty, forty, sixty pages, a hundred pages, well you've got to read it too. Plus you have to think about something to do with them, because I think our students are nice people but I don't know how motivated many of them are. So you have to find ways, unlike you guys, you have to find ways to engage them. I think you would have to do that anywhere, but sometimes it feels as though you have to put out an extra effort to get any kind of response. So sometimes I feel when I'm in the classroom and I'm working the crowd and I think if anybody would just nod or smile at me that would help me so much. So sometimes I tell them that, "you know you're awfully hard, you know what you look like, you look like this." And then that makes them laugh and so they might respond for a while. I feel as though when I walk out of a class, it's kind of like a theatre. You know, like I've been performing and now I have, I get to take a break for a couple of hours before I go on stage again. I don't know if all my colleagues feel that. They might work smarter than I do, but this is the way I have learned how to teach, and I guess I'll do it until they make me retire [laughs].

**PC:** What subjects do you teach here?

**NC:** Well I teach, my main base in the English department and I have taught quite a few of the medieval courses and I've also taught Shakespeare. I do, as all of us English department folks do, I do the service courses of Comp. and Intro to Lit. And then in theology, I began by teaching the Problem of God actually. But we never could solve it, so finally I said I'd rather teach Bible and so that's one of the things I do. And I've taught some upper level theology courses too.

**PC:** What's your favorite part about being a professor?

**NC:** I love it when some kid gets it. And then all of a sudden, there is such a big cliché but there is like, you know, a big light bulb goes on and it's like "OH YEAA!" [Laughs] or when you see somebody and they've written something, and I tend to be very, you know, I pay a lot of attention to what people write. And they write something and you see, oh look there is something, they don't even know that's there but that is so good. And then you say to them, "Look at that there, why don't you do something with that? Why don't you revise this paper and bring that up and forget about, and trash this, this and this 'cause it's useless, but what you've done here is so good!" And then they get excited and then maybe they follow through and maybe they can't accomplish it all, but you've helped, I've helped and that makes me feel good. I helped them to live something of their, you know, to live the intellectual life for a little while, and I think that is a wonderful thing.

**PC:** Is there anything that you dislike about being professor.

**NC:** Grading [laughs]!! Grading. God that's awful. And I also hate grade hounds. Recently, well not too recently now, but maybe oh I don't know three, four, five years ago, I was doing English Seminar, and there was one guy in there who was quite smart. Although he wasn't as smart as he thought he was, but he was constantly harassing me. He would turn in a paper that was clearly like "B," you know maybe 85. But he would not let me alone until, you know, like he could somehow think that if he could keep pressuring me, he would come in at a B+ or "A- at least, Sister." And he was, I don't know if you guys ever watched "Leave it to Beaver" or ever hear of that show. Well, do you remember, what was his name Eddie Haskell? Well this kid was an Eddie Haskell. I hate that, I just absolutely hate Eddie Haskell. You know I'd much rather have Beaver or Wally any day, but Eddie, [disgusted sound] no.

**GM:** What are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework, and do you share this housework with anyone?

**NC:** [Coughs] Excuse me. I live in a community with four other sisters, so we pretty much take care of our house, but it's different from a family in that we have five adults who are taking care. So my major role in the house is I go shopping every week for our groceries. Then we all take a turn cooking. Then I'm also responsible for the laundry area. Those are the major areas I need to help keep clean. And the other thing for us sisters is that we also have the rotation of our prayer together, so somebody has to prepare that too. So that's another thing that takes up time. We make that as well, you know as well as cooking, then you got prayer, so you do the two things. So those I would say are my major responsibilities.

**GM:** How has housework changed for you over time?

**NC:** Well, I don't know if it has changed that much, you know, since I never owned my own house. I had my apartment. I remember this is when I was, you know, a grad student and then I was a young professor, adjunct professor, and I had a top floor of like a triple decker. And I remember a friend of mine brought her little girl to visit and at one moment this little kid says very loudly to her mother, "Look Mommy! I can write my name in the dust!" [Laughs] So I don't know if I was ever a great housekeeper, in fact I know I wasn't. I think [laughs] I think that from my mother's time, my grandmother's time, like my grandmother was a major role in bringing me up. She had us doing lots of things that nowadays maybe a machine can do, you know? But I wouldn't say that it has really changed that much. We had vacuum cleaners back in the day, you know [coughs], that kind of thing.

**PC:** How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles, and interests in your life?

**NC:** Well I think it's an ongoing project and, you know, I spent, I said to you a while ago, as a religious I have what I sort of think of as my absolutely real life and then I have my work life. And I also have friends who are part of my real life, but most of them are fairly far away. So most of my time is spent either among my sisters or here. So I, balancing it, mostly I just do what I can and this just a sort of waffley answer, I'm almost embarrassed to give it, but I, I don't kill myself. And I know that maybe I could have been a scholar, but I couldn't see being an Assumption sister and being a scholar. There are scholars among our sisters in the world, you know and several are quite high powered, but I didn't have the ability or the desire to do that and to manage life and community. So I think probably I've settled for being mediocre in lots of ways. Ok?

**GM:** How would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path?

**NC:** Well I'd say that there at times there is a certain movement of mediocrity in my professional path. I think that the personal path, the religious path continues to be something that can get deeper and I'm praying that it is by my practice. You've got a bunch of more pages here boys [laughs].

**PC:** Do you, do you consider yourself active politically?

**NC:** No I do vote all the time, but I don't really have any, you know I'm not like Mary Lou Anderson or somebody like that.

**GM:** Have you been involved in volunteer or community work?

**NC:** Yes in the sense that I am involved in things that we sisters run for the community.

**GM:** What role has religion played in your life?

**NC:** A big one! Yea, I mean I think it's been, it's been at the heart of who I am. Not so much in the sense of oh, do this, don't do that. For me religion has to do with, or faith has to do with a person, you know? The truth is for me, Jesus says "I am the way the truth and the light." So my religion is my relationship with Him that I, I live out in the church with other people. You know, again people think, "Oh the church, oh that's those, you know, you know those guys." But the church is a community of people who are in relationship with Christ. And so I live my life with them and I think that gives me a lot of balance. It certainly gives me a lot of hope most of the time.

**PC:** When did you decide that you wanted to become a nun?

**NC:** Pretty late actually [coughs]. I had no idea that that was something I wanted to do, although I had been taught by sisters. It wasn't until I met the Religious of the Assumption in 1984 that I, I don't think I thought about it then either, but I, I enjoyed praying with them, because they had this sort of structured prayer. So I would go off into vespers. I enjoyed eating with them. I found them extremely neighborly. They lived on a very poor street in West Philly [Pennsylvania] about, I don't know, ten minutes from where I lived. And they were very much part of the neighborhood. So I admired that. As time went on I would be hearing them talk about, "Well, our sisters in El Salvador say this, and our sisters in Nicaragua say that." This was the time in the early 1980's when the United States was funding the contras in Nicaragua and also the government in El Salvador and the sisters were sort of operating from the other side of the equation. There sisters, the Assumption sisters, were, you know, like on the left side. And so I was listening to all of that and they were talking about these people and I realized all these sort of situations, all these wars and all of that that are happening there, which seemed kind of far away are actually like close. And it, it struck me very much. I'm sorry I'm making it a long story, but basically I began to think maybe, maybe I should whether maybe I could live this life. So in 1988 I, I asked to try it out.

**GM:** How many years have you been a nun for?

**NC:** Well since [clearing her throat] I began the postulate, which is kind of like a candidacy in 1989 in August. And I made my first vows in March of 1993.

**PC:** Was there ever a time in your life where you thought you would not become a nun and what were you planning on doing?

**NC:** Yes! The answer is yes. I mean I really didn't think about it at all until about 1987 or '88. So I had about 32 years where I certainly wasn't thinking about it, but I have to say I'm not really sure what I thought I would do. I think a lot of that had to do with the way I grew up where you couldn't really be sure what was going to happen. You know my mom died when she was 43, I guess maybe some ways I thought maybe I would die too

at that age it, it seems silly, but I think it may, may of affected me. I had to do, I had to do some serious, you know, work in order to get through that.

**GM:** What is the process of becoming a nun?

**NC:** Well, for us, I think it varies, but the general process is that you would, you would ask, could you, could you join us. And then the Provincial Counsel, which is made up of the Provincial who is the leader of our little group in the United States which is called a province and her counselors, there are three, would consider your request and if they wanted to take you on, they would say, "Yes, please come and start by just observing our life and then if that makes you feel good about things, you can be a postulant." Which is a particular step. I was a postulant for about a year, year and a half or so, a little longer than many people are, but I wanted to take a little more time. And then you become a novice and while the postulant owns her own car and still maintains her financial independence, the novice sells her car or gives it to whoever and the money that she's got, her savings, she'd give that to somebody that look after. And then she becomes dependent on the community and that's the first step for religious life, is to learn to stop being so independent and start becoming dependent on the community. So for us the initiative is two years, a first year is required by the church, that's called a canonical year. And then a second year by our congregation in which you, you have different kinds of apostolic experiences. It's different from the men here, they have the one-year, and then they'll make their vows or they'll leave. We take two. After that you make first vows, which I did in '93 and two or three weeks later I was heading to Brussels, and I lived there for two and a half years studying and learning to live in the Belgian Assumption. And then I came home and I worked here, and in October of 1998 I made my vows for life, my final vows. So I vowed poverty, chastity, and obedience for my life, until my death. Sounds very dramatic, but that's basically it.

**GM:** How much time do you spend praying? Is there a mandatory time that you have to pray?

**NC:** Well our rule says that sisters take 45 minutes of private prayer usually in the morning and a half an hour of adoration in the afternoon. Plus we have all those offices we have, I was describing earlier, readings, lauds, midday, vespers, compline. Plus if we can, we go to Mass. So I guess you know, you figure each one of those offices takes a good twenty, twenty five minutes and then you know there is the private prayer, I'm not always one hundred percent great at it, but I do my best. So I guess I spend three, three hours a day doing that kind of stuff.

**GM:** Did your parents have an effect on your spiritual life?

**NC:** Well I think that they both were, they were devout people. I didn't, you know, by the time I made up my mind my mother was already gone. My father you know he said, "You're a grown-up, you can do whatever you like, good luck to you." I mean he never

said anything negative, but I was realizing that in the era that I grew up, when I would go into the houses of my friends and in my own house, there were religious signs and symbols in our houses, you know. Whereas now a days when I go into houses I often don't see anything, even if the family is Catholic I don't see that they'll have a crucifix or a cross anywhere or they won't have a little statue of the Virgin or anything! I mean it's a completely secular (\_\_\_???). I don't have, I'm not making a judgment on that, but I'm saying for us it was more natural than it is now. So my parents, yes in a sense that they, they were, they were, they believe, they were clearly disciples, you know?

**PC:** Why is your faith so important to you personally?

**NC:** I don't know, except that it's a call you know. And there's a, there's a, there's a deep abiding affection that I have for this Christ. He's been very good to me and I want to respond to it, but why it is, I don't know. I believe that's a mystery, you know?

**GM:** Do you have a favorite passage from the Bible and if so why?

**NC:** Well, every Assumption sister, when she makes her final vows, asks for a word. It can be more than just a word, but like, you know, a little phrase or something. And then when we make our final vows and we get these rings, the word is engraved inside the ring. So my word is actually just one word, and it's the word Rebune, which is from the Gospel of John in chapter 20. Where Mary Magdalene has gone to the tomb of Jesus to cry and weep over him and she learns that he's gone. And then she turns around and she sees this guy, she thinks it's the gardener and she says, "Sir, tell me where you have taken him and I will go and take him myself." And he says to her, "Mary." And all of a sudden she realizes it's Jesus and she replies, "Rebune." It's a beautiful moment and it's so full of relief, joy, recognition, heartache, everything. For me it's a word that I'm still trying to learn, like how, how to live that word, how to live that word of welcome, how to live that word of joy, how to live that word of thanksgiving. So yea, if you want to know what's the, what's the word, I'd say that one [laughs].

**PC:** Does teaching interfere with your prayer life at all?

**NC:** No, it makes it more real because I have to pray for all the good people and the beloved numskulls that I teach.

**GM:** How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

**NC:** As I said when I was growing up, Multiple Sclerosis made our family special [nervous laughter] and a very kind of, I wouldn't say we were turned in on ourselves only in the sense that we didn't have a lot of help from outside and I regret that. But I think at that time that was not so normal. I mean now, now it would be different I think. And then so that that certainly affected the way I grew up and affected me as a young adult and even, I'm sure it still affects me. Then, well, two years ago this June, I learned I had



cancer, breast cancer. And I was pretty taken aback by that. Happily it was a small tumor that they were able to remove. I didn't have to have chemotherapy; I did have to have radiation therapy. People were great to me and it gave me a lot of encouragement, courage, and it allowed me to have some time, the college gave me time off. I was able to you know, think and pray quite a bit [laughs] about "Well, what do I love in my life and would I like to keep on with it?" The answer was a resounding "Yes!" So, at any rate, health on the whole I've been a very healthy person, the people around me have been healthy, but every once in a while, something happens and I don't think it necessarily made me more sympathetic, but it certainly made me more aware of all the people who are, who are coping with things.

**PC:** What are your experiences in accessing quality, affordable health care?

**NC:** I am very lucky, extremely lucky to be a full time employee of the college. The college provides us with our health care, we pay something into it, but when I look around I think wow. And the other thing is, here in Worcester we have the Fallon Clinic, which is now called Reliant Medical something or other. But when I had cancer, I first of all, first of all we have Fallon Community Health that was very fine, they paid for everything, but I also was part of at that time the Fallon Clinic Saint Vincent's axis. So once I got into that system, I never had to go elsewhere to look for things and I had first class care, you know. So I feel that I have been remarkably lucky and I wish that more people had what I have and I certainly support Mr. Obama's desire to, you know, expand health care and I am very worried that it may all be struck down by the Supreme Court. So although I am not political, I certainly follow things and I am concerned about that.

**GM:** How do you define success in your life, has this definition changed over time?

**NC:** You know I, I saw my dad live through a very disappointing kind of life because his wife, my mother, became so ill, and he had to make his way and he, I think he, he never quite recovered. He did marry again and I think he was happy, but for me success has been something like, not to give in to my natural tendency to melancholy or to feeling like, oh I missed it, you know. But to enjoy what, whatever comes. I'm not always good at it, but to be successful means to, to really love and to be loved. And I would say that's true for me. So there it is. Could be a little cliché but I think it's quite true.

**GM:** How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life, do you have any regrets?

**NC:** Not really. I mean they are the choices I've made. I think that, I think that I regret that I wasn't more footloose and fancy free as I said earlier when I was younger. I tended to be kind of a little bit too middle aged early on. I think as I've gotten more middle aged, I've gotten at least a little freer. That may be true for people, I don't know, but I don't really have any significant regrets, no.

**PC:** Based on your life experiences, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

**NC:** Well, I'd say follow your heart. I think people say that and I would agree. Follow your heart, but educate your heart. I think that that's also important. It's not just follow your feelings, and so follow your heart, see where you can, see where you can build up other people and when you do that you're going to be building up yourself. I think that's probably true. So I would say that to men or women. I don't have a particular message for women, [laughs] just people.

**GM:** Now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women, than has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

**NC:** Well my guess is that you are including the experiences of the project, sorry, taking women from all different walks of life and I, I find that extremely valuable and very, very admirable. I think it would be very important to ask them perhaps things, which you couldn't ask me, about you know their, their desires for their children, things like that, I don't know. I, I find that the questions you've asked me have certainly invited me to reflect on my own life quite a bit.

**PC:** Is there anything else you would suggest we talk about or talk to, excuse me.

**NC:** That's quite all right, no I feel as though you've kind of made me look in, look out, look all around. I'm, I'm satisfied with all the questions you've asked me and I hope that I've given you some answers that were interesting for you.

**GM:** That concludes our interview, thank you very much for your time Sister Cotter.

**NC:** You're very welcome, you're very welcome.