

Announcer: Welcome to Hancock Conversations, an Allan Hancock College podcast. Join President Dr. Kevin G. Walthers and members of the Hancock community, as they explore the stories behind the people and places that make Allan Hancock College the unique hub for learning that it is today. You're sure to learn something new and even have a little fun along the way.

Kevin Walthers: Hello Hancock community. This is Kevin Walthers, Superintendent/President at Allan Hancock College, welcoming you to another edition of Hancock Conversations. Today we're speaking with Marilyn Cronk, a member of the 1950s classes at Allan Hancock College, and a former member of the Allan Hancock College homecoming court. Marilyn, thanks for joining us.

Marilyn Cronk: Thank you very much.

KW: Great. Why don't you give us a little sense of what Hancock was like back in the '50s. Were you still going over on the Santa Maria High School campus back then?

MC: No, that campus was the Santa Maria Junior College, closed, and then opened over in the new campus, which was then to be called Allan Hancock College in 1954, following 1954. And all of these buildings on campus were in classrooms and barracks, from the days of the old Hancock School of Aeronautics. Several friends from Santa Maria Union High School were classmates, making this new learning environment a far less intimidating experience. It was lots of fun. To start, you know, a whole fresh idea of school over there.

KW: That's awesome. So, it looks a lot different than it does today?

MC: Oh, yeah.

KW: How did you get back and forth to campus?

MC: Well, you know, I think there must have been a bus that picked us up, because I lived about five or six miles south of Santa Maria at the time. I know there were times that my mom picked me up from school. I just don't remember. I remember one time a friend gave me a ride home on his motorcycle. I got all kinds of it from my dad for that.

KW: I can see. I think people don't realize that back in the '50s and '60s, where the campus is now in Santa Maria was kind of an outpost. It was kind of away from everything.

MC: Yes, it was.

KW: So, you were a part of the homecoming court back then. Give us a little sense of what campus life was like, and how the homecoming court was operated.

MC: I don't remember how that all happened. I just know that someone told me that I was going to be on that court. I don't remember how many of us, five or six of us maybe. And that was pretty exciting. Well I had been a queen candidate. I guess it was the spring of 1954, I was Orcutt's queen candidate for the Elk's Rodeo festivities.

KW: Oh, wow.

MC: And so I was, I think there were 11 or 12 of us girls that year, and I came in ninth, something way down in the back. But that was my second experience to be on a queen court at Hancock. And pretty exciting time, got to wear a pretty dress and all that.

KW: That's awesome. So, what was your degree in here at Hancock?

MC: It was associate of arts major. Well, I took more art classes than everything else.

KW: And that led you to a pretty good career here in the community.

MC: Well, not so much in this community. I continued doing my own painting for my own enjoyment. And then, began to show my work in art galleries and things were selling, and I was really inspired by that. I love doing artwork, I still do it, although I don't show in galleries anymore. But after having my work shown for over 15 years at the Red Door Gallery in Morro Bay, then I kind of branched out and went to the gallery in Los Olivos. And this was probably, by then in the 1980s, and Los Olivos had 12 really nice art galleries at the time, and it was a highly respected place to go for artwork. So I was really fortunate to have my work shown there. And that was kind of what led to getting into the art gallery management business, and eventually my position as executive director at the Elverhoj Museum of History and Art in Solvang.

KW: So, how long were you there in Solvang?

MC: I worked there for eight and a half years, and retired at 67.

KW: And, you know, I probably should have asked this in advance – do you still live on Central Coast or have you moved somewhere else?

MC: Oh yeah, no I'm here in Santa Maria.

KW: Oh, you're still in Santa Maria. Great, great.

MC: Yeah.

KW: Well, that makes sense since I saw you at that library event, that you probably wouldn't have come all the way in just to hear a Saturday afternoon conversation there.

MC: The farthest I have lived away was in Tucson, Arizona. Shortly after my husband and I got married, we were there for a year and came back. We had to come back. He got valley fever pretty bad over there, and couldn't work outside. He was a land surveyor and couldn't work outside there anymore. So we had to come back.

KW: Let's talk about your kids, because you're not the only one who came to Hancock. You sent three daughters to Hancock, is that right?

MC: Yes, three daughters. Two of them went on to Cal Poly, and the youngest one went to UC Irvine. They went on to have successful careers.

KW: And what is it, what are they doing?

MC: Well, now the oldest one is working with horses that are in protective shelter. She helps to foster horses. She just loves that, she has all kinds of training in how to do that now. Although, when she graduated from Cal Poly she had a degree in finance. She worked in savings and loans offices, and things like that for a while. She got married and had a family, and kind of switched gears after that. My daughter Marsha went on to Cal Poly, majored in biology and she worked at – oh, I'm gonna have one of those senior moments here – Genentech in South San Francisco. She worked up here for about 10 years

I think, and then she got lured away to work for Amgen down in Thousand Oaks. And then she got tired of that corporate life, and just decided on a whole new path, and now she's a dog trainer and just being very successful with that. And my daughter Karen was very involved in Hancock in the dance department there. She just loved that, she loved dance from the time she was a little girl, and loved to choreograph dances. So, she was actually a student choreographer there, at Hancock, for a couple of years. I think she went more than two years to Hancock before UC Irvine. But that education didn't lead her into a dance career like she thought it might. And so she went on to do other things. Now she's a physical massage therapist in Vancouver, Washington, and doing really quite well. She's won awards for her work up there. But when they look back on their time at Hancock, it's really good memories.

KW: I think one of the underrated parts of higher education is, you know, it's not job training for a specific thing, it teaches you how to learn, and you can then navigate your way through the world in different areas just using the skills that you've developed from the critical thinking programs.

MC: That is absolutely right.

KW: So let me ask, were you here when they filmed "The Spirit of St. Louis?"

MC: I was. That was a really fun time on campus then. We could at times go watch part of that movie being filmed with James Stewart. So I walked over there one time, I had some time between classes, and they were doing a scene in one of the old hangars there. They show that scene in the movie, they didn't cut it, and so whenever I see that movie, I think, 'Oh, I was there and I got to watch that.' But I probably didn't watch the actual scene they used in the movie, because when I got there, they were doing this scene. And then they did it again. And then they did it again, and they did it again, and I don't know how many times they did it before I wandered in there to watch. I don't know how many times they did it after I got tired of watching the same thing over and over. But I thought, wow, that's pretty frustrating to have to keep redoing the scene, and it looks like it was done exactly the same each time.

KW: Yeah, that's an amazing process.

MC: Yeah. And so that was pretty exciting to have all that happen on campus. I don't think I mentioned this before when I was talking to Susie and Lauren, that the next year, 1955-56, I was on the yearbook staff as an illustrator. I submitted illustrations of some of the background scenes from filming that movie. They put up special blinds over the old hangars and old buildings that were still out there, along the sight line. So I did that, and did character studies of movie directors, that kind of thing. Just kind of silly stuff, but it was used in the yearbook. I thought that was kind of cool.

KW: When you were here, I'm told that you had a special Thanksgiving event that you hosted?

MC: Now that was Thanksgiving 1954. My friend Henry Grennan was, I don't know how he got to be such good friends with these five young men that came out from Ohio. Bill Bertka, the basketball coach, brought them out here. But he was kind of running around with those guys and we were getting close to Thanksgiving and Henry said to me, "These fellows are not going to be able to go home for Thanksgiving," and he would like us to do a dinner for them. And he said, "My mom will roast the turkey, but we need to have a place for everybody to have the dinner." He knew I had a big house. And he said, "Do you think you think that you could get your girlfriends together to do the side dishes and have this dinner at your place?" So I asked my mom, and she said "Sure," she would bake the pumpkin pies and then so we had it at our house. And it was really a lot of fun, those guys were really, you know,

nice, nice boys. And after dinner we played old 45 RPM records to dance to, it was a great way to end the evening. Then we all piled in our cars and drove back to Hancock to the dormitory, which was the upstairs part of the best looking building on campus. I don't think it's still there anymore.

KW: No, the dorms are gone.

MC: Yeah, but they had to rush back there because they were running a little late. But that was really good memory, and that was so special of Henry, who was so thoughtful and that's the kind of guy he was. We remained friends for many years after that, well until he passed away.

KW: Henry ... you know I've been here seven years now, and Henry had just left the Board of Trustees, and was still such a good friend of the college and you know, adopted me and my family. And I can tell you how those boys got hooked up with him, because if you met Henry, he loved you, and that was just as simple as it was. He was such a great guy, and still very much missed on this campus and at VTC, and all the things that he supported throughout the years. So, really, really fortunate to have gotten to know somebody like Henry.

MC: I bet, yeah.

KW: Kind of brings us to the end now, with it. They wanted me to ask just a couple of quick things that you're not supposed to think about.

MC: Okay.

KW: Just tell us just about you. So here's the first one. So you live in Santa Maria, so you got to have an opinion. Do you have black beans or refried beans in your burrito?

MC: [Laughing.] Refried.

KW: Refried, alright. And then what's something you could eat for a week straight?

MC: Oh gosh. Ice cream.

KW: Ice cream, awesome.

MC: I have ice cream every night after dinner so I guess that would be my choice.

KW: It's good to be retired, right?

MC: Yeah.

KW: Well, great. So Marilyn, thanks so much for visiting with us. It's fascinating and think about the early days of the college here in its current location, and to have somebody who's had such good experiences here. We wish you well, we wish your family well, and hope once the pandemic stops we'll see you back on campus again.

MC: That would be great. I'm looking forward to it. Thanks so much for talking with me today.

KW: Alright Marilyn, thanks so much.

MC: Alright. You're welcome.

KW: You've been listening to Hancock Conversations with our guest Marilyn Cronk, a 1950s alumnus from Allan Hancock College. We look forward to seeing you on our next podcast. Thanks.