

1 MN: Okay, so thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me today.
2 CR: You're welcome.
3 MN: I am Margaret Novacek and it is 8:30 in the morning on October 12, 2019. I am with
4 Claudia Rovens in her house and I want to clarify that I am going to record this interview and it
5 will be uploaded to the University of Dallas oral history repository. Is that alright?
6 CR: Yes.
7 MN: Okay. Okay, so first question, um, can you just tell me a little bit about your background in
8 education as a student?
9 CR: Well, I left a small catholic high school and I entered the University of Wisconsin at
10 Milwaukee. Prior to entering the School of Education, I felt that the professors did not know
11 me. I was a number. Because there were hundreds of kids in a lecture hall. I felt school was
12 impersonal, but I, it also taught me to be very independent – a self-starter – because I really felt
13 if I died on the quad they'd probably step over me and continue to go. Then when I entered the
14 School of Education, I found it completely different. There were professors that cared, and I
15 learned a lot.
16 MN: Okay. Um, what would you say your favorite years as a student would be?
17 CR: Probably the last years.
18 MN: Yeah.
19 CR: Because I could see the light at the tunnel. And I was anxious to graduate but also
20 concerned because I was getting a degree in art education, but I wasn't quite sure, I wanted to
21 continue on to do the twenty credits.
22 MN: Okay.
23 CR: I had had enough of school and so I was going to be sure that I wanted to do that.
24 MN: Okay. Um, so then what made you want to become a teacher?
25 CR: In both second and fifth grade, I had a mean, angry nun. I said to myself that, I'm going to
26 become a teacher and make up for the likes of you. She was cruel. I learned later in life that
27 nuns, young girls entered the convent at eighth grade, so she had very little world experience. I
28 didn't – you never knew what their home background was like. But here's a case in point. She
29 was so mean that at one point she held up a holy card and said, "I sure would like someone to
30 draw this for me." It was a picture of Jesus at the Agony in the Garden. I felt this was my chance
31 to get in good with this nun. So I went home, I had a, a God-given art talent. I worked on this
32 painting for months to try to please her. It was large. My father drove me to school that day,
33 carried it in, proud of his daughter, and she said to the class, "Look at the wonderful painting
34 Claudia's father made."
35 MN: Oh my gosh.
36 CR: That helped me to determine I would be a teacher – I would never break a child. I would
37 always support a child no matter what. That was her feeling. Break a kid. So I decided to
38 become a teacher at that point in fifth grade.
39 MN: Oh. Oh my gosh. Did you know what age level you'd want to do?
40 CR: I did not at that point. I did not.
41 MN: Okay, wow. Um, so then you decided you wanted to become a teacher. Um, can you tell
42 me a little about the teacher education program that you completed?
43 CR: It was, as I said, four-year degree, but after I entered the art education school, then I had
44 good professors and I particularly enjoyed Ed. Psych, Ed. Psych because that is where I-I got a

45 good foundation to - I knew that I always needed to be kind because of my experience, but this
46 reinforced all of those kinds of things and taught us to deal with different psychological
47 problems that kids might have. It was a real good experience then.

48 MN: Is there one thing that you can think of from that class that always, that always sticks with
49 you? Or is it just the class as a whole?

50 CR: The class as a whole.

51 MN: Okay. Um, so can you tell me about your career as a teacher then?

52 CR: Yes. I got my four-year degree in art education and I needed to do the twenty credits more.
53 To be sure I wanted to be a teacher, I decided I would go to St. Roman's school, small catholic
54 school, and I would ask if I could be a teacher aid. I felt more time in the classroom would be
55 beneficial to me to be certain this was what I wanted to do because, to earn your twenty
56 credits, because I was going to be K-12, I had to student teach both in grade school and in high
57 school. So I decided I would do this. Of course, the pastor there wouldn't let me leave without
58 accepting a third grade teaching position. Over the course of the summer, I realized I hadn't
59 done the student teaching, so I threw myself into it big time. I had thirty-eight children. I loved
60 it. The first, when I first went to school in August, I of course got the class roster. This is a little
61 side bar, funny thing. I got a class roster and I read down all of my thirty-eight kids and I read
62 one child's name and I said, "Oh, I get it. This is a joke on the new teacher. Mhm. I'm not
63 making a desk for this kid. Her name, hm, no way." So, at ten o'clock, we had teacher break,
64 went into the teacher lounge, and I said, "Pretty funny all you teachers, I'm not making a desk
65 for a little kid named Zeenie Beanie." They said, "No, that is a real kid. Zeenie Beanie is a child in
66 your class and her twin sister's name is Zori." Now I suppose any other name with Beanie would
67 be fine, but Zeenie? We never called her Zeenie, we always called her Zeenie Beanie, it was
68 always one word.

69 MN: Oh my gosh.

70 CR: Yes. Yeah. She was an adorable kid. So I-I truly then remembered my philosophy from fifth
71 grade, never break a kid, I always walked around the classroom, I squatted down to face them,
72 and talk to them in their face, because I always disliked a teacher lurking over my head. Yes, I
73 was very sick. You know, I would catch colds and whatnot that they would breathe onto me,
74 but, it was okay. I really wanted my class, because there were thirty-eight of them, I got to be
75 really quick with the waste basket if any of them were going to throw up, because this, of
76 course, is a chain reaction. And anyway, I-I really emphasized within my kids that we're going to
77 be a family unit that whole year. And I was not going to tolerate any kind of, what we call today,
78 bullying. I saw it happen probably the first week of school when one girl said to another, girls
79 wear uniforms, kids wear uniforms. But one girl said to another, "Oh boy, are your socks ugly."
80 So, I had a discussion with my kids that day. And we talked about, why would someone do this,
81 why would someone say, "Your socks are ugly"? Well, kids, it's because that particular person
82 that morning, maybe had an argument with their mom, didn't like their lunch, had an argument
83 with their brother. For some reason, that student came to school not feeling good about
84 themselves. So what they wanted to do was make somebody feel as poorly as they did. So by
85 saying to someone, "Your socks are ugly", now that person feels poorly and they feel a little bit
86 better, so they feel a little vindicated. So, we talked about that. It got to a point where, if
87 someone said something unkind to one another, the child would respond by saying, "Oh, you're
88 having a bad day, what happened to you today?" So, it really worked to quell all kinds of, quote,

89 bullying. The second thing I did was, on Friday afternoons, I always had something called "Tell
90 Me Why". It was a book out called *Tell Me Why*. Now, this is 1970. There was a book out called
91 *Tell Me Why* and we would discuss certain things. In there, there were some questions, of
92 course, that I would say, "Sorry, I can't discuss that." But, I recall a question of, "Why do people
93 smoke?" And of course, we got into the discussion about the things that are added into
94 cigarettes to make them addictive. Anyway, it was always a good conversation, and it led to
95 them being open and caring about one another, and I loved that first-year class, even though
96 there were thirty-eight. At the end of the year, there were kids crying that they were leaving my
97 class. And you know what? I was crying too.

98 MN: Yeah. Oh my gosh, I'm sure.

99 CR: The second year, I had another, a reprieve, I had thirty-seven kids. And I loved that class as
100 well. I had another little guy named Dwayne Bealy, who was going to move to Portage,
101 Wisconsin, and he came to school and he said, "I'm going to move to Portage, WI." I said,
102 "Dwayne, why don't you stand up in front of the class and tell us about it." And-and so he did,
103 and then when he sat down, he said, "Oh, and another thing about Portage..." All the rest of the
104 year, he would say, interrupt and say, "Another thing about Portage..." To this day in my family,
105 we say, "Oh, and another thing about Portage..."

106 MN: Oh my gosh.

107 CR: So, these kinds of things will stick with you throughout your teaching career and throughout
108 your life. At the end of that second year the Catholic Archdiocese came through and said
109 anyone who does not have a four-year degree is not going to be renewed a license, a teaching
110 contract here. There was a wonderful teacher named Mrs. Bruin, she did not have a four-year
111 contract, she taught there for fourteen years. They did not renew her contract. She was sixty-
112 two years old, nearing retirement. And I said to them, the principal of the school, "You mean to
113 tell me, at sixty-two years old, you cannot find her a position in the library? Central office? You
114 cannot renew, she's been a wonderful teacher. She's got rave reviews. And you are not going to
115 renew her contract?" They said, "No." I said, here, give her my contract, because I'm leaving. If
116 that's, as a catholic school, if that is what you would do to a wonderful teacher, I'm leaving. I
117 don't want to be here." And I left, and there was huge uproar in the school, that I was leaving.

118 MN: Oh my gosh, I'm sure. Did she stay?

119 CR: She did not. She did not. They, and, unfortunately, she had to surrender her apartment and
120 move to a part of town that was unsafe near the Marquette campus and she got some other
121 kind of a job until she could collect her social security. With that then, I returned to get my
122 twenty credits, and because I had taught for two years, because I had taught for two years, I did
123 not have to student teach in K, in K-6. I then could student teach in the high school. So, it was
124 during the Vietnam war. I knew that there were many, many people trying to apply to be
125 teachers; men in particular, so they wouldn't have to be drafted. So, I wondered how I could set
126 myself apart from everyone else. So, I went to the central office of the Milwaukee Public
127 Schools. There was a gentleman named Kent Andersen there, and I told him to come and watch
128 me student teach; any time, unannounced, just show up. Because I felt I probably was a teacher
129 he'd want on his faculty. He showed up one day, and he stood in the back of my classroom for
130 probably half an hour. At, after that, he walked up to me and he said to me, "Come and see me
131 when you get your certification." So I did. He told me after I was hired that there were 1100
132 applicants in art that year and there were four people hired, and I was one of the four. Now I

133 did get a plum job at a school called John Marshall High School. It, the department head retired
134 and so I got her position. I got all of the advanced classes, which there were 11 of us on the
135 faculty. I felt it was unfair, so I offered to change classes with anyone who wanted those
136 advanced classes. I felt as a new teacher, it was unfair. Well, they couldn't change things. So,
137 John Marshall, in 1974 was a challenge to teach at. My first day there, I took a knife off of a
138 student. We had a bomb scare on a regular basis. As the teacher, I had to look for the bomb. Is
139 it under this piece of paper? Is it over here? As I was looking, I began to think, "They don't pay
140 me enough to have my hand blown off or my life ended. What am I doing here?" I came from
141 this lovely, small, private school, and jumped into this very large public school. There were
142 threats to my life. And, finally, I think the thing that made me decide I was probably not going
143 to return, was A, my husband and I were pregnant, and B, I caught two kids in my class smoking
144 a joint. Well, as the teacher, you certainly want to scream and say, "What are you doing?" But
145 as the teacher, you must stop and think, "Uh oh, what do I do?" Michael was eighteen years
146 old. So I walked back there. I thought, composed myself, walked back there, and said, "Get up,
147 and get out of my classroom." They said, "But, but, but . . .", I said, "Just get up and get out." I
148 followed them out of the classroom and I said to them, "I'm insulted that you think I'm that
149 stupid." "Well we didn't think you'd smell it because you had the kiln running." "Don't further
150 insult me. Michael, let's think about this. You're eighteen years old. Next week, you could be in
151 prison and Michael, you could be the oldest, worst guy's new girlfriend. Is that what you want
152 in your life?" Well they got about as white as a sheet of paper. I said, "Now listen. You can't put
153 me in a position of having to bust you and go to court with you. I don't want to do that. Count
154 this as a break in your life. Remember it as a break in your life and don't ever be so stupid and
155 break the law again. Get out of here." It was difficult. I was concerned that I would be called
156 into the principal's office and say, "I heard that you told these kids they could leave." But it was
157 1974 and I did it.

158 MN: How did the-the principal react to that?

159 CR: Never found out.

160 MN: Really.

161 CR: Never found out. The kids kept quiet and he never found out. So, two years at home, I'm
162 going, "Uh oh, all this education to Sesame Street, peanut butter sandwiches. Because while I
163 was work-, while I was teaching then, I began working, yes, on that, those, the second year, on
164 the twenty credits, and then I began to work on some master's classes too. So, but, I-I knew
165 that I wanted to go back into the classroom, but I knew that I did not want to go full time,
166 because I had a lovely daughter. So, some, one day, I just walked into Alverno College, and said,
167 "Do you need anyone on your faculty?" I don't know what possessed me to do that. But you
168 have to be bold sometimes. You have to put yourself out there. It's a big world. So, I did that. I
169 went in and asked if they needed anyone on their faculty and she said, "Write up a curriculum,
170 and bring along some of your own art that supports your ideas." So I did. I wrote up a
171 curriculum called From Painting, 'From Drawing to Painting'. And brought it back in two weeks.
172 She was impressed. She looked at it all, looked at my art, and said, "You're hired. Name the
173 days you want to teach and we will babysit for your child. We have students that are here and
174 they run a daycare for faculty and they are students studying to be teachers." It was, it was a
175 fabulous thing. That lasted for about five years. I taught various classes there until they wanted
176 me to do weekend college, which meant every other weekend, I would be teaching Saturday all

177 day and Sunday all day. Not conducive to family life. I was then offered a teach-, a teaching
178 position at my old alma mater, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. I was thrilled. But, they
179 said, "We will have a guard take you to your car at night." I knew that as the young teacher, I
180 would be getting the night time classes and so I felt I did not want to do that. Not conducive to
181 family life. So then I taught for Milwaukee Area Technical College in Greendale and I taught
182 various art classes, night school, until my husband began to travel. Our daughter was now in
183 junior high and I was smart enough to know you don't leave a good kid home alone four nights
184 a week, so I resigned my teaching position. So that was the end of my teaching career.

185 MN: Wow. Okay. Wow. So, with all of that experience, um, how would you say that your
186 experience as a teacher, then impacted your decisions of where to send your daughter to
187 school?

188 CR: I saw a huge difference in private and public schools. Often in the public school there was
189 little or no parental involvement. I felt when I was at John Marshall, that parents said, "I'm
190 sending my kid in there to, you parent my child. I'm-I'm, but I'm free to criticize you." When I
191 taught at John Marshall, we had a grading system, certainly A-F, but we also had an F minus 1
192 and an F minus 2. I never knew there was anything lower than an F. But there was. F minus 1
193 meant I rarely saw the kid. F minus 2 meant I never saw the kid. So, you had to call the parents
194 if they were going to get an F minus 1 or an F minus 2. I happened to have a student, called the
195 parent, parent said, "What are you bothering me with that bleep for?" Well, there you have it.
196 Parents are not always involved in school. They send their kids to school, and say, "Handle it."
197 In addition, they would have a three-day suspension for swearing at a teacher. Monday,
198 Tuesday, we had school, they'd walk, excuse me. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday we would have
199 off. Monday morning, they would walk into school and say, "Hey Mrs. Rovens, *eh* you." And I
200 said, "Well you know what you've got." "Yeah, a three-day suspension. I'm out of here for the
201 week. See ya." So really, who, what are we teaching these kids here? I saw a definite difference
202 in the private school and the public school. So, when it came to our child, I-I wanted her to be in
203 a private school. So, what I did, is I went and substitute taught at the local catholic school. And I
204 really loved everything that they did. But our daughter was in the gifted and talented program
205 in-in kindergarten and they did not offer that in the catholic school. So, we left her in the public
206 school for a while until seventh grade when she won the science fair and then she competed at,
207 and saw young girls from Divine Savior Holy Angels, a catholic high school on the opposite end
208 of town. She said she wanted to go there so for eighth grade, we moved her to a catholic
209 school, and they told us she had great grades but no study skills.

210 MN: Wow.

211 CR: So, they beefed up her study skills that year and she did well at Divine Savior and ended up
212 at St. Mary's at Notre Dame. I think, let's see. What else? Oh, in addition that, part of that
213 question was-

214 MN: Oh, your grand- how did this influence your grandchildren – where your grandchildren
215 attend school?

216 CR: Well it influences where my grandchildren go to school. They go to a wonderful private
217 school. Happens to be the same school that Margaret went to.

218 MN: Um, so, let's see.

219 CR: Oh, part of the other question was what do I think about today's education.

220 MN: Yes.

221 CR: Right? Okay. Well today, what I'm garnering, and of course I'm not in a classroom anymore;
222 but what I'm garnering is teachers want more pay, less work. As example, they're not teaching
223 cursive writing anymore. Well, how are you to read the Declaration of Independence if you
224 can't write and you can't read cursive either? They're also not teaching the Constitution.
225 They're removing classical – classic literature from our libraries. All in an effort to be politically
226 correct. If you look at our national statistics versus other countries, we're poor – we rank pretty
227 poor in many many areas. Even though we spend per student a large amount of money. I
228 believe in Milwaukee its fourteen thousand dollars a year per child in the Milwaukee public
229 schools.

230 MN: Wow. Wow. Um, how would you say your experience as a teacher has impacted the way in
231 which you've helped to raise your grandchildren?

232 CR: I'm very organized and patient. As a teacher you have to be organized because if you aren't,
233 what you're doing is you're taking time away from a child in the classroom. So, when I began
234 my teaching career, I got there early and I stayed late. I did work on the weekends. You just
235 have to be organized as a teacher. Otherwise, you're hurting your kids. You also have to be
236 patient. So, I try to encourage my grandchildren to discover their God-given talent, because we
237 all have one, and help them in their educational direction and per- because that brings on
238 personal satisfaction and happiness.

239 MN: Okay. I like that. Um, you have experienced formal education in four different ways: as a
240 student, as a teacher, as a parent, and as an involved grandparent.

241 CR: Yes.

242 MN: Um, what transfor-, what are the biggest transformations in education that you've
243 observed over these three generations of schooling?

244 CR: Alright. As a child, I saw that there was control through fear. They always said God will
245 punish you if you do that.

246 MN: Wow.

247 CR: Yes. As a matter of fact, here's another little sidebar, a story about Claudia Rovens, it was
248 that same nun that I didn't like in fifth grade, said, "Now children, on the way – it's Friday – on
249 the way home from school, if you are even thinking about a hot dog, and you are hit by a car,
250 you – and killed, you will go to hell." Claudia raises her hand, stands up, and says, "I don't
251 believe that." She said, "What?" I said, "You just had us memorize the acts of faith, hope, and
252 love. And in it, you say God is all knowing, all loving, and all forgiving. He would not condemn
253 me for the thought of a hot dog." So, there you have it: control through fear. Alright? High
254 school was the same thing pretty much. Every Monday morning we had uniform check. Kneel
255 down. If your hem isn't touching the floor, they ripped your hem down because obviously –
256 obviously you were immodest. Alright, control through fear. As a teacher then I-I decided I
257 would have control through caring and love. I felt if the kids cared about me, if they loved me,
258 they would abide by my rules. When I first started teaching third grade, I wrote out rules of my
259 classroom. And everybody had to abide by it and if there was some issue, all we would do is
260 point to the rules of the classroom. But I felt control through love and caring was a better way
261 to go. As a parent, the same thing. Control through love, but firm with rules, because rules are
262 rules. As a grandparent, of course, it's the same. Now, at Brookfield Academy, their philosophy
263 is the five stars, which I'm sure Margaret can tell you about. But also, I believe that they-they

264 feel you were born to be successful. And we will help you do it. So, we are very pleased that
265 they are in that private school.

266 MN: Um, so with these changes in mind, do you have any advice for a first-year teacher
267 entering the field?

268 CR: I do. I do. And this advice was given to me years ago when I first taught first grade. Don't
269 smile 'til Christmas. And I said to the kind nun at the school, "What does that mean exactly?"
270 She said, "You can always loosen up. You can never tighten up. The first few days of school –
271 those kids get your number. They know what they can get away with, and what they can't get
272 away with."

273 MN: Yeah.

274 CR: If you're firm, you better they – better they go home the first couple of days of school and
275 say, "Oh. She's – or he's – strict. Woah." because you can always loosen up." The second thing I
276 would say is, don't forget to take your patience pill every morning. Because some kids are a
277 challenge. But at the end of the day, keep humor in it and remember that at the end of the day
278 and the end of the semester, they do go home. They don't live with you. You have influence
279 over them for eight hours. Be the best influence that you can be.

280 MN: Okay, very nice! Well, thank you so much for-

281 CR: You're very welcome. I just want to say one last thing.

282 MN: Yeah, I was going to ask if there was anything else you'd like to add?

283 CR: Yes. If my grandchildren turn out to be as wonderful as Margaret Novacek, we will be
284 blessed. She will be an awesome teacher. Some kids will be lucky to have her.

285 MN: Thank you, Claudia. Thank you so much.

286 CR: You're welcome! Good luck to all of you!