Winkler, Sister Arlene

Interview and memoir

UIS Alumni Sage Society

Winkler attended Sangamon State University between 1977 and 1981 to obtain a master’s degree in Gerontology. She fondly remembers Professors Gari Lesnoff-Caravaglia, Jeff Chesky, and Harry Berman. Winkler was a member of the Gerontology Club, Sigma Phi Omega, and the Alumni organization.

Interview by Janice Spears, 2008
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Q. This is Janice Spears interviewing Sister Arleen Winkler at the Saint Francis Convent on Monday July 14, 2008. Sister Arlene.

A. Hello, yes I’m here with Janice. I’m Sister Arlene Winkler. I entered the Convent in March 1949. I made my fist vows in October 1951. I celebrated my silver and golden Jubilees and my last one was for fifty years in 2001. So you see I’m still plugging along.

I’m from the beautiful state of Ohio. I have three sisters and one brother. I have two sisters older then I am and a sister and a brother younger then I am. My parents are deceased. After I came to the convent and after my first vows I went into nurses training at Saint John’s hospital in Springfield.

After I graduated from St. John’s, I was missioned in several hospitals, mainly St. Francis in Litchfield, St. Joseph’s in Highland, and St. John’s T.B. Sanatorium. I did bedside nursing at these hospitals in a staff position. Later I attended classes at SCI part time. In 1969, I went full time to Mariette College in St. Louis where I obtained my BS in Nursing. In 1971, I was assigned to the Motherhouse to work with our elderly sisters in activities. And this searching led me to beginning courses and I enrolled as a student at Sangamon State University.

Q. Prior to attending SSU what was the extent, if any, of your post secondary education?

A. Post-secondary, you mean after high school?

Q. Yes.

A. When I entered the convent and in the novitiate, I took courses in theology, morality, the Bible and such. Then as I mentioned, I attended St. John’s School of Nursing and received my RN degree in 1961.

Q. What goals or circumstances prompted you to apply to SSU?

A. Well I tell you; in 1971 I was assigned to work with our elderly sisters. At that time there were many changes in the Church and Vatican II documents came out from Rome. It seemed then like retirement and aging were new words to many religious communities. So our Council thought that it was fitting that I get some education in regard to the aging process.

Now this was a little bit difficult at the time because I had just established the activity and occupational therapy department here at the Motherhouse. One summer I was asked to go to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor for education on aging. When we get an assignment
and if we have any reason why we cannot fulfill that assignment we must say so. But I thought, “I want to learn something about older people.” So I went to the University of Michigan. When I was there I thought, “How can I go on with any further education?” I thought my education was all finished when I got my BS. Lo and behold there were so many students there that came, older men and women.

I’ll never forget, there was one man that came to class with his backpack on his back with his books. He took all of his books out and in the pack he had his little baby, three or four month old baby, and he slipped that baby in his backpack. He sat there in class and I thought, “My goodness! Here he is working double duty. He is taking care of his child and getting his education. If education is really, really that important then I really think I need it too.” After I finished by summer there at the University of Michigan I came back here to the Motherhouse and was again in the activity department. I then tried to think of what more I could do for our Sisters.

I was presented with the idea of going to someplace here in Springfield. At this time Sangamon State had no gerontology truly established, but there were some mini courses that Gari Lesnoff-Caravaglia started and I went to them. She had a pilot study in gerontology because that’s what she wanted to establish at the University. And so Sister Valerie Ann Borlee and I got interested in the program. Sister Valerie Ann worked in the physical therapy department here and that was close to our occupational therapy department. We both got the idea, “Why don’t we just go to Sangamon State?” That was in 1977 that prompted us to begin our work in gerontology.

Q. What years did you attend SSU?


Q. Did you receive a degree?

A. Yes I did. I have a Master of Arts degree in Gerontology.

Q. Describe in detail your initial impressions of the campus and your classes.

A. Well the classes were small. Of course, the university did not appear to be a big place to me in a way. We had only those brown or green buildings there. The only real building that I saw then was the Brookens Library, but that was over farther. There was a huge parking lot in the front and so I thought, “They must be expecting a lot of students to attend.”

After awhile I got the parking permit. I could drive but Sister Valerie Ann did not, so we had to arrange our classes so we always could be together. We started our classes mostly in the evenings at 5:30 pm. Once in a while we had some classes on Saturday sessions, and once in awhile maybe a day class that we had to attend something on. We both had to be there then even though we had a full time job at the Motherhouse.
There was no housing for students on the university grounds. There was a house called the Cox House. This Cox House was where the first director or president, Dr. Robert Spencer, lived. There is a big picture of him, Dr. Spencer, in the Brookens Library. I haven’t seen it lately, but I know it was there near the stair well when we were there. That was after Dr. Spencer died, the Cox House became the Gerontology Center.

I tell you that house was something nice. We could go there any time as we had our instructors there. We had a big lounge area, and we could have coffee there. My class advisor was Dr. Harry Berman, and I could always see him if I wanted to. And I tell you that we students had a grand, grand time getting to know each other.

Our first Christmas was in the Cox House. We decorated the Christmas tree and brought our goodies. There was only about maybe fifteen or twenty students there at the time – I don’t recall who all came – but Sister Valerie Ann and I, we decorated the place. I had our elderly sisters make paper decorations. We took old Christmas cards and cut them to make a chain.

We hung them across the Christmas tree and they looked beautiful. We had candles and pine cone wreaths we used. It was just outstanding the way that this Christmas party came about. So that was the Cox House Center for us. Later on, I think it was used as a day care place for students that came to the university with children.

Q. Did those impressions change in the course of your studies, and if so, how?

A. Yes they did but it took a long time it seemed like. See, everything was so new. The classrooms were mostly in those dark buildings. We had one or two classes in the PAC. The PAC building was not done or completed yet. It started and then there must have been a strike or something that work was delayed. We went there and saw the construction going on but no men working at it. Work on it was slow.

But I tell you the classrooms, I’d oftentimes laugh, they were so cold in the wintertime and then the one room where we had – I forgot what class it was, was it the Perspectives of Aging? I believe it was – we had in the back of the room a big barrel and it said “The Sweater Barrel.”

The classrooms (laughter) were so cold in the winter time. In one classroom we had a sweater barrel. In the room where we had class, I laughed about that because people had donated sweaters and anyone who was chilly when they came to class could take a sweater, put it on, wear it during class time. After class they would put it back in the barrel for the next person to wear [laughter]. That was rather comical to see something like that!

Q. Identify and describe two or three of the most memorable professors, good or bad, that you took.
A. I got a picture here of her, Gari Lesnoff-Caravagli. I took this from the faculty book. She was really a person who took a lot of interest in you. She’d spend time with you and would give you a lot of encouragement. And she’d say, “Oh yes, sure you can do that! Sure you can.” I can remember in the Perspectives of Aging that I just couldn’t get over it that Gari was so willing to come here or show us articles to clear up our problem.

Dr. Harry Berman, he taught the Psychology of Aging but I didn’t have to take it from him because I had taken that at the University of Michigan. But he wanted my syllabus and all the papers I had written for my class. I gave it to him and I got credit for it. That was pretty nice. He was my class advisor and one that helped me so much when I wrote my master thesis.

I wrote my master thesis titled *Loneliness and Spiritual Well-being in the Elderly*. He at first said, “I don’t know how you will ever find any material for a thesis on that. You’ll have to have a scale to measure loneliness.” And I said, “Well I’ll keep on looking.” So I did and on the day I found a scale in the library, I showed it to him. I don’t know who was happier, he or I. I had something that I could use for my master thesis. That was really outstanding the way he assisted me.

Dr. Jeff Chesky, oh my goodness, he taught the Biology of Aging. He was very concerned about his students. He would repeat things and he’d give little tests on the spur of the moment to see if you understood what he was talking about. I thought at first, “Biology of aging, now that sounds rather unique in a way. Why do I want to study the biology of aging as he did all of his studies on mice? And I thought, “He’s going to compare man with a mouse? That’s silly.” I found out afterwards that he really knew his stuff, and it really was good.

Another instructor I had was Mr. Marshall. He taught the Sociology of Aging. That was one of the very first classes in the Cox House. Mr. Marshall told us about the different areas of where older people lived. I thought at the time, “Well, what do I care about that?” But I knew that I wanted to get through the program and took it. He knew his material well, but he seemed so young. I don’t think he stayed at the university more than a year or so. There was another lady who taught at times, Jean Turner. She only substituted for classes.

Q. Rogers.

A. Rogers. She only substituted for classes that I know of. I want to say something about the library. When I went to SSU, there were no computers around whatsoever. And we had to look up all of our material. Dr. Chesky was somebody who gave you a lot of books to read or articles from magazines to get a good grade in his Biology of Aging. He gave us a list of the articles and we had to go to the library and look them up and Xerox them off. Sister Valerie Ann and I spent a lot of time there. She took one page of the articles and I took the other page. When we found them, we Xeroxed them at five cents a sheet. We took them home and read them.

I tell you we spent a lot of time going through those red books, called the Reader’s Guide to find those articles. Oftentimes we had to go through those file cases to find the books. We
learned about the different libraries where we could get material we needed. Being there in that library, well it was a good place to be, when we wanted to meet other people, too. So I would say all the instructors I had were very good.

Q. In SSU’s early years, University Week was a special feature of the curriculum. Did you enroll in or attend events for any University Week and if so, describe those experiences?

A. I don’t know if you’d call them University Week events, but we had Gerontology Institutes and they were great. They were on a weekend, and each one started on a Friday night for two hours and all day Saturday. We had to go to get the credit. I have the certificates here for those I attended. I remember that one was on Death and Dying, one was on care of the sick and terminally ill and ethical issues concerning them. One was also on the environment.

Q. Yes, [reading] I see the certificates for 1979 and 1980 Gerontology Institute.

A. So there was no end – I think I even attended some even after we graduated because those Gerontology Institutes were very good. They covered a cross section and they said that all students had to take those institutes in order to get credit because the subject matter applied to many.

Another thing that I did get or receive from the university was the scholarship from the Zonta Club. That scholarship was given if a student had a certain grade average. I and another student received the Zonta Award and that was given on the stage in the Brookens Library. I believe we had a meal or a banquet in the cafeteria after it. The Zonta scholarship covered for three hundred dollars of our education. I felt pretty good about that.

Q. Did you have a favorite classroom on campus or downtown? If so, describe it.

A. No, I didn’t go to any classes downtown because it was too hard for me to get there. One thing we did have was all these nice breakfasts the university had – no matter what kind of award there was given.

We also had the Gerontology Club that was organized probably a year after we were there. Maybe that was before then because we had a speaker who came for each meeting. I do have one full lecture that somebody at the University gave at one of these meetings. It was mostly on gratitude. I read it over maybe a month or so ago, and I was so grateful that I saved it. I guess I can’t say enough about the University.

Q. Do you recall who the speaker was?

A. I have his name someplace. It’s probably in there but I don’t know where it is right now. If you want this, you can look it over.

Q. Yes, I’d like to read that.

Winkler
A. Ok, take it.

Q. Have you stayed in touch with any students, staff members, or professors that you knew at the time? You might want to mention any special acquaintanceships.

A. Oh yes, there was a couple students from our Gerontology Club that I stayed in contact with after graduation because I joined the alumni. I say the alumni is what kept me going. It made me feel proud of the University. It changed from being Sangamon State to the University of Illinois in Springfield. I don’t know exactly when that occurred, but that was really great and so was our graduation. I have our booklet here but before that I might say that for my master thesis – my father died in 1979 and I was off for maybe two months or so. The University was very kind and extended my time so that I could come back into class and make up what I had missed. For that I am very, very grateful.

Q. Are there any particular names you’d like to mention who you’ve stayed in touch with or recall fondly?

A. There was Eleanor Gleason. I had three internships. I had one internship at the Seniorama where I met Eleanor. The senior center was here in Springfield. From there I went to the Bonansinga High Rise. I had activity sessions with the residents. We had maybe ten or fifteen residents who would come down twice a week to talk about the aging process. We sometimes worked on craft activities like making tray favors for Memorial Hospital. We had little prayer sessions with the residents, and I thought that was very useful.

My second internship was at Saint John’s Hospital in pastoral care. Of course, there I come in contact with Sister Anna Marie, who was the director of pastoral care. After I was there two weeks she said to me one day, “Now I’m going to take Monday off and I’m going to give you the pager. You will have to go wherever you get paged to go to, like the emergency room, ICU or across to North.” I thought, “How can that be? I don’t know much about pastoral care.” But my heart was beating fast and luckily I did my ordinary rounds and I never got called for those places. [Laughter] I had to give a report on Pastoral Care in one class. It went across pretty good.

My third internship was at the Springfield Housing Authority. For that I visited residents at the Hildebrand High Rise. That I found very useful because when I did my master thesis, I had to choose residents to interview on loneliness and spiritual well-being. I asked for permission and of course had to go through a lot of rigmarole to get it but my questionnaire was approved by the Director. I visited the residents at the Hildebrand High Rise and compared their answers to our elderly sisters here at the Motherhouse and some of the Ursuline Sisters. That was real, real good research. I have my master thesis yet, and I think there’s a copy at the University, too.
Q. Were there any campus practices, for example pass/fail grading, casual attire, unstructured class discussion, unusual course topics, that impressed you strongly? And if so, please elaborate.

A. Well, I think I stated that I got a lot from the Gerontology Institutes and our Gerontology Club. Oh, I belonged to the Sigma Phi Omega that is the honor society for gerontology students – for those who have had a grade average of 3.5 or something like that. We were inducted into that society by Gari Lesnoff-Caravaglia and they still have it going. For a while it there was no one except Jeff Chesky to keep it going. It was really great to belong to that national society. At one time Deborah Beechler Pilaphill conducted our meetings.

For our induction ceremony, we met at the Bauer Restaurant here in Springfield. After luncheon, we got a nice pin and I wear it when I go to the meetings. I still get invited to a lot of Sigma Phi Omega meetings. In fact, I make corsages for all the honorees, and I look at that as a great privilege. I am also asked to lead the meal prayer before we eat.

Q. Did you want to talk about pass/fail grading or the casual attire of the students or unstructured classes?

A. Oh, well I [laughter] always dressed that I looked like a Sister. I had my veil on that might have disturbed some people but they never said anything to me. The only one who mentioned that was Bill Gorrell, who taught research methods. One day he said, “How about this? When you do your research at the high rise that you don’t wear your veil? Would that make a difference?” And I said, “No, I don’t think it would. Do you want me to not wear it?” He said, “It’s up to you.” I never was forced to take it off.

But now, I don’t wear it around here because after I broke my arm I had a hard time putting it on. The attire of the other students – well, they came very casual. Sometimes I didn’t know if I was meeting a lady or a man because they had long hair. Some of them had braids, and [laughter] you really couldn’t tell. I said hello as long as they were on the university grounds. I never became too much involved in what they were doing. I saw a few coming with dogs; I saw them coming with bicycles and motorcycles. It didn’t make me too much difference; I knew that probably was what they could afford. I was just glad that I could drive a car.

Q. Did you and other students have a favorite off-campus meeting place?

A. No, not as a student. We met in classrooms or wherever the Gerontology Club members met. I remember one meeting we had at Gari Lesnoff-Caravaglia’s home. It was out by the lake and she had a beautiful home, just a beautiful home and a nice outdoor patio that we could sit and we had a potluck dinner there.

She had a real nice baby grand piano. Dr. Chesky played that piano and it was something to hear him play. I never knew that he could play it. I was so grateful that we had that time to get together and know each other.
Of course at that time, no one knew what they were going to be doing in the future. We weren’t through the program yet at the University. We were all talking about where we had worked and what we had done and what we would like to do in the future. It was a happy time; there was no regular meeting place. We were always given a letter a month ahead of time where we would meet.

I remember there was one minister that was in our group. We met at his place in their big hall. I forgot his name. We always talked about what interested us.

Q. Well, we’ll stop the recorder when I’m done asking you questions and we’ll look for that.

A. OK, fine.

Q. In recent years, how often per year do you visit the campus and why?

A. Well I would say I wasn’t there since last year when we had the oral history review. Was that in January, I believe it was in 2008 or December 2007. Otherwise I go to the PAC building once in a while for musical presentations whenever they have them. I also go to the alumni meetings whenever the big banquet is held downstairs.

The big event I did go to was in 2003. I was given the loyalty award by the Alumni Association. That was a surprise. [laughter] When I got the letter asking me if I would submit to being honored in that way, I thought, “Oh that surely must be a mistake. How did they ever get my name into something like that?” But anyhow, after so many inquiries, I consented. That was just a very glorious night to be down in the basement of the big PAC building. I don’t really know where it was anymore, but we had nice big blue tablecloths. I was sitting at the table with our Provincial, Sister Joan Winkler and Sister Jane Marie Lamb, who also graduated with me. Dr. Chesky and Kathleen Cross were also at my table.

They were all special. It was Kathleen Cross who nominated me to be given that award. It was because I had written the oral history of Saint John’s Hospice. I started working in hospice at Saint John’s in 1993 and am still working there. The facilitator wanted a history and so I interviewed thirteen different people for an oral history of Saint John’s Hospice, of how it got started. The University also has a copy of that. I found out that was why I was given an award.

Q. In retrospect, what was the value of the education you received?

A. Well, I would say it gave me a reason for living, working, and doing what I did, caring for the elderly. I treasure it highly; I would say it’s one of the best things of my life now that I’m older. See, I worked with the elderly; I’ve seen a lot of their problems, and I’ve tried to help them, I know that everyone is going to die and now being in hospice for fifteen years I have assisted many people in their dying and family members in bereavement. August the tenth this year I will have been in hospice fifteen years,
That is the core thing with hospice; the family members are always included. I think I’ve seen the whole gamut of aging from one age to another in one’s life. I value that greatly. I know it has helped me spiritually. I take more time to think of and reflect on my end.

I keep in contact with Mary Caroline Mitchell at the alumni office and others there, too. We’ve had a lot of meetings there. One thing we had that I attended there was the tree planting ceremony. When the university or rather the Gerontology program was twenty-five years old, we had an aging workshop initiated by Dr. Harry Berman because I had suggested it. I was instrumental in asking if we could please plant a tree (holding up a photo). I have that shovel and helped place the tree in the hole along the sidewalk where the tree was put. I’m very proud of UIS. I call it the “You Is” University [laughter].

Q. You Is [laughter].

A. You Is. That is not the right language, but that was OK for me. I did a lot of oral histories on our older Sisters. I also did a lot of background genealogy work on my family. I made a family heritage book on the relatives of my family, both from my mother’s side and my father’s side. I have written my own autobiography. I have written poetry and have written all kinds of articles and essays. In hospice I composed songs that I sing to the patients. I have one essay I wrote about the emotions and feelings of my father’s death. I journaled about the thoughts in my mind after I received the loyalty award. So you see I love the University, and I want to stay in contact with it.

I might mention here that I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Cullom Davis. After I graduated Cullom taught me the subject of oral history from which I gained tremendous knowledge. I now see how the future depends on what happened in the past and the present. It is sometimes difficult to get a recording from people on the past. I seem to capture that art from Cullom and am most grateful to him.

Q. Are there any names of people, faculty, staff, students, from the early days that you would recommend that we interview for the Archives?

A. One would be Teresa Babistzki. She is from Chicago and attended SSU a year after I did; she had a stroke. Another outstanding person is Margaret Summers, but she is deceased now. She often spoke at our Gerontology Club meetings. She was in charge of the Seniorama, the senior center and I worked under her. The Seniorama was a good place to work.

Here is something that I wanted to tell you that I thought about [rustling papers]. When Dr. Chesky retired we had a retirement part at the university. I never really thought too much of him until after I graduated (laughter). Can I read it to you?

Q. Yes, please do!
A. Ok, Ok. I never really thought as I said, too much of him until after I graduated [laughter]. And so this is what I wrote to him when we had his retirement party. [Reading] Congratulations and God’s blessing on this your retirement day. You worked hard for over twenty-five years and this is what I have to say: When I entered the gerontology program in 1977, I took your Biology of Aging, but in it I did not rate.

You spoke about mice and their life span, you spontaneously tested us and the process of aging taught us to read, research, and ponder without raging. You had a heart full of gold and a deep concern for all who were willing to learn. Do you recall the first Christmas party we had at the Cox House? We decorated, sang, and celebrated with all who came. The internship report I gave in your class, oh I was so nervous and ready but you called on me last.

I don’t know where you were on my graduation day. You probably stood in the corner and said “Hooray! She took my class, she passed the grade, I’m proud of her progress that she has made.” As the years past by and after I earned my degree, I sometimes met you at conferences and you were still concerned about me. Whenever I came to read at the WUIS radio station, you greeted me. We shared news and spoke about our nation. At our SPO banquets and the bestowal of our pins, you always found a speaker and we members were proud of him.

We all were astounded when you were president of AGA (American Aging Association) the national board, your message and that newsletter made aging a top reward. When I needed a recommendation for further education and pastoral care I sent you a letter and received a phone call so rare. You said, “What do you want me to say about you?” I replied, “Make it short, honest, and true.”

You said, “You are a compassionate person who cares about people. You are a nurse, a consoler, and have faith in God as high as a steeple. Your assistance at the tree planting last April on the university ground made me feel the growth of gerontology acquired now into Human Services, it is called.

You honored me greatly with your presence at the Alumni Banquet last November. You said I was your spiritual guide through the years. I wondered what service did I render. Now as you launch into your retirement years stay active, wear your white cap, and have no fears. I can only say God bless you for all you have taught me. You are an instructor I’ll be thinking of for all eternity. Amen. [Laughter]

Q. Nice. Is there anything you’d like to say in conclusion of our interview here, Sister?

A. Yes. My graduation day was very, very memorable. It was at the Convention Center. I have pictures and my graduation report here. My mother came for that ceremony all the way from Ohio. She was proud of me. Of course, at the time I was walking with a cane but the Lord gave me the grace to go up and get my diploma without my cane. After we left the Convention Center, we had a nice little reception at the Motherhouse. Gari Lesnoff-Caravaglia came to it.
She gave me this nice bookmark (holding it up for inspection). I’m always going to save it because I think a lot of her for what she did for me. She was a real support to me.

So I think that probably ends up with all I have to say. Maybe I forgot to mention that I did read for the Radio Information Services at the UIS radio station. I got many compliments, awards, and certificates for that. So may God bless everyone who accompanied me through SSU. May God bless everyone who reads this history. I recommend any young person to enter the field of Gerontology.

Q. Thank you, Sister.

End of Interview

45 minutes 39 seconds