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SAVANNAH COMMUNITY MEMORIES PROJECT  
“FAITH IN ACTION” RESIDENCY  
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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DIRECTOR/CAMERA: ERIC DARLING  
PRODUCER: MICKEY YOUMANS

SUBJECT: HELEN O’BRIEN



Helen O'Brien

- 14:16:01:06 [Eric Darling]: Anytime. Thank you. Can you read these numbers? All right. Okay. Good Mickey? (Mickey: Yes.) Okay, Tom, we're ready.
- 14:16:27:19 [Tom Kohler]: Great. Thanks. Well, Helen, it's great to have you in Savannah.
- 14:16:32:08 [Helen O'Brien]: Thank you, Tom. Wonderful to be back in Savannah.
- 14:16:34:03 [Tom Kohler]: Really excited. And I'm particularly excited about this interview 'cause I knew your mom and you know, she was an inspiration. And before we kinda get talking about Mary O'Brien, if you could tell us your full name and also spell it.
- 14:16:50:15 [Helen O'Brien]: Certainly. My name is Helen O'Brien, H-E-L-E-N-O, apostrophe, B-R-I-E-N.
- 14:16:58:21 [Tom Kohler]: And do you have a preferred pronoun?
- 14:17:00:20 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes, she is my preferred pronoun.
- 14:17:03:02 [Tom Kohler]: Great. Well thank you very much. And then I think to know Mary O'Brien, we need to maybe talk about the O'Brien family a little bit. If we could, do you mind just starting there?
- 14:17:15:04 [Helen O'Brien]: I'd be happy to, yes. Because family was an essential part of who Mary O'Brien was. Mary grew up in Savannah on 33rd Street, just down from Sacred Heart Church. She was one of a large family of extended cousins and brothers and sisters. She was Irish Catholic, which was very much a part of who her identity was. She married my father, Thomas Keating O'Brien in 1953. And they raised nine children, five sons and four

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- 14:17:48:23 daughters, which also was an ex... very important part of her life. And spoke to who she was as a person.
- 14:17:55:23 [Tom Kohler]: What was her maiden?
- 14:17:57:05 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh, her maiden name was Ryan. So she was Mary Dorothy Virginia Ryan O'Brien,
- 14:18:03:20 [Tom Kohler]: Irish Catholic.
- 14:18:05:00 [Helen O'Brien]: Irish Catholic. I think she was a hundred percent Irish.
- 14:18:09:05 [Tom Kohler]: Wow. And then what part of, when you were growing up, what part of town and I mean, what, what was life like in the Tom and Mary O'Brien household?
- 14:18:19:07 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes. My parents lived at a couple of places before they built a home in Mayfair on the south side of Savannah, where when I was three we moved there. And I think at that point they had four children. And it was just down the street from St. James Catholic Church, right at Montgomery Crossroads in Whitfield Avenue. So St. James, the parish and the school was a very part, very important part of our family connection. In 1970, my parents bought a piece of property on a creek of the Vernon River. And that was a huge influence on all of our lives because
- 14:18:52:10 it was a few acres and it had a, a corral where we eventually had a horse and some ponies and it was on, like I say, a creek of the river. So being on the marsh and on the river and being attuned to the tides and the moon was an important part of our lives. And I think my mother especially loved, she loved nature and she loved the opportunity to raise her children in a place where we were very much connected to nature and were able to play
- 14:19:21:00 outside. We, we always played outside, but on Whitfield Avenue, there was a closer connection to nature. And I think that was part of what she valued and also as part of her spirituality, that connection with nature and the appreciation of the beauty of God's world.

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14:19:35:05 [Tom Kohler]: Well, just outta curiosity, I mean, how did y'all get around as a family if there were nine of 'em plus that's 11 people.

14:19:41:22 [Helen O'Brien]: That was 11 people.

14:19:43:20 [Tom Kohler]: How did it work, mechanically?

14:19:44:08 [Helen O'Brien]: Yeah. Well, the house that my parents built in Mayfair was a three bedroom house. So there was 11 of us living in a three bedroom house for a very many number of years. Yeah. We, we never wanted for anything, but we didn't have luxuries. There was a lot of sharing and carpooling and a lot of coordination. We were certainly offered opportunities, even though there was a lot of children, we had opportunities to be involved in sports and activities. I still marveled that my mother was able to take me twice a week to Isle of Hope to take

14:20:15:08 ballet lessons for years. I'm not sure I would've been as good to, to my children if I had as many to take care of. So they, my mother certainly felt like having opportunities outside the home was a very important part of what she wanted for her children.

14:20:28:08 [Tom Kohler]: And and how did your dad make his living?

14:20:30:06 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh, my dad was a certified public accountant. His, his father was also a CPA. It started one of the first and the largest CPA firms in the city and then went on to do his own practice. And actually, my parents met when my mother, after going to Armstrong, took a job with my grandfather's CPA firm. And so that's the beginning of our immediate family was that job and their connection later on, my grandfather. And then my father had their own CPA practice in Savannah.

14:20:59:18 [Tom Kohler]: What was the original firm? The large firm.

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- 14:21:01:20 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh my goodness. I wish you hadn't asked me that. 'cause I'll get it wrong. I think it was O'Brien and Spillane at one time, and it went on to have a much longer name that I'm ashamed to say. I don't know. There you go. Thank you very much, Tom.
- 14:21:13:17 [Tom Kohler]: And that would've been in the old Savannah Bank building? Yes,
- 14:21:16:09 [Helen O'Brien]: That's where my parents met. Yeah.
- 14:21:18:22 [Tom Kohler]: Oh, that's it. In the old Savannah Bank Building?
- 14:21:21:03 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes. 'cause my, my grandmothers were childhood friends. And when my mother needed a job, my maternal grandmother called my paternal grandmother and arranged for my mother to get a job at my grandfather's CPA firm Savannah. Yeah,
- 14:21:37:19 [Tom Kohler]: Savannah. Exactly.
- 14:21:38:12 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes,
- 14:21:39:11 [Tom Kohler]: Savannah. Exactly. So where are you in the birth order?
- 14:21:44:14 [Helen O'Brien]: I'm number two. I'm the oldest daughter.
- 14:21:47:16 [Tom Kohler]: I see. And what did that mean to you?
- 14:21:50:18 [Helen O'Brien]: Well, my husband says I've been bossing people around my whole life. So I I, there's some truth in that.

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- 14:21:57:16 [Tom Kohler]: And so, and so I'm assuming that everyone went to Catholic school?
- 14:22:03:07 [Helen O'Brien]: Actually, that's a very interesting question. Tom, my older brother went to St. James and he learned to read, and I went to St. James and I learned to read and my next brother went to St. James. And he had a very difficult time reading. And my mother knew that he was intelligent, but he had a very difficult time reading and she realized something wasn't quite right. And I'm sure you'll know that learning disabilities like dyslexia were just beginning to be understood. And she worked very hard to make sure that not only my brother Pat, but
- 14:22:40:12 subsequently they realized not only were many of us had dyslexic tendencies that my father had suffered from dyslexia. 'cause he was very smart and had a, a wicked wit about him, but schooling was very difficult for him. So in that process, Catholic schools didn't necessarily offer the same resources for children with learning disabilities that public schools did. So we had
- 14:23:03:16 a mix of public school and Catholic school. None of us went to Catholic high schools, but some of us graduated from St. James and others of us went to public schools.
- 14:23:16:20 [Tom Kohler]: Would I'm just, I'm just curious, curious, would this experience of realizing that Pat wasn't doing very well in school, something's up, would that be a, a a a, an early little, but on the activism vine, so to speak?
- 14:23:30:23 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh, that's a great question. I think mama, if you ask mama that question, she said the early buds on her activism would've gone back much deeper than to her childhood, but certainly raising a number of children who had learning disabilities, taught her to advocate, to ask, to question, to push. She was not a, a pushy person by any means. Anybody who knew her knew she wasn't pushy, but she knew that her children needed her to fight for them in her very diplomatic gracious way. So yes,
- 14:24:04:17 she learned that she couldn't just ride the streams. She had to do things that might not be expected of her.

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- 14:24:13:08 [Tom Kohler]: Well, since you have pointed me in the right direction back to those early yes. Buds of activism, can we go there?
- 14:24:20:03 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes. And I think those early buds of activism also are related to this strong Catholic faith that she had. Her, her parents, John and Helen Ryan, they lived a half a block from Sacred Heart. They were deeply religious, deeply Catholic people who every morning went to daily mass at Sacred Heart and then would walk across the street to Gottlieb's Bakery to get water rolls to bring home, to heat up for breakfast for the family. So she was instilled with a deep Catholic faith from the very beginning. But she would say that even as a child, there were
- 14:24:54:00 things that she questioned. She, she writes about being taught the just war theory as a child. And there was a part of her that, that didn't resonate with it. And the just war theory says that there are times when war is justified in it's consistent with our Catholic faith.
- 14:25:10:04 [Helen O'Brien]: But she is a child questioned that she may not have voiced it, but she knew, she questioned that when she was, I think she was 12 when her beloved older brother, Jack Ryan, was killed at age 20 at the Battle of the Bulge. And, and she wrote how deeply that affected her. You don't experience things like that without going deep. So certainly there were questions she had, she didn't act on those for many years in a very public way. But she was not afraid to question her faith, not in a way
- 14:25:44:11 that was challenging to the faith, but in a way to deepen her faith, is how I would express it.
- 14:25:52:07 [Tom Kohler]: So just in terms of an interfaith experience Yeah. Every morning it was an interfaith experience.
- 14:25:58:07 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes, it was. She was raised with an interfaith experience, her because Catholics, we are very much attuned to senses. That is one of the parts of our ritual, the taste, the sound, the, the, the music, the smell. And so I'm sure that experience of every day having her parents receive with the body of Christ in them and the water rolls in their hands was a significant part of who she became throughout her life. That's beautiful. Thank you for making that interfaith connection. Tom, I missed Yes. Lovely. Just saying Yes, God lives as gottlieb. Oh, yes. And,

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- 14:26:31:04 and, and for us as children, we all, I mean, those water rolls were part of our heritage, even though we seldom had 'em, but they were part of our heritage in the way many other things were. And, and the neighborhood that my mother grew up in, you know, we think about, we think about the south and the thirties and forties as being a very segregated place, but it wasn't in her neighborhood.
- 14:26:50:21 [Helen O'Brien]: All kinds of people and lived in close proximity. And I think that deeply influenced who she was and her love of all people, because the strongest thing I can say about my mother and her faith and the way she lived her life was that she loved all people. I don't care where you were from. I don't care what you looked like. I don't care how old you were. I don't care if you agreed with her or didn't agree with you. She loved people. And she saw that as an expression, I believe, of the
- 14:27:24:10 deep love that she knew that God had for her. I think that deep love was instilled with her, and she lived it out in every encounter, almost every encounter that she had with people throughout her 70 years.
- 14:27:40:15 [Tom Kohler]: Can we, can we talk a little bit about, so she's raising nine children and I can't really imagine what that's like, to be honest, but I'm not trying to imagine it. How, I mean, how did she manage to get out beyond that and into the bigger world? Mm. I'll leave it at that. Yeah. And, and when did that start and when did that begin to her, her sense of purpose and her sense of compassion and passion for the
- 14:28:12:17 outside world and what was going on? When did that really begin to show up out there, I guess?
- 14:28:16:22 [Helen O'Brien]: Yeah, that's a great question. And I, I think I would answer that by saying, even while she was raising nine children, being present to other people was important to her. She was not an organizing kind of person. She wasn't the type of person to be the head of the PTO or that kind of stuff. But she was the type of mother that, I remember the little girl across the street, nobody had taught her to ride a bicycle. But my mother was like, well, Rhonda, you, you're gonna learn how to ride a bicycle and I'm gonna teach you. Or the, that was a mentally
- 14:28:47:10 handicapped man that lived in the neighborhood, but he was included in the activities. So even while she was raising children, and of course was very busy, she found room to welcome people in. And not just children. My brother Tom and I were talking about when Vietnamese helicopter pilots were training at Fort at

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Hunter, she invited them into our home because she thought it was important for them to experience American families.

- 14:29:14:22 [Helen O'Brien]: And she, I'm sure she also felt like it was important for us to be exposed to that. When families from Vietnam relocated to Savannah, she took them in and she didn't take them in literally, but she befriended them. She helped them. So in little ways, she always did that. A very significant event that happened was when our middle brother, my brother John, was killed in a swimming accident on the river that we grew up on, which was once again, another time when her life was devastated. And of course, those tragedies, I guess they affect people in
- 14:29:51:08 different ways. As much as she was devastated by the loss of our brother John, it also helped her, I'm sure, to reflect on what's really important in life. How do I wanna live my life? What, what matters. So though all of that mattered to her, all of that was who she became in later years. But I think one of the most significant things that happened to her is that in the late eighties, she attended an a weekend that was sponsored by Pox
- 14:30:22:20 Christi, the Catholic Pox Christi, which is a Catholic peace organization. And this group had invited Father Emmanuel Charlie McCarthy, who's a Catholic priest, who's an Eastern-Rite Catholic priest, and actually had 12 children himself to come speak on Christian nonviolence. And in this weekend, he talks about the early te teachings of the church and before
- 14:30:45:19 cons, before 300, the Catholic church, the church, it wasn't the Catholic church at the time, the church was seen as based on the nonviolent teachings of Jesus. But once the church became part of the institution, then in Constantine in the three hundreds, then those teachings of Christian nonviolence got lost in the process. Before Constantine, you could not be a Christian and be a soldier after Constantine, you could not
- 14:31:13:17 be a soldier without being a Christian.
- 14:31:15:21 [Helen O'Brien]: So that influence on the church has had repercussions for centuries. So going back to those early teachings of the church confirmed some of those thoughts that my mother had always had. Like, how do we teach love your enemy? And yet we go to war. So I think that one weekend helped motivate her to feel the empowerment to, to speak out more, to act more. And shortly after that, we attended our first Feast
- 14:31:47:08 of Holy Innocence, which is a, a, a Catholic feast that happens after Christmas every year, which is in commemoration of when King Herod killed hundreds of

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young boys in an attempt to, to kill this threat of a a, a savior coming. So the Catholic Church celebrates that after Christmas. And there was for a number of years peace activist that gathered at St. Mary's, Georgia, where the nuclear submarine base was being constructed on this

14:32:18:05 marsh that looked so similar to the marsh that we grew up on, to build weapons, to be prepared to kill millions of people. So she felt a calling the first year to go to that after this McCarthy workshop. And so her activism kind of that if you had to have a benchmark that 1985 would've been a significant timeline in this progression that had happened in her

14:32:45:12 life that was now becoming more public than it had been before.

14:32:50:07 [Tom Kohler]: Now since you said St. Mary's, I don't want to jump ahead in the story here, but is it possible your mother was arrested?

14:32:57:03 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh gosh, yes. It is possible that our mother was arrested. It is fun sometimes to say things to my pe to friends that don't really know my past Oh yes. When my mother was in jail. So yes, she attended events at St. Mary's, which is in south southern Georgia, right above the Florida line for a couple different years. But in 1987 each year at, at these demonstrations, usually a few people would choose to attempt to walk on the base in attempt to dialogue with the commander of the base.

14:33:28:16 So how do we talk? Because I would think that in most cases, the commander of the base was also a Christian. So how do we as Christians prepare for war and live out the teachings of Jesus at the same time? So in conjunction with these demonstrations, people would also actually go talk to people in the community, actually not talk to people, but listen, because listening is such a powerful, a powerful tool that we don't often use. So we would listen to people in the community about their thoughts about

14:33:59:02 having this space in their community. And then hundreds of people would gather peacefully outside the gate, and a few people would choose to enter the gate. So she did on two occasions, violate the law of the state, maybe not the laws of God by attempting to enter the base. And the first time she was arrested and was just held for a few hours and released and the charges were dropped. But later on, she was again arrested and went on trial and spent some time in the, the facility in Camden County, Georgia with some

14:34:31:02 wonderful inmates who, who she made connections with. And just like she had done growing up, and just like she had done when she was raising children, she

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found people that she could love and connect to and listened to and hear their stories and, and befriend.

14:34:47:03 [Tom Kohler]: How old roughly was she when she went to jail?

14:34:49:02 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh goodness. Well, she was in her sixties. Yeah, yeah.

14:34:54:05 [Tom Kohler]: Good for her.

14:34:55:02 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes, absolutely. Yes. And I think she felt the freedom at that point, that her children had been raised. We were not dependent on her the way she felt like we had, well, not how she felt like, like we were for so many years. So I think she appreciated having that freedom to be able to choose for herself and to be able to act on what she knew to be right and not feel like I started to say, to not feel like there were consequences for other people. But of course there were consequences for other people. My father did not necessarily agree with her, her

14:35:28:07 actions, but an interesting story, my sister Maureen, had come home from Atlanta after this arrest, the first arrest had happened, and she was not part, I don't think she was particularly comfortable with Mama making the front page. And so she asked my father, well, what do you think about this going on? And, and Daddy said, yeah, he, he wasn't quite sure about it. And having his own CPA firm, he was, had some fear that some clients would tend to

14:35:56:11 choose to take their business to another CPA. So he did have some legitimate concerns, but at the time, my mother and father were sharing a Bible back and forth, they would take turns reading it. And my father said to Maureen as he put his hand on the Bible, but she's right. The more I read this, the more I understand that what she's doing is what Jesus calls us to do. So even though on a certain level he didn't necessarily approve of, he, I'm sure he would much prefer that the Spirit hadn't moved her in

14:36:25:23 that way. He could not, he could not complain. He, he, on some levels, really supported that she was following what she knew was what she was called to do. Yeah.

14:36:40:15 [Tom Kohler]: Tell me some other ways that your mom, your mother showed up in the broader Savannah community over time.

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- 14:36:45:21 [Helen O'Brien]: Yeah. Well, one of the ways she did it is she just stopped people on the street and met 'em and invited 'em into their house, her house for, for tea. And the next thing she was, you know, she was going to Germany to visit this woman. The woman was coming back to stay with her. She'd see a bulletin board at Sacred Heart that somebody needed, a young woman needed a room to rent while she came to SCAD for one semester. And the next thing you know, Gentry's moving in with mama. So that presence with people was certainly all through her life what she did.
- 14:37:16:17 But she also then went to work at the Social Apostolate and worked there as the assistant director first a sister Mary Therese Brown, and later was Sister Paulie O'Brien. So for many years she worked at the soup kitchen and the emergency assistance facility, bringing the light of Jesus to those who needed material help, but also the light of Jesus in the face of whoever they could encounter it in. Yeah. So in, and when we talk, and let me, 'cause I'm afraid I might figure
- 14:37:46:21 this too. One of the things she wasn't, she was never like an organizer kind of person, but later in her life, she did organize, I think it was called the, the inner, it was definitely an interfaith pilgrimage with the middle passage where people were recounting the middle passage where slaves were brought across the Atlantic Ocean. And there was this pilgrimage that worked all the way down the East coast and I think all the way down into Brazil. And she was the Savannah organizer for this event. So it was
- 14:38:18:07 probably the most public interfaith organizational thing that she did in her life. And that was brought about, she has some very good friends who were a Buddhist nun and a Buddhist monk. And they were involved in doing this. And she was very good friends with them for many years.
- 14:38:35:01 [Helen O'Brien]: And one of the culminations of her expanded spiritual understanding was a trip that she took to Japan with Itsumi brother Itsumi, this Buddhist monk where she met at different temples around Japan and brought a bit of Savannah to Japan and opened more deeply her understanding of spirituality. So part of her faith journey was understanding that this Catholic faith that I was immersed in can be so
- 14:39:07:09 much wider than that. She was very much open to people of other Christian denominations, but she was more and more open to other areas of spiritual and religious expression. She wasn't afraid. Her faith was not threatened by openness to other, other people and other religions. And I think we could see that grow in demonstratable ways as she aged.

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14:39:31:19 [Tom Kohler]: So when many people age, they begin to sort of pull back.

14:39:36:18 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh yeah,

14:39:38:02 [Tom Kohler]: Your mother did...

14:39:38:14 [Helen O'Brien]: Did the opposite. The opposite. Yes. That's exactly in talk, in talking to some of my siblings about this, and one of my brother-in-laws, who is only our brother-in-law, because my mother happened to meet him at Daily Mass and invited him home for breakfast, not ever imagining that he would one day become a son-in-law. But because he was this, this nice young man who she wanted to know better, she had such curiosity for all people. But yes, just the opposite. And so many people become more insular as their age. And Mary O'Brien did the exact opposite.

14:40:09:09 Her life expanded in any way it could as she aged. She was very courageous in a, in a low key kind of courageous way, I guess, because it's very threatening to many people to go beyond what is comfortable, what it's known. But that was not her experience at all.

14:40:27:22 [Tom Kohler]: Well, just to say the idea of welcoming the stranger.

14:40:30:06 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh yeah.

14:40:31:02 [Tom Kohler]: I mean, it seems to me that would be what she was instinctively called to do. She just welcomed the stranger?

14:40:39:15 [Helen O'Brien]: She welcomed the stranger on many an opportunity. And she told me later in my life and later in her life, that she knew what her purpose in life was. She said her purpose in life was to connect people together. And she did that on every opportunity. A lot of times it was connecting her with that person, but then it would expand to, oh, well, well, Tom, you need to know this person. And so that was part of the way that she lived out her faith. Not that she was ever saying, here I

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- 14:41:10:21 am as a Christian too. It just came from who she was. The spirit inside of her, the love that was deeply rooted in her, was available to all people. And if it meant she welcomed the stranger, so be it. She also knew that her life was enriched by that. It was not a sacrificial thing. She was not, she was not a sacrificial person. She was about enjoying life. And she knew that her life was richer from each of those relations or most of those
- 14:41:42:10 relationships. There were a few that even taxed Mary O'Brien, but it was well worth the risk because of the joy and the delight that she received from those interactions with people.
- 14:41:54:08 [Tom Kohler]: And then, does the name Dorothy O'Neill?
- 14:41:57:20 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh gosh, yes, Tom. It does, yes. Okay. That's my connection with you. Tom goes back to Dorothy O'Neill, who you introduced me to early on, and I was an advocate for her for a short amount of time before my mother took over my responsibility. My took over the friendship there with Dorothy, and certainly was a friend to Dorothy for many years. Yes.
- 14:42:21:06 [Tom Kohler]: And Ed Fogarty was tied into that in some way?
- 14:42:23:02 [Helen O'Brien]: Ed Fogarty was some Yes, I think so, yes.
- 14:42:26:00 [Tom Kohler]: That's your point about connection.
- 14:42:27:04 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh my gosh, yes. Yes, absolutely. Yes. Yes. If she could make a connection, she was all about it.
- 14:42:34:03 [Tom Kohler]: And then, do you mind if we shift a little bit? The, I I've just written down the, I've been talking, I've written down the word hospitality.
- 14:42:42:16 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh gosh. Yeah.

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- 14:42:44:17 [Tom Kohler]: I mean, the notion of you, the front door to your house was a bit of an open, an investment where it was an open front door, not, not just the family came through that, that front door. Many different people came through that front door.
- 14:42:56:17 [Helen O'Brien]: We owned no keys to that door. We, I don't think, I don't think anybody owned a key to that door. I, I mean, we never locked our door. We never locked the door to our house. I was in a sociology class one time at Armstrong, and they talked about how life had changed and how, you know, you know, it used to be a time when people didn't lock their door. And I said, well, we, we don't lock the door to our house. And they like, you don't. And I was like, no. And somebody said, where do you live? And I'm like, oh, well, nevermind. But yeah, I don't, I mean, I don't, I don't know that we ever, I mean, somebody maybe had a key
- 14:43:27:04 to that door, but it was never locked. Well, because with 11 people living in a house, somebody was probably always home.
- 14:43:32:12 [Helen O'Brien]: Well, I shouldn't say that. The door was locked from the inside when some of us were not home in our curfew time. And the door might get locked to teach us a lesson. But yes, there was always people in our home. I once met a woman in Colorado who was from Florida, who it turned out had slept in my bed in Savannah. But she and I had never met. And when my mother was so excited to tell my father this story, my father said, well, when you consider all the people who have slept in this house, it's not really all that surprising. So yes, as hospitality was
- 14:44:07:10 absolutely an important priority for her.
- 14:44:12:18 [Tom Kohler]: And then there's a distinction between sort of good works and social justice.
- 14:44:19:21 [Helen O'Brien]: Mm, yes.
- 14:44:21:07 [Tom Kohler]: How would your mother think about that?

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- 14:44:24:15 [Helen O'Brien]: I don't know that, I don't know that she would say this, but there was a wonderful Brazilian priest, Dom Hilder Kamara, and he once said, I feed the poor. And they call me a saint. I, I, I ask why the poor are poor, and they call me a communist. So I don't know that that exactly answers your question, but there are certain good works that you do, and people think, oh, how good of you to do that? You are doing what you're supposed to do. But if you question a system or you go against
- 14:44:58:08 what's acceptable, or you just get outta line a little bit, it makes people uncomfortable as Jesus made people very uncomfortable. So social justice often involves pushing the limits a little bit, asking hard questions, bucking the system. And she became more comfortable with that. The older she got, she really felt that people were all connected.
- 14:45:24:23 [Helen O'Brien]: She, she wore a little pin with the earth that set all one people, and she would hand these little stickers out to people. And she felt like that was an important message that we don't, we don't, we don't create boundaries between people that all people are loved by God. And so if we talk about people who aren't deserving or people who are our enemy, or people who it's acceptable to bomb, we have lost sight of that, all one people. So I think if there was one thing that she, well, I guess I
- 14:45:54:22 shouldn't guess that, because she handed these stickers out to everybody. That's that aspect of all one people was so important to her. And social justice, I would say this, the basis of social justice is an understanding that all people are valued and all people are important, and we are, our lives are all connected. That if you think somebody else's misery is not connected to your own, you've lost sight of something important.
- 14:46:23:13 [Tom Kohler]: And then when I think about hospitality, I think of you,
- 14:46:26:16 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh,
- 14:46:27:13 [Tom Kohler]: Do you mind talking about some of the ways that you've shown up in the world?

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- 14:46:31:12 [Helen O'Brien]: Well, one of the things that's a beautiful gift for me is that I think my mother deeply influenced me. And there may have been some small ways in which I was able to influence her and that we could grow together in some ways. She introduced me. I, I had a real sense at one point in my life that I was supposed to work with the poor. And she said, oh, well then you should read Dorothy Day, who was an amazing Catholic woman who came to Catholic faith through an interesting road, through
- 14:47:02:08 social activism and many interesting avenues early, early in the 19 hundreds. And I started reading Dorothy Day and I said, I don't wanna read anything more about Dorothy Day, because she was way too radical. And she went to jail, and I'm going to stay away as far away from Dorothy Day as I can. But the spirit in Dorothy Day plagued my life.
- 14:47:22:00 [Helen O'Brien]: And I read more about this woman who was one of the people, one of the two people who started something called the Catholic Worker Movement in the 1930s in New York City when there was many homeless men, especially living on the streets of New York City. And they started soup kitchens and housing. And I very bravely said that I'd be very happy to join a Catholic worker house in Savannah if somebody else would start it, because I figured that was really safe. Nobody was going to start a Catholic worker house in Savannah until Father Liam Collins ran into a, a,
- 14:47:54:14 a brother who had just left a Catholic worker house. And he invited him to come to Savannah so they could start a Catholic worker house. So there I was caught in my own words and said, I guess I better be part of this. So a small group of us started a, what's called a Catholic worker house in Savannah on the corner of 34th and East Broad. At that time, it was known as Hazard County. I'm proud to say it looks very different today than it did those, we, we happen to go into that building yesterday, which is now still run by the Union Mission years later. But the
- 14:48:25:20 neighborhood's very different. And we offered hospitality to people who showed up and needed a place to live. And Mama was very supportive of that, and very much a helper in that. And she would show up. We would have mass there three nights a week, and she would often show up for mass. She would help come help with the hospitality there. She would bring her granddaughter there. So yes, she was a great help and a great support in that hospitality work.
- 14:48:50:21 [Tom Kohler]: And then in my memory, Roseanne Kylie?

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- 14:48:54:00 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes. Roseanne Kylie was... So Brother Bob and Roseanne Kylie and I were the three who, who's lived in the house for a good many years with, like I say, father Liam Collins was a huge part of that happening. We lived in a building that had been, there was a, a, a nun sister, oh my goodness. Sister, sister Carmen, who was also a medical doctor. It had been her medical building before she allowed to use it, use it for the Catholic worker house. It had no windows in the building 'cause they had drugs in the, in the medical office. So we did live in a, a room
- 14:49:28:22 with no windows in it, which had its challenges. That was only one of the many challenges of living in that house. Yeah.
- 14:49:36:20 [Tom Kohler]: And, and then how long did you do that? And then what, what kind of, what have you gone on to through the years
- 14:49:41:06 [Helen O'Brien]: Ago? Okay. Yes. So we did the ca. So Roseanne and Brother Bob and I ran the Catholic Worker house for a few years, and then Roseanne moved on to some other things, and Brother Bob moved on to some other things. And then another friend, my future husband, Tom Gagnan, came to help us out with the Catholic Worker House for a number of months. And another friend moved in to help with it. But after a while, Tom and I were planning to get married and move outta Savannah. And there was not anybody who was willing to take over the work. So the house was closed, which was a very, very painful experience to have to close this house of
- 14:50:14:16 hospitality. But as I mentioned, eventually the Union mission took over that building first for an AIDS, an AIDS home for men suffering with AIDS. And it's still continuing to be used for hospitality. So that is encouraging in that sense. Tom and I then eventually moved up to Northeast Georgia where Tom, my husband, for many years, built, was the lead carpenter with Habitat for Humanity. And so that brought us to Northeast
- 14:50:40:03 Georgia where we live today.
- 14:50:42:15 [Tom Kohler]: And has your activism, your personal activism continued there?
- 14:50:48:19 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes. In smaller ways, I guess I've tried in some ways to also live out my mother's example of trying to be present to people. Mama told us, I was telling this to someone in our family recently, she said, you can't be too busy if you're busy. People don't, you know, you don't, people feel like you don't have

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time for 'em. But if you say, I'm not busy, I'm here. How can I help you? What do you need? Or just to hear people's stories. 'cause so often people just need to be heard. They just need to, they just need to be heard. So that's one of the ways I try to

14:51:21:18 live out her life. And now that I'm retired, it's so much easier to say, I'm not in a hurry. What do you need? So ways like that. We've certainly been involved in our community and some small outreach things. We do try to vigil on our, the little square in Clarksville has a gazebo. And we do try to have a very quiet witness anytime there's an execution in Georgia. But we haven't been as actively involved in direct peace activities as we might

14:51:49:03 have been years before. Yeah.

14:51:51:03 [Tom Kohler]: Were you just, were, were you, you were in the gazebo, what, two weeks ago?

14:51:54:20 [Helen O'Brien]: We were, unfortunately, yes. Yes. Mr. Pi. Mr. Pi from sa We thought of him as we came through Sparta on the way home to Savannah this week. Yeah. Once again, the injustice of a system, not that he may not have been guilty of, of the murder of a, a young woman, but the injust injustice of a system where a man who has limited mental capacities is executed when in most states of the union, that would not be Georgia's limit. Georgia's criteria is much stricter than other states. Yes.

14:52:28:23 Mary O'Brien would've been there with us if she was alive.

14:52:33:09 [Tom Kohler]: Yes. Yes, she would. Are there other things that you would like to say about your mother that we've not been able to kinda Mm. I've not given you a, a jumping off spot.

14:52:44:19 [Helen O'Brien]: Yeah. Let me think for just a second. I think I've said this, but I have to say it again. That the most significant thing is, I've talked to my siblings about this, which has been a fun way for all of us to kind of share. Mama. The thing that comes out again and again with, with the siblings and also with the in-laws, is her presence to people that she was very present when you were talking to her. You felt like you were the most important person in the world. And that gift of presence is, is such a remarkable gift. It's a simple gift, but it's a gift

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- 14:53:19:14 that's often lacking in our world. And there just that sense of being attentive to valuing a person was the essence of who she was. A lot of her activism grew out of that. Public displays of that faith grew out of that deep desire to respect and to support and to love all people. So if we could say one thing that was most encapsulated who she was, was the fact
- 14:53:47:10 that she was loved. Not only did she have that intrinsic knowledge of God's love for her, but she was nurtured in a loving family. She shared that with her children. She shared that with the world, and that was her gift to the world.
- 14:54:02:17 [Tom Kohler]: Thank you.
- 14:54:03:13 [Helen O'Brien]: Thank you. It's, thank you for giving us a chance to talk about our mother. Oh
- 14:54:07:18 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah. Believe me. I was excited about it. Yeah. Yeah. She was an inspiration to me. Yeah. Good. Is the technical side of this okay?
- 14:54:18:15 [Eric Darling]: Very good. Okay.
- 14:54:19:16 [Tom Kohler]: Very good.
- 14:54:21:18 [Helen O'Brien]: Is that what y'all wanted?
- 14:54:23:08 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah. I think, is that what y'all wanted? I'm good. That good?
- 14:54:26:16 [Helen O'Brien]: What you wanted, Anne?>
- 14:54:27:21 [Eric Darling]: Do you want to add the question about the ed, you know, from the children's education perspective, if there was something that she could sort of frame in that?

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- 14:54:37:07 [Helen O'Brien]: Okay. Hold on just a second. Ann, anything that you wanna add that we didn't cover? Tom?
- 14:54:41:06 [Ann]: I really don't think so. I was kind of pulling this out that, that Jean and Pat had come up with, but I don't think we necessarily need to use it as a quote.
- 14:54:48:22 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh, I'm, but I figured just
- 14:54:50:22 [Ann]: If you wanted it, it's here
- 14:54:52:20 [Helen O'Brien]: And I have it right here. So, and what I was trying to remember was David Brooks', what did David Brooks say? Did, did, did you put that, or did Pat and Jean put that? Oh, I didn't put David Brooks. Hold on. David Brooks author David Brooks from the Yeah. Says, attention is a moral act. And I think that's pretty powerful, isn't it? But I couldn't remember exactly what it was. So if you want me to say that, I can. But the other quote that Anne's talking about is, 'cause this
- 14:55:25:23 is so much a part of who she was, every human being is a mystery that must be learned slowly reverently with care, tenderness and pain, and has never learned completely. So she actually had co and maybe we should say this, 'cause she copied that from Sister Mary Teresa Brown. We're not sure exactly who the quote is from, but she copied that for people and handed that to them. So that was part because she, she quite often had these little index cards of things she would want people to, that she would quote, write quotes and handle to people. And so this, I didn't remember
- 14:55:57:02 that. This, I didn't know that this was one of hers. So if, if that's important to say that we could, let's get that, we can include that. Yes. And I'm sorry, the question about the education.
- 14:56:06:10 [Eric Darling]: Oh, so what we're doing is we're, we're presenting a website from this material. We're culling the material down, of course, but we'll be producing a website for educational purposes for middle school, roughly middle school aged students. And so we're sort of asking our participants in the interviews to sort of weigh in on if they, if there was a message that they would like to share Oh. To,

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to share with them the importance of the understanding of a wider view from an interfaith

14:56:38:06 perspective, why it's important that they consider that, or that they make themselves more aware of that. Okay.

14:56:43:12 [Helen O'Brien]: Just

14:56:43:23 [Eric Darling]: In general terms? Yes. And in your own thoughts and words.

14:56:47:02 [Helen O'Brien]: Okay.

14:56:48:04 [Eric Darling]: But of course, tell, tell Tom instead of me.

14:56:52:03 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes. Yeah. So Tom, if you'll feed me a line that I can do that I can segue into this quote. Yes. Okay. And for,

14:57:01:07 [Eric Darling]: For that section, you can feel free to hold that too. Okay. I think the sound will be better if you

14:57:05:03 [Helen O'Brien]: Do that. Okay, great. Okay. Whenever y'all want me to do whatever.

14:57:13:22 [Tom Kohler]: Well, looking, looking back, were there any particular, like guideposts or any particular well guideposts that your, that your mother seemed to kinda have as her kind of almost like a, a north star as she moved through the world?

14:57:30:00 [Helen O'Brien]: Well, I would say scripture was that for her, but she also had this habit and of quotes that meant a lot to her. She would write 'em on index card. She might have 'em on her mirror in the bathroom, but she not, didn't keep on to

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herself. She would copy different quotes and hand them out to different ones of us or her way of spreading her message throughout. But one of the ones that my, my brother and sister-in-law remembered that she had gotten this quote, and I'm sorry to say, I don't know who the quote is to be attributed to, but she had gotten this from her very dear friend, sister Mary Therese Brown. And she copied

14:58:03:01 it for herself and for other people. And the quote is that every human being is a mystery that must be learned slowly reverently with care, tenderness and pain, and is never learned completely. I think that embodies a lot of what she's was striving to do in her life, was to to be that person who carefully and tenderly knew people. And she wanted that for

14:58:30:06 other people. So it was her way when she handed us these cards, we knew this is something she thought was important enough for us to pay attention to.

14:58:38:08 [Tom Kohler]: Well, that, that, so now we're talking about your mother, obviously as a teacher.

14:58:42:15 [Helen O'Brien]: She was, she was

14:58:43:14 [Tom Kohler]: A good teaching tool

14:58:45:05 [Helen O'Brien]: If you'll,

14:58:46:12 [Tom Kohler]: And we'll be using a teaching tool unbelievably, we'll be using the internet and putting a website together to gather, to help people look at all this work that we've done. I would wonder if your mother were with us and we were thinking about helping young children, junior high school, teenage children, high school children, look at the world and she was going to try to help those young people look at the world and think why it would be important to reach out beyond one's own bubble

14:59:20:01 and see the bigger world and see people who come from different faiths and, and, and think about how to be present to those people. What do you think she would say?

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- 14:59:31:23 [Helen O'Brien]: Oh, I think the first thing she would say, and she loved young people. She loved all people, but she really enjoyed young people. I think the first thing she would say is that it is a gift to yourself. It is fun to know other people. It enriches your life to know other people that you already know yourself somewhat, and you know those people around you, but your life can be so rich and so full by taking that little bit of courage to go beyond yourself, to sometimes be in those
- 15:00:03:03 situations that are uncomfortable. She didn't take herself too seriously. She, and so, which sometimes you make a little bit of a fool of yourself, and she was okay with that. So I think she would encourage people to not take yourself too seriously, be willing to learn from others. 'cause it's a gift to yourself. Your life will be better.
- 15:00:23:07 [Helen O'Brien]: It's not a sacrificial thing. She would also, I think in this day and age, when I'm, we're all aware of how easy it is on in uncomfortable situations to pull out a device, which blocks that interaction that we might have. And as much as she certainly used technology and pushed her understanding and her familiarity with that, she would also, I think, say that that can be a block to this richness that we can have by being in interaction with others. And she also knew that the
- 15:00:57:00 more she learned about other people and other cultures and other religions, it helped her to be a better, a better Mary O'Brien, I guess. Because it just expanded her understanding of so many things. So I would say that Mary would say the best gift you can give yourself is an openness to other people and an openness to expanding your horizons. And to not be afraid.
- 15:01:23:23 Not be afraid. Yeah.
- 15:01:26:20 [Tom Kohler]: Good lesson.
- 15:01:27:18 [Helen O'Brien]: Yes. Yeah. I'm still learning it.
- 15:01:31:04 [Tom Kohler]: Well, we all, well thank you again. Yeah. Thank you.
- 15:01:34:10 [Helen O'Brien]: Thank you very much. Yeah, you're welcome. Yeah. Yeah.

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15:01:38:05 [Eric Darling]: As you stand, watch your head

15:01:39:06 [Helen O'Brien]: There. Oh, thank you very much. Ann, Tom, we good? (Ann: It could have been any better.) Oh, I don't know about that, but it was fun to do. Thank you.

15:01:45:19 [Tom Kohler]: Oh my gosh. Made it so easy.