

Interviewer: Nicole Morin-Scribner
Interviewee: Sister Viola Lausier
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Transcriber: Elizabeth Mutina

NMS: It is Monday, November 5th, 2018. We are at the Sisters of Good Shepherd Convent, on Pool St. I am Nicole Morin-Scribner, a volunteer with the Biddeford Cultural and Heritage Center. Also in the room is Diane Cyr, who is the organization's president. Today, we have the honor of interviewing Sister Viola...how do you say your last name?

VL: Lausier [LO-zee ay]. The "au" is like "o"

NMS: Thank you for agreeing to meet with us today, Sister Viola. Can you tell us the date you were born?

SVL: July 21st, 1924

NMS: Where were you born?

SVL: In Grand Isle Maine

NMS: Were you born at a hospital?

SVL: No, at home

NMS: And who did the delivery

SVL: Dr. Faucher

NMS: Was that the norm back then, to be born at home?

SVL: Yes, yes

NMS: And the doctor did the home deliveries?

SVL: Oh yes, he did

NMS: Tell me the story about how your family came to Biddeford. SVL: My family never came to Biddeford before I entered the convent. When I entered, it was on 69 Adams Street. That was where we received our formation. After we made our first vows, we went to Québec for a year. After that year, we were assigned for a ministry. I was assigned to be a teacher in Massachusetts. I was then sent to St. Ann's Home in Methuen. This was an orphanage and later we helped to turn it into a home for emotionally disturbed children. It's still existing and they did so well continuing our work and adding to it. Right now, if you study psychology, they're going to send you there for an internship. They're doing very well. I had worked with the State of Massachusetts while at St. Ann's, so they sent me to Saint Andre's 33 years ago. Because I had worked with the State system, and they were having a hard time with the State of Maine to get funds, they thought I would help and I was happy to do it. I don't blame them if they do something wrong, but I proved it to them by report. I was very active with congress and legislation. This is how St. Andre's got help. I would tell them everything that was going on especially during a hard time... and then they would support us. The first one who helped us get funds from the State was Senator John Cox from Bangor with the approval of Governor Curtis.

St. Andre's started on Pool Road. In the '70s and society changed. They accepted

pregnant young women, much more than they did before. The Sisters did a very good study to change the way that we gave services. They went to the State to start group homes. We were given an allocation through the Aid to Dependent Children Institute. Then the Sisters bought 3 group homes: one in Bangor, one in Lewiston and one in Biddeford. Biddeford was always for pregnant women. In Bangor it was also pregnant women, but also for emergencies. In Lewiston, it was for troubled teens. It was interesting.

I like helping these young women. When I was at the office, they used to come and show me their babies. I had encouraged them. They always knew that I liked babies so they would come so I could hold them. I really enjoyed working with them. For Christmas, people would ask what we would need, and I would always say baby clothes. I had fixed the garage with all baby clothes so if one needed something after they left, they would call me, come, and I would give them what they needed. Even the social worker at the State would call me to say "I have this girl who has nothing". But the most important time, I'll never forget, this grandmother called me and her granddaughter was pregnant, and she said "You know, we can't give that baby away. I'm willing to help her, but I don't have one thing. I don't have one thing!" I said "Don't worry, I'll fix everything what you need for a baby. Then

I'll call you and you can send someone to pick it up". The grandmother did that. A couple years after, she came to show me the baby. She was so thankful! You never

know when people need help. We have to encourage them to be a good mother! This is the most important, because if you don't show them how to be a good mother, the baby's going to suffer. There are so many things we have to show a mother to help the child. I really enjoyed all the 33 years I helped. I was in finance but, I was always helping the birth mothers.

NMS: I wondered about that, even though you were the Finance Director whether.... Did you, you didn't start as the Finance Director? When you first started working for St. Andre's you started as the Finance Director? SVL: Yes, that's what I was in Massachusetts. When they took me out of teaching, they put me in finance because I knew how to work with the State system. *NMS: I was going to ask you about that because you have a very interesting progression of your career. So you started with teaching, is that something you had a personal interest in?*

SVL: Well at that time, the community was all teaching. So, if you entered you were sure you were going to teach. I liked that because it was working with children. I taught in Massachusetts. The only place I taught in Maine was North Caribou. We had started Sacred Heart School. They had closed 7 little country schools in the back settlement. It lasted quite a few years after I left, but then it

closed. You had to help these children as they came from all different schools.

When we merged, we didn't teach one grade, it was 3 grades. I had 3rd, 4th and 5th, the first time I went there. The second time was 6th, 7th and 8th. It's a whole thing

to organize! The 5th grade, you're going to have them one year but the other ones you have two years. So you have to make sure you don't repeat. It was interesting to teach that way.

When I left, North Caribou, they transferred me to St. Anne's in Lawrence. The pastor didn't want to open two other classrooms, so he said, "She comes from North Caribou. She knows combined classes, so we'll open only one class." It was 5th and 6th grade. They had never had that school experience. For children who learn fast, you can interest the children to really listen to the other class. It's a learning experience for all of them.

NMS: Now did you find a big difference in the communities where you went to teach? Like, Lawrence, or when you were teaching, were the communities very different?

SVL: No. People were very helpful. I think in Caribou the parents were more interested in school than in Lawrence.

NMS: Now tell me something about Grand Isle, I'm not that familiar with it. What is Grand Isle like compared to Biddeford?

SVL: It's a small town. We knew everyone. We lived near the Saint John River. It's a little bit like my room here, I see the river. It was about the same length from our house at home to the river. We lived between the river and the railroad track. My

mother was very strict, “Don’t go near the river!” and ‘Don’t cross the track without permission!” One of my little brothers wasn’t in school yet. He crossed the track without my mother knowing it. So, when he came back she said “Where have you been? So, you crossed the track?” “Yes.” “Well, you know the punishment. You’re going to have to go downstairs in the cellar and sit on that bench.” So, he went. Of course he was crying, and all of the sudden he stopped crying. I remember we opened the door. He was sitting on his bench eating donuts. My mother had made donuts while we were in school and he knew where they were, so he was eating donuts! Yeah [laughing]

NMS: That sounds like a good punishment!

SVL: Yeah, you never know. This was always something that was very serious, for us to cross the railroad track.

NMS: Now is Grand Isle a French community?

SVL: Yes. The only Englishman was the policeman. Because there was a ferry that crossed to Canada, you always had to report to the police. There were protestants. Their children came to school at 9 o’clock because we had permission to teach religion in this school at 8:30. They were part of us. If there was something in

church, they’d come. That was the only exciting thing that happened for them as the town was so small. But we had a good school though, and a church. *NMS:*

Did you speak French at home?

SVL: Oh yes.

NMS: Just French?

SVL: Yeah.

NMS: When did you start speaking English?

SVL: Well in school we learned English little bit. And then later on in high school it was more English.

NMS: Was it encouraged? To speak, to keep the French?

SVL: It wasn't forbidden to speak English. The parents were happy. Knowing two languages is always useful and it didn't make any difference. I had a brother who went to the University of Wisconsin and had his doctorate in French. During World War II, he was a French interpreter. My other brother graduated from Marquette University of Wisconsin and UCLA of California. He was a Russian interpreter during World War II. So, language was easy for them. I only have French and English.

NMS: Now, so when you moved from Grand Isle to Biddeford, was that a difficult transition?

SVL: Well I was leaving my family and at that time, we didn't visit our family. I didn't visit my family for 7 years, that was serious. And I have a baby sister that was born after I entered the convent. I think she was like 4 years old when I met

her. Things like that did happen.

NMS: When did you decide to become a Sister?

SVL: Oh, this was always... because I knew they had a mission to take care of children. This was the important thing, taking care of children. Because at that time I don't remember [them having a home for] pregnant women. I'm sure there were some. But at that time, the family covered that. I was really interested in the children. In school I used to help the teacher with the little ones. *NMS: So, that's what you envisioned when you decided to make?* SVL: Yes, that is correct.

NMS: Now there are a lot of different orders of Sisters. Why did you choose Good Shepherd Sisters?

SVL: Oh yes! Well I had two aunts that were Daughters of Wisdom. One was a missionary and the other one was a chef. But they used to say we served the same God, don't worry! I had an uncle who was a priest. and he was the first priest that went to Papua, New Guinea. Rome had asked their community to send someone. For two years, one of them went to Washington to learn all the laws of that country. My uncle went to meet the people, but there was always a policeman that

went with him because they were cannibals. You never know. I always had the support of these aunts and uncle, but they were always saying "Don't worry." I have a sister who is a Presentation Sister. She liked the Presentation and she entered there.

NMS: So how did you find out about the Good Shepherds Sisters? Were there any up there?

SVL: They came, I think it had to be the freshman class. The pastor had asked the general leadership for Sisters and the Good Shepherd Sisters came to live in the convent. That was how we met the Good Shepherds.

NMS: At Grand Isle there were some Good Shepherds Sisters...

SVL: In Grand Isle, yeah.

I did the most teaching in Methuen. They had Saint Theresa School where I was principal and teacher for a good number of years. We had the children from the orphanage and the parish. You really have to be a good teacher to merge cultures. We were the first school to have a colored child. We had prepared the classes about colored children and their whole history. Everybody was so eager! We hadn't told them what classes they would be in, but, they were accepted! *NMS: Because I imagine, growing up in Grand Isle, you weren't exposed to a lot of diversity...?*

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SVL: No! The first time that they saw a colored person, was when the airbase started in Limestone. Before that, there was none. So, this is how history goes.

NMS: I go back to when you decided to become a Sister, you said back then you weren't allowed to see your family. So how did your family react when you

announced you wanted to be a Sister?

SVL: Oh they were supportive because we had the aunts and the uncles. They knew that different communities have different rules so ... it was different. But they accepted that.

NMS: That must have been difficult for you too, because were you close with your family?

SVL: Oh yes, I used to miss the little ones. Five of them were born after I entered the convent, but there's no difference in communication. I come from a family of 16.

NMS: What's that like?

SVL: Well we didn't have to invite too many people. The house was always full! But my mother was a home-ec. teacher, so she knew how to organize. Every Saturday, we received the list of what we were going to do the following week, and if we didn't do the thing right the previous week, somebody's gonna be on your back. She was a very good mother to teach us.

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NMS: Can you remember some of the traditions your family had when you were still living at home?

SVL: Well, aunts and uncles from the family always liked to come home. On Sunday, the house was more than full, and my mother would cook and keep them

for supper. So, we'd always say "Now who's gonna come next Sunday?" We have Sister Dorina, who's here at the convent. Her family came every Sunday of the year. We had children about the same age, so we would play together. We were a very close family, on both sides; my mother's side and my father's side. That makes a difference.

NMS: What did you guys do for fun as a family?

SVL: Ah! We were great singers. My father was a member of the choir. He would rock the baby and practice his Gregorian chant. So, we learned all of the Gregorian chants. And when all the uncles and aunts got together, they used to play cards and sing. I remember, how we did sing!

NMS: Any special foods you remember? There was a lot of cooking? SVL: Oh yes. Well the regular. It was always very tasty. I'm not fussy, so I liked everything she did. On Sundays my father used to cook the Sunday dinner. It used to be a roast with potatoes and vegetables.

NMS: Your father used to cook the Sunday dinner?

SVL: Yup, that is correct.

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NMS: Gave your mother a break?

SVL: Yes that's true. We used to go to an early mass and he used to go to the second mass so he could start the dinner before.

NMS: What were holidays like?

SVL: Oh, we had decorations on holidays. There was always something special for holidays that she would do. Christmas... I guess we were a big family because she never decorated the Christmas tree before the night before. Not like today, they start at Thanksgiving, but it was the night before. At Christmas we saw the lovely Christmas tree and all the gifts. The gifts were usually clothes. She was a very good seamstress.

NMS: Did you go to midnight mass?

SVL: Not when we were young. My father used to be the one that sang “*Minuit Chrétien*”. I was about maybe 13 or 14 when I went to the midnight mass. Children usually didn’t go. If you were 13 or 14 you could.

NMS: Did your family come visit you when you were here in Biddeford?

SVL: Yes.

NMS: Once they changed it so you could see your family?

SVL: Yes, that is correct. My father worked for the railroad, so they had a free ticket on the railroad at that time.

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NMS: Now let’s see, so when you first moved to Biddeford you were at the Adams St. Convent you said?

SVL: That’s when I entered and also years later when I was assigned to St. Andre. After they sold the convent, I was at Fitzbach on Elm St.

NMS: Now how big was your class when you entered the convent?

SVL: To teach?

NMS: When you joined the Sisters?

SVL: We were 14, and 12 who stayed. We're still two living and we're both here at the Pool Road convent. The oldest one, Sister Estelle Leblanc is 97. I'm 94.

NMS: That's pretty amazing!

SVL: Yeah

NMS: How do you feel that the Sisters were--- what was the reception of the Sisters in Biddeford? Do you feel that they were welcomed?

SVL: Oh yeah, they were very happy to have these young people come in. Only on certain holidays could we be with them to celebrate. We were a young group living together on the same property.

NMS: Because you happened to live through some of the major events in history you know like, World War I and World War II...

SVL: No, World War II.

NMS: World War II, rather

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SVL: Because that's the day. We entered in August and World War II started in December. So, we had all these rules to obey [note: air raid drills]. The bell would ring, the lights were off and we had to go down to a basement room kept closed, so they wouldn't see any light. I remember we had to bring some water...to make

sure we had water if there was a fire.

NMS: Were you here in Biddeford during that time?

SVL: Yes. I remember in the middle of the night, during air raid drills, we had to get up and stay in that room until the city alarm rang for the end of the drill. *NMS: Were there any shortages in terms of supplies or food. Or anything like that?* SVL: Oh yeah at that time, sugar and butter, and all these things that you needed to have a special paper. Whoever did the buying had the problem, we didn't. *NMS: I heard that there were some lines, so they're the ones that had to stand in line. Now were you here...when I understand there was a big fire in 1947?* SVL: No, I wasn't here, I was in Massachusetts.

NMS: Okay and let's see, are there any other major events that happened through time that you feel had a really big impact on the Sisters?

SVL: We always felt bad to sell the convent on 69 Adams. And later, it was on fire. Some went to see that fire because they had lived there. That affected a lot of people.

NMS: That must have hurt.

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SVL: Yeah, yeah.

NMS: Because you lived there how many years?

SVL: Well I lived there at least three years to start and a good number of years later. The people, and Sisters from Biddeford, remember that space. Our Novitiate

was that special house.

NMS: Now this is taking a couple of steps back, but so you went to school yourself... you started out in Grand Isle?

SVL: Yeah at Lincoln School

NMS: Okay, and what was that like?

SVL: I remember my teachers. When I was working at St. Ann, my kindergarten teacher came to visit me. Everybody was so surprised to see she was my kindergarten teacher! Yeah, we had very good teachers, men and women. We had Sisters only as freshmen and sophomores. We didn't have the other two [juniors and seniors]. We had to go to Madawaska or Van Buren or St. Agathe. But I didn't go to any of those. Then when I entered the convent, American School in Chicago helped us to get our two last years. Some years later, I received a Bachelor's degree from Dominican College in Racine, Wisconsin. I then took summer courses, especially in management and cost accounting, from Notre Dame University in Indiana. Education is never done.

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NMS: It must have been a little bit of a transition going from a little school near Grand Isle to some of these bigger places?

SVL: Well I like school, so it doesn't make a difference where I go. My brothers left Grand Isle and went to California and Wisconsin. Those were big places, but

they did well! So that means we had very good teachers in Grand Isle. *NMS: Is it your parents or the school or both that really encouraged you to 'Hey whatever you want to do, you can do it'?*

SVL: My mother was saying, "This is the way we do things. If you think you can do it better, go ahead!" It was very challenging and whatever we chose, she helped us.

NMS: But it didn't seem like... there was an expectation that you were to stay close and that you were limited.

SVL: Oh no, no. I was the only girl with 7 boys, so I was all dressed to kill. I had the latest style, and maman always looked in the Spiegel magazine and would dress me up with those latest styles. But she only had one girl at that time. *NMS: She must have found it difficult when you left home to go to school...?* SVL: Well, yes because that's when my first sister was born. But then, none of my clothes that she had kept fit the others.

NMS: Did you find it a difficult transition when you were in college? Was it very difficult?

SVL: No, no. I guess if you're interested in education, it doesn't make a difference where you are.

NMS: When you were saying you started in teaching, because the order had you all start as teachers, and then they threw something completely different at you...

SVL: Well yeah!

NMS: What was that like?

SVL: Well, they'd say "You're organized!" "You would be good in management and finance, you know business and so forth" so, that's how they put me there. If I needed help in Massachusetts, I was dealing with the Boston Bishop, so I could get help from them. When I left, I came to Biddeford. Whoever they had hired [back in Massachusetts] didn't work out and things were all mixed up. Cardinal Cushing asked me to go [back] and correct that so they could hire somebody else. I had done a good job, I guess.

NMS: You weren't intimidated by having to deal with these...?

SVL: No, no. With Cardinal Cushing. But you never knew what he would do. One time we had the board of directors meeting. I had prepared a nice lunch. So here he comes and says, "I want some hard candy!" I said, "Oh my God, where am I going to get hard candy?" But you never knew what he would ask, but he was very good Bishop and later became a Cardinal.

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NMS: Because I've heard you say that you really liked working with children, when they asked you to get in an office and deal with all these figures, did you still find a way to stay connected?

SVL: Well at St. Ann's it was an orphanage.

NMS: Okay...

SVL: So, I had to make sure the care of the children was excellent.

NMS: You had to do some of those duties too?

SVL: Oh yes. I always had time for them. They knew if they needed something they'd come and see me. "Go see Sister Vi, she's gonna give it to you." *NMS:*

She's the one with the purse strings as well!

Were there any big cultural differences in terms of, when you were in the communities of Lawrence or Methuen versus Biddeford. How is Lawrence and Biddeford similar or different?

SVL: Well it was teaching, but when I came to St. Andre's it was completely different because it was social work. But you know, employees get together...and help each other.

NMS: Are the cities very different, you know as a community? What's it like to live in Biddeford vs. Lawrence?

SVL: Well, Lawrence was more like a city at that time. A little bit less in Biddeford.

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NMS: Do you see a difference, did you see efforts to preserve the French culture and the French language?

SVL: Oh, Biddeford was always for the French culture, I think. In Lawrence, yes and no. Though at that time, in school you had half a day of French, and half a day

of English, even in Massachusetts.

NMS: It was like that is Massachusetts as well?

SVL: Yeah, the balance was about the same. So, you didn't have any problems with that.

NMS: Do you feel that the French people were treated the same by non-French people both in Biddeford and in Lawrence? Felt comfortable, or? SVL: I didn't see... In Lawrence, you had the French and you had the Irish. You had the Irish school, the Irish church, St Mary's. They could go to an Italian school or an Irish one. It all depends on where they live. So, I didn't see any of that. *NMS: So, you never felt any discrimination for being franco?*

SVL: No, I don't know if that word was very popular at that time. *NMS: And, I don't know if you were talking about the parishes here, from your experience, did you experience a difference in the parishes in Biddeford?* SVL: It was St. Joseph's that I went to. There was connection with St. Andre's, and there was connection with St. Mary's also. I didn't see anything that you were against one or the other. The same thing in Lawrence. We had St. Patrick's, St.

Mary's and St. Anne's. No, I didn't see any of that. I wasn't looking for it! It could be though!

NMS: But you didn't feel it?

SVL: Yeah

NMS: Now one of the things I've just really been impressed about your background is you've been very active in some very responsible leadership roles whether it was, in addition to your career you've been on boards...? SVL: Oh yes. I still am!

NMS: ...and so how did those opportunities come about for you? SVL: Well, it's helping and it's in education. You know it doesn't make a difference what board you are on. What's that board for, who are they helping and where's their trouble? Every board is like that.

NMS: So, you enjoyed those roles and you were fully accepted?

SVL: Oh yeah.

NMS: Because it's not all women who have had those opportunities SVL: That's really true. Even when I went to the State, sometimes I was the only woman there. I went to the legislature many times and I was the only woman. But that didn't bother me. I was there for another reason, not because I was a woman. When we started on Medicaid it was PNMI, private non-medical institution, that the group homes came under. You had to really make sure with Medicaid that you

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knew how to report. Sometimes, group homes in other places had a hard time. They'd say, "Go see Sister Vi. She's gonna help you because she knows how to do it." You support the system. Because I never had a hard time with the legislature and congressmen when we met.

NMS: Because most of the funding for those kinds of programs have been through...

SVL: Oh! I know that! Every time you renewed an allocation, it was always a big thing. Many times they look to close you. One time, we got the message, “You have to close your group home because your group home is for women and you have babies there.” Well, if you have pregnant women, there’s gonna be babies. So, you had to present it to remind them. “Look if we have pregnant women, we’re going to have the babies and we have to teach the mother how to take care...” They had never thought about that, I suppose.

Or one time they decided that, “You have to close, because you’re taking care of women over 18. And all the money that we paid you for the last 10 years, you have to give it back.” I didn’t have a cent to give them back! So I did the statistics from all the reports I had kept through the years. How many women we’d had over 18 all these years and how many babies we served. I had finished the report at 2 o’clock in the morning. “Now what do I do with that report? Who do I call? I’m gonna go to bed, maybe tomorrow morning I’ll see.” So, the next morning I still

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didn’t know. I went to Mass and the gospel was from Saint John. “My God, John from Eagle Lake!” So I call him. “Are you gonna be in Augusta this morning?” He said “Yes, but I have a meeting at 10 o’clock”. “What if I’m there for 9 o’clock because I have a problem for you?” “Sure, come”. So, I gave him the information and he said “Well wait a minute. I know what to do with all this. But don’t worry. I

don't think I'll be able to it this week, but next week I'll do it." So, he did and I didn't owe them a penny, but they owed me some money! That was a good policy!

NMS: Wow! That's...That's pretty amazing. Now I did want to spend some time talking about St. Andre's Home and, thank you for providing that report. That's going to help a lot. And...So you must have some information in there about how many babies were born in St. Andre's Home or under the auspices of Notre Dame.?

SVL: Yeah, until 2015 I have all these statistics.

NMS: Now was it just unwed mothers or were there married mothers that came to St. Andre's too?

SVL: Well when at 407 Pool Road there were, because the Biddeford hospital was really full, they had asked if we would accept married women because we had our own hospital. We did that for 11 years. At St Andre's, when we had the group home, we had a few married women. They were divorced though. But we've had some.

NMS: Was there a reason, at some point that they discontinued accepting married mothers as patients?

SVL: Well that was the State. We had an order from the State that, as of June 30, 2013, you can no longer take any clients. They had decided two years before that they were the only ones sending clients. So, we could not accept other clients. It was the State plan. So, they closed all the group homes. There were 40 group

homes in the State of Maine. We all received the same letter.

NMS: That mustn't have been good news to get...

SVL: Yeah, that was really... but I think they realized they did wrong. Because you know you have all these women with all the problems they have now. If they had help when they first got their baby, you wouldn't have all these babies in foster care. They make the rules, but many rules.... are wrong. It takes them years to find out. Maybe someone new will come, see this is wrong and try to repair it. Group homes could come back but will take some years.

NMS: Is that one of the biggest changes that you've seen, kind of doing the— SVL:

Yes, that's one of the biggest things that the State had done. They didn't see the problem. So, if you don't see the problem, you're not going to do anything. *NMS:*

How did the women find you? How did they find the group homes? Is it pretty well known out there?

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SVL: Yeah, because I guess everybody knew St. Andre's always had a service that no other agencies had. It was always a special thing. We were the only one [for pregnant women]. When St. Andre's started in 1940, the only place for a young woman, pregnant and unmarried, would be the women's prison in Skowhegan, there was no other place.

NMS: How long would they stay here?

SVL: If it was just pregnancy and once they give birth, they give their baby for adoption or keep their baby. That could be a year and a half. But when they were parenting, it could be 2 years, and sometimes 3. It all depends how well they were doing.

NMS: Someone shared with me that when the new wing was added in 1965, there was a time capsule that was buried?

SVL: What?

NMS: Someone said there was a time capsule that was buried... Is that anything you're aware of?

SVL: No. It must be when they opened in 1940

NMS: Okay, they said something about a new wing was added in 1965. SVL: Oh okay, they did have a new wing. They may have put one there, I have no idea...

NMS: You don't know anything about it...?

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SVL: Yeah

NMS: Were there any sisters that were transferred specifically from Québec to come work at St. Andres

SVL: Any special Sisters...?

NMS: Were there any Sisters from Québec, that were assigned to come to St. Andre's?

SVL: Yes. We had Canadian Sisters in all our convents. Some were teachers,

others were laundresses or cooks. At St. Andre's, I'm sure there were. I'd have to look back at the list of Sisters. At that time, it was the same work in Canada as in the United States. So, they were used to... you get adapted to that work. *NMS:*

What language was pretty much spoken at St. Andre's Home through the years?

SVL: Well, it was French, but when we started having young Sisters who came and spoke only English, then it was decided that the main language... should be the language of the country where we live. That's where English became popular. It's like Canada is French. If you go to Basutoland it's gonna be Sesotho. So, you take the language of the country where you work.

NMS: When did that change start to come around?

SVL: It was a decision, "mon dieu" [translation: my God], I don't remember, the year. But it was a decision of the general chapter.

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NMS: Who were the doctors that worked at the home? Were there doctors that worked at St Andre's Home, or were they volunteers? Or who did the deliveries?

SVL: They were doctors from Biddeford. We had chosen them because those doctors were very good to the pregnant women. Doctor André Fortier though, he was the best one! Then, after we accepted married women, it was only from the doctors that work at St. Andre's that would send their married women. *NMS: You mentioned Dr. Fortier, so he's connected to the Sisters...?* SVL: Oh, he was really! Even when I was working at St. Andre's, he'd drop by some afternoons just to see

“How is this sister doing?” He loved Sister Mary Priscilla. She was the nurse in charge and he used to say “When she calls you for a delivery, you move because she doesn’t call us to lose our time.” *NMS: What role did the Saint Andre’s Ladies Auxiliary play in helping the home?* SVL: Ahh, they were really helpful! At first, we didn’t have anything and they loved the girls. They used to have meetings. I attended quite a few meetings when I was there. It was “What do we work on this year?” They used to have projects to work on to help. They really helped a lot and they continued with the Biddeford group home. They’d do it for the girls. They’d have their Christmas and meetings once a month at the group home. They’d always bring something for the girls. *NMS: Something that always impresses me that you keep saying, is that some of these different people who were associated with the home were really dedicated to*

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helping the girls. Because being an unwed mother, you know, especially when you go years back was not exactly....

SVL: That’s correct, no that was not an honor. Even with families. [I remember] This little girl who was 14 years old and lived with this man. The family had disowned her. It was Thanksgiving and she was roaming the street. The police stopped her. She had not eaten for 4 days and she was pregnant. In the morning, I always went to work early, I got a phone call from the police and the doctor to take her, but she was 14. The Director had to call the family, but the family decided. “If she goes to St. Andre’s, we will help her”. At the end they really helped, and she

kept the baby. They said, “We will help her to bring her baby”. Once the man found out she was pregnant, he just threw her out! The doctor had told us what to give her to eat, and how to follow up and that was... the day before Thanksgiving.

NMS: I think that's one of the things that I wonder about, especially growing up Catholic and knowing that that was not an honor, how hard it must have been to go to some Sisters to get care. Because it may not have been obvious that they would be welcomed.

SVL: Yeah, we helped many families to really get together when their daughter was pregnant. We had one, the daughter was pregnant by her brother. So, the mother was saying “That’s really our blood.” Many times, the families became

reunited because we had helped them. Those happenings always help people to be better... just like the unwed mothers.

NMS: That's pretty amazing! So, can you give me an overview of the evolution of adoption through all of this because that's changed a lot.

SVL: Adoption has gone through a lot of changes. We then had international adoption, which was a whole new study. Every year, we had a picnic with the adoption families, always in Bayview. It united them at the same time. The parents would get together. Sometimes they had a hard time, “What do you do with this?” They would help each other.

One time we had a family that was adopting a Chinese baby. It had to be a girl because you couldn't adopt a boy. You know what they would do, to get rid of girls? They would put them on the window sill and the little baby would fall and die... to get rid of the girls. Now they are having a problem because they don't have enough girls! But anyhow, the Director got a phone call in the middle of the night to say that they would not let them the adoptive family leave. We had told them, "don't pay anyone" [as we had made all the arrangements]. They wouldn't let them cross because they wanted to be paid. So, we called Washington. It was the senator from Maine, I don't remember his name. He called China to find out what was going on, and it was some Americans that wanted to be paid. Of course,

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they lost their job. So, they were able to come. Sometimes you have problems like that in adoption.

The National Council of Adoption started giving "Angel of Adoption" awards at the national level. Sister Theresa Therrien was the first from Maine. Later on, our executive director at the time, Dr. Gregory Foltz, was appointed to the National Council for Adoption Executive Committee. In 2004, Dr Foltz was inducted into the Adoption Hall of Fame at a gala event held at the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC. St Andre's became known nation-wide.

NMS: Is St Andre's Home still involved with adoptions now?

SVL: No, we don't. The adoption program is dormant. But if for instance, someone wants some information, they can call. Like two weeks ago, I had one that called me. She said, "I never got any information about adoption, but I know that my birth mother was there". We have all that information at St. Andre's. If for instance, they didn't give the baby up for adoption, it's only on a card. But, we have a lot of information. We can go in the book and we have when the girl entered, what was her name, where she's from, how old she was, when she went to the hospital, the date of the delivery and then if the baby was adopted or the birth mother kept the baby. I was able to give her all her information and she was really happy!

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Last year there was a 60-year-old man who called. He said, "I never wanted to look for information because I didn't want to hurt my adoptive mother." His adopted mother had died, so he could do that. So, you never know when you're going to get a call from someone.

NMS: That must have been a big change when they changed the law so you could now provide that information.

SVL: Yeah, but some of them we had promised confidentiality. Now they can have their own real birth certificate. Because when they're adopted, they have an adoption birth certificate. They can now have their original birth certificate and

their mother and father will be on it. That's been only 3 or 4 years that the State of Maine passed this law, so you had a lot of changes in adoption. The latest adoptions though, I don't think there was less secrecy. All the adoption information was given to the adoptive parents, so the parents could tell their adopted child.

NMS: It must have been hard in the early years. I'm sure that there must have been someone that came back and said I really want to meet my mother, or find out about my birth mother, but you couldn't...

SVL: We always try to help. A couple years ago... it was only a grandmother that was still living, we couldn't find where the adoptee was, and she said "Well, she's living in England". She had been married "But she will come at Thanksgiving."

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So, when she comes at Thanksgiving, is she willing to come meet her birth mother? "Yes" So she met her at Thanksgiving.

One I remember, it was the Saturday before Mother's Day, her adoptive mother had died. She came to the secretary and screams at her "You know who my birth mother is and you're not saying anything!!" I went over and said, "Why don't we come here and talk?" I said, "Well you know they don't know who your birth mother is. This is all confidential, but if you want to write your birth mother a letter, I will send it to her." "You would do that?" I said, "Yes!" So, it took her almost a month and a half to write that letter. She said, "You know, that's hard to write!" I said, "Yes that's correct, but I'm gonna send it to her. When I get some

information I will call you.” The birth mother was living in Ohio. The birth mother had been a student I had had in North Caribou. Because the other had said “You were born in...” I don’t remember where. I said, “You were born in Caribou weren’t you?” She said “Yes, and I went to school in Caribou. The Sisters were there. Where is Mother St. Benedicta?” I said, “You’re speaking to her!!” She was surprised and full of excitement. She said “I have teenagers. My husband knows that I had that child, but I don’t want to tell them now. But next year we’re going for a vacation in Cape Cod, and I could meet her if she wants to.” And they did. The adoptee was working at the police station, so if we had some girls that had

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been trouble, she would say “Go tell Sister Vi you saw me!” She was always so grateful.

NMS: You must have quite a treasure trove of stories like that, where you have seen reunions that must warm your heart.

SVL: Oh yes, I do and it was always helping people.

NMS: What is something you’d want to make sure that people take away from hearing your story?

SVL: That I was a helping person. I think, it doesn’t make any difference if it was finance, or pregnant, or babies, or grandparents.

NMS: Is there anything in particular about Biddeford as a community, that maybe

we didn't ask about that you know, what do you think about when you think about Biddeford as a community?

SVL: It was always the center of where we were. But, you know, we helped people all over the state.

NMS: Have you seen Biddeford as a community change over the years? SVL: I guess I'm so involved in these services, that I forget. But the people that were on our board, many of them were from Biddeford, and they were very good. So that's a plus.

NMS: So overall, you'd say Biddeford as a community has been supportive of this cause?

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SVL: Oh yeah. If they had not been supportive, do you think we would be in Biddeford?

NMS: That's a good point!

SVL: No, they were, so that was good.

NMS: I've asked a lot of questions, is there anything else you'd like to share that maybe I didn't ask?

SVL: No, I think I told you... a wide range of things!

NMS: Now I see that you have some papers there—

SVL: No-the last time they had some new board members at St Andre's, they asked me to give them the history of St. Andres, so I had some of the things here. I

have kept them in the same file.

NMS: Okay, well I thank you so much for your time.

SVL: Well thank you! It's nice to meet you!

END