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Sister Leonard Marie Lichinchi

Rosie the Riveter  
WWII American Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by  
Shanna Farrell  
in 2015

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Sister Leonard Marie Lichinchi, 2015

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Interview 1 September 20, 2015

01-00:00:05

Farrell:

This is Shanna Farrell with Sister Leonard Marie Lichinchi and this is an interview for the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Homefront Project. It's September 20, 2015 and this is our first interview. Sister, can you tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:27

Lichinchi:

I was born in Queens, in Long Island City. I was born at home. My mother had promised to have me baptized the day I was born, so my godmother brought me to church, and the priest did not want to baptize me. It was a weekday, and I wasn't ill. My godmother said to the priest, "The mother wants it, you know?" So he finally gave in, because she said she wouldn't move until he baptized me. She was very assertive. So I was baptized. She had to wait for my godfather to come. My godmother was such a good friend of my mother's that she was godmother for five of us. My godfather was my father's best man, and he was the sponsor godfather for the same five or six people.

We were six children and my parents. They were both born in Italy. My father came over when he was about sixteen or seventeen. He was educated, but he did not know the language. He had a license to—they had the horse-drawn carriages—to do that. He liked it. His friend, my godfather, Theodore, they boarded together in Florida. When they asked my father his name, he said "Lichinchi," because that's how it's pronounced, and they interpreted that to be "Leo King." So he was always Leo King, until he realized that it wasn't so, and then it was corrected. But he always enjoyed saying that, you know, "You would have had a shorter name, King, instead of Lichinchi." That's Americanized way.

Our church that we went to was Saint Mary's in Long Island City. My sisters who married, three of them, they were married there, and my parents had been married there as well. There's great attachment to the church, which still exists to this day. Long Island City, when I was growing up, was mostly Italians, Irish, a few other nationalities. I know we had some Polish people and some German. We did also have Jewish people. Many of those were storeowners. We all went to PS1, public school. My sister Albina, who was the first one there, she knew very little English, because we spoke Italian at home. But she learned fast and then she taught the rest of us, so we were all right when we went to school. My youngest sister and my brother, who was the second youngest in the family, they both went to Saint Mary's School, because we were living closer to it. My parents rented the homes that we lived in. We all graduated from high school. My parents—especially my mother—was very demanding that that's what would happen to us.

I was born in 1924, February 14. I had two older sisters, about maybe three years older, together. I can't think of anything else on that line. My father, as I told you, drove the carriages, and later on, he was working for the railroad. I think it was mostly manual labor, and he worked with other people there. I didn't hear much complaining about things, even though we certainly weren't—I would say we were poor, but not like the poverty you see today. We always had food, we always had clothing, we always had all the things that we needed, but I would say it was more everybody was the same there, so you didn't see that. Of course, not having TV and radio, that brings the outside world, too. You're contented with what you have.

I had a very good friend, Theresa Grosso, and our families were also friendly. We went all through grade school together. We were inseparable. We went through grade school together, and then we both wanted to be dress designers. That's what we said in those days. Today it would be fashion. We didn't know where we could go to school to get what we wanted. We found out that we could go to Washington Irving High School. The school was outside our district, but if you wanted something that the local schools couldn't give you, you got permission to go ahead. So we both went there. In Long Island City, Manhattan was just one subway stop away. We went to high school. We get there, and we find out that we're not put in the dress designing group, but we were put in the art group, painting and all the other things. This was after we had started our term. Afterwards, when we found out that it wasn't what we wanted, they couldn't change everything. They did change the hours that we would have had art to having sewing, which you also need. Now, neither of us knew how to sew, but their argument was—which was a very valid one, that we should have figured it out ourselves—how could you design dresses and other clothing without knowing the sewing of it? You know, what parts you need. So we started that.

My very first thing that I sewed was a baby's dress, like we would have used for a christening dress, all handmade, with all little tucks and everything. It came out so beautiful. I didn't know I had the talent to sew. We learned how to design also, and how to make patterns, paper patterns. We also were taught how to drape the fabric on a dummy and make that. I made a coat. I designed a coat, and sewed it, made it up. It was a winter coat. It was a dark burgundy color, princess style, and I was happy to wear it. It was lovely. I remember, for graduation, for the graduation ceremony, you had to wear something that you designed and made. I remember making a two-piece waffle-print dress—suit. No, it was a two-piece suit. In our senior year, we had to learn how to drape over a dummy. We draped fabric over it, and we had to make something. I made the gown for a prom, which I didn't go to. They did hold the prom in Roosevelt Hotel. [pause in recording]

01-00:09:07  
Farrell:

Okay, we're back.

01-00:09:13  
Lichinchi:

Theresa's family moved to Brentwood in our senior year, and naturally I stayed on. When I graduated, the school suggested someplace—there was opportunity for me to work in certain places. I was being sent to a designer. If I remember correctly, the name was Serena Alexander. It was on 57<sup>th</sup> Street, off 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. I had been there the semester before. For those of us in that particular course, if your grades are passing, at least, the last semester you went one week to work and one week in school. I had been sent to Serena Alexander. That's the full name. I thought I really was going to learn things, but I didn't. I ended up being more like a gofer. They were nice to me and all that, but that wouldn't be a place I would choose to go if I was going to work. That was the place I was being assigned to. I went back to school and I told the person who was assigning jobs that I wanted to learn more. I wanted to have more experience with the power sewing machine. She said, "Well, you'd have to go to a factory." I didn't know what a factory was, so that was fine by me.

So I went to a place on Adams Street. When I got there, I realized that it was making soldiers' uniforms. It was quite a group of people there. Many of them were deaf and mute. They very seldom stopped the machines, because then you couldn't hear them. But then when they did, they got us very interested, but we couldn't tell what they were saying. We also had some people that were blind, and they worked beautifully on the machines. Naturally, they didn't look at it, but there was never a problem. Nothing happened. And here I was, learning how to do it. What I sewed was the back pocket. I sewed the welt seam. The manager taught me what I was to do, and I started sewing. I was treating that one part of the pants as if it was a dress on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. He watched me, and here I'm struggling with it. He came over and he said to me, "You know, Yolanda, this is piece work." I thought he was referring to that these were all separate pieces of the same part, but then I understood that I would be paid according to how many I sewed. So I learned how to sew quickly.

01-00:12:34  
Farrell:

You had mentioned that you were assigned to work different places. Was that your school assigning you to work?

01-00:12:39  
Lichinchi:

Yeah. Not really assigned. They suggested, I guess you would say.

01-00:12:44  
Farrell:

So it was like a career—

01-00:12:45  
Lichinchi:

Yes, like a guidance counselor, although they didn't have guidance counselors in those days. Yes.

01-00:12:50

Farrell: Were there other options that you were given, or you were just naturally interested in making clothes?

01-00:12:55

Lichinchi: No, I was interested in the sewing part of it, yes. Because I wanted to design clothing that would suit me, and in all different colors. Then, as an adult, I ended up wearing the same outfit everybody else wore, and it was always black. [laughter]

01-00:13:13

Farrell: Around what time was this? What year?

01-00:13:18

Lichinchi: I graduated elementary school in '38, so this would have been when I graduated from high school, '42.

01-00:13:27

Farrell: You went right from high school to this job?

01-00:13:28

Lichinchi: That's right.

01-00:13:29

Farrell: How long were you doing this for?

01-00:13:33

Lichinchi: I would say I really don't have the memory of why I left that job. Then I went to another one, where I sewed gloves and parachutes. I don't remember what happened that I left there. I have no recollection of that. Either it was horrendous or not worth thinking about. That's all I can think of. I don't have any memory of something being unpleasant. Maybe the work was finished and we all left. I couldn't say. I've been trying to remember that, but I can't.

01-00:14:17

Farrell: When you moved from sewing the soldiers' uniforms—it was on Adams Street?

01-00:14:21

Lichinchi: Adams Street in Brooklyn.

01-00:14:25

Farrell: So you started working on gloves and parachutes. Was that also for the war effort?

01-00:14:29

Lichinchi: Not the gloves. These are dress-up gloves. They had the seam—it was outside, and the sewing—not the seam. The seam, and then some of the fabric was still outside it. You know? It was very intricate. I was glad to have had that experience. Now, maybe I just moved from place to place. I don't know. Because it was wartime also. Everything was war-related. From what I figure,

from the time I went to Republic to work, it probably was about a year, at the most, before I went to Republic.

01-00:15:19

Farrell: Growing up, you had mentioned that your father, Leo, had worked on the railroad. Was he working on the railroad during the Depression?

01-00:15:27

Lichinchi: I guess so, yeah. I guess so.

01-00:15:29

Farrell: Do you have any memories of how your family adapted or reacted to the Depression?

01-00:15:35

Lichinchi: I don't know. When I say "I don't know," I didn't see anything different between ourselves and the other families around. I have no memory of that.

01-00:15:55

Farrell: One thing I did forget to ask you is, what's your mother's name, and where in Italy did both of your parents immigrate from?

01-00:16:01

Lichinchi: My parents were both in the province of Potenza. On the map, they were on the Adriatic side. If you knew where Naples was on the ocean side, they were across in that area. That's how they described to me where they were. I guess it's the town that they grew up in was Venosa, V-E-N-O-S-A. As I said, my father came over. I think he was sixteen or something. His parents had—I think it was vineyards. I'm not sure. They were well-off. He had an older brother. I guess people just traveled. I don't know. I know he went to volunteer for the war, the first world war, but they were too late. Maybe they were very lucky, but they were too late to be taken, both he and my godfather. That's about what I remember.

01-00:17:03

Farrell: What was your mother's name?

01-00:17:04

Lichinchi: My mother was Rosa DeVietro. My mother, as a teenager, with other young ladies, worked with the—I can't think of the word that comes to me—cloistered, for the cloistered nuns there. My mother and some other girl, they worked there, and they lived there. The nuns made pastries, all kinds of pastries, all kinds of pasta, and sewed a great deal, in different ways. They interacted with the laypeople that came to buy it. My mother carried that skill in baking and cooking when she was our mother. Cooking, to her, was an art. The simplest meal was presented that way, and such gratitude for it. I remember that. In Long Island City, there's an area that has factories. I know there was a place that made coats, and the people were hired to sew buttons or something. Once in a while, I know she went out there and came back, but she wasn't a steady—she was really a home person. I hope what I'm telling you is

what my sisters would also say, because my memory isn't that great on this. But I don't think it would be too different. Then I think I'll move on to high school.

01-00:18:59

Farrell:

Sure. You went to P.S.1. D-Day was in 1941. Do you have any memories of that day or when the war started?

01-00:19:09

Lichinchi:

Oh, yes. We were listening to the radio, and we heard, in 1941, that Pearl Harbor was bombed. Our brother, he was about maybe six years younger than I, maybe, around that time. I remember Roosevelt, hearing him on the radio, but I don't remember exactly what he said. He did say what a terrible thing had happened there. I guess we talked about it, but I don't—and we didn't have anyone very close to us that was old enough to be into the service, although our neighbors and other persons of the family, they did.

01-00:20:13

Farrell:

Did you have a sense that the war was coming? I know you were younger and you were a teenager, but did you have a sense that something big was happening?

01-00:20:22

Lichinchi:

As I'm thinking of this, I'm not sure if I knew it then or it's what I taught later as a teacher in social studies. I'm not sure that I would know. I probably was about fifteen or sixteen then. I don't remember. I know we had rationing for sugar, and I think for shoes. I think you were only allowed to have so many coupons. I know we had that. I know people collected things, like metals that were around, and other things like that. I don't know how much we were personally involved in it. That's what I remember. Not too much.

01-00:21:18

Farrell:

When you had graduated, were you interested in helping with the war effort? Was that what—?

01-00:21:24

Lichinchi:

No. Well, it wasn't a case of helping or not. It just didn't come up. When we talked about it, it was with great sadness, but at the same time, with great patriotism. It was so easy being patriotic then. Later on, when I was teaching in high school, with the Vietnam War, it was such a different thing.

01-00:22:05

Farrell:

I'm interested in that. Can you tell me a little bit more about what you mean by it was easy to be patriotic?

01-00:22:15

Lichinchi:

This is the part I'm not sure I knew then or because of what I taught. Roosevelt wanted us to go in to help the Allies, England and all that. He was trying to influence the country in such a way when he spoke that they would see that it's good for us to be in it. I think we just took it, that it was good for

us to help. I remember in high school, I had the social studies teacher, and we knew nothing about what was happening. It wasn't taught, what was happening to the Jewish people. He said, if we don't go into the war, he would kill himself. We didn't know why he said that. If we lost the war, that's what it was. Because he felt they were coming over, the Germans and the others, that his life was in danger. Not for himself, but his family. But fortunately, that did not happen. Little things like that that come back, but I'm not sure if it happened then or when I taught the class.

01-00:23:39  
Farrell:

So you moved from making uniforms and gloves and parachutes into working on an assembly line in a hangar and installing fuel lines for P-47s?

01-00:23:50  
Lichinchi:

P-47s, the Thunderbolt, right.

01-00:23:52  
Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about how you moved into that job?

01-00:23:55  
Lichinchi:

How I got there, right? My friend, Theresa, her father was a tug captain, which means that the tugboats that moved other boats, he was the captain of that. It was better for him to be living out on the island, so he and his family moved out to Brentwood. Brentwood, at that time—that was '42, '43—was not what it is today. From Suffolk Avenue all the way down to—what's that parkway up there? I can't think of it. Anyway, there were only about four or five people, houses, in that space, for that long distance, which is more than a mile. We traveled by Long Island Railroad, so we took the Long Island, and then we had to walk home, because we had no other way of getting there. We lived a little bit more than a mile away, but it was a good walk. My friend moved to Brentwood, and I had been out to see her. I would go back home by the Long Island to Queens. I must have been out of work. That's all I can think of to try to fit into what happened. Theresa lost her last semester at Washington Irving, but she made it up later and got her graduation, high school.

I came to visit Theresa, and I was going to be with her for a couple of weeks, so I must not have had a job. Or I had a vacation. She asked me if I would accompany her to this workshop in Bay Shore that was training people to work in Republic. I was very unsophisticated, and I said to Theresa, "I'll go." She wanted me to go with her. She would be there practically the whole day, so I might as well be there. We went by bike to where we had to go. I was in the class with her. I was never questioned what I was doing there. We learned everything about the tools that we had to use. Then it was time to be assigned to Republic, the job. The woman interviews us. I was baptized Theresa Yolanda, although my mother wanted me to be Yolanda, but he told my godmother that that was not a saint's name, so I couldn't get Yolanda. So my godmother said to him, "The princess of Italy is Yolanda." He informed her

that she's Mary Yolanda or whatever, but she has the name Marie with it. They were trying to figure out what name to give me, because my mother didn't give it. I think it was a time—because 1924, there was a lot of interest in the Little Flower, Saint Therese. So that's how I got the name. He said, "Let's take Theresa. She said yes. So, Theresa Yolanda. I went all through life being Yolanda until I became Leonard.

So I'm on line, and this woman is asking each one of us as we're coming in to get our assignment for Republic—which I personally didn't want. So I had Theresa. She says to me, "And what's your middle initial?" I said, "Y." I said it to her three times, and I couldn't think what was wrong. She thought I was asking why did she have to know it, not that my initial was "Y" for Yolanda. We got over that, and we were assigned and went to Republic. I guess they must have taken us in a car or something. There are about maybe eight or ten of us, and we're all standing in this hangar. That's the first time we saw it. It was huge. They had two rows of planes, parts of the planes. The cycle was two hours. Every two hours, you would move. If you're on the assembly line, you were on a very high platform. I think it was about nine feet tall. Because people worked underneath while you were working on the top.

Theresa nudges me and she said, "Oh," she said, "I hope I get on the assembly line." I wasn't happy where I got, just wanted to get out to get home. The other choice was working—they call them benches, but they were tables where the people made the parts, or they assembled parts that those on the assembly line would install. Theresa said, "Oh, I want to be on the assembly line." As I said, I didn't care where I was. They called out, and Theresa was called to work on the benches, or the table. I'm there, practically the last one, and I get called, and I'm on the assembly line. Fortunately, after my experience with it, I was very lucky, because I was working with this fellow, John Esposito, who was just wonderful. He was so thin, and, which I found out later, we both had to work together at one time in the cockpit. It was a one-seater plane, and we had to work together without, naturally, the seat being there, and it was tight quarters. I probably was taken because I was very thin and short. Theresa wasn't too different, either.

When we got assigned to the different places, I spoke to the manager, and I said to him, "I really don't want to work here. I want to be released to go home." He said, "If you don't do this job"—after they trained me for a week or so, I should have known that there was a catch to it, but I just didn't. I didn't pick it up. So I worked there, and we installed the fuel line. Every day when the manager came by to check up, I always said to him, "Will you try to see if everything is tight enough and everything?" and it always was. I was so concerned, because, as I said to John one day, I said, "They'll never have a second chance being up in the plane if we don't do our job right." I worked with John, and he was a wonderful person to work with. He probably treated me as his daughter, but that was okay. On the assembly line, I don't think there were more than five women. Most of them were men that worked there.

At the lower level, underneath the plane, I knew there were only men there. When we had a coffee break, the gong went off and everybody had a coffee break at the same time. You did find groups that you could just talk with.

It was pleasant. I can't say it wasn't pleasant. But I was missing my family. We worked six days, mostly six days, and it was very difficult to go back to Long Island City—yes, Long Island City, because I was thinking of Jackson Heights, but they hadn't moved there—in Long Island City, to see my parents. I was afraid to tell my mother what I was doing, because she wouldn't be happy of my working that way. Many weekends, we just did our wash. We wore slacks. You had to wear slacks. You had to have your hair in a bandana, and they had many pictures around of women who lost their hair because it got caught in the wheel of the drill or anything else. It was horrible, because the root and all was pulled out. So you only had to see a picture like that to make sure your bandana was on right to close it.

01-00:32:55

Farrell:

Did they instruct you on how to tie the bandana so that wouldn't happen?

01-00:33:00

Lichinchi:

Oh, yes. Well, no, I'm not sure they did. They just told us to keep it covered completely.

01-00:33:08

Farrell:

Were you ever working when an accident happened?

01-00:33:11

Lichinchi:

No, I never saw anything. I know I worked in the summer, and I know I worked there at least for one Christmas, because of what happened that I remember. Let me see now. You think I had the movie right in front of me. I see it, but I can't see it here or there. No, that's it. Republic is really in Farmingdale, but the train station, they had a section put in, so the train stopped right at Republic, and then it was quite a long walk to get—a covered walk, though, it wasn't outdoors—to where you worked. They were a nice group of people. I remember some of them. They were just very kind and nice. I never had any experience with somebody not treating you nice or making remarks. I did have one experience, just to show how unsophisticated I was. This particular man climbed up there and talked to us. He said did I want to go with him? I said, "Where?" He said, "We could go swimming." I said, "I'm not interested." When he left, John said to me, "Give him a wide berth." I learned from him. He would give me the signals for some of them that he felt were being pesty. I never had any experience like that.

I know we belonged to a union, and the manager, the person in charge there, they were going to vote. I didn't even go to the meeting. But anyway, they were going to vote. He calls me aside, and he said, "When we vote, you vote for this person." I just looked at him. But I didn't go. I wouldn't have worked for what he said, unless I also thought it was good. Those are the little things

that sort of help you to live. I think, in growing up, we had a very sheltered life, because everybody in that area knew everybody, and there was kindness. We had our usual crushes and all that. Somebody was important to us from school, but that's what it was.

01-00:36:01

Farrell:

With the union, did you have to join the union?

01-00:36:05

Lichinchi:

I don't know. He just said I was a union member. I had no clue.

01-00:36:10

Farrell:

And you don't remember paying dues?

01-00:36:11

Lichinchi:

No, no, and I never went to a meeting. But I did hear people talking about the union, and they were saying how it's important to go, and they were saying it's so lengthy. Later, when I was teaching about the unions in school, I remembered some of the things that they said and why they said it. They said, for those who have a plan that they want to happen there, they get their way because people just give up and go home, because they made unimportant things last too long. Then, when they have the people there that they want, that are going to go their way, then they vote that way. But whether that happened frequently or not, I don't know.

01-00:37:04

Farrell:

So you didn't have any real formal training for the job?

01-00:37:07

Lichinchi:

Yes, I went with her to school.

01-00:37:11

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about—

01-00:37:13

Lichinchi:

We went to the school, as I said, Bay Shore High School, and we had class every day. They took all the different tools, which I can't remember now, and how to use them. I think, probably, we were taught about safety. They had different kinds of machines and that. I have a poor memory about this. This will probably all come clear in my mind when I no longer have to do it.

01-00:37:44

Farrell:

Do you remember the length of time of school? Was it about three months?

01-00:37:48

Lichinchi:

No, two weeks. I'm not sure it was two weeks, but I know it was more than one week. I don't know if it was more than that. It was a full week. That I know. We had very few cars around. First, gasoline was rationed. That was another thing during the war. And we didn't know how to drive. One day, this man with his car—I don't think he hit me, but I fell off the bike. He gets out

of his car and he says to me, “Get on that bike.” I didn’t want to get on. He said, “Get on that bike.” He really forced me to get on it. I guess I wouldn’t have gone on again, because you think you’re going to get hurt. That was good, because I felt that—and when I got back on, there was no problem. He probably was in a hurry to get someplace, but he would take the time to teach someone it’s better to get on it and have the confidence of being on it than—

01-00:39:05

Farrell:

What was your uniform like, or your work outfit?

01-00:39:07

Lichinchi:

Slacks.

01-00:39:10

Farrell:

So the slacks and the bandana. You had to wear coats or heavy gloves?

01-00:39:15

Lichinchi:

No. No, I didn’t do any work that would require that. We were indoors. Naturally, we had the signal for lunchtime. We used to sit outside the hangar, and then we used to hear these planes. One day, I asked somebody. He said that they’re testing the planes. It was an awful place to be, where people are testing. I don’t remember any accident happening or anything. I know they received awards for the work that was being done there, and I think they mentioned something in that paper that I gave you. [pause in recording]

01-00:40:23

Farrell:

We’re back.

01-00:40:25

Lichinchi:

As I said earlier, we worked six days a week, but some sections worked seven days. It wouldn’t be on the assembly line, because you would need everybody there in every section. But where Theresa worked, they wanted her to work on Sunday. We’re on the Long Island Rail Road, going home, and she said to me, “They’re after me again.” I said, “Theresa, you have to make your mind up what you want to do,” but I understood her position. You have to go to work so early, and Saint Anne’s Church, which is our parish, they only had one mass on Sunday, the mass that we went to, anyway. She said, “I wouldn’t be able to get to mass,” and all that. As we’re discussing it and coming to no solution, we look up and we see these two nuns on the train. They may have been there other times, but we didn’t notice them, but that day we did. Prior to this episode, I had said to Theresa, “I’ve always wanted to be a sister growing up.” We had sisters in religious instruction, and then when you made your confirmation, in those days, I made my confirmation the same day with my sister and my younger sister and my brother, because in those days, it wasn’t part of the liturgy. The bishop went to each place. So many grades were connected. When you had confirmation, that was the end of instruction at that time. I forgot why I came to that.

01-00:42:30

Farrell:

You were commuting. The long commute.

01-00:42:33

Lichinchi:

Commuting, and the sister. I said to Theresa, "Let's go over there and ask those two sisters. Maybe they can resolve the issue." So we go up to them, and they look at us very strangely, because we had these bandanas still on our heads. We said, "We want to ask you a question." We turned around and chatted with them, and then we told them what happened, what we were talking about, and what would their answer be. They said, "There's no problem with that." They said, "You ought to go to speak to your pastor." He was Father Graham in Saint Anne's. They didn't know where we lived, and we didn't know where they lived. When we get to Brentwood Station, the four of us are leaving the train. They thought we were following them, and we thought they were following us. They said, "No, no, no, not here. Your own parish." I said, "We live here." "Oh," they said. They said that they lived there, and we never knew that the convent was there. We never saw it. That's how we knew. After that, we would meet them every Saturday, and we just chatted with them, and they would invite us for activities in the academy when they had the bazaar and other things. We had a wonderful relationship with them. They were very friendly. When I had spoken to Theresa one day, I said, "I better get going on this process."

I went to Father Carpentier, who also lived in Saint Anne's—not in Saint Anne's, but for that parish. He was standing with the convent property behind him, and in front of us was Saint Anne's Church. I told him what I wanted. He said, "What about these people?" I said, "What people?" I didn't even know a community was there, the Saint Joseph community. I said, "What do they do?" He said, "Teach." I said, "I don't want a teaching order." I said, "I would like to take care of children." He gave me a book to read, *Convent Life* by Scott. When I would read it, I would always bunk it under my mattress so Theresa's mother wouldn't find it. To go back to what we were talking about earlier, that day we went to see Father Graham, to ask him the question. He came and he said to us, "If work is necessary, you have to go there." We kind of thought that, too, but in those days, you were a little timid about not getting to mass. That took care of that, and we were friendly with the sisters, and we went there. Meanwhile, I'm talking to Father Carpentier, and the book that he gave me to read.

One day, the sisters asked us what we were going to do after the war and so forth. Theresa said that I wanted to be a sister, and they were so surprised. It had never come up in this time, because we had been meeting them for a couple of months. They said, "What about us?" I said, "No, because you're a teaching community, and I'm interested in"—so they said, "We do other kind of works." So I did apply there. Sister Charles Edward was the general superior. She found it difficult to see how I would qualify, that I didn't live with my family. That seemed to be a problem. She kept asking. I tried to

explain that the reason I didn't live with my family was because of the job. Whether it was understood or not, I don't know. I had to repeat that a couple of times going to see her. The two sisters that I met were Sister Grace Catherine and Sister John Berchmans. Later, she returned to her family name, was Mildred Meany.

Anyway, I went through the process, and then I entered the Sisters of Saint Joseph. Later on, I often thought that I wouldn't have become a sister of Saint Joseph—I mean, I became a sister of Saint Joseph because of my meeting them, where I would not have met them had I not been living in Brentwood because of working in Republic. So I always have a nice feeling about Republic for that. I was very happy, and am happy, as a sister of Saint Joseph.

01-00:47:49

Farrell:

So you had been thinking for quite some time about becoming a sister?

01-00:47:52

Lichinchi:

Oh, yes, a long time.

01-00:47:56

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about that feeling of wanting to be a sister while you were working in the factory during the war? Was that feeling growing stronger during that period?

01-00:48:08

Lichinchi:

It was only going stronger to the extent that I felt I should be doing something on it. It wasn't that it no longer interested me. But the nice thing that happened—it was a very nice thing that happened, but strange at the time. As I had said I didn't want to teach. The first day of normal school—because that's how we were taught, was normal school—the sister, Sister Francis Antonia, who was in charge of us—she was called the mistress of postulants. That's while we were there, and then novices would be afterwards. When she saw me that day that school opened, she said to me, "I know you don't want to go to normal school, but you should go." She said, "You're a natural." Whatever she meant by that, I don't know, but it was the greatest gift I could have had, because my first day in the classroom, I knew it was for me. I just loved it. That was a no that turned to a yes. A lot of them all my life. We all had that. Things change. It was a good change for me, because I loved teaching, I loved the education course that I had because of it. Had I not been, I wouldn't have been in that direction. Then teaching the grade school, teaching in grade school and high school.

Then I tried being a principal, but after two years—my first year, really—I liked the thought of being a principal in the way teaching would take place, but that wasn't possible. It was a lot of trying to change things, and you thought you were doing it in a slow way so people get used to it. When I was principal, my first year principal, when the child would be sent down to the principal's office, I was not mostly involved in what happened. I didn't know

what happened, so I could be different in treating them than the person who went through the experience that had to send them down. I understood that part of it, having been in that place myself. They had them sit for a while, and then I would call them in. I'd say, "Do you like coming down here?" Usually the answer was no. I said, "What could you have done differently so that you wouldn't have come down here?" Because what we wanted to do was change their behavior. I rarely saw these children again that way. People, some of them, felt I wasn't, I don't know, punishing them or something. I don't know what they expected.

01-00:51:35

Farrell:

Before you moved into the sisterhood and you had these feelings of wanting to do that—you had mentioned before that when you were working in the factory, you didn't really care what your assignment was, and you just kind of wanted to go home. Why did you choose to stay in the factory and continue to work there for about a year?

01-00:51:53

Lichinchi:

Oh, because I was told, because most of the jobs were war-related, I wouldn't get a job anyplace else. They call that blacklisted or something. It was necessary. I needed a job. The war on the Europe side, in that theater, ended faster than the one in the Japan theater. That was a year later. I just forgot what I was going to say.

01-00:52:43

Farrell:

You were talking about leaving—

01-00:52:44

Lichinchi:

Oh, yes, that's right. They were letting people go that were not as important for the job. Maybe they had too much of something and they didn't need it, whatever. The supervisor who had originally said no, he came to me and said, "Are you still interested in leaving?" I already was preparing to enter that September. This was 1944, and I would say probably around February, because it took a couple of months before it finally went through. He said, "Are you still interested?" and I said yes. It was far better for him to let people go who were interested in going than to tell other people to leave. As I said, I was going to enter in September. The two sisters, Sister Grace Catherine and Sister John Berchmans, we used to call them spiritual mothers. The person that really sponsored us, and they would help us in buying the clothes that we needed and all, and other things that we had to do to be ready. They took turns, and I think Grace was a little more free with her scheduling or something. Then when I left, I still needed money to get some more of the clothes that I needed and so forth. Sister John Berchmans had a friend in the telephone company, and she said, "I could tell her that you're only going to need it for a couple of months, if there's a way that you could work there." So I did work in the telephone company, I would say maybe three or four months. They gave me the simplest incoming job.

What was interesting, we were four groups in this big room, and I guess that was to the level of experience that you had. The woman in charge that Sister John Berchmans knew was related to one of the sisters that I later lived with. Nice person. She was very nice. She said, "I know your story," and she didn't say anything to anyone, which was nice. When I left, the day that I left, she said, "There's another woman here that's going to the same community." She was Sister Dorothy Fowler. She died fairly recently. She entered the same day I did, was going to be the same group, but we didn't know it when we were there. It was such a surprise when we found out. That's what happened then.

01-00:55:52

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about your memories of the end of the war? Were you already in the sisterhood when the war ended?

01-00:56:02

Lichinchi:

Yes. I lived in Brentwood. I was working at Republic. In Republic, when I said to you earlier about how easy it was to be patriotic, when things got boring, we'd all be singing, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition." Who would ever sing that, if you're thinking correctly? But it was different. It was so natural. You had such a sense of pride. It was so different when you taught about the Vietnam War and lived during that time as a teacher. That was a hard time. In the sixties—that was the sixties—not only did you have the hard time with the Vietnam War, to face it and face what was happening in our country to people that didn't believe in it all and left. Drugs were very strong at that time. The Catholic Church was going through the Second Vatican Council. At that time also in the sixties, early sixties there, and mid-sixties, I was teaching home economics in high school, Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Brooklyn. I taught the marriage course there, too. I taught about family life. This young lady came in with *Time* magazine, and on the cover, the picture, it was about two people cohabitating. She came to me and she puts it right in my face, and she said, "Why get married? We don't have to get married." A lot of things happened that were very threatening to a lot of what we had before comfortably.

01-00:58:13

Farrell:

What did you see change after World War II? That period between when that happened and World War II. Basically, the dominant narrative, the historical narrative that we've all been taught, or at least I have, is that women went out to work in World War II because they were helping the war effort, and then in the fifties, it was a return to the household, and then the sixties was kind of coming out of that. Immediately after that war period, what did you see change, if anything?

01-00:58:46

Lichinchi:

I was a novice then, and it was different.

01-00:58:54

Farrell:

Did you see communities change? Even with new inventions. I know that plastics came out.

01-00:59:01

Lichinchi:

Yes. Oh, the nylon stockings. They cost five dollars a pair at that time. Everyone wanted a pair of nylon stockings. That was a big thing. Oh, the first World Fair. I was a child then. That was before, before graduating from high school. That was '39, wasn't it? Thirty-six, '39, in that area? That was in Flushing, which is not far from where I lived. We went there many times, and we were thrilled with all the wonderful things. You sat on a moving car. Not a car, but like a train thing. You saw everything before you, what was going to happen. I don't want to get my Worlds Fair mixed up, because we had another one later. That was exciting. In fact, when my sisters were moving last year and they went through their things, my sister had a spoon, a silver spoon, that must have belonged to a set, which has some of the buildings from World's Fair. In fact, I came across it the other day when I was looking for something else. I do know, from the teaching, they started to build out in the suburbs. Then, of course, the GI Bill of Rights and the people that went to be educated more. Newer positions and new places to work came up. It's almost hard to say, because it isn't exactly correct in the fact that it was after the war that we really overcame the big Depression.

01-01:01:25

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about what you want people to know about the World War II era?

01-01:01:35

Lichinchi:

What I would like everyone to know about the war, that that is not the answer to solving problems. In fact, when we went to the—they were honoring us in 2007—they asked me to give the blessing. I called and I said, "Why can't you ask somebody else?" She said, "You're the only sister there, and we think you should do it." Well, I did it. But in that, I did say, while we don't have the energy to build the planes that we did before, I said I would like to spend my time building a plane that would just drop goodwill. That's why, today, I know it's a questionable thing and we don't know what's going to happen with the Iran treaty—what is it? What do they call it?

01-01:02:37

Farrell:

It's a treaty.

01-01:02:37

Lichinchi:

Treaty. Well, no, it's not a treaty, it's a plan. Anyhow, whatever. That is a way of solving a problem without going to war. We have to take the risk someplace. We, as a country, do not have to prove to anyone that we have the strength that we have. We should try to do something else. At the last election—when Obama was first elected?

01-01:03:16

Farrell:

That was in 2008, and then the next one was in—

01-01:03:21

Lichinchi:

When I wrote, we didn't know who the president was going to be. I had written to one of the news TV companies, and I had said that. Maybe we can learn to solve problems in other ways. I don't mean that we should never take a stand on something. I don't mean that. But we have to take a stand diplomatically. We have to learn to solve problems in another way. It's terrible the people that have died. You cannot look at a program today without seeing those people just moving from place to place. It's just horrible. So we have to find another way to solve it. Maybe it will come. But war is not the answer.

01-01:04:23

Farrell:

Aside from that, what was the biggest thing that you learned personally, or about yourself, during that period of time?

01-01:04:32

Lichinchi:

During the war? The part would be I graduated in '42. We were bombed in Hawaii in December, the seventh, of '41. There was one year of it that I was still in school then. I remember a social studies teacher telling us—and not the one that had said that he would kill himself if they lost the war. She brought in the newspaper and she said, "Reading the words is not enough. You have to know what's behind it." Little things, but I'm remembering. It's a long time. I hope some of the kids remember some of the nice things that I taught. You want me to go into my teaching?

01-01:05:50

Farrell:

This might be a good place to stop for today, unless you have anything else that you want to add.

01-01:05:54

Lichinchi:

Oh, no. I'm fine.

01-01:05:57

Farrell:

Thank you. [pause in recording] Okay, we're recording.

01-01:06:07

Lichinchi:

I would like to say something about being a sister, and why I'm happy to be one, and I know many others are. That is, I feel that the call that we all have is to love who and what God loves, as God loves. I think we need that. I think we, as sisters of Saint Joseph, and other communities also, do that in the ministries that they're involved in. This is a good way also to close this interview. Our ministries reveal how well we read the signs of the times. Sister Helen Kearney, our president, recently captured them well in the following.

"The sisters of Saint Joseph believe in the power and presence of a loving God, active in our own world, for all time, and in this time. United with all

who minister with us, we seek to bring God's healing and reconciling love where it has the greatest need. We minister in elementary schools, high schools, colleges, universities, literacy programs, and religious education programs. We use our ecology center and organic garden to foster a greater understanding of our interconnectedness with all creation and the implications for our way of living on this planet. We minister by providing shelter and protection for women who have been abused and imprisoned, and for children whose mothers are incarcerated. We nurture the spiritual and physical needs of many, through parish and social outreach programs. We care for the sick and frail with reverence and affection, in hospitals, residences for the elderly, and in Maria Regina, our skilled nursing care facility. We advocate for social justice, especially in areas of human trafficking, immigration, nonviolence, availability to healthcare, affordable housing, and the sustainability of our planet and all creation. In our daily living and through our ministries, we serve to counteract ignorance, exclusion, and structures that oppress or deprive others of their basic needs and dignity."

Why I want to end with that is, when I entered in 1944, the primary ministry was teaching. We did have, at that time, nurses that staffed two hospitals, which are no longer in existence, Saint Joseph's in Rockaway, and Saint John's in Long Island City, and later in Elmhurst. When we see the world around us, and many sisters either alone over the years—that's '44 to today—over the years, some sisters, and sometimes a group of sisters, took the great risk of testing the waters to what else we could do to the people that we meet. Our charism is to love God and to love our neighbor, without distinction. I think that's a wonderful way to finish this interview. Thank you.

[End of Interview]