

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: Maria Martin (MM)

INTERVIEWER: Phoebe Herland (PH)

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PH: My name is Phoebe Herland.

MM: Hello. Nice to meet you, Phoebe.

PH: As if we didn't just have lunch [Laughter]. I'm here with Maria Martin in her home in Astoria, Queens. We're here to discuss her long career at MoMA as the senior receptionist. It is, what is the date? Monday, April 28th, and it's 2:30pm. So, Maria, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me.

MM: Thank you for coming.

PH: Can you just start by telling me a little bit about how you grew up?

MM: I was born in the Philippines, and there were seven of us. We were six girls and one boy, and I'm the third from the oldest. My parents were both doctors, they had a private clinic there. I graduated from the State University of the Philippines. The State University of the Philippines is the only recognized university in the States. Of course, my parents wanted me to have a career, and I'm not a type who wants to have a career. I'd rather go dancing and be with friends [laughter]. I hated school, so I took Fine Arts because Fine Arts is easy. You don't have to have chemistry and all those— so, I started Fine Arts in the University of the Philippines. From there, I wanted to go to the States. At that time, my father's sister, who lived in the States, her husband had just passed away— she was also a doctor— and she needed someone to be with her. She had kids, but young kids. So my parents asked, "who wants to go to the States?" I said, "I want to go!" And so anyway, that's how I came here. I was the first in my immediate family to come.

I took some more art courses in the School of Visual Arts, just to see how Fine Arts are here. But I needed a part-time job, so I worked at Alexander's [Department Store] as a salesgirl. That was funny too, because it was so easy then to apply for a job. I applied, and they said, "Oh, do you know music?" I said, "Oh, sure, I know music." "Do you know Motown?" I said, "Oh, sure, I know Motown." And then they said, you can work in the record section. So they put me there, and people would ask, "where's the Motown section?" And I'd say, [whispers] "I don't know, where's the Motown section." [Laughs] And so they complained about me. Then they put me on

the upper floor, which is more fashion, dresses, and I liked that better, putting clothes back on the racks.

PH: What kind of art would you make when you were a student?

MM: I did sculpture. But I left them all in the Philippines, I should have brought them. There was a difference between school here and in the Philippines, especially with Fine Arts. Here you have nude models, and I wasn't aware of that. So, we were in this drawing class, and there was this model, she was in a robe, and all of a sudden, she took it off. Everyone else was really used to it, but we didn't have nude models in the Philippines. We had models, but not nude ones.

PH: And then pretty soon after you started at MoMA, right? Did you just want to work at any museum, and you happened to pick MoMA? Or were there other museums that you were applying to?

MM: No, actually, I didn't even think of other museums. I think when I was going to the School of Visual Arts they mentioned MoMA. So that's why I said, "oh, I want to work at MoMA." It was so easy to apply. You just walked in, you don't even need a resume, you just say "I want to apply for a job." And they say, "okay, sure, you can go to the"— they called it the Personnel Department then, not HR. So at that time, they looked at my resume and they asked, "how come I want to apply here?" I said in the interview, "I'm a Fine Arts graduate, and one day I want to be a curator." Thinking that a curator is just a curator [laughs], I didn't even know. But then at that time, the Director of Mail Order Department was going on vacation, and she needed someone to help her process all the mail order, like in the bookstore and the store, because it was during Christmas time. And she said, "would you want to try that?" So, I did. We got along well, she trusted me. And at that time too I was kind of self-conscious talking in English. But anyway, to make a long story short, I worked in mail order but I was getting bored, because all I did was just process the orders, the books and everything. So a friend of mine says, "Maria, there's a temporary opening at the reception desk." I said, "oh, I could be a receptionist." So that's how I got the job as a receptionist, and they liked me and they wanted to hire me permanently, but it was only temporary. The receptionist was on vacation, and she said she was coming back. I said, "okay, oh, I wish I could work here." And a sad story is that the receptionist got sick. She had—not arthritis, but more of a—you know, like she can't walk? And she couldn't work anymore. So they asked me if I wanted the job, and I said, "oh, sure." So that's how I started being a receptionist. I liked the job because I liked working with people.

The Museum was small then, before the renovation. When you walk in, it's just my desk, the reception desk, and nothing else. And then they renovated, and they moved me to a more enclosed, private room. It was near the check room where [people] sign in and everything. And that's where I met *everybody*, which was really fun. From Mrs. John D. Rockefeller to Jacqueline Kennedy— because that was how to get through to the offices. They have to stop at that desk. It was a small room next to the check room, there was a glass door and everything, not like now. People would come in to go to the study centers on the upper floors, and I'd have to stop them. One time Meryl Streep came, and she was so—[whispers] "I'm Meryl Streep," and I said, "I

can't hear you." [Whispers] "I'm Meryl Streep." [Laughs]. And then they called me [from the offices upstairs] and I said, "call me [first], so I don't have to delay them." So anyway, it's just a lot of stories like that, because that was the only entrance to the offices. I used to see [Andy Warhol](#), he would just be standing by the check room, by the rope, and he would just watch people.

PH: Really?

MM: Yeah, he would just watch people.

PH: And you would watch him watching people [laughs].

MM: He wouldn't say a word. People would come up to him, and he just wouldn't say a word.

PH: So this was in '80s?

MM: In the '80s. Before the big, big expansion, yeah. Before we [temporarily] moved to Queens.

PH: Do you remember any other artists coming in?

MM: Yeah, there were quite a few. Who else did, though? Well, [Chuck Close](#). And he was a little stand-offish. Like, "you don't know me?" And I'm like, "I know you." There were quite a few artists. [Salvador Dalí](#) would come in. [Lee Friedlander](#) was very nice, and [Jasper Johns](#). And [Frank Stella](#), I knew his assistant very well, Paula Paulson, who used to work with Aggie [Agnes Gund]. I met the Picassos, [his daughter] Paloma Picasso and his son [Claude Picasso]. They were nice, too. The Film Study Center was upstairs, so lots of movie stars came in, too. One time it was Al Pacino, and he was rushing because the paparazzi were following him. And I stopped him, and he was so mad at me. I said, "Excuse me, Sir, where are you going?" He said "Why are you stopping me!" Because that's my job, to stop people [laughter].

PH: What was your daily routine in the 80s?

MM: In the 80s, that was it. Checking people in before they could go to the offices. There was a security guard sitting next to me and two elevators, so they have to get a badge from me, and then go to the offices upstairs. My closet became the VIP closet. The trustees would put their coats there. It was very exciting. It was mostly movie stars who came through the desk, because the artists would be met by the curators. They didn't go [through me]. One time, Tom Hanks came in. It was when the Museum was closed. There were tourists following him, fans, and they wanted to take his picture. I said, "I'm sorry, but you can't because the museum is closed." He says, "please, please, please." He was so sweet. So I called the Press Office, and they told me he could go ahead and have pictures taken with those people, even if the museum is closed. So he gave me a big hug.

PH: So you mostly weren't dealing with the general public?

MM: Mostly the private. Sometimes, when I was at the front desk in the beginning, I would interact with the general public, because my desk was right by the entrance. Oh, I have to tell you this. There was a young girl, probably about seven years old. She and her mom came in, and there was such a long line, and the museum was going to close. The mom said, "I know the galleries are closing, but can we just see [Vincent Van Gogh's] *Starry Night* [472.1941]?" And I said, "I'm sorry, but you can't, you have to come back tomorrow." And the girl started crying. She said, "No, I want to see Van Gogh's *Starry Night!*" And I said, "come back tomorrow, come and see me, and I'll just give you a pass." And then the mother said, "we live in Boston, let me call her dad if we could stay another night at the hotel." And so she called her husband and it was okay, and the girl was so happy. But then I said to the security supervisor, "What if Van Gogh is not on view? What if it's being borrowed somewhere, and they're going to stay in their hotel for another night and it's not even here!" So he went to check, and— "pew, Maria, it's here." [Laughs]. So first thing in the morning, she was there with her mom. Right after they saw it, they left. It meant so much to her. She was seven. And sometimes people propose in front of [Claude] Monet's *Water Lilies* [666.1959.a-c].

PH: Yeah, the artworks mean a lot to a lot of people.

MM: But then when they did the first renovation, I was in the main lobby. That's when they had the Picasso show [*Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective*, [MoMA Exh. #1290](#)]. The whole museum was Picasso. The line would be like, 53rd to 54th, around the block.

PH: That was a big one.

MM: That was exciting because [I got to see] the Rolling Stones, Elton John, who were friends of Kynaston McShine.

PH: How many people do you think were working in your department when you started?

MM: In the reception area when I started? Very small, like 10 people. The staff was closer then, we called it the museum family. There's only one main reception desk, which is my desk. I was the main receptionist at MoMA.

With the expansion, the Lauder Lobby desk became my desk. And that was fun, because I saw more variety of people, coming into the museum, coming into the offices, and they all have to check in with me. Everybody has to check in before they could enter the museum. And Aggie [Agnes Gund], especially Aggie, trustees, everybody. I loved my desk. When the Obamas came, and when Hillary Clinton came, there was very tight security. Michelle [Obama] and the rest. I was the only one who was allowed to go behind the desk. I was typing something, and all of a sudden, the security people came in. I think one of them said "no, no, no, she's okay. She's okay." And Bill Clinton, he was such a charmer. I'll never forget this—the volunteers were sitting across from me in the lobby, and Bill Clinton came in, and it's like, "oh Bill, oh Bill, we love you." They were so cute, those volunteers. [Laughter].

PH: Oh, that's funny.

MM: But there's one incident that it's hard for me to forget. Artists would come in, and they would say, "I'm here to drop off my work." I'd say, "No, I'm sorry, but you just can't drop off your work. You have to make an appointment with the curator, and I didn't hear anything about this." And this guy says, [forcefully] "No, I'm here to drop off my work." And I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not allowed to take any of your work until I hear from them [a curator]." And so, I was going to call the painting and sculpture curator. And what he did, he took something from his pocket, and it was a crumpled piece of paper, and he put it on my desk, and he took a match and lit it. And it just—[gasps] lit on fire, and then he walked out. But he left his work. And the guards were just like—

PH: Fire. On your desk.

MM: On my desk!

PH: So a lot of artists came in to drop off work?

MM: A lot of artists.

PH: At what point did that policy get made, that you couldn't accept work?

MM: It was always the case. But I was never told. It was just me. First thing, I know that you're not allowed to accept any artwork because otherwise they will all just drop off their work. But I was so scared in that moment. And there was another staff [member] from the information desk that was next to me, we didn't know what to do. We just put the fire out. I said, "I don't know to do that [the artwork] just leave it." Those are the— kind of not safe. We didn't really have a security [guard] next to me. But then they installed a red phone for me, just in case.

PH: Did you ever feel unsafe, besides this fire situation? Were there any other moments when you felt—

MM: Not really. I mean, I didn't even think about this fire. Because the majority of the people who came into MOMA, for the museum, or for the office, or just to inquire about the museum, they were really nice. They were nicer than [laughs] thank God. Not like today. They were really nice.

PH: Do you have any other stories about celebrities?

MM: Celebrities, yeah, Jay Z. The information desk, they're younger, and sometimes a celebrity comes, like Cheech & Chong, and they— [whispers] "Maria, Maria!" And I'd say "what?" [whispers] "he's okay, he's okay." So I would just give them a pass. But who else came? The Wilson brothers. [Whispers] "Maria, Maria!"

PH: I remember you mentioned Elizabeth Taylor came in at one point?

MM: Elizabeth Taylor. When she walked in, oh, my God, she was the prettiest. Of course, she didn't come to my desk. That was the old, old [building], the first one. And people were just [makes "ahh" sound] google eyed. And then one time, too, Michael Jackson came. And who would stop Michael Jackson? That was the old, first renovation, the [César] [Pelli](#) renovation. He walked in and he just went to the bookstore. But some of them are very friendly. Chuck Close, not as friendly. But he was friendly with me, because we talked. I talked to them.

PH: When celebrities and politicians came in, who are they meeting with?

MM: Usually the director of MoMA, mostly. And some of the curators. One time this guy came in and he said, "my boss is in the car, and she is to meet someone here at the main lobby." I said, "you have to give me the name of your boss. I just can't— Who do I call?" And he said, "well, my boss is in the car, and she can't wait. I have to let you know, and then I'll get her." And I said, "in the meantime, I really have to know." Because who am I to call? The director of the Museum? And then I got a call from the director of Museum. It was Oprah Winfrey.

PH: Oh, wow.

MM: Yeah. She was in the car. She had lent a [Gustav] [Klimt](#) and she wanted to see it. But she was very pleasant, she was very nice.

PH: Was that when Richard Oldenburg was the director?

MM: No, that was Glenn [Lowry]. That was recent. Richard Oldenburg was more old school, very down to earth. At one point, the entrance to the Museum was on 54th street because they were renovating. I was moved to the townhouse right across the library. I was there for a few years. Nelson Rockefeller's floor was on the third floor, I think. And that was where my entrance was. And that was kind of tough, because it was a small, you know, it's a townhouse. [People] have to meet their guest's downstairs. Mr. Oldenburg was the director of the Museum then.

PH: You had a great relationship with him?

MM: We had a very good relationship. Mr. Oldenburg is so down to earth. He was very shy. And, you may know, Claes Oldenburg is his brother. Mrs. Oldenburg used to come to MoMA, and she would wait at the desk. It's important to know, my first desk with the two small elevators and a closet—everybody came there. Madonna was there breastfeeding a little baby, once. And Sex in the City filmed there one time, because Samantha was a good friend of one of the staff, Emmett Watson. He was in Development and Membership. They left their bags in my closet. The Blue Man Group put their coats in my closet. Even at night, when the Museum was closed for events, people would ask, "where's Maria's closet?" They knew about it.

PH: So it sounds like that desk with those two elevators in that very first building, was a nice refuge for people.

MM: Yeah, very private, very small. And it had that VIP closet. One time, I have to tell you, Robert Redford came. He was allowed to put his coat and his cap, the one that he always wears, in my closet. As soon as he left, I put on his cap [laughs]. And I got a call from the security office downstairs and they say, "Maria, what are you doing? You're on camera!" I'll never forget that. I trying on his cap. It was fun.

But the 54th Street entrance was more exciting, in a way, because that was the only entrance, so I'd get to see more people. And this is how humble Mr. Oldenburg was— he was standing waiting for a guest at my new desk and then this guy came in and says, "I'm here to see Dick." But another Dick, Dick Jansen. I said, "oh, sure, Dick." And Mr. Oldenburg was standing a few feet away from me. "Oh, Maria, did you call me?" [Laughter] I said, "Mr. Oldenburg, I would never call you Dick!" It was so cute, he was so humble.

PH: Do you have any other funny stories with Richard Oldenburg?

MM: A funny story is when he retired. I was very close to him, because I lost my son. He was very close to me and Aggie. They were very close. But anyway, the story. When he retired, Aggie was then the president of MoMA, or Mrs. John D Rockefeller, one of them— Mrs. John D Rockefeller, I have to tell you, is the very, very nicest person. When I was at the small desk, she would just stay downstairs, and she would sit right across from me, wouldn't say anything. She would just sit there, and I didn't want to ask her. And then they would call me after 10 minutes— and she was just waiting there— and say, "Maria is Mrs. John D Rockefeller there? "Yeah," I said, "she's been here." So they were waiting for her, but she never would come to me and tell me, she just waits. I was kind of close to the Rockefellers and David Rockefeller, because I was close to Marnie Pillsbury, his assistant. It was his 80th birthday, I have to show it to you, I have pictures, because they were taking pictures of staff who knew Mr. Rockefeller. They were celebrating his 80th birthday at Party in the Garden. And Marnie Pillsbury said, "Maria, David wants you to be in the film, wishing him a happy birthday. He said he has to have you in that happy birthday tribute." So when he passed away, I was invited to his memorial service. The Rockefellers are very, very nice. They're very down to earth people.

PH: Yeah, and you were also close with Aggie?

MM: I was very close with Aggie. But let me tell you about— So when Mr. Oldenburg left, I got a call from either Aggie or Mrs. John D. Rockefeller that they want me to say something about Mr. Oldenburg at the retirement party. I said, "I can't, I will be so"— about 500 staff! No, I didn't want to say anything. But can you say no to Mrs. Rockefeller, or Aggie? I said, "I've got to do it." So, Karen Davidson, she says, "Maria, we're going to rehearse so you don't feel—" So it came. And Philip Yenawine, who was at the director of education, I told him, I said, "Philip, I have to give remarks." He said, "That's okay. You can do it." "No, I can't. 500 people!" We were in the lobby. He says, "let me get you something." And he got me a glass, and it was a glass of, not even

wine, maybe stronger than wine. He said, "here, take a drink." I did. He said, "take another one." And I did give the speech.

PH: How did it go?

MM: It went very well, because it was emotional. And I really show [emotions] like that with alcohol. I really showed my feelings. And after the speech they all clapped their hands, and some of them were crying, and I gave him a big hug. And the other speeches that came after me, they didn't care. I said to Phillip, I said, "Thank you so much for that." [Laughs]. So yeah, that was one story.

And I was very close to Aggie. I had a son that passed away when Aggie was the president of the Museum and Mr. Oldenburg was the director. The wake was here in Astoria. They came to the wake, the two of them. And somebody told me that when Mr. Oldenburg heard about it, he said "Oh no, not my favorite person." So that's how close we were. And even Mrs. Oldenburg, I was very close with.

PH: So they were there for you in times of the hardship.

MM: Yes. They called me up and said, "Maria take as much time as you need," because usually you'd only have so many days off for bereavement. When Aggie found out that I came back, she was on her way to a meeting and she said, "where is she, I'll go see her first." I became very close to Aggie during that time. She's the best. She's such a compassionate person. The staff too. There was a bulletin board in the staff lounge, which had a story about my son on it. A lot of the staff and even the trustees donated money to help me through. Every day, "Maria, there's another check for you."

PH: Do you have stories about Aggie to share?

MM: Oh, yeah. She was always there. She is just the kindest person. She would never introduce herself, and she was very friendly to everybody. I would go to her house, and sometimes we had lunch together. I knew her children since they were babies. We exchange gifts for birthdays and Christmas. You give Aggie one gift, she'll give you a hundred gifts.

PH: She's given you artwork too.

MM: Yes, and when I retired, she donated a Fred Wilson sculpture, a chandelier, to the Museum in my honor [*To Die Upon A Kiss*, [710.2019](#)]. I was so touched when I got the letter from Ann Temkin telling me. Aggie is so real. Mrs. Lauder, too, is very nice. The both of them are.

PH: Do you have any stories about the Lauders?

MM: The Lauders. Oh, yes. Like I said, they wanted to give a retirement party just for me. But, at the Museum, they can't, because it's a group of retirees who are going to retire, and it's not fair to

just celebrate one. So, they decided to have a private retirement party for me, given by Aggie, in Mr. Lauder's house. And it's funny, we were waiting downstairs for the elevator, and Mr. Lauder came in and he was teasing us. "What are you doing here?" [Laughter]. I didn't realize that he was going to be the one giving the remarks. It was so cute.

PH: So you gave remarks for Mr. Oldenburg, and Mr. Lauder gave them for you.

MM: Yeah, yeah.

PH: What did they say? Do you remember?

MM: Like, what it says on the cake [refers to picture]. Thank you for being so friendly and so welcoming at MoMA. And then that's when Mr. Lauder says, "the lobby is the Lauder lobby, and that's Maria's Desk. So you can't leave, because we feel that the lobby, and that reception area, we built them for you."

PH: Yeah, you're part of the architecture. [Laughter].

MM: All the trustees are nice. Mrs. Kravis would give me a gift every Christmas, and the Lauders would give me a pastry from the Neue Gallerie [Café Sabarsky] for my birthday every year.

PH: Oh, how nice.

MM: When they had that retirement party for me at the Lauders', there was one room in the house that's like his gallery, his personal collection of what he likes. And you see all these sculpture pieces, a statue holding out his hands, like this [demonstrates with two open, flat palms] and it was right when you walked in, to put the mail on.

PH: Oh, wow.

MM: Most of the trustees are very nice, very friendly. And even their families. Oh, you know who is nice, too? Mr. and Mrs. Cullman. Very, very nice.

PH: Do you have any stories?

MM: Mr. Cullman, he would always come to me and say, "Maria, can you hold this bag for me? It's Mrs. Cullman's." [Laughs]. It's a very special desk, because you meet all kinds of people, from the messenger to the VIP trustee. There's, of course, sometimes a limit, but if a messenger comes first, I take care of them first. Because, I mean, they're doing their job.

And one [story] too, was when Mrs. John D. Rockefeller— she was so down to earth. There was a big event at MoMA, and she was one of the ones to greet [guests]. And she was late. I was there because I was helping them, and I saw she was standing on line waiting to be checked in. I said, "Mrs. Rockefeller, what are you doing here?" [Laughs]. She could have just walked in.

That's how nice she is. David Rockefeller and David Rockefeller Jr., too, very, very down to earth.

PH: Did you ever interact with Ethel Shein?

MM: Oh, yeah. Oh, Ethel. Ethel was instrumental about me being close to Aggie and the Lauders, because Ethel and I just love each other. She was a kind of hard person, very strict, but we got along. Ethel was special. If she liked you, she liked you. She was very close to the Lauders. It's funny because she was the director of Special Programming and Events, and I was always invited. Mrs. Lauder would invite me to events, like the Christmas party, private parties. And she would always say, "Maria, you have to sit next to me." She always wanted me next to her.

PH: What time would you come in in the morning?

MM: I would come in at 9:30 in the morning. When the Museum opens, that's the hardest part of the day, because the only people who could come through the entrance is the members, and sometimes I'm by myself, there's no volunteer, and I don't have any security guards.

PH: So there's a rush, when it opens.

MM: Yeah, because I was the only receptionist. It was kind of tough sometimes, because I couldn't leave my desk. I always had to be there. One time there was a trustee, and she wanted to cross the building to the other side, but the elevators were closed. She wanted to take the escalator, and I had to leave my desk and go with her. And then one time too, there was a trustee who lived in California, [Howard] Gardner, and he came to the Museum on the Wednesday before Christmas. And the Museum was closed early, but I was still there. And he said, "I just wanted to see this painting before I go back to California," but the security guard didn't want to let him in. But I knew him. I said, "Mr. Gardner, I know who you are, you come with me." And he was so appreciative. That's the one thing with the trustees of MoMA. They're so appreciative. Donald Marron once sent me a bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolate for letting him in and trusting him, knowing that he's a trustee. That's how they are. They're very down to earth.

PH: Did you have to work late often?

MM: No. But I did work a lot as a hostess for the special events, especially for film screenings.

PH: How did technology change over the years?

MM: Technology was kind of hard for me because I like talking to people. I'd rather be on the phone, person to person, instead of talking to a computer.

PH: Well, it sounds like you got to do a lot of that anyway.

MM: Yeah. There was a switchboard operator for a long time.

PH: Right, Dottie Lehty.

MM: Dottie was a good friend of Mr. Oldenburg and the Rockefellers, too. In the old building, she was in the basement, by the elevator. And she was very friendly, so when staff would wait by the elevators, sometimes she would just ignore the calls and start talking to them [laughs]. And sometimes someone would ask, “can I have painting sculpture, please?” And she says, “Maria, what’s the number for the painting sculpture?” [Laughs]. She’s the switchboard operator and she’s asking me [laughs]. That was the old days, we were smaller then. The Christmas Pageant.

PH: The Christmas Pageant, tell me about that.

MM: Well, I was the snowflake. And then at one point, too, there was the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph, and that was Mr. Ruben’s Assistant Secretary. And some of the staff would push us—

PH: Like, on a float?

MM: Yeah, yeah, on a float. I would get dressed up for that. It was fun.

PH: Did you often get pulled into jobs that weren’t within your job description or were you pretty consistent.

MM: Pretty consistent, yeah.

PH: Did you have people that could fill in for you when you were away?

MM: Yeah, Melanie [Monios], sometimes, would sit at my desk. Because we were in the same department [Visitor Services]. It was hard when we moved into the Pelli building, because people would come in there, and we had a sign that said the entrance is two doors down. I still remember, “two doors down to your right,” because people don’t read the sign.

PH: What was it like during the 2004 expansion, when you were out in Queens?

MM: Queens was very quiet, actually boring in a way, because nobody would come in and there was nothing really to do. And we were there for, what, two, three, four years? The offices were not at MoMA QNS, they were in a different building a few blocks away. So that’s where the executive offices were. And you don’t see a lot of curators.

PH: Did you see curators a lot in your regular life? I mean, not in Queens, but—

MM: Oh yeah, in the other building. I was very close to Mary Lea Bandy, who was a curator in the Film Department. She was very active in the Union and with the staff, even before she became

the director of the Film Department. I also got along well with Anne Temkin, she was very down to earth, too.

There was one curator at the Museum, she worked in Exhibition Design and Production, and she loved cats. On Halloween, she would bring her two cats to the office all day.

PH: [Laughs] were they dressed up?

MM: I think she would dress them up towards the end of the day [laughs].

And then there was an incident when we were in Queens, when we were coming back from lunch, we noticed a cat that was left in a carrier, just dumped on the street. So, of course, we picked up the cat and took it into the MoMA building, and we hid it. Charles Silver, he passed away, but he was in the Film Study Center, and said, "Maria, we keep the cat here in my room." And then I think it was Jennifer Russell who came in, one of the curators, and the cat started meowing. Nobody knew about the cat except three of us. And Jennifer said, "is there a cat?" I said, "no, is there a cat here?" [Laughs]. And we transferred the cat to another room. And the next day I took her home to Astoria, because we were very close Astoria. I think one of the staff adopted the kitty. At MoMA QNS, we were more like a family, because there was no real business going on. We were just hanging out there.

But the best thing, too, is when we had the *Matisse Picasso* show in Queens [[MoMA Exh. #1906](#)], because they asked me if I could greet the VIPs. And that was exciting, because I saw all the movie stars. Renée Zellweger, she was very friendly. Dave Matthews came. They said, "Maria, Dave Matthews is coming," I said, "Who is Dave Matthews?" [Laughs]. And I greet them, I walk them in and everything. And then one time in [The Roy and Niuta Titus] Theater 1, David Bowie was sitting next to me, and we were talking, and I didn't even know who he was. And then after that, Paul [my husband] said, "I didn't want to tell you, because you would get so excited." [Laughs].

PH: Maybe talk about how you met Paul.

MM: Oh, yeah. He was the security supervisor. My break was at 11:30 and his break was 11:30. So when he was just a security guard, he would hang out on our breaks and we would talk. And then he became the security supervisor. He would open the museum, and I'm always late, so he would be waiting at my desk. That's how we started. And people like him, he's well loved. When we got engaged, Ethel, Aggie, Mary Lea Bandy and Mrs. Lauder said, "Maria we want to give you a wedding reception here at MoMA." We did it on the second floor overlooking the garden. And they had a beautiful cake made, it had a house on it and it said "A house full of love and litter boxes," on it because they knew I like cats. Mary Lea Bandy told Paul, "take care of Maria, because if anything happens to her—." At that time, the staff were on strike. My niece was working at MoMA and she couldn't go to the party because she was on strike [laughs].

The Security Department would always have a Christmas party of their own in the basement, which I was invited to. And that was so enjoyable, all the dancing. I could really write a book about the ins and outs of the museum. I know the gossip, because I was friendly with the security guards, and of course, they know it all. Like when the museum expanded, it was kind of scary, because there was a hotel next to the museum, the Dorset hotel, that became part of MoMA. One day one of the security guards said to me, "Maria, when I was checking the galleries, when the galleries were closed, and I saw a couple walking around, floating." He would see ghosts in the galleries. There was a couple.

And then there was the Rockefeller townhouse, and they would tell stories about when the Rockefellers lived there. And this one guard was saying that they have an elevator, and when only the maid and the porter were there, the elevator stopped, and they got caught in the elevator and they died because they couldn't get out. That's a true story, according to one of the security guards. Because the townhouse was a part of MoMA.

PH: Were there any other tales?

MM: Yeah, there was another one. It's probably in the archives, too. When we were on 54th Street and the Rockefeller building was right across, I think there was also an incident where they saw the ghost of one of the Rockefellers coming out.

PH: Did you ever see anything questionable?

MM: No, I would be so scared [laughs]. In the Rockefeller townhouse, I never wanted to use the elevator, because it was a small elevator.

PH: Do you have any memorable, atypical days in your career? I don't know if maybe you were working on 9/11 or—

MM: Oh, 9/11. I was on my way to work. And when I got to the museum, it was before they attacked the second tower. There was an announcement from, I don't know who, that they were screening the news down in the theater. They said, "whoever wants to come to the theater, we'll watch. But whoever wants to leave, can leave." But there were no trains running, so I had to walk from MoMA to Astoria. Paul had to sleep in his office because he was working downtown. But most of us [at MoMA] walked home. We didn't have to come in the next day.

PH: Any other days that come to mind?

MM: Not that I can think of. When there was that incident with the slashing a few years ago, friends who know me said "thank God you were not there." And I heard that as soon as that happened, Christophe Cherix sent flowers to the film desk. That was nice.

PH: Do you want to take that short break?

MM: Sure, sure, yeah.

END AUDIO FILE 1 of 2

START AUDIO FILE 2 of 2

PH: Anything else you want to mention before we wrap?

MM: The staff. I really liked getting to know all the staff and their families, when they would visit, would come to my desk to pick up their tickets. I really liked meeting them. My own family became involved in with the Museum, too. My two nephews worked there, during summers, in the design store, one of them is a supervisor there now. And one of my nieces got a job there permanently, but she's not there anymore. And now, one of my little nieces, who just turned 18, just texted me said, "do you have any openings in the summer for me?" [Laughs].

PH: So sometimes your MoMA family was really family.

MM: Yes. And I think the hardest and most emotional part for me, when I left, was that it was like leaving my childhood behind. That was my life, all those years at MoMA. I was lucky, because it was smaller then, more like a family. It was my home. Especially for me, because I came when I was young and I didn't know anyone in the States, really. Even now, I still see Melanie [Monios], we have lunch at the Greek restaurant across the street. And Kevin [Gafford] is coming next week. Jennifer Katanic, she's in accounting, she comes here for lunch too. When I retired, it was very hard not seeing my friends. It was good and bad.

PH: It's good that you keep in touch. It's nice to be at a place where people want to stay for so long.

MM: Yeah, it's not as common anymore. But people still do.

PH: You've brought so much life to the Museum, and all these stories you're telling me—it sounds like a fascinating place. You've covered so much ground; I can't think of a single other thing to ask you. Thank you.

MM: It's my pleasure.