Transcription of Interview with Dr Nelljean Rice:

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In Edwards College Video Production Studio

Introduction by Prof. Andrew Busch:

Hello, this is the inaugural year of Honors 306 Oral History in Action, an experiential learning course in the Honors College curriculum where students learn interviewing and research techniques and then interview people who made significant contributions to Coastal Carolina University. Our goal is to contribute to the broad community understanding of Coastal Carolina’s history and to strengthen ties between CCU and the Grand Strand Community of which it is a part.

I am Andrew Busch (AB), Assistant Professor in the Honors College at CCU and the instructor of the class. The students doing today’s interview are Sam Ikner (SI), a senior psychology major and Jon-Chris Fenyo (JCF), also a senior psychology major.

We are pleased to welcome former Dean of University College and long-time CCU professor and administrator, Dr. Nelljean Rice.

Nelljean Rice (NR):

Thank you, Professor Busch. I was what is called in the business a trailing spouse. And so my husband got a job here in the English Department but by October of 1987 I was teaching part-time at what was then an active air base… the Myrtle Beach Air Force Base. That’s how I got started at Coastal and have been teaching ever since actually because after I retired as a Dean, I started teaching again online.

Samantha Ikner (SI): You worked at Coastal beginning in 1987 and you just retired last year in 2017. What was it about Coastal that made you want to stay around for so long?

NR: It’s a great place. I was able to do so many different things. I was talking to Professor Busch earlier and told him, “I just kept saying yes.” When anybody asked me “Do you want to take on this project? Do you want to take on this project?” They all sounded wonderful. Coastal was growing. The students were coming from many different places. That was exciting. I have enjoyed every single year that I have been here. I love it.

Jon-Chris Fenyo (JCF): So you started out at Coastal as a contingent faculty member and wound up as dean, which is very unusual and impressive. Tell us about your different positions at Coastal and how you were able to climb the ladder so quickly. And was there anything specific to Coastal that allowed you to make this possible?

NR: Yes, to that last question. Coastal is a very entrepreneurial place. And I think if you have an “I can do it” spirit and keep saying over and over again, “I can do that!” As I said in my answer to Sam’s question, I just kept saying yes.
So how I started out was, actually it wasn’t that fast. I was a contingent faculty, which is a part-time faculty for eight years or so. Then I began working on a Ph.D. I have a master of fine arts in creative writing and poetry which is a terminal degree but the then dean of the Humanities and Fine Arts College said “Well, your husband has that job. So to teach for us you need a Ph.D.”

I wanted to get a Ph.D. anyway. So I started driving back and forth to USC (University of South Carolina) and working on my Ph.D. as I was still teaching here. I cut back on my teaching. Because I had been teaching five classes a semester. That’s the beginning of how I got where I was. And then once I got my Ph.D. I became a Lecturer. I became an Assistant Professor. They had openings because all this time Coastal was growing and growing and growing.

When we first came here in ’87, the only dorms – and they were new that year – were the ones that are named after trees. So you know where they are, near the volley ball court.

JCF: Named the Woods.

NR: Ah hugh (nodding). And only about not even 2000 students. So it’s grown.

After my husband died in 2004, it was difficult to be in the English Department without him because we had worked together so tightly. The then Provost - a few Provosts ago now – came to me and said, “I have a project that I would like you to work on because you love freshmen.” And I said, “Yeah, I do love freshman. I’ve been teaching freshman all my life practically.” He said we want to develop a course for freshman. We don’t even want to try it out. We want to institute it throughout all the colleges and we want to do it by next fall. Well, when he came to me it was around this time. And I said “Sure!” And we did it. We did it.

Then, I transitioned from the English Department into what was then called the University Academic Center because that’s where we were going to have the class. It wasn’t just me of course. We have a wonderful committee put together who worked on best practices and saw what freshmen really needed to become a success in their college careers. Then that lead more and more responsibilities were given to me in that position and eventually that Center became University College and I became the Dean of University College. So, long story short; that how.

SI: That is very impressive. So kind of transitioning a little bit. In 1998 you were awarded the best new teaching style at CCU. Tell us about how your pedagogy evolved over time and perhaps how it related to the culture of CCU faculty and students?

NR: Well Sam, that is a very interesting question because when I saw that question I thought “What was it that I did in 1998?” And I can’t remember exactly. But I will tell you that as a creative person I always wanted to mix up my classes. So every semester I would do something a little bit different. Over the years, I noticed that students’ learning styles had changed as well and students did not learn the old-fashioned way as readily and easily. What I mean by saying the old-fashioned way is having the professor stand up and lecture and the student sit and take notes.

So I used more interactive things, more group work. Sometimes students would evaluate each other. Students would take over the responsibility of teaching the classes. I would always ask my students “What do you want to get out of this class? “ and would tailor my syllabus to the extent that I could once I received their answers. And I still kind of do that.
Whatever that teaching award was for.. it was probably one of these innovative things that I was trying to do to get my students to be really engaged with the materials. And I think how it related to the culture of CCU faculty and students? I think students come here wanting to learn for the most part.

Faculty here are some of the best faculty that I have every worked with anywhere. They are engaged with their students. They want to see you; they want to work with you. And I was one of those faculty. That’s has been one of the greatest things that ever happened to me. .is to be around vibrant young people.

**JCF:** And now you’ve already told us a little about FYE. Will you be able to tell us more about developing the first year experience course and why that class became such an important part of CCU’s culture?

**NR:** Yes, Well there was a movement years before Coastal started the first year experience. Some people who studied freshmen in general realized that a lot of freshmen were not being successful. They were dropping out. They were not having the kind of experience that they wanted and that the professors wanted for them.

The transition from high school to college work was becoming more and more difficult for a variety of reasons. So the people who studied that said well, there is a way we can ameliorate that by creating a course where we present lots of different things for these students; techniques to help them, critical thinking is one of those which some high schools of course do critical thinking with their students. But many students that I had would come in and say “you know I never read a book all the way through and you’re asking me to read 200 pages a week?” Combined in all of their classes. They just didn’t have the skills to do that. And so it was very difficult.

And transitioning culturally and socially as well. Much more difficult I think today than back in my day when I went to college. But even then I went to a small liberal arts school and we had a class that was something like this. It was called the Underclass Commons course and all freshman took it. So, it is not a new idea at all. But instituting it at Coastal I think really helped students engage with Coastal to the point where they wanted to stay and they were confident in their ability to be able to master the material.

**JCF:** May I ask a side question?

**NR:** Yes.

**JCF:** So how much do you think the retention rate changed from keeping freshmen after adding FYE?

**NR:** Well the first few years it changed significantly by four or five points. And that’s significant in the studies that have been done on this phenomenon. Then, there were outside, there are always outside issues that prevent students from being able to complete. One of the big outside issues that came up – we started this in 2000 and, well I was asked to do in 2005 and roll it out in 2006. In 2008 and 9 we had a really bad year as a country financially. A lot of people lost their jobs, banks were closing; all sorts of terrible things were happening. And as you probably know
almost half of Coastal students come from out of state. They pay a different tuition rate. Some of the parents...you know I heard terrible stories during those years of both parents losing their jobs. Well those students couldn’t stay at Coastal. Even if they had good financial aid packages, they had to go home. It has been up and down with the retention rates. But when we first initiated it, there was a big jump.

SI: In addition to the FYE class, you were also instrumental in the development of the Japanese exchange program. What was that like for you?

NR: Well that was another instance, Sam, when I said yes. Before that I applied for and got a National Endowment for the Humanities grant and also the Japan Foundation so that I could go and study at San Diego State for a summer. And what we studied was how to incorporate Japanese into the curriculum. While I was there, I met and networked with quite a few people that had much more experience than we had in Japan exchange programs. So I got all fired up by that. When I came back I said why don’t we have something like this. The international programs department said “Yes, we need it” and so it got started.

I basically did the administrating of that. I got to go to Japan of course, which was a big perk. I am very interested in the Japanese culture. I was born in China and we lived in Asia. My dad was a diplomat, so we lived in Asia most of my first formative years. So I’ve just been a devotee of Asian culture ever since. So anyway, that’s how that started.

JCF: Will you be able to tell us about your research and how it evolved throughout your career?

NR: Yes, I said that Coastal was an entrepreneurial place. I will use another word; eclectic. I am an eclectic researcher. I am very interested in many many different things as you probably heard as I’ve been speaking. So I started out and I am still very interested in women poets and my own writing as a poet. That’s where my initial research has been and I have a monograph - that’s what professors call a book, which is called a New Matrix for Modernism about two understudied and undervalued British women poets. That’s what my dissertation was on. Then a publishing house wrote to me and said we’d like to publish your dissertation as a book in a series that they did on outstanding dissertations. So that’s how I got that done.

And I am still very interested in those two women. But shortly after that was when I transitioned into administration.

So then I became also interested in the first year experience. How students acclimate to and where they are and how best we can serve them here at Coastal and tailor programs that would be Coastal specific so they would feel that Coastal was the place for them. So I got into that.

I also co-wrote a little book on sort of a nature writing on a barrier island that is down South –in - almost into Georgia-- South Carolina with a former professor here who used to teach ornithology. He is now - well was at that point a naturalist down there. He said you got to come down and help me write this book about this island. I said fine, you know, again. I always say yes. So my research has kind of been all over the place.

I am a published poet myself. I don’t have a book on poetry. I am working on one. I am still engaged in research. I was just asked if I would submit. There is going to be a special issue of the
humanities journal on gendered modernism and that is what I was writing about with these two women. They were really modernists poets but they weren’t ever included in any of the modernist anthologies.

The woman who is editing it wrote to me and said, would you like to submit a paper? And I said what?

JCF: yes, ma’am.

NR: Yes, I did.

JCF: the entrepreneurial spirit…

NR: Yes, so that’s where I am today. I am reading, I am trying to get up to speed on one particular woman who I am very much interested in. Her name is Charlotte Mew. I sort of put her to the side when I started doing these other things. I am going back and reading all the stuff that I hadn’t read up to this point. So my research is all over the place and still evolving.

JCF: Definitely eclectic.

SI: You said a little bit about moving into administration. Would you like to talk about the biggest challenges you faced during your time there and what were your greatest accomplishments there?

NR: Well I will answer the second part of that question first. I think the greatest accomplishment was not mine. I think it was the team that was put together when the entity was still called the University Academic Center. Those folks transitioned for the most part into the University College. I believe in working as a team and that teamwork is what gets really significant things done. I don’t believe in top down leadership. I believe in collaborative working. And so that’s how I always approached the job.

I think the creation of the College was our biggest accomplishment. And having actually a place for freshmen to go to where they could be taken care of, if they had any kind of academic issues that they needed help with.

I was very pleased that we did that. And advising, having professional advisors. That was all started out of that University Academic Center.

Biggest challenges was just keeping it going. And you know it’s not going anymore, it has changed, it’s morphed. But that’s the name of the game in university, in life, anywhere. I am very happy. I know one of the questions we might talk about a little later on is about the Honors College. I am just really excited about that. The University College served its purpose and it did what it was supposed to do. So you know, I am a little sad to see it go, of course, but happy at what it evolved into.

JCF: Then the next question we have for you. How do you think the new Honors College fits into Coastal’s identity moving forward?

NR: Well, there has always been a very strong honors program at Coastal. I started teaching in the honors program – always saying yes whenever anybody asked me. Do you want to teach the
freshman honors sequence? YES. Do you want to teach the capstone course with other professors? YES. It’s always a challenge but it’s always fun too. I’ve been involved with the honors program pretty much since the late 80s.

It grew. It was growing and growing and growing. And several years ago it became part of the University College. It had different homes. It bounced around to various places. It always had very dedicated directors sometimes co-directors. You might want to talk with some of those people because many of them is still around. One of them is the dean of the Edwards College of Humanities and Fine Arts. He had back in his past life quote a lot to do with shaping how the honors college has become what it’s become.

I think Coastal is ready for an Honors College. I think Coastal needs to celebrate the excellence of its students, the intelligence and the entrepreneurial spirit. And I think the Honors College is a very very good place to do that.

SI: So kind of shifting gears again. Your time at CCU coincides with a dramatic shift in the role for women in the professional world. Tell us a bit about your experiences as a women and the leadership roles changed over the years.

NR: That’s a really good question, Sam. The way things are going in the country right now, I am a little discouraged.

One of the things that I did. You asked about my accomplishments a few minutes ago in a different context. But one of my biggest accomplishments – and again, I say my but it wasn’t just me it was many of us - was creating a women’s and gender studies department, not department but a minor. A professor who is retired also and I began that. We shepherded it along. It’s now going tremendously. It was in University College, I think it is, I’m not sure about the structure but I think it is incorporated somehow in the Honors College.

I just think everybody needs to take that introductory course. Because I still think there are many things that need to be brought out into the open. It’s not easy being a professional woman in the academy because – well for a lot of different things, a lot of different reasons. You know, it was not easy. Women have different leadership styles from men and so sometimes, those don’t mesh very well.

I don’t particularly want to talk about sexual harassment necessarily, but that happened and it happens in every setting. It’s happened here at Coastal. Those are the things that still deeply disturb me about being a professional woman but again you just keep powering through, right? You just keep working away and I’m very hopeful for the generations to come. All of you women out there - and men. I think it’s beneficial to men to have true equality. We’ll get there.

JCF: Now you have mentioned the difficulties in being a professional woman. Do you think CCU is an inviting place for women to work and if so, why?

NR: I think it was an inviting place to work. I would not necessarily qualify that it was an inviting place for women to work particularly. Although I felt it was an inviting place to work. I might just tell you an anecdote. When my husband and I first moved here of course, he was the one who got the job. As a trailing spouse, nobody knew what my credentials were or anything.
Sometimes I felt like people thought well, you know she’s just - she doesn’t have anything going for her much...she’s just taking care of the kids. I had to stand up for myself and say, well, excuse me, yes I do. Here are my degrees. You should hire me to do this.

Working as an adjunct for eight years, that contingent that word contingent that just means if they need you then they will hire you, if they don’t need you they won’t. So not knowing what I was going to teach, when I was going to teach, where I was going to teach. That was a little difficult for eight years. There were a lot of women who were in that situation.

Now one of the things I’m seeing now at Coastal and I hope it happens more often, both partners in a relationship are getting jobs and not just contingent faculty jobs but lectureships or tenure track positions which I think would be the ideal situation here. But this is just the way of every college; every college uses contingent faculty. You know, I won’t say it’s been easy.

SI: This is more of a follow-up question, but are you able now, like today to look back at those challenges and appreciate - maybe they weren’t the easiest - but they helped you grow professionally and develop? Were those good for you?

NR: Oh yes absolutely. I think I learned to negotiate pretty early on. I am also very stubborn. If I think something ought to happen, I don’t quit. I think as a dean that was a particularly useful tool to have because I would just keep – not forcefully or in a pushy way - but just keep reminding folks, we need this, our students need this. Here is how we can do it. All we need from you is this. The more you repeat that, sometimes you wear people down you know and they will say Ok you’ve got it. So, I had some successes using that technique.

SI: We’ve been talking a lot about change. I just wanted to know how did CCU change over your years here and what sort of changes do you envision in the future?

NR: Well it grew tremendously. That’s one of the biggest changes. I think the student body has changed. For a long time Coastal was considered to be.. well it started out as a two year school and then it was a branch campus of the University of South Carolina. When it really began gaining its own identity was when it broke away from the university system. That I think was one of the best things that could have happened to Coastal. As that happened, new majors were created and different colleges were created. It just exploded.

The makeup of the students has changed over the years, too. I think Coastal has always been a very welcoming place for students partially because the faculty are so open with their students and want to interact with them.

Physically it’s changed completely from when I first started. The English Department’s offices were upstairs in the library. Yes. It was blocked off from the library, but the library was much tinier than it is now. It is still kind of tiny.

Classes were about the same size. Students were just as interested as they are now. So I think when I say the student body has changed what I mean is young people have changed, not necessarily the Coastal students. Because even back in the late 80s Coastal was attracting students from all over the world. We had a very vibrant international population at that time; a lot of them played sports and a lot of them still do come over here to play sports and come to
Coastal to specifically play sports. That has always been interesting and in my opinion has been a very cool part of Coastal.

We have always had about a 50/50 split of in state and out of state. I think that’s great. I know some people say that when students divide here at Coastal, the division is the North versus the South. And that’s the greatest division, but I think that is also the greatest opportunity for students to get to know people that they would not necessarily have gotten to know if they had just stayed in their own region and gone to university there. And it has been very exciting as a professor.

**JCF:** Well that about does it. Is there anything else you would like to add, Dr. Rice?

**NR:** Well I appreciate the opportunity that you all have given me to talk about my career here. I just wish you all the best in your endeavors and particularly in graduate school. You both told me you are going on to graduate school very soon so that’s exciting for you. Just keep saying yes. That’s my advice to you.

**AB:** Alright. We would like to once again thank Dr. Nelljean Rice for being so kind and sharing some of her memories of Coastal with us. We would also like to thank you, Dr. Rice, for all you’ve done for this University and to wish you well in your future endeavors. So thank you so much.

**NR:** Well, thank you for inviting me.

**AB:** Our pleasure.

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