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Joyce A. Nardulli Memoir

Nardulli, Joyce A

Interview and memoir
digital audio file, 25 min., 12 pp.

UIS Alumni Sage Society

Nardulli, currently Vice-President for Government Relations for the Illinois Banker's Association, discusses her Sangamon State experiences. She graduated in 1984 with an undergraduate degree in communication and went to work immediately in the press room of the Democrat staff under House Speaker Michael Madigan. Nardulli reminisces about her classes with SSU professors: Mary Bohlen, Alex Casella, Mike Duvall, Roy Wehrle, and Jo Warfield.

Interview by Mary Caroline Mitchell, 2010

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Narrator: Joyce A. Nardulli
Date: May 20, 2010
Place: Springfield, IL
Interviewer: Mary Caroline Mitchell

Q. This is... What day is this? Friday, March 5th and Joyce Nardulli, an alumni of UIS is being interviewed by Mary Caroline Mitchell. Thank you, Joyce, for taking this time. I was wondering if you could describe for me any... what your educational background was before you enrolled at SSU.

A. Ok, well I was one of those traditional nontraditional students at that time having finished one year at Lincoln Land before getting married. I worked for six years, full time and then found myself in a situation where I was divorced with a two-year-old child. So I knew that my education was the only thing that was going to prevent me from being a struggling mother near welfare. In fact, I had lived on food stamps for a time when I was laid off from a factory job.

So I finished my Lincoln Land education, got my associate degree, and went straight over to Sangamon State, signed up the next semester and continued to commute from Mt. Pulaski, Illinois, work in Lincoln Illinois, and drive down to school at night to finish my degree, which took all of about six years.

Q. Six years.

A. From Lincoln Land... to finish the three I did in six, so I took a pretty heavy load.

Q. How did... what did you... how did you learn about Sangamon State or did you know what you wanted to study when you came there?

A. Yes, I knew that English was my strongest suit in high school and I had a knack for it. I was a very good student in English. I was actually Salutatorian in my high school class, no reason I should have not finished school when I did, one of those dumb decisions that you make when you're nineteen and in love.

So I knew about Sangamon State of course because it was the only educational institution of higher learning for you know juniors and seniors at that time the only place that I could go. There was no other place that I could get a bachelor's degree and still do everything that I needed to do for my family. So it was a safety net for me.

Q. What was the admission process? Do you remember? Who did you meet with and how did you get admitted?

A. I went through the process just on my own. I picked up a catalog and read it very carefully and knew what I needed to do and showed up, signed up. I was sent to an advisor, Larry Smith, who was my advisor at that time, and he helped me make sure that I stayed on course.

Q. How did you pay for your college courses?

A. Well because I was a single parent, I was very poor. I applied for scholarships. Professors at Sangamon State wrote letters of recommendation for me. I had scholarships that helped me pay for my education. I had grants and I found it to be very affordable there at that time, so I paid my way.

Q. Were you aware that many of the other students may have been subsidized through their state job? Was that ever discussed?

A. No. I was a night commuter student so I never developed strong, close personal relationships with the students. There was no on-campus life for me. In fact, I took my daughter to class on several occasions if I couldn't find a babysitter. She would come with me and quietly sit and entertain herself. I have kept a diary of those years. I was reading those diaries over the weekend in preparation for the interview and I was surprised how many times I took her to class.

Q. Would those diaries be about your school experience?

A. A lot of it was.

Q. A lot. At some point you might consider donating them to the Archives, do you think? Or is there a lot of personal stuff in there?

A. Too much personal stuff.

Q. Ok, all right, that's great. Well I know that's something they're looking for. I know you shared some photographs but they don't have much about a person's personal experience in reflection on that, so that's great. What was your first impression when you came on the campus? Where was your class held?

A. I was in some of the prefab buildings and then I moved into Brooken's Library for some classes and then on to the PAC [Public Affairs Center] later.

Q. What year was that that you first started classes?

A. 1980.

Q. Ok. Was there construction going on?

A. No, I don't think so, not at the time. I'm not sure when the PAC building was finished, but it was I think finished right before I started.

Q. About how many courses did you take a semester?

A. Between two and three.

Q. Oh, my. When did you find time to study?

A. At work I studied on every break and I studied through my lunch hour and I studied at night after my daughter went to sleep and I studied on weekends.

Q. There weren't computers at that point, were there that you used to...

A. No. Pretty much, no.

Q. So when you needed to go to the library, you had to go to the library?

A. Yes.

Q. And you had to find time to do that?

A. Yes.

Q. Outside of class?

A. Yes. Yeah, it wasn't easy.

Q. No. Would you describe some of your most memorable professors?

A. I'm glad you asked. I had many memorable professors. A couple of them that were most memorable to me weren't even in my communication degree field. And I would say Roy Wehrle, who taught me World Economics in 1983 was right up at the top of my list of best professors I ever had. One reason was he taught me things outside my box and my realm of learning.

He shepherded me because I went into that class with a group of people who were primarily master's degree in world economics. And I said, "I don't think I can, I'm not cut out for this class. This class is over my head. These people are all master's level people and this is their field." He said, "I think you can do the work." And boy did I work (laughter).

Q. Was that an elective?

A. Yes.

Q. Ok.

A. He taught me a lot, I worked hard in that class and kept up with it and learned so much about the world economy that helps me to this day to know we are in such a global society and to not think just within the United States, but we have to constantly think about what is the rest of the world doing today. So he taught me that and it's been a great education for me.

And the other person is I would say is Al Casella, who retired a few years ago but he taught me a class called Energy, Ethics, and Public Policy, and he was tough. He lectured long into the night; he had a lot to say and we had a lot to learn. A lot of it I remember being the nuclear energy discussions he would have with us, gave me such an education about energy that again had I not been a student at Sangamon State, I would have never learned those things that are still relevant in my world today.

And there are of course, the many people that taught me the communication world that were excellent teachers. One of the best I think being Sherie Good, who was a journalism professor of mine in 1982, helped me with letters of recommendation. She advised me and counseled me. Larry Smith that I mentioned was excellent.

I also really enjoyed Judy Everson. When I started that class, it was a science fiction class and I wrote in my diary that everyone in this class is really weird and I don't know what I'm doing here (laughter). And after, at the end of it we read twelve books that semester. We watched films in class. We learned so much about science fiction that I developed an appreciation for an art and literature that I never thought that I would enjoy. But Judy made it, through her eyes I loved the class and I loved her.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. So it was fantastic. Jo Warfield taught a great class on media advertising. Mary Bohlen was a public relations professor of mine whom I adore to this day and she only lives a block down the street from me. She was my communication advisor after Larry Smith and helped me get my first job on Speaker Madigan's staff, so I'm forever grateful to Mary Bohlen.

Q. How did you transition from English to communications because your degree is in communications, right?

A. Right. I just found it fascinating. You know I took video production from Mike Duvall; I took photography from Linda Smogor. I learned so much that I went right into four different interviews for the Speaker's Office where I had to write press releases and took a job where once I got on staff, I realized everyone but me was politically connected. I worked with Paul Simon's son, Alan Dixon's son, legislators' kids. How did I get this job? Only by my talent; I'd had absolutely nobody helping me but myself.

Q. Wow. In the 1980s, was the campus still rather avant-garde compared to the culture that you were coming from?

A. It was. I took a New Wave Culture class and it was just about the weirdest thing I had ever been in. To this day I thought that was a really weird class, but yes it was definitely.

Q. And what was it? The faculty personalities or the dress of your fellow students?

A. It was the whole culture. It's hard to put a finger on one thing really.

Q. Uh-huh. So you described yourself as a commuter student, so you would leave work, could you kind of describe your typical class day and how you handled that?

A. Sure. I would leave work and pick up my daughter from the babysitter and she would then ride with me from Lincoln or Mt. Pulaski to the campus where... well actually on my way there, I had a Springfield sitter who would watch her free for me because she used to keep her before I changed jobs and missed her.

So she also knew I had no money, so this lady, her name was Do Bristow and she just wanted to continue to watch my daughter and said, "I'll keep her for free. You know you're going to school and you know we laud that effort and we want to help you out." And so she would watch her for me and then I would pick up my daughter, Monica, after school around 9:30 to 10 o'clock pm, and drive about a half hour back to Mt. Pulaski.

And these were in the days before seat belts. She would lay on my lap, put her head on my lap and fall asleep on the way home and I'd put her in bed and get her ready for school and go off to work the next day.

Q. Wow. You described that there was little student life that you knew about or participated in. In the classroom, did you interact with students?

A. Yes, yes. One of my best friends because he was in several of my classes just turned out to be Barry Hickman who is a Facebook friend of mine yet still today. A couple of other friends I think would be Tina Workman, Ed Jones, Judy MacAnerney, and Barry Cole – all helped me in different ways, taking notes if I couldn't get to a class.

Or I remember Barry shared a \$30 book with me because I couldn't afford it. He said, "Well, I'll just share that with you." And so everyone was really you know understanding, helpful. If I had to take my daughter to school, they would just be extremely understanding and work with me and were helpful and supportive.

Q. Did you find that most of your classmates had a similar story? Were they around your age or were you younger or older?

A. I was pretty much in the middle of the age spectrum and again didn't get so close to them to know that many personal stories I'd have to say.

Q. So you never had time to go out after class because you had a little girl with you?

A. I never, never had time for that. I did have a favorite stop on my way to school. I would stop at the Wendy's and grab a salad just about every week and that would be my dinner before class.

Q. What was the grading like? Did you think it was hard or easy?

A. I thought it was tough but fair.

Q. Yeah.

A. As an older student, I studied harder. So I was getting pretty good grades, but I worked pretty hard to get them.

Q. Were you aware of any campus politics or like elections or student government or any of those things?

A. Only if I would pick up the student newspaper and read it during a break. Then I would remember reading about that then. I don't remember so much about it today.

Q. Besides classes, did you ever attend anything else, like intersessions or colloquium or any of those kind of extra requirement classes? Did you have those?

A. Well we had an AST, Applied Study Term.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. And fortuitous for me, I was laid off of my job. The last semester I needed for the Sangamon State and I was able to collect unemployment check from that job, work my AST, and take a full load. I took nineteen hours that last semester in order to graduate on time, which was spring of 1984. So that lay off was the best thing that happened to me. Otherwise I would have been a student much longer.

But my AST was working at the Vonderleith Nursing Home in Mt. Pulaski where I lived doing communication work for the residents and to this day, that was one of the best jobs I ever had. I did a big poster board of the 90 employees so that everyone could see a picture of the people that took care of their loved ones on the second and third shift or whatever shift they didn't normally get to visit so they would know who all worked there. From you know from janitor to nurse to doctor, everyone had a picture with their name and shift attached.

I would do just like you're doing with me; I would do interviews with the residents and talk about their life history. And then every week, we would put up a new life story about a resident on this big board. As you walked into the Vonderleith Nursing Home, you could see the resident of the week with their photo and a story of their life. The Mt. Pulaski newspaper was a weekly paper, still is I guess, and they would take those stories and run them that I wrote about the residents, so that was fun.

And they had a great activity department there. We would do Easter egg hunts and bring in kids to visit and have a lady come play the piano almost every day. And all of these activities, I would take pictures of and put it in the weekly newspaper to just really give the nursing home a presence in the community. It was a lot of fun.

Q. How was that job identified? Did you find the AST yourself?

A. I did.

Q. Uh-huh, and then they approved it?

A. Yes.

Q. Ok.

A. Yes, I had an advisor who came and talked to my supervisor who was the administrator of the nursing home, but it was fun, it was. I did a lot of things to elevate I guess the PR presence of the nursing home and it was a great place to be.

Q. So where were you working that you got laid off from?

A. Lehn & Fink, it used to be a factory owned by Sterling Drug in Lincoln, Illinois. They would make things you've heard of like all the Lysol products, Wet Ones, and Baby Wet Ones, Love My Carpet, Dorothy Gray cosmetics at that time, Givenchy cologne that everyone thinks is made in France used to be made in Lincoln, Illinois.

Q. Really?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Wow, and you worked in the factory.

A. I worked in the factory for sixteen months and then I was laid off and I came back into the office. I applied for a job that 50 other people applied for and was able to work in the office for the five years most of the time that I was going to school. But because of that one lay off, I'd picked up a bartending job at a restaurant called the Tropics in Lincoln and I kept that job on Monday nights, the night I didn't have class because I was afraid if I got laid off again, I didn't

want to be without any employment. So I didn't want to give up all those skills I had learned, so I kept a Monday night job as well as the full time job.

Q. Wow, so you graduated in May of 1984.

A. Uh-huh.

Q. And where was that commencement held? Do you remember?

A. It was on the stage in the auditorium.

Q. Ok. Were there two commencements that year?

A. No.

Q. Still, just one?

A. No, I think there was only one.

Q. Ok.

A. I only remember one.

Q. Yeah. Did your family come?

A. Oh yeah, it was cap and gown all the way. We had a big party. It was a pretty big deal.

Q. Do you remember who spoke at your commencement?

A. I do not (laughter).

Q. That's an interesting question. Most people don't, and the people probably sweat blood over they can remember that.

A. Well you know I could look that up in my diary for you if I knew that question ahead of time.

Q. No. That's great. So you had a job lined up by the time you graduated?

A. No, actually before. Those interviews started for me in February and I actually went to work for the House Democrat staff for Speaker Madigan on April 23, 1984. And I clearly remember as I'm wearing my cap and gown and standing in the lineup everyone around me saying, "Well now is the tough part, now we have to go out and find a job." And I didn't want to brag and say, "Not me, I've got a job." But I was thinking that to myself how fortunate I was that I had a job.

Q. Well that's great. I know that your children have had a very different experience in going to a traditional four-year college and everything. I wondered if you could reflect for yourself what this type of education, which was pretty much piecemeal compared to what the immersion that your children are in, how that has impacted your life.

A. You know if there is anything I can do over, it would be going to have the four year college campus experience that I wanted all my children to have. And I have a daughter that graduated from Eastern Illinois University, another daughter who just graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University, and I have a son that's a sophomore at Evansville, Indiana; University of Evansville; all of them getting the campus experience. One played four years of sports, one is in a fraternity, all you know I'm living vicariously through them and their experiences.

Q. Ok. What is the value... you worked so hard to achieve your education, what do you feel... do feel that... you obviously got jobs because of it, but beside the job part, what... the real basic of what the education is do you feel that you took away from Sangamon State?

A. One thing it definitely taught me was hard work because now just having a job is a piece of cake compared to having two jobs and raising a daughter by myself and going to school at night and keeping up with that all. After going through that I guess I learned a huge discipline for myself and that anything's possible and that hard work will have its rewards that you could do anything you set your mind to.

Q. Great. We've had a kind of list of questions to guide our interview, but were there things that you thought of when you were looking back on your notes and thinking about this interview that you feel would be helpful for the Archives of the university to know what it was like to be a student at that period or what the impact of an education is.

A. Well. one of the best things for me has been it really elevated not only the job I have today but my income level way, way beyond what I ever anticipated. And that has caused me to want to give back and to help other students. I've had six interns here already go through the banking, an internship with the Illinois Banker's Association as a way to give back.

And I've been a houseparent to a student from India and have wanted to do many other things to help the university to grow and prosper through the Alumni Association. And in fact when I was chairing that, was asked to also sit on the overarching U of I Alumni Board. I said, "I couldn't do that, I didn't even go to University of Illinois at the time." To be sitting on the Champaign board just seems like... get out... I you know would be... what's the right word?

Q. Out of place?

A. Out of place definitely, but I actually have a brother who did go to the U of I and I would feel like an imposter. That's the word I'm searching for.

Q. Oh, ok.

A. He did, I didn't. But they kept hounding me to please come to represent the Springfield campus that when you put it in that light, yes, I'll go and be the blue and white and not the blue and orange and represent the Springfield campus. Then that made sense to me and I'm really, really glad I had that opportunity. I'm sure that I'm the first person who ever served on the U of I Alumni Board who didn't graduate from the University of Illinois.

But I'm glad I've had those opportunities and I'm glad that in even small ways that I've been able to give back. And I think my favorite thing has been three commencement opportunities to speak as an alum and tell people what they should do to give back and be proud and be grateful for everything that they've received in their education and to help those who haven't had as much.

Q. Well, we've been very grateful for you because I think you did say something that triggered me that we need to do a little more oral history about the Alumni Association because you were there for the transition and probably one of the first... you were the first representative as when our alumni office became part of the University of Illinois Alumni Association.

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Is that right?

A. Yes, we even wrote the bylaws for Springfield chapter.

Q. The Campus Advisory Board?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Ok, and you were... were you the first chair?

A. No, I wasn't the first.

Q. Ok, but you have certainly been involved in... I forgot to ask you. Would you please share what your current position is and what other jobs you've had since graduation?

A. Sure, well sure. I am currently the Vice-President for Government Relations for the Illinois Banker's Association; I'm in my seventh year here. I started December of 2003. I spent twelve and a half years working for the Illinois State Medical Society as an Assistant Vice President of Government Relations from 1991 to 2003. And I spent seven years working for Speaker Madigan from 1984 to 1991. So 26, 27 years in state government related work.

Q. Did you ever... this triggered my question about our kind of identity as a public affairs university. You just happened to go into a field related to politics and in communication you

could of gone any direction, was there something that related to your coursework that set you in that direction or just the luck of the job with the Speaker?

A. It was really that Mary Bohlen had just gotten off the phone with them knowing they needed somebody in their press room that she was friends with someone there and I walked in and said I need a job and I'm looking for something with health benefits because I'm a single mother. And at that time, the state had very good health benefits so that drove me. Actually the starting pay there was almost less than I made at my factory job.

But my education that I received on staff was invaluable to me. I didn't know anything about politics when I took that job. I self educated once I got on board reading books about Chicago politics, Mayor Daley, Illinois government, educating myself kind of while I was on the job about what am I doing here. What's this all about? I didn't have a political bone in my body when I got that job.

Q. Right, that's real interesting because you... a lot of people get political studies degrees to do what you're doing.

A. Yes, yes.

Q. But you put that all together.

A. I would say I did with the help of God. I think he has really guided my path.

Q. That's great. Well, thank you, Joyce.

A. Thank you.

Q. It's been a pleasure.

25 minutes 0 seconds

End of Interview