FIELD NOTES – Nancy Schemerhorn

Interviewee: Nancy Schemerhorn

Interviewers: Marleny Abreu and William McNeill

Date: October 17, 2018

Location: The Bistro, SUNY Cortland, Cortland, NY

Length: 37:42

The Interviewee: Nancy Schemerhorn, a well-known cashier at The Bistro dining hall, has been a member of SUNY Cortland’s staff for 17 years. Nancy has always lived in neighboring towns around Cortland, and she has raised her daughter here. She gives personal, insightful details on how both the town and campus has evolved over the years. She loves her job and says that it helps fulfill her. Nancy does not like the use of cell phones and personally believes that they are causing a reduction in interpersonal relationships in family and social lives. Nancy also believes that the current president, Erik Bitterbaum, has done great things to unite the college and Cortland community.

The Interviewers: Marleny Abreu is originally from Rockland County, New York. She is a transfer student at SUNY Cortland majoring in Early Childhood Education with a concentration in history. William McNeill is from Brentwood, Long Island, New York. He is an Archaeology and History Major at SUNY Cortland. This interview is part of an Oral History class under the observation of Evan Faulkenbury during fall 2018 semester.

Description of the Interview: This interview took place at the Student Life Center. This building holds The Bistro, one of SUNY Cortland’s dining facilities. The interview was conducted in a meeting room off the main entrance of the building. The room had long rectangular tables that allowed us the opportunity to face each other. The interview lasted over half an hour.
ABSTRACT – Nancy Schemerhorn

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Nancy Schemerhorn was born in the Cortland/McGraw area and lived here for her entire life. She has been working for SUNY Cortland for 17 years. She loves her job and says that it helps fulfill her. Nancy does not like the use of cell phones and personally believes that they are causing a reduction in interpersonal relationships in family and social lives. Nancy talks about a negative experience that she had when a student made a mock Twitter account impersonating her and how her friend and coworkers helped her deal with that experience. Nancy talks about a local cider mill where students can get the best cider, as well as a restaurant that she believes is a hidden gem of Cortland.
William: So, we’re recording now and we just have a few questions, answer them with as much detail or as little as you want.

Nancy: Okay

William: So, first thing, is actually could you tell us like where did you grow up, did you always live in Cortland or?

Nancy: I lived in Cortland or surrounding areas I also lived in Groton, which is where I started kindergarten. Moved from there to Cortland and McGraw and moved back to Groton and graduated with the kids I started with which I really liked.

William: That’s nice, so what was it like growing up here, when around that time was it like growing up?

Nancy: It’s so different then it is now, it’s hard to explain to someone who never lived it -

William: Oh, we just want to hear anything you have to say about it.

Nancy: Oh, kids didn’t have, there were no cell phones. So, you had an antenna for television, there was no, no cable nothing like that, kids played outdoors a lot more, ride your bicycle, played with the other kids, it was a totally different life.

William: So, again. I’m not from here so what was school life as a kid growing up?
NS: Groton is a small school, I loved it there. I thought it was a wonderful school, got a good education, I had wonderful teachers. They had a good reputation, I think they still do. We had wonderful school lunches, they were really really good.

WM: Were you able to tell us more about your teachers growing up? Or those schools’ lunches also both if you could?

NS: My sister and I both have talked about the school lunches, they were really, really awesome. They had things like, I think it must have been cornstarch pudding that they make, because it’s the recipe I use now when I make homemade pies, and they would put banana slices in it sometimes, sometimes they would have mandarin oranges in it. They had things like pork pinwheels, and the fried potatoes were out of this world. We were really lucky, we had really, really good lunches. I know other schools, they don’t get those things. We did.

WM: I imagine the school system must have been pretty good also.

NS: They were very good, I had really really good teachers. I only had a couple I didn’t like but most of them were awesome.

WM: So, what was like - I want to make sure I don’t forget any questions- What was your favorite subject when you were growing up there?

NS: Spanish

WM: Spanish, really?

NS: Yeah.

WM: Are you fluent now?

NS: No, I remember some, but it’s been too long. I remember getting a 98 on a Spanish regents and I was upset that I missed something. (laughter) all these years I have wondered what I’ve missed. (laughter) I really liked it, I had, my Spanish teacher that I had at that time - because we had three or four different teachers, the one Spanish teacher ran away with the French teacher. So, we had a new teacher
then she left, and then we had Mrs. Shane Iski and she was really awesome, and she would let me come in my free periods and I would teach her classes.

WM: Wow

NS: So that was really awesome. I really enjoyed that.

WM: Was this in high school?

NS: Yeah

WM: Wow that’s really impressive.

NS: It was (laughter) I really enjoyed it.

WM: Do you have any questions?

Marleny: Was there any favorite memories you had growing up?

NS: I think it must have been when I lived in Cortland, and we lived down on South Main Street in Cortland and my grandmother lived on this little tiny street, that’s only got a couple houses on it. I went to Randall School at that time and I remember being at my grandmother’s after school and my mother would call and say, “Is Nancy there? She didn’t come home from school” and my grandmother would say, “yes she came here to visit me and don’t you holler at her.” I guess that’s my very favorite one.

WM: That’s nice

NS: It was.

WM: So, I imagine living up here there was a lot of like you said, kids played outside and walked around. Did you pretty much have free roam of the neighborhood?

NS: Yeah. People didn’t worry like they do now, it was a lot safer then and I'm not saying bad things didn’t happen, they did. But not like it did not like now.

WM: So, would you be able to kind of tell us like the changes that you saw in the town? Like you say that it's not quite as safe, now. You won't have your kids just walking around.
NS: I just went out with some of the girls Saturday night. We went to a bachelorette party for one of the girls is getting married that works here. And when we were walking down Main Street and I said to them, ”you know the street is so different when I was young.” We had five and dimes and a home Dairy and this wonderful chocolate shop on the corner of Main Street that you would could get fantastic sandwiches from. People I think people didn't stick to themselves as much then. You knew your neighbor as you know, everybody around you. It was a totally different life is so different now because no one seems to have time for each other and families don't get together like they used to years ago. I don't like that

WM: Hmm that’s unfortunate.

NS: It is.

WM: So, would you like when you were younger? Would you like to know the shop owners and everything you could go in and then -?

NS: There was one man in particular, he had a little grocery shop actually down the street and around the corner from my grandmothers and we used to walk down there and I can remember he would let us go behind the counter to get our Penny Candy and pick it out ourselves. I can't remember his name, but I can remember what he looked like.

WM: That sounds nice

NS: It really was.

WM: What was it like when you were in high school, so what was like the typical high school experience. For instance, I know like a lot of people in like movies and whatnot they’ll show people working and going to school it feels like it was a lot different from when I went to high school.

NS: I lived in the country. So, I didn't work. I worked really hard in school just rode the bus to school and would come home and do the chores that we had to do at home and get your homework and next day started all over again. Pretty much there was school dances sometimes on Friday night, so football games, basketball games
WM: Was football really big here?

NS: For me, I guess what sticks out more is the basketball.

WM: Really?

NS: Yeah, I don’t know why but -

WM: So, were there like the basketball players were the ones who like ruled the school or was it everybody just like appreciated basketball?

NS: I think it was more that everybody appreciated it. There were clicks just like there is now, these were the smart kids, these were the athletic kids, and that type of thing, but we all really got along well for the most part.

WM: So, what was that, what was your class number wise, was it big, small?

NS: It was not big. I know it wasn’t that big I can't remember how many of us there were. Somewhere between 60 and 80. I'm not sure of the, I'm not sure of the number.

WM: Wow that’s small

NS: Yeah, it’s a small area.

WM: You probably knew pretty much everyone you went to school with.

NS: Yeah, we did know all know each other. In fact, one of the girls that I graduated with. She's the owner of the Elm Tree. I don't know if you know where that is. It's a bar restaurant in Mclean, that's where she is. Some of us are still around. We're getting ready for our 50th reunion next year. We can't believe we're this old.

WM: What do you think is something about Cortland, that might not no longer be around but was really big when you were growing up while you were here? I feel like as a student we pretty much stay on Main Street and don't go much further out. What’s like a hidden gem here in Cortland?

NS: I have told this to a few students one of the hidden gems the Cortland has and most of you don't know about so I try to tell people is a wonderful restaurant. not a fancy place by any stretch of the imagination, but this place has been there since I was a kid and it's the Melody Land on South Main
Street. Melody Land, they do Italian cooking, they make homemade pasta, the food is wonderful over there.

WM: That sounds nice

NS: It really is, it’s really good. They're only open Wednesday through Saturday. So, I'm not able to going school is in session. So last year on my birthday. I said to my husband when he said where do you want to go for dinner? “I would like to go to the Melody Land because I can't go there during the school year.” That's where we usually go. It's really good.

MA: So just forwarding, what made you work at Cortland?

NS: I have been cleaning houses for a long time from the time my daughter was probably two. And I decided it was time to do a job where I was going to get vacation pay that I wanted to retire from and one of the girls that still works here and her sister also worked here and she told her sister who I know her sister at the time who owns the bridal shop on Main Street that there was an opening in the Friendly’s on campus. So, I called and spoke with the manager and I said I'm looking for a job and I want to retire from here so they set me up for an interview I came in, after the interview was Jackie Conger that interviewed me and she said to me you're hired Charlie told me before the interview. He wanted you hired. I said “this is awesome.” I'm really shocked that anyone wanted somebody my age but they did. I'm still here.

WM: That’s nice, how long have you been working here, for Cortland?

NS: My anniversary was just last, on the tenth. I made seventeen years.

MA: Oh wow

WM: Wow. So, I imagine the campus along with Cortland must have changed a lot during those seventeen years. Could you talk a little bit about that?

NS: It has. I first started here when there was a Friendly’s over and Corey, that's where I started. We started out right inside of Corey where the other part was and then they moved us out of there to the little building that used to have movies. We were right next to Dunkin Donuts. Then they closed that
They transferred from there to being a cashier in Corey, they changed the creamery, they redid that to Hilltop. They redid Neubig, and then we were next. It’s changed quite a bit.

WM: You said there was a place that they used to show movies here?

NS: It was, no they did not show movies, but then they told me long before I ever came here. There used to be a bowling alley in the basement at Corey and Racket Pizza one time was called the Tannery, and they sold alcohol there, kind of shocking, they did. That was before my time but the movie place they just rented movies. You could go and come in and rent a movie that you can watch I guess in your room. They closed they close that up. I'm not quite sure why, but that’s where they put Friendly's.

WM: That sounds nice, Friendly's it was here right before, in my first year here it was still open.

NS: We were really busy, I was very lucky because I had awesome students that worked with me. They were awesome.

MA: So just from what I’ve been hearing around, I’m a transfer so it’s my first year and everyone seems to know you and love you and I just want to know how you build the connections with students?

NS: I don't try, it's just in here. I don't know. I think, I love the kids and I know they know it. When I talk to you I genuinely care and I think that's what's important. I had students after that graduated, I'm in fact friends on Facebook with lots of them and they have told me I was so homesick when I was here and you helped me through that. I didn't know I was, I was just being me. I felt then and as each year passes. I feel more strongly that this is where I'm supposed to be. I am supposed to be here for all of you. And I think I have gotten as much out of it as all the students have. You've made my life much much better.

WM: We appreciate that

NS: I appreciate you.

WM: So how do you think the student body has changed like since you've been here? Have you noticed anything like different than the seventeen years that you've been here?
NS: I think for me the only thing I've really noticed is that we have a harder time finding kids that want to work for us. Other than that, I don't think I don't think the kids are any different than they were, they just don't want to work. I know school is rough. They have a lot to do and other than that, I think they're still the same. I still connect with them as strongly as I did before, sometimes more.

WM: Why do you think the students of kind of stray away from working for Cortland?

NS: One of the girls that works with us, she told me that her friend is a student supervisor over at Neubig, and she told her that the kids don't want to work over in the Bistro because the dining room is too big. They don't like doing it. They find it boring. I think that's what a lot of them say they think it's boring, but I had one girl used to come over every time she was working. She would come over to me and complain that she was bored, and finally one night I said to her, I'm going to tell you the same thing. I told my daughter when she was growing up life is not always exciting. You do what you have to do. That's all there is to it.

MA: Is there a story that you'd like to share with about the most influential person that you've gotten to know here?

NS: Oh my… I think what immediately popped into my head is Noel Paley, did you know her? I'm not sure what her title was. But I had a terrible terrible, terrible, experience here a few years ago when I was working in Corey. It devastated me. One night on Facebook, I was reading something and it was a former friendly student that worked with me, and she was very upset about something, and for some reason, I just had a feeling that it was me that was being talked about. So, I sent her a message privately, and I said to her “was it me that they were talking about?” and she said “I really hate to tell you this but it was.” Somebody I don't know who, set up a fake Twitter account in my name They had come in on unbeknownst to me when I was working and had taken pictures of me, had posted them on this thing, and the stuff that they wrote was pretty nasty, filthy and I was devastated. I was friends on Facebook with Noel. And I sent her a message, “I need to talk to you.” She immediately called me, and I was crying so hard that she couldn’t understand what I was saying. I finally was able to tell her what somebody had
done. She was very, very angry. I had to report this to my managers, I had to talk to UPD, I had to talk to the sheriff's department. We were never able to find out who did this, I suspect it was a young man that thought it was funny, believe me, it was not funny. I remember when Lee Weber was here she was student government president, I had to speak with her and we talked about how devastating this was. I wish that these people would know. How would they like it if it was their mother, their grandmother, their sister, there anybody, any female? If someone did that to them. Because it was devastating.

Shortly after that happened, one Sunday when I was working in Corey, as a cashier, the girl in the next register over said to me “I'll be right back”. I said okay. I thought she was going to the bathroom. She came back a minute later, and so did the manager. I'm looking at her and she's looking at me and she said,” those boys that were sitting at that table right next to you, they were videotaping you”. I freaked out. I cried hysterically and told them, I can't go through this again. Noelle helped me through that. I think she's a lovely, lovely lady I wished she hadn't left here, she got a wonderful job in Tennessee and I'm really glad for her, but I think she had something to do with student diversity or something like that. I'm not from that sure what her title was. Probably Christina Populowa would know that. I always thought she was very influential with the students. she came to speak at one of our return work days, that's how I got to know Noelle, and I thought she was awesome. She was fantastic. I would pick her. I also like President and Mrs. Bitterbaum. I love them, I think his wife is such a nice lady, I love her.

WM: Have you been here ever since president Bitterbaum has been here?

NS: Mhm

WM: How do you think his involvement has changed the campus? At All?

NS: I didn't really know much about the person before him. I don't remember hearing as much about that person, so I think he's probably more involved with the students than the other person was.
WM: Makes sense. What do you think makes Cortland special or unique compared to other schools? I guess not just Cortland the school but also Cortland the town? What do you think is unique or special about Cortland?

NS: I think we are in a good location. I think because it is smaller people probably get to know each other more than they would in any huge city like New York. I think for the most part the people are friendly. Another hidden gem that Cortland has, it’s just outside of Cortland to, that I tell kids about is Hollenbeck cider mill in Virgil. Have you been there?

WM: I have not, my friends have. They think that it's one of the better places to get apple cider doughnuts.

NS: I think it's The Best. Their cider, I won't buy it anywhere else. And their doughnuts are really good. I like that place a lot.

WM: Sounds good, I'll have to check that out at some point.

NS: It's really good it's well worth it

WM: How far outside of Cortland do you think it is?

NS: You must know were Owego Street is, off of Tompkins? If you go straight up Owego Street go straight up that Hill and you're going to get to the intersection and you’re going to go straight on through and it's going to take you all the way up to Virgil. When you get into Virgil you're going to see where the school is. That four-corner stair the school is over here, Hollenbeck's is right around that corner. You can't miss it. It's about two places up from a corner at that intersection were the school is. It's really easy to find.

MA: Are there any lessons that you have learned over the years that you could share with us?

NS: I know I have learned a lot. I think I have changed a lot over the years. I think for me the biggest lesson is to share your love, because what you give comes back 1000-fold. If you give love you certainly get it back. I think that's what makes the world go round.

MA: I Agree.
WM: I think you’re right. How do you think the relationship between the college and the Cortland community has changed over time?

NS: Well I know the Cortaca a few years ago did a lot of damage. There were a lot of angry people. I myself constantly defending the college students. I tell them you, you only see the bad side of them. I see the good side day after day after day. I tell them all I get treated like a Queen, I really do, I feel very lucky, I feel very lucky to be here with all of you. I wish that everybody felt that way about the students. I think it's like anything in life whether it be the students or just the general population. People tend judge you by the bad people not the good ones. But I think for the most part are I think it's pretty good. I think they're very accepting. This place is what feeds my family. I like my job a lot yeah

WM: That's good to hear because I feel like sometimes there can be a separation between the Cortland community and the college. Do you think that has grown or shrunk over time? With the interactions between the students and the actual town?

NS: I don't know what it was before because I never really paid attention. I don't think it's any less. I think that especially since that really bad Cortaca, I think that President Bitterbaum and the town work very hard to keep it so that it’s not like that anymore. So that we have a good relationship with the students. I think it's pretty good.

MA: Just off the top of your head do you recall any historical events happened while you were here?

NS: I actually do. We were just talking about this, my family, I had a memorial service I had to go to last Monday for my cousin. And somebody that was sitting with us. somebody came over and we were talking about when Robert Kennedy came to Cortland.

MA: Wow.

NS: It was one of my cousins. She said she was going to get out these pictures and she thought that my sister and I might be in the picture. I remember one time there used to be a store here called Family Bargain Center and Debbie Reynolds, who was famous actress, came here. I can't remember if
there was anything else but Those two are what stand out in my mind. as Robert Kennedy coming here and Debbie. I can't think of any others at the moment but it was pretty exciting.

WM: I Imagine. Was that an event that pretty much anybody in the town could come to. I imagine everybody would want too.

NS: Yeah, they could. Anybody that wanted to could.

WM: what was it like meeting somebody like Robert Kennedy?

NS: It was awesome. Yeah, I think for me the other person that I think kind of made history in Cortland was when the Jets came. I absolutely loved them. I really did, they were awesome men. I remember one of the days that they came. Obviously, it wasn't their 1st year. Maybe their 2nd or 3rd year here. I'm standing there and they're all walking through and I saw Mark Sanchez and he had a huge smile on his face. I'm looking all around looking to see who he was smiling at. Until he got to me. And he wrapped his arms around me to hug me and tell me he was glad I was still here. That was pretty awesome. So, every year when he came he hugged me. Yeah, they were really nice men, and I remember one day, because I always worked in the Dining Room when they were here. There we served rice every day and rice on carpeting isn't the greatest thing in the world to clean up, but I was trying to clean this rice up and one of these huge players wanted to get on the floor and help me clean up this rice. That was pretty impressive to me. That was a big moment for me I really enjoyed them.

WM: that sounds Delightful. So, before we get back to that I forgot to ask what is your family life like? Do you have siblings, children?

NS: I have. I came from a large family. I have one sister I have a Half-sister and I had, oh my, 10 or 11 step brothers and sisters. I have 1 daughter and I have 2 granddaughters

WM: What was it like having such a large family?

NS: I loved it. We all have been talking, all of us that are in this age group, because the family doesn't get together like I used to for family reunions and we all miss it. Some of them live in Virginia we never see each other. I haven't seen them in, oh my, I bet it's been a good 20,30 years. Maybe more.
We want to have a family reunion next summer so that we can all reconnect. Our families don't know each other anymore. And it was sad because it was wonderful when in the olden days when we had family reunions and everybody knew who each other was. Now people just don't. I think they're too wrapped up in their cell phones all the time and they don't take time to talk to each other anymore and my family know I don't like that. I don't like it at all. I don't have a cell phone and when you're in my house for dinner you know you're not going to bring that cell phone to the table because I'm going to tell you. You put it away we're here and we're going to talk to each other. I like it like that.

WM: It sounds pleasant.

MA: How was it raising your daughter here, in the area, is it any different from your childhood growing up?

NS: Not a lot because we live outside the city limits and we didn't have a lot of children in our neighborhood but there were a few. She went to a smaller school then I did because she went to McGraw school. But not a big difference. Just a little. She was probably able to go and visit her friends more than I was able to. She had a different home life than I had. She was lucky because she didn't have an alcoholic parent, and I did. So, we were unable to go places because we didn't have a car. That system was a totally different life than I had. Other than that, it was generally stable life but it wasn't a whole lot different than mine.

WM: So, I imagine that living out in the country does definitely make it like a little bit of separation between Cortland center and out there. How is the relationship between the people who live in the city of Cortland and people of the country? Is it just a friendly everybody just...

NS: Yeah, I think I we all get along. I have a lot of friends that that live in town.

WM: Is there anything else that you want people to know? Anything that you'd like to share that we haven't specifically asked you about? A story or what it's like being in Cortland for so long.

NS: I've lived around this area my entire life so I don't know anything different. Occasionally I get offended when I hear students say negative things. They need to understand this is where we grew up.
This is where we live, and I realize it's not in New York City but that doesn't mean that Cortland has nothing to offer. You chose to come here for a reason. You must have thought it had something to offer. I think they just need to not expect it to be like New York City, it's not. It is never going to be, it's just a small city. With I think an excellent school, from what I've seen and heard.

WM: What you think the students could do to, kind of make the most out of Cortland. Or give back to the community that has given them so many things?

NS: I think just accept Cortland for what it is and not expect it to be like a huge city. I think if you do that than you will get out of it what were supposed to. It's probably a slower paced life. I would say that knowing that you kids work your rear ends off between working in school but it's a it's a totally different life, and I think it has a lot to offer if you just let it.

MA: Just lastly, what does SUNY Cortland mean to you?

NS: It means the world to me. I think that the greatest thing I ever did was the day I came here and applied to a job. I have received love 10,000-fold more than I ever dreamed. Obviously, I had love for my family and all of that but, it gave me so much more. I used to the feel badly for my daughter that she was an only child and I felt like I only had one child. I don't feel like that now I feel like you are all my children. It's been a really good thing for me. I think it was the best decision of my life because I think I meant to be here with you. I think I'm very lucky to know that because most people go through life and it's just a job it's just a job. When I had some students, who were sitting near where I am. He hollered over to me and he said, “you like your job don't you”? I said, yeah, I do. He said “I can tell”. “I'm glad I'm glad you can because yes I do like my job”. I would go out kicking and screaming if they ever tried to put me some place else. No. No I like it right where I am. I like being with all of you.

WM: We really enjoy being with you too. We are always happy to be able to see you.

NS: I'm glad.

WM: I feel like you are one of the faces of Cortland. I think everybody should have the opportunity to meet and hear your story.
NS: I feel very fortunate that so many feel like that about me. I one day had some kids say to me, “All your coworkers are not as nice as you are. They are not nice to us”. I said “I know, and I feel really bad when that happens I don't like it. I don't like them treating you like that”.

WM: We appreciate you.

NS: I appreciate you too. If there is ever anything that I can do that makes it better don't ever hesitate to tell me, because I will.

WM: Well thanks so much for helping us out.

NS: You are welcome.

MA: We Just want to take the time again to thank you for coming down and doing this interview.

End of Interview.