

**Oral History Interview with Dr. Maurice O'Sullivan**

**Kenneth Curry Professor of Literature**

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Rollins College Archives

AA: Good morning, today is June 1, 2010. My name is Alia Alli. With me is Wenxian Zhang, head of Archives and Special Collections, and Jennifer Ritter, a student at Rollins. Today we will be interviewing Maurice O'Sullivan, the Kenneth Curry Professor of Literature. Starting off, can you please tell us a little bit about your family background and what it was like growing up in New Jersey?

MO: Yes, well my family was almost entirely Irish, and we grew up - I grew up in Jersey City in what was essentially an Irish ghetto—a nice Irish ghetto. I had a large family; in all, I had about thirty-two first cousins. So Catholics believe in families and having babies, they had lots of babies. Both of my grandmothers were there, both of my grandfathers had died before I was born. Once a month we went for dinner to my mothers' home, and she was one who had the largest family. And she was a wonderful crusty, flinty old lady who would sit any of her grandchildren who was speaking too much like the rest of the kids in Jersey City next to her—she had a gigantic diamond ring, and during dinner, if any of us used colloquialisms like “erl” for oil—put some erl in my car, or “de” for the—dis and dat, or even expressions like “you know”, she would wack us. And one mark of having sat next to her was usually a little scar on your cheek for most of the rest of the month. That was my grandma Brady. She was a wonderful woman. Her husband had been very wealthy, but had lost most of his money in the depression and in the search for a cure from cancer.

My other grandmother was a woman from Ireland, and she was intelligent but she didn't believe in showing it. She liked to eat and she liked to drink, she liked to sing. She would over almost every Sunday for dinner and sit in our living room. I remember especially when she was older—they both died in the nineties—but when she was older, she didn't want to admit that she was losing her vision. And she used to read the entire Sunday *New York Times* sitting on the sofa. And I asked my father if I should say something to her because she clearly couldn't see and read it upside down. But she just turned the pages so that we couldn't realize.

But I spent most of my life among the Irish there and our neighborhood. I went to Catholic schools all the way through. When I was a—after my junior year in high school, my father was concerned that I was a little too inbred, and so he arranged for me to go to a leadership camp sponsored by the National Conference for Christians and Jews. And I was terrified because there was going to be Italians there, there were going to be Jews there, there were going to be Hispanics there, and there were going to be Blacks there. So one thing I knew was I would never survive that camp. Somebody would stick a knife in me or knock my teeth out. And I went to the camp very defensively and had an extraordinary time coming to understand that you can actually have a conversation with a protestant, that most of the black kids had the same aspirations I did, and it was transformational for me. At the end of it, I was elected president of the New Jersey Youth Council, and spent most of my senior year traveling around the state giving talks with my vice president, who was an African American gal from Newark. And the two of us would walk in to schools—this was the early sixties before the Civil Rights law had passed—and people would be shocked when they saw us walking in as friends,

and every once in a while when we were walking around, we'd hold hands so people thought we were dating. She had much better taste and would never date someone like me but it was very inspirational. And it was great; I sat in at Woolworth's Newark, when we were integrating—trying to integrate; the whole period of civil rights was exciting at the time. One of the things that I find curious was many of my older cousins when they saw me with that young woman, used to tell me that they were really grateful since they thought I was dating her, because they were afraid I'd date an Italian. And they were much happier that I'd date a black woman than an Italian girl.

AA: You said that you went to Catholic School?

MO: Catholic.

AA: Can you tell us a little of what it was like during that—what kind of education you received?

MO: I had no idea of any other kind of education. My father was an educator; he was the associate superintendent in charge of the elementary schools in Jersey City and a dean at Seton Hall. But my grammar school days were pretty typical, large Catholic school taught by nuns. Then I went to Jesuit prep school and my high school was probably—I shouldn't say probably—was definitely the most academically challenging experience I'd ever had. The Jesuits were absolutely demanding; they assumed every one could do all the work they expected. Most of us got in because we took exams to get in to the high school. There were a handful of kids who were exceptional athletes and were given scholarships to go because the school had a great state championship program. But the Jesuits assumed no matter who you were, no matter what your background, you could do four years of Latin, you could study at a very high level, and so far as I can say, everyone met their expectations. That's where I started developing a realization that the key is expectations about education. The more you expect of people, the more that you produce. And then I went from a Jesuit prep school to a Jesuit college. My father said that I could go to any school I wanted to, but he would only pay for Jesuit school or an Irish school. And I was accepted at Trinity in Dublin, but the bishop who was a friend of my father's vetoed it, since it was a protestant school and they didn't want any of the Catholic kids from Jersey City going to a protestant school. So I wound up going to Fairfield University and then my junior year I spent in England at the University of Manchester, which was a very good experience. It was my first time outside that Catholic orbit and the first time I was ever—since grammar school—that I was in classes with girls, in a school which instead of giving us the expectations, assumed that we would develop expectations since the British system is so different from the American system. And it was a lot of fun there. There were—I played the American stereotype. I was—there were five Americans enrolled at the University at the time, and three of us were on their varsity basketball team, which was a stereotype. They just assumed that if you were American you could play basketball and unfortunately some stereotypes turn out to be true.

AA: And then after that, you went for your Masters at Case Western University?

MO: I went into a doctoral program. It was, in those days, there were two kinds of programs. One involved just a doctorate and others had a masters and the doctoral degree. During the first year, one of the students, my cohort—a group of us had gone in together—became pregnant and

she indicated that she wouldn't be able to finish the doctorate. So we petitioned the school to allow us to also do a master's so she could get a master's. We didn't want her to leave with nothing. So they arranged a master's exam which we took, but it didn't interfere at all with our studies and they allowed us to go through pretty quickly if you were willing to the work. And I was very, very well funded.

AA: Did you go in knowing that you wanted to study English Literature?

MO: Actually, after I'd gotten back to college from England, I wanted to go into the Foreign Service because I'd done a lot of traveling. A fellow I met in England, and I traveled to the Middle East and we were pretty much appalled at how badly Americans were treated in the embassies and the consulates. So I wanted to go to the Foreign Service, so when I was a senior in college, I applied to the foreign service school of Georgetown, and as an alternative, to a couple of graduate programs in history, because I liked history. I was accepted by most of the programs that I applied to, but they all told me that I had not had enough courses and I would have to take one year off--go to the year and take one additional year of classes and then take a two year master's program. I then got a call from Case Western Reserve--in those days it was Western Reserve in Cleveland, and it was the chair of the department. One of my professors had recommended me to them, and he offered me a full fellowship to get a doctorate in three years--so then I had a dilemma--in English--I had a dilemma of choosing between three years to get a Foreign Service certificate master's or a master's in history in three years, or an English doctorate in three years. And being the pragmatic kid, the last option seemed the best.

AA: So after graduating, what job did you go in to, and in what field?

MO: You mean after I finished graduate school?

AA: Right.

MO: My first job was at Ohio State, so I taught there for six years. I was an assistant professor. It became pretty clear to me very quickly that a large school like Ohio State was not a good fit for me, and I thought I did well; my teaching was good, my research went along well, but I wasn't very happy. When I eventually came to Rollins, the entire faculty at Rollins was smaller than the English department that I was in at Ohio State. And I think the other problem for me was that I went to Ohio State too young. When I got there--at the end of the summer, I received my doctorate and the first term I had a graduate course, something they did for new faculty. I walked in, I was twenty-four, and the youngest graduate student was thirty-two. And I felt like a kid--of course, I spent sixty to seventy hours a week preparing so that I wouldn't look under-prepared and I knew a good deal more than they knew. I had finished a doctorate, but it was really intimidating. And then after a while, I got into a groove and began to understand what was needed. The biggest problem I had there was at one point, the chair of the department called me in and told me that some of the senior faculty were concerned that I spent too much time in my office and that I had too many office hours and they thought that would interfere with my research. And he added that they also thought it made them look bad, so I realized that I probably needed to move on to somewhere else. And I began looking--in my sixth year, I really started looking actively. I had two offers, one was from my Alma Mater, Fairfield, but they

wanted me to come and be an administrator. I spent my life with a father who was a college administrator and I knew what that life was like. And the other was Rollins, which one of the graduate students at Ohio State had come here, Steve Phelan, and he loved it and he thought I was a perfect fit for it. And my specialty was eighteenth century British Lit, and the woman who was teaching eighteenth century British lit, Paula Backscheider was leaving. And he thought it would be good and we used to play Saturday morning football—flag football—and he wanted somebody to come down and play football and basketball and he knew I was a sports nut.

AA: There was something in your file that said that you participated in the “Free College Program” while you were at Ohio State, do you remember anything about that?

MO: We started part of—I was at Ohio State during the Kent State days—the shooting at Kent State days—the universities were closed down. At one point, all the—many of the faculty from Ohio State met there and we voted on all sorts of issues. We voted to impeach the president of Ohio State, we voted to impeach the president of the United States—just typical faculty acting out. The most radical faculty showed up with bandanas covering their face. There was tear gas in the streets, the National Guard was out, and all the universities. And the following year when things settled down, we ran an election because the president of Ohio State was retiring—we ran an election to fill his position. Of course the trustees and the governor ignored us, but we had a great time. We brought Alan Ginsburg in to do a fundraiser. My group ran **Starden Lynn**, who was a famous radical from Yale at the time. Others—the black student union ran Dick Gregory, the athletic students—the athletes ran Woody Hayes, the famous Ohio State football coach, and we held rallies. We had a lot of press, of course, whatever the vote was—and we had ten thousand votes in the election, so it was a great election; it was great educational experience and a great educational opportunity. But the governor appointed a new president who had nothing to do with any of the goals we had, so a group of us started what was known as a free university to offer free courses in subjects people wanted. And we held them and for a year or two it worked well, but like most volunteer organizations that have a very short half-life, and so it eventually died out. But we had—it was more like a series of open conversations on topics led by faculty and graduate students and interesting students. That period of the late sixties and the early seventies was a wonderful time of ferment and higher education as the country was trying to figure out its future, as a new generation of faculty were beginning to assume their role and they were kids who had been anti-war students in the sixties, so didn’t want to wait their time as previous generations had; they wanted to take power immediately. So it was an exciting period of ferment and I did a lot of work. I began understanding a good deal about education, students, and faculty. I also came to realize that much of it was pretty naïve. We weren’t—we were changing our environment in small ways, but we were not transforming the world the way we all thought we would.

AA: And then you came to Rollins right after that.

MO: I came to Rollins in 1975.

AA: Can you tell us about your first impressions of the College?

MO: I interviewed in the spring and it was hot, and my first impression was that this is pretty hot and I need to lose a lot of weight. My second impression was that it was the whitest school and the most WASPY school I had ever visited. I interviewed with the vice provost and during the interview, after a couple of fairly typical questions about my background, he began edging towards a series of questions about what I could teach. And it was pretty clear that I could teach eighteenth century and Shakespeare and fairly traditional and canonical works, but then he asked me—or he said, “Now, I understand that you can also teach black literature” and I said yes, I published a couple of articles and I’ve been teaching some black literature ever since graduate school. And then he sighed with relief and said, “I thought so”, and he paused and said, “You’re Irish Catholic, aren’t you?” And I said yes, and he said, “All you minorities know each other, don’t you?” At that point I realized that in his mind being Irish Catholic was like being Black, like being Muslim, like being probably Native American or Hispanic.

AA: Who were some of the administrators that you worked with while you were here?

MO: Um, the first president was Jack Critchfield, and I was one of the faculty who really liked Jack, which put me in a definite minority. Jack was a business man—he had been an academic, but he later went to Florida Power and Light as president, and he was very successful and very happy in that. I respected Jack because he was absolutely open and honest with the faculty, which is I think what got him into trouble with the faculty. When I came, for some reason or another, the first year I was at Rollins, I was chair of the Student Life Committee, or the equivalent of what our Student Life is, and the faculty was voting on creating co-ed dorms. At that time, every dorm was single gender. And the faculty was very strong and it wanted to have the better dorms available for both men and women and they wanted to put people on different floors, which was pretty typical around the state and around the country. Jack disagreed with it, and when the faculty voted, I had to go and talk to him about it. And we had a conversation, and he told me that he was going to veto it at the next faculty meeting. Those days faculty would pass motions and then the president had the right to veto. And I told him that I believed that it was most probable that the faculty would override his veto. In those days we had a policy that two-thirds of the faculty, I believe it was, could vote to override the presidential veto. And he looked at me and said, “Of course they will, they have to. Rollins is going to go co-ed in its dorms, but I don’t believe in it, and I have an obligation to myself to veto a policy like this. Plus, the trustees want me to veto it.” And I really admired him because he knew he was going to make a purely symbolic act, but it was something he believed in. He believed in enough of those symbolic acts that he left the next year.

And then we had a brief interregnum—Fred Hicks served as president and then Thad Seymour came. And Thad, I think, really redefined Rollins. That hadn’t happened since Hamilton Holt. Thad came in and he immediately had, I think the only successful self-study committee that we’ve ever had and that self-study committee identified what Rollins was. And there were some issues, for example, almost a third of our students were self-declared business majors, even though we had no business department. They had done it as individualized majors, and as Thad pointed out, we had a graduate faculty, but we didn’t have any people with terminal degrees teaching on the undergrad level. We also didn’t have a very strong culture of publication of research and scholarship. There were a couple that were very strong—Ed Cohen in English and Jack Lane in history would probably be the two outstanding figures on the faculty. So Thad, after the self-study, had support from the faculty to make radical changes; he

eliminated the undergraduate business major, separated the Crummer School as an entirely independent program, and among other things, brought back Classics. And it was fairly traumatic; a lot of faculties were terrified because they thought some of the traditional students who came to Rollins might not come. But what it actually did was started attracting more students, and then Thad played what was his ultimate card. He pointed out that people identify the kind of education they get with its cost—the way people do with cars. And so he doubled our tuition, and again, many faculty were terrified what that might mean. They went along; in those days, the faculty was much more willing to go along with administrators, and I think many of the newer faculty recognized what this might do. That immediately transformed us. Applications became much stronger, people in the Northeast started thinking of Rollins not just as a party school, a place to go to the South; but if it costs this much, then it must be good. Um, he hired—Thad hired a man named Ober Tyrus as the public relations guy and Ober was a great salesman and managed to get us on the cover of *Times* magazine as one of the hot American colleges and our reputation really moved forward. The one thing we weren't able to do at that time was to raise much money. We didn't have a tradition of raising funds because we have had a few very generous patrons. The McKeans for example, John Tiedtke, and there was no structure for fundraising.

And it takes a long time and then when Thad retired we brought in Rita Bornstein, who was a genius at raising funds. And I believe when she came our endowment was about \$30 million, when she left it was about \$350 million. That's something most people don't believe when I tell them, because that's probably not unprecedented in a literal sense. I'm sure there are other schools that have done that, but it is so rare. What we managed to do with Thad, which was to raise the academic standards, to improve the quality of the faculty, then had the financial support so that we could do the kind of programming that a school like Rollins should be able to do—everything from merit scholarships and improved faculties, and technology, to making the Rollins case.

AA: And you've also worked with various faculty members as well. Can you tell us what it was like with that?

MO: I've loved a lot of the faculty, haven't loved a few of them, but there are faculty—most of the faculty have taught me enormous skills and provided me with wonderful knowledge, even people that I'm ideologically not in sympathy with. I'm always awed by Alan Nordstrom's patience. He was here before I came, and he still has the same kind of patience; he is willing to talk with students about almost any subject. There were occasions, especially when I was department chair, when I had to—since we've always had offices very close to each other—had to go in because I'd hear a student making an incredibly stupid argument for an hour, and Alan, showing patience towards the student—and I'd finally go in and say this is idiotic, that's the stupidest excuse you've ever made. There's no reason for you to keep making this case; Dr. Nordstrom would never approve what you want to do. And the student would look at Alan and Alan would nod yes, but he was not willing to say absolutely no, and I just couldn't take that kind of patience any more.

Ed Cohen, I think, has always been a model of someone who combines his scholarship in teaching, scholarship at a very high level, excellent teaching, and a person who became—a lot of the senior faculty or people that had just become senior faculty were really good mentors to me. Wayne Hales in economics taught me an awful lot about the real world, and he is just a

wonderful, wonderful human being, gracious, had wonderful social values. Larry Contanche in education had one of the best senses of humor I've ever known. He was a total skeptic and he was a wonderful person to talk with.

The person that probably did the most for me was Jack Lane, because when I came, Jack was the voice for scholarship. Jack was the faculty member who would argue most loudly that you can't be a really good teacher unless you really know your subject, and the only way that you can demonstrate that you know your subject is by sending it out to your peers, not to nineteen or twenty-one year olds. We can stand in class and say all sorts of silly things, and students will nod and smile in agreement because the students don't have the academic breadth to question or challenge what we're saying, especially in the more professional areas. What we do when we publish is I write an article and I send it out and it's being vetted by people who know more than I do, and if they accept it, they're making a statement that the case I'm making that they don't necessarily agree with it, but it's a legitimate case. And Jack was adamant that all the faculty should do that. He was so outspoken that for probably the last twenty years of his career at Rollins, he explained to me he could never be elected to any committee except appeals committees because faculty didn't like serving with him on committees with him since he would always argue his position very strongly, but they wanted him there in case they had been terminated, for example, since they respected his integrity and they knew he wouldn't give up. He wasn't going to back down to any pressure.

Jack and I, back in the eighties, were asked to teach some workshops for teachers on Florida subjects by what was then the Florida Endowment for the Humanities—it's now the Florida Humanities Council—and he was asked to teach a history course, I was asked to teach an English one. And one day at a party, we started talking and thought it might be fun to put them together and create a Florida studies course based on the model of American studies. So, we created it and taught it for a couple of summers for teachers, and our biggest problem was finding material. We wanted to write a book that would be a series of critical essays on important works in Florida, but most of those works were out of print, so we thought why don't we try to put together a book that has those texts and that way once it's out we can do what we really want to do, which is our critical analysis of those texts. And we put it together and we found that most publishers didn't think that Florida was interesting enough, including the University of Florida Press. Finally, a very good independent press called Pineapple in Sarasota expressed interest, and they had some questions because some of the texts we included were questioned by Florida Historians. They did not believe for example, that Ralph Waldo Emerson ever wrote about Florida. They did not believe there had been a woman named Sylvia Sunshine writing about Florida. And so we had to actually prove to the press that these books were in existence and that this was legitimate, this was not fiction. And Pineapple was very supportive, published it. And that book has been very successful; we have been very happy with it, not only for the annual royalties of course, but it's pretty widely used. I just got back from a Florida Historical Society conference and five different faculty members told me that they use the book in their classroom on Florida. After the book came out, we began getting letters and calls—this was pre-Internet—from people who wanted to teach about Florida. The Florida Humanities Council was very happy with the work I had done, and it decided it would start talking about Florida studies, which is the term we had used. And so, we're seen as the godfathers of Florida studies. But Jack—working with Jack was impressive to me because when I would write an introduction or I'd write some text, I'd send it to him, and I would get it back and it would be savaged. It would just bleed red, and so I realized I should do the same thing with him. And we

got in to epic battles over interpretations, over how to make a case. I think it helped my writing a great deal. It—I'd like to think it helped his writing, but the book—it was my first book, and Jack made what he later said was the dumbest decision of his life. He had done two other books, and he said since it was my first book, he wanted my name to go first on the editors. And about ten years later he told me that book had sold almost a hundred times as any books—as all of his other books together, and everybody referred to it as the O'Sullivan book, or the O'Sullivan-Lane book, whereas it should be the Lane-O'Sullivan book. He said, that was the dumbest thing I had ever done to let your name go first—but I think it was a remark of his fundamental generosity.

JR: What was the title of that work; which book was that?

MO: *The Florida Reader*.

WZ: The first one here,

MO: -although the libraries' cover is gone. The cover was—the other thing that I learned from the book, we had a bright orange cover with the woodcut of Florida and a lot of people—as many people have talked about how attractive it was, has talked about how good it was. And from then on, I've tried to make sure that every book I did have a very bright, usually screamingly bright cover.

AA: What are some of the other books that you've helped write?

MO: I did a number of books on Florida. A wonderful professor at Manatee Community College, Jane Jones and I, did an anthology of Florida Poetry; Pineapple also did that. There were some visual issues I thought with *Florida Reader*—smaller print than I would like, and Jane has a wonderful visual sense, so she helped design *Florida in Poetry*, and I think it's the prettiest of all the books I've worked on. I did a couple of books on popular culture. One of them *Crime Fiction and Film in the Sunshine State*, and one was *Crime Fiction and Film in the Southwest*; Steve Glassman and I did that. We also published a collection of early mystery novels, since most people think that the Florida mystery novel begins with John D. MacDonald, 1963. So we wanted to show the roots and we went back to the twenties and put together some of the earliest Florida mystery fiction. The University of Florida Press published that. I've done a couple of books on Shakespeare. I did an article on Shakespeare's other lives, fictions with Shakespeare's character, and a couple of people suggested they'd like to see those works so I did an anthology on them. After Jack and I stopped working on the summer programs with teachers on Florida, Stew (Stuart) Omens, who founded the Orlando Shakespeare Festival, and I developed the Florida Center for Shakespeare Studies at Rollins, and we began doing workshops for teachers on Shakespeare—performing Shakespeare. And after a couple of years, we were asked to give talks in New York in Corfu, and we decided we'd put together an anthology, a collection of essays by people who had taught in the program, and people who had taken the program. And that came out as *Shakespeare Plays in the Classroom*.

The book I worked on the longest was a study of translations of the *Book of Job*. Every time I went to a library, I'd look for old editions of *Job* and I finally found about 140 translations since the thousand. Some of them are pretty obvious—the King James version, but there are a lot of idiosyncratic versions and as a tribute to a book that I think is the greatest book I've ever read,



I wanted to do a study of some aspect of *Job*, since I'm not a theologian, I thought the best thing I could do would be study how the translations reflect the culture and history of the period in which they were—they appeared. And then for about a year the Rollins archivist, Wenxian Zhang, was asking me to come over and look at a manuscript he had found, and finally when we were in China, he was leading a group of Rollins faculty. One night, a couple of us wanted to go out and find a place that served adult beverages, and none of us spoke Chinese. We realized the only way we could get a drink that night was if we could get Wenxian to go with us. He was never shy about doing that and I realized that as tit-for-tat, I'd better tell him as soon as we get back, I'll come down and look at the manuscript. And when we got back, I looked at the manuscript and I immediately recognized its worth. Probably fairly typical that he had recognized it a year before I did—as soon as he saw it—it took me a year to understand that this would be valuable. And yet, I worked on it, published it, and we've been very happy. I think the results of it have been nicely recognized; the Florida Historical Society's very pleased with it. They announced at their conference over the weekend that it would be their first electronic book. It's going to be coming out on Kindle in the next week or two.

AA: Speaking of adult beverages (laughter), I read that you led an Irish studies class at a pub.

MO: Yes I did.

AA: Can you tell us about that experience.

MO: In a much more relaxed time at Rollins, I was teaching a course on Irish literature and decided that I would arrange it—we met once a week—so that in alternating weeks we would meet in the classroom, and then the students would have the option of whether we should meet in the classroom, whether we could meet in one of their apartments—a lot of students in those days lived off-campus, especially seniors, and this is mostly a senior class—and they voted to actually visit the Irish pubs around Central Florida. And we went around to Central Florida pubs in alternating weeks and would have our discussion. Class was in the afternoon, so it wasn't really interfering with other people. And the *Orlando Sentinel* wanted a St. Patrick's Day story, so one of the reporters came out. We met the day before St. Patrick's Day down at Kate O'Brians, Downtown, Orlando, and the reporter came and sat with us and wrote a story which was on the front page of the *Sentinel*. And it was, I thought and most of the people who read it thought, a wonderful story because we were talking about Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. And some of the students were absolutely brilliant. There were a number of Asian students in the class, so that the names and appearance was wonderful. There was a mixed response to it; people read the story, and I thought people who had a sense of humor all loved it. I had a lot people calling me asking me if they could audit my courses at Rollins. But one of the trustees saw the picture, which had the students sitting around the bar with a couple of pints of Guinness—and the picture was taken at the very end of the class—and became upset. And Rita Bornstein became upset; she and I had it out and she was very interested in the public image of Rollins and I tried to explain to her that we would get many more applications when people actually read that and understood that you could have an exciting lively discussion in any environment. She was a little more concerned about the glasses of Guinness. So that was the last class that I had in the pub.

AA: What are some of the other various classes that you've designed?

MO: One of the things that I found when I got to Rollins was that most of the students came from a privileged class, and they were what we tend to call Christmas and Easter Christians. They knew very little about the Bible. They had not come from Evangelical backgrounds and that was true about 40% of students were Catholics. Catholics usually study Catholic theology rather than the Bible. It's very difficult to read British literature and even some of the early American Literature without knowing biblical figures and biblical themes, so I developed a course in the Bible's literature, which has been very popular. And I love it, and to be completely frank, when I proposed teaching it, I hadn't read the entire Bible. I read selected books, and one of the things that it made me do was to go and through the entire Bible, and I found in reading it how good it was—far better than I'd ever really expected. And I had always read Catholic translations, and for the class I decided to use the King James or variations on it and it was only in reading that I understood how stunning the prose of the King James' version was, and how much it had shaped all writing and English since.

Probably the most unusual courses I've taught—the first a course that met at the Fringe Festival, and we would go to the Fringe Festival and we would spend all day going to plays, meeting whoever we could, including Kate O'Brians, but that was just for a meal and we would pull in any of the actors and directors and writers who were there, and we had a wonderful time. I remember one night we had dinner and there were I think fifteen students in class. We had twenty actors and directors around sitting with us, talking about their plays—things we had seen, things we had liked. And I developed some very good friendships there with some of the theater people. The Fringe had some bad years and since I liked the idea of taking students to a festival, I thought I'd try the Florida Film Festival, and I've been doing that for about eight years now—taking students over, and we'd spend—on Saturdays and Sundays we'd go there from noon to midnight and watch movies. Since many of films are independent and their directors and actors and writers and cinematographers come along, we grab those people and we just sit in front of the theater. We grab chairs, a table; bring people in, talk with them about the movie.

And both of those experiences were interesting to me because I was teaching works I didn't know. It's very different than teaching *Hamlet* or the *Book of Job*, works I've probably read fifty to a hundred times. Here I was seeing the movie for the first time, and then having had an hour long discussion of it—so I was like a student entering into it and it was exciting. In both cases I wanted to bring in another voice, because students tend to credit us with more knowledge and more insight in to truth than we actually have. I thought it was good to have two voices, especially people who disagree. So on the Fringe course I asked Bill Boles to come in and he was wonderful with that. He's an excellent theater person, and since I disagree with many of his aesthetic judgments, it was great for the students to hear two people who really disagree. And in the film festival, after I'd done it for a couple of years, I'd like to get it started and make sure it was working, I asked Denise Cummings to join me, and she's been wonderful. She has a much more academic approach to film and is much more forgiving of stupidity than I am. So it's good for her to sit there and try to find something good in a really atrocious film while I'm just tearing it to shreds and she's trying to demonstrate charity.

AA: It must have been pretty challenging to teach a course that you didn't have a background in, right?

MO: One of the great things about Rollins—and some people would probably think this one of the great flaws about Rollins—is that it has traditionally encouraged people, or at least allowed people to explore areas. And usually, you have to have some kind of background. I remember one year back in the eighties when I had a pretty light schedule, I decided that was a period before the video tape had really taken off, the number of films being released was very small—there were two hundred films released in America in one year—and decided to see every one of those films that were shown in Orlando, and I did. So I've always loved film, I've always been really interested in it. I loved theater—I remember one year, I was in London for twenty-one days and saw eighteen plays. So I've always had interest in it but didn't have a formal training that other people have had. But Rollins has allowed that and encouraged it, and it's encouraged cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary work. Part of my discomfort at Ohio State was that at Ohio State, we had nine people in the English department teaching eighteenth century literature, three in novels of fiction, three in poetry, and three in drama. When I was hired, I was the junior person in eighteenth century poetry, at my department there cross-discipline meant I could teach a course in the eighteenth century novel, but everything was very highly specialized because research was so important, publication was so important. And you have to work pretty deeply in a field to produce as much material as a research university wants. And I see a very important role for that, but it wasn't my role. I don't think I have an intellectual depth or the personality to focus that long on one subject or one area of a subject.

WZ: I saw that you also team-taught a course with Marvin Newman on classical literature in modern management. Can you tell us about that? I saw it in your file.

MO: I might have, but I don't remember that course. There are a lot of courses -

WZ: -yeah, I- (speaking at the same time)

MO: - I don't remember. I team-taught in 19—the year after I came—I came in '75, '76, so the following fall I did a course on the American Revolution and every class I brought in faculty members to talk about some aspect of the revolution. People like Barry Levis, talked about why the revolution was a mistake, and the colonies would have been much happier had they remained well with England; and Gary Williams presented the exactly the opposite position and actually a local socialist to talk about how the revolution should never have ended. So I've always liked the idea of bringing people in, having multiple voices. I think we have challenges in the world where there are so many voices on the web, so many voices in all the media, having classes where students hear only one voice—only one perspective—and I'm not sure that's a healthy thing, because I think the problem with the media and the problem with the web is that there isn't much critical analysis of what's being said. And in a class where someone's there—Jack Lane says the North won the Civil War, I'm able to challenge him and try and point out how in fact the North may have appeared to win it, but the South seemed to have actually won it if you look at the long run, if you look at the distribution of resources in America, if you look at the last six or seven presidents in the United States, if you look at where military bases are, the South seems to have done pretty well in some ways—and the lack of pressure on the South to change some of its structures.

AA: There was also something that struck me as fascinating. You invited the grand dragon John Paul Rogers to come speak.

MO: That was—since I was teaching black literature when I came, I became very friendly with the man who was then Dean of Minority Students, Alzo Reddick, wonderful, wonderful human being. He later went on to become the first African American elected to the state legislature from Central Florida. Alzo was here, and I talked with Alzo and suggested that we team-teach a course in—and it had various titles, but the one I liked was “Black on White, White on Black,” which we divided the class in half. I’m not even sure that would be legal now. So we would have eight black students and eight white students and we engaged them in a discussion of every possible thing that could affect color. One Sunday, for example, we took them to a historically black church, like an AME church. The next Sunday we would take them to a traditional white Southern church like the Southern Baptist Church and they’d go and we’d sit around and talk about it. And we thought it would be useful to bring in the grand dragon of the Florida Clan. I was more awkward about this than Alzo was, but we invited him, and I thought he’s probably going to put on his PR hat when he comes in, so one of the things that we did was we invited him to have coffee first with some of our students. And I probably should be ashamed of saying this, but I asked the two most attractive blondes in class to meet him and his bodyguard at the cafeteria and buy them a cup of coffee and talk to them and then escort them over to class. When they came to class, I found a way to avoid shaking hands, but Alzo, who was born a politician, went up and shook their hands and they looked a little startled, but they shook his hand, sat down and spent the next hour and a half talking about the fact that they were not anti-black, they were pro-white. They were giving all the nonsense that the clan and white supremacist groups do, never used any derogatory language or making political and economic cases, express their support for black separatist movements. They left, we thanked them—of course when they’d left, they passed out membership forms to all the white students in class; and then after they left, we had a break and then we discussed what they said and the two young women who’d had coffee with them described how they actually talked before they came into class. And they were clearly hitting on the girls, and I explained that to the girls, and the girls had dressed a little provocatively to try and draw them out a little more, but they had in talking with the students before class, expressed all their hatred of blacks, used the language, talked about what was wrong with Catholics and Jews and Hispanics and immigration—things they never said in class. And so there was a significant dichotomy between their presentation privately with two girls that they were interested who looked like their kind—or they thought they looked like their kind of women and then to an interracial class. So it was a really good experience for the students seeing that. We did that I think three times, and finally a couple of faculty members were really upset about it. As much as Alzo tried to defend it, they weren’t—they were actually white Rollins females who complained that this was too racist. And the one—at that time, the one black faculty member/administrator at Rollins tried to defend it and the administration said no, we’d rather you didn’t do that. So it was a little censoring on that.

AA: And then that same year you were asked to be faculty marshal at the graduation, right? What was that experience like?

MO: That’s been wonderful. To me ceremonies are very important. Ed Danowitz had been a faculty marshal before me and their seemed to be a tradition that a historically congregational

school like Rollins recognized that two Catholic products of Jesuits education—he had gone to Holy Cross—understood ceremony in a way that congregationalists didn't. We like dressing up, we like formality. Catholics and Jesuits were very much into that, but to me the commencement graduation is a critical moment because that's the formal ceremonial end, not only of College, but for most students of their education, which is all they've known in life. And I think it's very important that it goes smoothly; it goes well. And as much as students deny it, there is an enormous nervousness about graduation and trying to find ways to make students comfortable and to organize it so that they don't have to think, they can spend two hours just being directed. We have it programmed really well, and it's actually one of things that I look forward to each year—not getting rid of the students, but making sure that the transition runs well.

AA: What's your opinion of Dr. Casey's convocation speeches —?

MO: Maybe I should pass on that (laughter). I do think his commencement speech for Holt was a little more—they're effective with the students and they're part of his personality. But Dr. Casey and I did not see eye to eye on lots, and lots and lots of subjects.

AA: You were also the chair of the English department.

MO: Yes.

AA: What other positions have you had at Rollins?

MO: I've chaired, I think, on most of the major committees. I was chair of the humanities division for about twenty years and that was mostly by default since I could rarely get the division together; I kept trying to get them to come together to vote me out and vote someone else in, and since they knew that, they wouldn't do that. The humanities commission is much more loosely organized than the science division for example. I was president of the faculty. Probably being Chair of English was the most important, and being president of faculty, president of faculty you have the chance to make sure faculty business moves forward, there's always going to be some struggle between administration and faculty. It's important to have a clear voice for the faculty and to help the faculty articulate.

I thought probably my greatest achievement as president of faculty was when we heard—many faculty have had relationships with alumni and trustees—we heard that the old elementary school building on Park Avenue, which was known as the Park Avenue building, was going to be sold for what seemed like a very low price. And at that time Rollins was in a major selling mode. Almost all the land and gifts it's got were sold. My first year, it sold both an airplane that was donated to it and a yacht that was given to it. They sold a wonderful estate in England that was given to it, which would have been a great study center, and some of us were kind of sick of Rollins losing all of its property because trying to replace it years later would be enormously expensive. So we had an entire block on Park Avenue which had been an elementary school, and after integration the county decided that even though the school was fine, that it should be condemned and sold, and that was largely because it would have attracted a black population from the west side and the merchants on Park Avenue didn't want black kids walking down Park Avenue every day. So they sold it to Rollins for I think \$50,000—probably an embarrassing moment for Rollins, but took advantage of a good deal. Now it was going to sell for a very low

price to a group that was actually related to one of the trustees. And so, I called—I asked for a meeting of the executive committee for the trustees and I got some of the brightest faculty in terms of economics that I knew—Wayne Hales, who was especially good. We sat down with them and they made the case to us about why we should sell it—it would add about a million dollars to put into the endowment, because in those days when Thad Seymour was president our endowment was fairly low. We explained to them how useful it would be to create a joint project with a developer and build either an apartment complex, a set of shops; we had a whole range of possibilities that we showed them and a couple of our faculty had done financial projections to show how much would come to the College, and the idea was that we would have a joint venture for fifty years, and then everything would be referred to the school, so at a point where we might need that in the future. Then we had another person who brought in maps that showed other property around Lake Virginia that the College had own and had sold, and now needed because we had an enormous constraint on space. And I thought the presentations were brilliant and all the faculty showed up in three piece suits, which were popular in those days and all the trustees showed up in sports shirts; so we actually had a little power edge on that. And we hand them the data—we gave them overwhelming data and a month later, Thad Seymour announced that the trustees had decided not to sell the property but to engage in a joint venture—that's the parking garage where the Starbucks is. And we saved that space and from that time on, Rollins stopped selling properties as aggressively as it did.

There's a house just on the corner of Lakeside right across from campus, and it was willed to the College and the College sold it to a biology professor who left the year later for \$35,000. The house is easily worth eight-hundred, nine hundred thousand dollars today, and would have made a great house for students, for transitional faculty members. I think one of the things that Lewis Duncan's done that has been good is buying property—making sure that we have some property for the future. We have to think not only about 2010, but 2050, 2080.

AA: Asides from the properties started buying out, what other transformations have you seen the College go through?

MO: I think the biggest transformation has been the student body; the diversity of the student body has been wonderful to watch. I think the assertiveness of our women students—when I came, the sororities were very dominant on campus and there was a model of how you dressed, how you behaved, and I think now there is much more opportunity for women to explore who they are on campus. I think that's also had an issue in that we spend enormous time, energy, and money on issues relating to women. And I think the guys have lagged behind so that now I'm getting a little frustrated at the fact that every graduation when we give the five General Reeve Awards to the five students with the highest GPAs, there isn't a single John or William in the group, it's all Jennifers and Alias. And I think what we need to do is start refocusing—that's a national issue of course. Nationally, males have fallen far behind females academically and I think for a healthy society, we need to have everyone engaged in it. To me, the great question is who are all these wonderfully talented, highly educated, interesting women going to marry? If I guess they're heterosexual, they're going to have a real problem if they can't find guys as interesting, well-educated as they are.

AA: What have been your favorite types of students to teach?

MO: I like the students who challenge me, I like the students who raise questions, I even like the students who are obnoxious. And you will know some of those students. I think that's very interesting; I like students who are self-motivated. I love students who are prepared, which is not all the students. And it's challenging, I think it's a difficult world and I think your generation—especially because of the nature of entitlements and the way the world has been presented to you—aren't as prepared for what I think of as the world as I'd love to see them. And I wish we could do more in empowering students to take more responsibility for themselves rather than being as protective of them as we are.

AA: What have been some of the other challenges that you've had while at Rollins?

MO: Um, I think for all of us, we are not doing as much as we'd like to do on all levels. I have a couple of writing projects that I really want to complete and time just—especially as you get older, time starts to disappear and the day gets down to about six hours rather than twenty-four hours and so it's harder to get things into it. I wish we had more properties abroad. I think that structures affect behavior so that if we actually owned apartments in Shanghai, more faculty would go there and more students would go there not just as part of courses. I think it's really a shame that we haven't had apartments in London, because students go there as a part of regular structures but to be able to send students there on independent studies, to be able to have properties for people to do that, it encourages folks to break out of their comfort zones. Florida State bought a very nice property near the British Museum and this weekend I was talking to a couple of the faculty members from state schools who were planning to go there—were actually competing with each other to go there—and having the structure encourages people to take advantage of it rather than having to develop it entirely on your own. I also think we have to develop—and this goes back to a thing I've mentioned before—we have to develop some ways of returning responsibility to students. We now have a policy that anytime a student goes off campus, he or she has to fill out a form and I can some initial form, but in a class that wants to spend a lot of time off-campus, those forms being filled out every week returns to high school; it's infantilizing.

I actually think one of the great loses was when Rollins closed down the Tar Pit, which was a pub, which is now the basement of the library—I'm sorry, bookstore—the basement of the bookstore, which was a wonderful place. When I first came, I met students there, people would go there, many of them didn't drink, but they would go there, faculty would go there after basketball games—faculty were encouraged to come to the games—when basketball games were down, have a pitcher of beer or a coke, sit around the table, students would come up and talk, and there was a sense of interaction. When students were old enough, they would join the table and sit down. And I remember that from college, and it was an adult experience, but I think the more we infantilize students, the more we define the relationship between teachers and students as parents and children with an enormous barrier rather than the apprentice concept, which I believe should be the role for students. And I think, plus it also in an unusual way the student pub offered lots of opportunities for students. The first student to be in charge of it was Mike O'Donnell, who is now CEO of Ruth's Chris [Steak House], and I'm not sure he would have gone in to the hospitality industry has he not had the chance to do that on campus to get some experience with it. I just saw him over the weekend and he's turning Ruth's Chris around—had some financial issues. It seems absurd not to accept the fact that students are adults and should have the full rights and privileges of adults but be held to the responsibilities of adults also. But I

think that's not so much an academic issue as a cultural issue; I think that we should actually return to the days that it happened.

AA: So what ended up happening to the pub?

MO: The puritans won and the pub was closed because there were changes in the drinking age, there were other kind of changes, and the lawyers have been getting their hands on everything, and lawyers keep talking about liability—why we can't do things, which is why we no longer have diving boards in the pools, which is why there are so few classes in things like water skiing, which were potentially dangerous and we have, I think, too many people who think our job is protect our students, not provide them with the ability to deal with the world.

AA: Alright, throughout your career you've also been awarded many awards like the Arthur Vining Davis Fellowship, and the Rita Bornstein Award that you received. What has been your most memorable accomplishment so far?

MO: Well, my most memorable was outside of the academic world—it's being a father. My sons and watching them become the kind of human beings that I admire. I lost one of them; the other son is just a remarkable young man, and I think that is the achievement of which I want to be judged. Ben Johnson wrote a poem after his first son died and he called his son his best piece of poetry—my best piece of poetry—which I think is true. The best creative act we have is reflected in our children—what are children are like—and I think there's nothing to me that's more important than that. The Bornstein prize was one that I was really glad to have because it's an acknowledgement by the school of serious body of research over a long period of time. The Florida Historical Society has given—I've gotten a couple of prizes from them which have been reflections from outside the school; a lot of awards tend to be internal. I've gotten a couple of things from the Florida College English Association, but almost everybody in that group is my friend, so I don't know if they're voting because they think I'm really good, or if they're voting because they like me—as hard as that is to believe. Florida Historical Society, I didn't—I'm not a historian, so when I receive awards from them, I think that's a little more objective or else they hate each other so much that they're looking for someone else. But for Wenxian's sake, I think it's really a reflection of something that they admire.

AA: Looking back on your Rollins career, how do you view it thus far?

MO: I think it's been the right choice for me. I mean coming to Rollins was a very good choice for me. I think that there have been really important relationships that I've developed with colleagues, with students, with some of the staff members, and I prize all that. I think it's—I've become frustrated because I think all of us want to see it move forward and we have to find ways that we can reach agreement on what forward means. But I think it's been a good life, and it's also been a privileged life. Not many people get to live the way we do. We really teach relatively—relatively few numbers of hours every day, every week, we have lots of time off to do what we want to do, we make decent salaries, we have a good environment to work in, we have good benefits, and I think we have an obligation because of all the privileges that we've been given to work at a school like Rollins to try and see what we can do to make the conditions of other people better. I think other teachers in the best, most just world, grammar school teachers



would make the highest salaries, high school teachers the next highest, college teachers the lowest because our life is so much easier than their lives.

WZ: You also have a column in the *Orlando Sentinel*—"My Word". I see you have a distinguished voice there. Tell us about that experience.

MO: I like writing about—probably twelve years ago, I began realizing most of my writing is pretty academic and I wanted to develop a voice that can speak to other people. Plus, I remember very clearly one day Barbara Carson—after a department meeting—when we were talking about, I forget what the subject was, but architecture came up, and I went off on bridges and struts and well-designed bridges and not well-designed bridges, which had nothing to do with the subject, but it was indirectly related. After it was over, she came up to me and she said, "Socky, you really do have opinions on everything, don't you?" I thought that was a compliment, and few minutes later I realized it wasn't. She was commenting on the fact that I did give my voice about everything. And I think that it's an obligation for citizens to express their opinions on subjects where they feel strongly. So I began writing; I began with the *Sentinel*. Mike Murphy, who was the editor of the op-ed section, liked the pieces and occasionally call me and say something was coming up and they wanted a piece. I remember once it was about the—they were being inundated by columns about why creationism should be taught in the schools and he knew that I had strong opinions about that, and he wanted someone to make a case for Darwin and evolution in education. And I explored a little bit beyond that; I did a column for the *Wall Street Journal* in America, a Jesuit magazine and *Change* magazine. I'm interested in writing those because I have opinions and I'd like to express those opinions to a broader audience, that way maybe my colleagues will not think that I'm just being obnoxious in class, and in meetings. It's fun.

WZ: We enjoy reading those and ever piece that we run across we put it in your file.

JR: Now, that nickname of yours, Socky, short for Socrates, when did you start using that? When did that nickname for you come about?

MO: Actually, the nickname came before I was born. My father, was among other things, teaching philosophy at Seton Hall, and I was due to be born on July 12, which is a protestant holy in Northern Ireland—Orangeman's Day, so the students offered a mass to ask God to keep my mother in labor and I wasn't born until the 15<sup>th</sup>. They claim that she was in labor for three days, but I'm a little skeptical about that. I think she was just a little bit late. When I was born in the 15<sup>th</sup>, the students sent a telegram to the Pope saying that God had once again shown the victory of the Catholics over the Protestants by having Socrates O'Sullivan born on July 15th. And it got to be to be a family joke. My name is my father's name, I was junior and growing up in Jersey City, the way the family distinguished us was—some people were still Big Mo and Little Mo, and Big Maury and Little Maury, but I had cousins - and it's Big Ed and Little Ed, and Big Ed is 5'6, weighs about one hundred and forty pounds, and Little Ed is about 6'3, weighs about two hundred and fifty pounds and he was much older, so they knew there was a problem with this. So the family started calling me Socrates, and then Socky.

And in Jersey City, everybody misinterpreted that. As I mentioned before, I grew up in an Irish ghetto. My brother was a couple years younger, and when he went off to college, he had

no front teeth, he had a plate in there, he had no cartilage in his nose, it had been broken, one arm had been broken and one leg had been broken in fights. Nobody would touch me because a rumor started in the Italian neighborhood that there was a kid in the Irish neighborhood was so tough that he became a professional fighter at eleven and his name was Socky. And when I eventually met Italians, they would say, Are you the Socky O'Sullivan, were you really a professional fighter? I was just a pudgy little kid. And then later, in the—I went to school that was about ten minutes by subway from Greenwich Village—and in high school everybody went over the village during the days of the beatniks, and a couple of them loved the idea of Socrates O'Sullivan. One of them was LeRoi Jones, who became Amiri Baraka, and every time I saw him he would say, "Socrates!" He just loved that and he'd call me it. And it just became a nice distinction, and it's one of the ways our secretary Karen Slater, has of distinguishing between people who know me and people who don't—to find out whose selling timeshares. They are always looking for—they use to say maw-REESE, as opposed to m(o)rice, which is the correct Irish pronunciation. So Socky, it did me well, except for the fact that when my brother went to West Point, they gave him a new nose, and he's really cute, and every time I get a profile of myself, I realize it would be nice to have the US Army design a nose to me that fit face much better than what I have now. But, I've lived with Socky for a long time, so I'm assuming that I will die with it.

AA: Asides from your column in the *Orlando Sentinel*, what other various jobs have you had throughout your life.

MO: I was a golf caddy which taught me how much I hate golf. As a kid, probably the two most interesting jobs I had was a teamster, where I drove a beer truck, and as a jail guard in Bridgeport State Jail. I spent a summer in a program that was supposed to create more knowledge about jails to the general public and introduce academic—academics, college students to the jail culture, and that was an eye-opening experience that got rid of most of my naivety.

AA: What were some of the experiences that you had at the jail?

MO: I learned—I came believe that were really are sociopaths and psychopaths, there really are people who have no sense of moral guilt or responsibility. I was stunned; I worked the night shift—the third shift from mid-night to eight, and in the middle of night a couple of the inmates would come up. We kept them in individual cells and in what we called the cage of thirteen cells. There's a lot in jails to make people feel unlucky, like Arpaio in Arizona, the sheriff who paints his cells pink—do what they can to embarrass inmates, but putting them in a group of thirteen people is obviously sending a message to them. And they were—and once they found out I was a college student, they learn everything very quickly. They'd bring sheets of paper out because they'd be writing to women asking them to do things for them. They always figured since they had plenty of time—which is the whole idea of jail of you doing time—that if they could get one woman to respond for every hundred they mailed—every hundred letters they mailed—they'd be able to get them to become mules, to sneak in some drugs, to sneak something else in, and they would often come and read their letters to me because they thought as a college kid, I could help them become more convincing in trying to seduce these women. I learned a form of moonshine where they made alcohol was by pouring any liquid with alcohol in it through loaves of bread. And that turned out to be useful knowledge because I couldn't realize why it was so

easy to get people to wake up early to work in the kitchen. And that was my job since I was on that shift and we had to provide breakfast. But inmates who had a chance to work in the kitchen would leap at it, and then of course they'd leave with their shirts bulging with the bread they were stealing, and they'd just pour whatever they had through the bread. Their ideal was wonder bread, pure white bread, and what came out they drank. It was a form moonshine from white dog whiskey.

WZ: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us before we close?

MO: No, except if any of you get up to Nashville, I have a couple of pubs up there and we should go up and see what life could be like if we had a pub back on campus. I've actually—every five years or so volunteered to open one on campus and always found that my offer's rejected.

WZ: That sounds good, especially since Alia is now able to drink (laughter). Thank you so much Socky. We really enjoyed the conversation and we would like to thank you for your contribution in helping us preserve the history of Rollins College.

MO: Well thank you all of you; thank you Wenxian, thank you Alia, thank you Jennifer.