

THE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS, F.I.T.

ORAL HISTORY OF F.I.T.

MARIAN BRANDRIS

RETIRED DEAN OF STUDENTS

Date of Interview

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Interviewed by

Mildred Finger

Q.For the Oral History Collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology and particularly for the project relating to the oral history of the school itself, this will be an interview with Dean Marian Brandris, who retired from F.I.T. as of February 1, 1973. The date is December 19, 1984; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

So, tell me Dean Brandris, when did you start at the school, actually --what year did you come to the school?

A. The year I came to F.I.T.?

Q. To F.I.T.

A. 1944

Q. 1944 at the very moment that it was born, so to speak. Well, let's go further back and talk about you and where and when you were born, and how you finally came to this institution.

A. Well, actually, I started as a teacher of English and upon graduation from Cornell University I did some substitute teaching in the city and then was assigned or appointed to the Central High School of Needle Trades. And there I taught English for a while until the concept of F.I.T. came to Mortimer C. Ritter, who was then Principal of the High School, and whose dream was a fashion institute. He doesn't get too much credit for it these days, but it was his baby, his idea, his creation.

He was a very astute man. He was able to pull from the faculty of the High School those people he thought could do a job in starting his new school. I remember in '43, possibly--maybe even earlier--he would call some of us into his office and remove from his safe, architectural drawings of the new school. And we all thought it was

ridiculous and that it was a mirage and that it would never come to pass. But it did. And in the spring of '44....

Q. I'm sorry. How many years were you at the High School for Needle Trades?

A. Four or five. And the High School, incidentally, had moved from 24th Street to its new building...I forget what street it was on...But anyway, to its new building, and when F.I.T. first started, we occupied the first two floors of the High School building. And getting back to the spring of '44, Mr. Ritter called me into his office and said, "I don't even think we had a name at that time, but I'm not sure. And in order to entice these students to come, we would give each one a \$10 a week scholarship.

Now, may I say that prior to this (though I had no direct involvement), there were some post-graduate classes at the High School, led by Dorothy Donnelly and Helen Klupt, both now gone.

Q. How do you spell Klupt.

A. K-l-u-p-t. And these graduates would come from High School to learn more in the way of fashion illustration and drawing. Essentially it was drawing for those two, and it was really from this germ that the whole idea of F.I.T. developed, and Mr. Ritter's concept of a college which would serve the fashion industry.

Well. Going back...In the spring of '44, then, I visited high schools all over the city, in Long Island and Westchester. When I

think of it, I don't know how I did it, but I did it. And you have to remember that in those days, the concept of a two year college was an anathema. It seems amazing that in 40 years a tremendous change has come about, but the good high schools (and when I say "good" I mean good academic high schools) stuck their noses up at a two year institution. They were not interested. Well, it was a real tough fight to get into the schools, to get them to allow me to talk to their students, and then to convince some of them who were interested in art and design that here was a new school that was willing to take a chance on them to the tune of \$10 of week.

Q. Where was that money to come from?

A. From the industry. But I really wasn't too much concerned about it. I was simply told that this is what would happen. But I know that it came from the industry. Some schools, such as The High School of Science, wouldn't even let me in. But the High School of Music and Art did, and we had some of our first students from that school. On Long Island the reception was very poor. A two year college! We're talking about middle class, upper middle class, and they wouldn't dream of a two year institution, so I didn't fare too well there in '44, and the same was true in Westchester. But somehow I managed to get 100 students to come in.

Q. What were your criteria? I mean, how did you feel about the students?

A. Well, the students had to be interested, of course, in this

whole field, and they had to be fairly good academic students because we always had academic subjects involved, and they had to show some of their art work or their drawing, and at that time, I think Miss Donnelly, looked at some of the art work and Mrs. Kopp, who was one of the first, who was part of that group of ten, looked at some of the apparel, if they had it. Mainly though they had art work.

Q. Kopp is K-o-p-p?

A. Yes. Myrna Kopp. I also taught in those days, in '44. Half of my time was devoted to teaching, and my title at that point was Director of Admissions. So that my main responsibility was getting those students in, and...

Q. And there were ten of you altogether on staff?

A. That's right. . . And after they came in, their programs were assigned. Naturally, there wasn't very much. There was apparel design and art, essentially, and English. The History of Civilization we always gave, by Dr. Zucker, who is also gone now.

Q. Z-u-c-k-e-r?

A. Yes. He was an international figure in the history of art. And academic subjects and technical work...I don't know if we had some help there or not; I don't know. I don't remember. And that was the beginning. The second year, when I went out to get additional students, it still wasn't much easier. The two year institution had not yet gained

much headway, but I traversed the island and Westchester, getting lost very frequently in my journeys. And then...I said the next year; actually it was February. We admitted twice a year in those days, for several years, in September and February, and brought in new students who were reasonably happy while they were here, doing the kind of work that they loved to do.

We provided some form of student activities at the time. That was one of my responsibilities as well. And there was a very popular room called Meyer Hall in the old building where the students used to congregate to smoke and chat and give their parties.

The library and all the facilities, of course, were high school facilities, which rubbed people the wrong way a little bit, but we tried to keep our people on the two floors separated from the high school group.

The curriculum in those days was developed slowly by the people in charge. I remember very distinctly Rosalind Snyder and I trying to develop the business management curriculum. We felt the best place to go was to M.I.T., from which we etched out a management program. There were very few men in those days. It was very hard to interest men in these programs....We even had...

Q. You mean as students?

A. Yes. Even though the need for men in management was always there. We pretty soon outgrew our office and classroom space in the high

school building and plans were afoot to build a new building, which came, ultimately, in 1959. Prior to that, after our first graduation in 1946, where the student placement was excellent, word began to filter through to the high schools and gaining admission to speak to students was beginning to get a little bit easier. It was still a tough job, because the community college still had not been recognized. But, by 1951, when we received the status of community college under the State University of New York, entree was made a little bit easier. And applications for admission grew steadily, and finally I needed more help to sift through the applications. In addition, the art people and the design people wanted some evidence of the students' ability. So, we institute some kind of test for these people. Either they were to bring in some samples of work that they had done, or, later, in the case of illustration, The Chairman definitely wanted them to do work on the premises so he could be sure it was their own.

Q. Oh, that's interesting. In other words, he had thought there might be a possibility that someone might bring work that was not theirs?

A. That's right. That was always a risk. But then they did that later. We began to develop admissions officers who would go out to speak to some of the high schools, and as the years passed, we were not only made more welcome but we were actually invited to speak. Because placement was always excellent and the students were extremely happy. That was one characteristic of F.I.T. -- the students were finally and at last doing the work that they loved to do.

Q. And at a level that they....

A. ...a very warm relationship with the faculty which has never been duplicated. We had a much smaller group, of course, and the faculty was the most devoted you will find anywhere. Hours meant nothing. We came early and we stayed late, and the faculty worked very, very closely with the students.

Finally (I don't recall the year), my teaching stopped and I became Director of Admissions and Student Personnel. That meant that admissions, programming, placements, health--all student personnel services came under my jurisdiction. Then, when the dormitory was built, of course, that too became a part of my work. As the fame of F.I.T. spread and more and more people became aware of the excellent placement opportunities, we started to get people not only from the city and the metropolitan area, but from the whole state, and from high schools in other states in the union. I myself spoke to other high schools around, not only in the metropolitan area, but in different states. I wouldn't go too far, but I remember going to New Jersey and Virginia and Connecticut. And gradually the students came and applied and many were accepted at F.I.T.

Then housing became an enormous problem. New York City being the kind of city it is, it wasn't very easy to find places for these students and for a long time we housed them in one of the hotels nearby.

Q. Really.

A. That offered tremendous headaches...

Q. Most of your students must have been pretty young...

A. Well, eighteen...We had a....I don't remember what we called them...But some kind of counselors. That stayed with them, both at the hotel and then later, when we built the new dormitory, we were able to get the equivalent of counselors or house mothers at the dorm. In those years I was pretty strict with the rules and regulations in the dormitory, and visiting hours for young men were curtailed. They could not stay in the girl's rooms. Of course things have changed radically since then!

Q. When you talk about boys and girls -- what was the ratio as the years went on between men and women in the school.

A. Well, there were very few men in the design areas. There were some, but not many. Most of the men were concentrated in management. Production management, and the ratio was always very lopsided. My offhand guess is 10-90(%). And then it would be 20-80(%) and maybe 30-70(%). The best, I would say, it ever was would be 60-40(%)

Q. 50(%) women, 40(%) men.

A. It was very hard to interest young men. I remember... The exact year I'm not sure of but it was very early, '46-'47, I went to Stuyvesant High School, which, after all, is the plum in New York City, and they let me speak to a group of seniors and a few of them came. Went into management and did extremely well as the years have gone by. But it was always a tough struggle to get men into management. . .

Q. Were some of your students children or grandchildren of

people in the industry?

A. In some cases, yes. They were the children of workers. But my memory is not that clear as to...Most of them were youngsters who simply wanted to design clothes, and later, to make textile design. They had art ability, but they knew they would never become great commercial artists. And yet they were tremendously interested in clothes. Now, the men who were interested in clothes (and there were always a few) had been fighting their parents and their friends their whole lives, because it was called sissy stuff and they were frowned on as being too effeminate. But if they stuck to it and came to F.I.T. and went through the classes, they were by and large very, very successful.

And so admissions grew. Our applications became far more than we could accommodate, even after a new building, and I was given several admissions counselors, as I said...

Q. By the way, when did you stop paying the \$10?

A. I would say it went on through '45, '46, '47, '48...Maybe by '50, they no longer had that incentive. Of course, however, we did gradually have a student aid program, which came in later, from the Federal government, and we always had some aid from the industry. People who were willing to donate money to the educational foundation, and I was able...That was another one of my jobs, to dispense money to those who needed it. Then came Federal assistance, with their forms and their requirements, and we ultimately got a Financial Aid advisor.

So it grew gradually through the years. More work in student

activities, so that ultimately we had an Assistant Dean of Student Activities and Admissions and Programming....I used to program the entire college myself the first two years.

Q. What do you mean by programming?

A. Setting up the classes, who was going to teach them and who was going to take them.

Q. Really. That's enormous...

A. I remember laying out the cards on my dinning room table and doing it all. But, ultimately, it became too big a job. . . So we put someone in charge of programming, and...Registrar is the word I want. And then student records became very voluminous and more important, and recommendations to industry. Gradually, too, some few of the students wanted more training and a few had gone to higher ed where they could get their B.A. or their B.S. degree. Of course that's no longer necessary.

Q. You mean, they would get out of school and go on to other schools.

A. That's right.

Q. But the upper program, the one year extension, did come about somewhere in the...

A. Yes. That was the beginning of work after F.I.T. There was a one year program developed for graduates of college, and from that program we had a great deal of interest from the out of town students. I remember hoping and fighting for an M.A. degree in those years,

especially for teachers who could come to a one year program, but Albany said no. Albany has subsequently changed it mind, of course.

Q. I'm not sure I know what you mean. They've changed their mind about what?

A. Because they even have M.A. programs at F.I.T.

Q. Oh, right. That is to say, you're going to be able to. I don't think it's in yet.

A. I thought it was in.

Q. No, I don't think so. I don't think it has started yet. I'm not positive...

A. I thought Mr. Feldman said it was.

Q. Well, perhaps, next September but not yet...

A. Anyway, the one year program was successful for a long time. They didn't have to take academic subjects because they already had more than we offered. So they just concentrated on the design elements, and that was quite successful.

Q. What about the evening program? When did that start?

A. I don't know when the evening program started, nor do I know too much about it. I was not directly involved with it at any time.

Q. How were the students for that admitted?

A. Dick Meagher would have to give you the answer to that.

Q. Who?

A. Dick M-e-a-g-h-e-r. He's been in charge of the evening division for many years. Not the first one, but for many years. And . . .

Q. I would gather then that that became important enough to require the services of someone. . . who did nothing but that...

A. Oh, yes. I was never involved with the evening division. Al Wagman was there; he was the first one. Then I think Dick Meagher was the second one. The expansion of the evening program has been very, very great through the years.

Q. Well, these were industry people; people already in the industry I assume...

A. Well, at least people who were working. And were hoping someday to get into the industry.

Q. And, of course, there were people who were just taking one course, I assume, and not planning to matriculate for a degree.

A. That's right. There were some going for an evening degree but very few. There were some but most of them had to work, to earn money, and were hoping to upgrade themselves in the industry.

Q. It's interesting...You said you were a woman who did anything that needed to be done, in addition to the admissions...

A. For a long time, yes....

Q. Could you illustrate that with some of the stories you've told me...

A. Well, as a matter of fact you can tell somewhat from my title and the change...When we started I was Director of Admissions. Subsequently I became Director of Admissions and Student Personnel, and finally the title of Dean of Students. At the very beginning I did everything--

programmed the school; I helped the faculty members, especially those who came from the outside, such as Dr. Zucker who had an international reputation in the field of History of Art but was nonpleased with the teaching situation as he found it. The students were not gung ho for the history of art in the first place, this was one of his chief... They didn't know "the Bible." They simply could not understand, and he had such trouble with small things. I took his attendance for him. I opened the windows for him. I helped him run the machines. All of this was beyond him. Another person who came to me outside was Eleanor Herrick who, too, was quite an authority in her field.

Q. What was her field?

A. Let's see.....history of something. Labor Relations...she ultimately became...but I don't know what it was. But she was much better adapted to the classroom setup. I didn't have to do much for her except to get her started and show her how to take the attendance and that kind of thing...

Q. I assume, then, in those days academic requirements were not really in place for the instructors. You didn't have to have a degree in education or a degree in something else that would be relevant to teaching.

A. They certainly needed the background...

Q. You talked about Dr. Zucker...He did not have a degree in education.

A. No, but he had taught elsewhere. I suspect he taught in Germany as well.

One of the things that I did and felt was very valuable-- two things as a matter of fact--I interviewed all the students who came to apply and I did that right through until my retirement, with the feeling that the students (1) must know what the institution offers, and (2) you must be very keenly aware of the interest that the student had. This wasn't a place where you could fool around. You had to come, you had to attend, you had to do your work, and they had to be very, very serious about it. Another thing that I did was to call the home if the student were absent for an excessive period of time. And the reason I did that was there was no way of making up the work. If you missed a week in apparel design, foret it. You just couldn't make it up. Now, sometimes the parents didn't know that the student wasn't attending school, and that was a shock for the parents. And subsequently, I imagine, for the student. But it was a way of showing our genuine interest in the students and their accomplishments. I remember the story, that I shall never forget, of the daughter of one of the faculty members, who went to the Dean of Students at a university she knew me and she knew the kind of work I had been doing here--and she asked to see the Dean of Students at this university and she was told that the Dean of Students doesn't see students. Which was, of course, the exact opposite of what I had done in all the years I was here. To me the students were the most important and the most relevant, and if they had to see me or I had to see them, because of problems that they had, this came first.

After a while, of course, we did develop a guidance department, among other things, which also fell under my jurisdiction, where they were able to bring students in who had problems and help them over some of the difficult things that they were facing, trying to solve.

Q. When you speak of guidance...Did the school start a remedial program during your time--remedial reading, remedial writing...

A. No. Not at the very beginning. We needed it subsequently. Before I left there was a great deal of remedial work being done because you have to remember we were reaching out; we were reaching out to minority groups....people not so well qualified for college, etc. But when you talk about '44, '46, '48--we have never really matched some of those students. They were just tremendous.

Q. And as time went on, because we're talking not only about the very early...

A. As time went on and we opened our doors more and more to minority groups...And also to those students who had a great deal of talent but academically were very weak...We had to make a decision there, and some of them never did get through F.I.T., couldn't get our degree. But the talent was there, and those were some of the tough decisions that had to be made.

In recent years, where the doors have opened much wider, they have done a great deal of remedial work and, from what I gather, quite successfully.

Q. What was your relationship with the other administrative people.

For example, in the early days, was there a great deal of contact with the President of the school and with other members....

A. If you're talking about Mr. Ritter, yes, a great deal. I told you earlier, he had a great knack for picking the right people. In Rosalind Snyder he had a splendid administrator. And later, when ...And the faculty was chosen, essentially, from those who had shown their merit and their skills in the high school. The Chairman of the department and I worked very closely together because I picked students that they were going to develop, and, therefore, their needs and desires and wants were made known to me. We discussed each student who came in and how good they were, etc. When we developed the various areas--student activities, dormitories, registrar, financial aid, etc.-- I was conferring with those people all the time, as they did less and less of the detail work.

Q. What kind of period of transition did you have when President Mortimer died, rather soon after F.I.T. was established, really.... What kind of a transition was there between him and the next President?

A. Lawrence Bethel . . . Well, by that time, practically speaking, I guess, we were pretty well enlarged, and we would meet with him periodically and discuss curriculum, how to get more students, how to get more money, and that kind of thing. When Jarvey came afterwards, it was the same kind of thing happening. Their contacts were rather with what I was doing and what were the results, but they weren't involved with the details and the running of the shop so to speak.

When we moved to....This building...No, not this building, but the old building here on 27th Street, there was a big change. Each of us had offices now and we were able to spread out more effectively. And then many of the departments inaugurated many of their exciting programs--study in England. More money came in so that we could offer more prizes at graduation and help the students while they were in school so that they could get additional aid from us as well as aid from the Federal government.

Q. What was the story with the cost to the students of their being students here? How much was...When did the practice begin of charging tuition?

A. The year I couldn't tell you. At the beginning there was no tuition charged...

Q. And you paid them \$10 a week. Right.

A. Then, quite a while later, tuition was charged. I have no idea what the date was, but the business office would know that. Their expenses for supplies were, of course, always paid. They had to buy fabrics and they had to buy paint. They had to buy books, of course, but that was relatively unimportant. Small, I should say; not unimportant. Small compared to fabrics and paint and other things that they needed.

Q. Are you familiar with the program of critiques from people in the market?

A. Yes. That started too, under Jay Watkins.... and she did a tremendous job in bringing designers in to lecture and assist our design

students. That came, I imagine, somewhere along in the '50s. I'm aware of the program, but I was not involved in it.

Q. Right. And a program such as Dorothy Hannenberg has conducted for...the Community Resources Department and...

A. Well, that's the one I'm referring to. That was started by Jay Watkins. . . and Dorothy Hannenberg had taken it over and enlarged it but the initial idea was Jay's. Yes, she worked with Virginia Pope first, I would say. That's where it started. And then long before Virginia died Jay took it over and enlarged it and now it's just splendid of course.

Q. And do you know anything about the alumni association? Was that...Did you have contact with students once they were alumnae, or is that no longer part of your...

A. Well, a little bit, yes. That was, for a while, I was in charge of that too. And we had Molly Wincur running the alumni association. But no, I wasn't doing too much with that. And toward the end, not at all, actually.

Q. And toward the end your time was pretty well spent with the whole admissions process, is that right? Because by then admitting a couple thousand students a year had to be an enormous...

A. I was no longer even interviewing I don't think by the time I left. We then had several admissions officers who were doing work. . . programming was done by somebody and...

Q. Yes. So, as the school grew, I assume, the functions that

you had performed alone were divvied up...

A. They were divided and I had overall jurisdiction of them. But we were becoming, certainly in the art areas, more and more particular (as we could be, once the student applications increased) about what the student brought in. And there was a long process of having all their work examined; what they did here and what they brought in from the outside, and that it was all done. And I don't know if it's till being done or not.

Q. Well, I think that...I don't know what the admissions requirements are today. Actually, I think I'll have to find out. I still have to have that brought up to date. But certainly the numbers of students who are admitted today, it must be a much more elastic kind of admissions program I would think...

A. On the other hand, if a student doesn't have the innate ability in the design area, they shouldn't be coming here. Because one of the things...Why I always thought interviewing was so important, to be sure they knew what they were getting into. Otherwise it was a tremendous waste of time and money.

Q. What happened when a new department was added to the school. I'm thinking specifically of Fashion Buying and Merchandising that today is probably the biggest department of the school. What happened when that was instituted? How did that effect the desire for admission on the part of the students?

A. When Fashion Buying and Merchandising was first introduced,

it went ahead in leaps and bounds. Students in the high schools were extremely interested in this area, and apparently the department stores were extremely interested in getting these students. No sooner was the department started (and I don't recall the year), thereafter there was always an enormous number of applicants. It should be remembered that the motivation of all our students, certainly in those early years and I hope it's still true, was very, very, great. They knew what they wanted. I always claimed we had the most highly motivated students of any college in the country. These students knew what they wanted, they were willing to pursue their careers until they got there.

An interesting thing about the name of the institution: Moritmer C. Ritter wanted from the very beginning wanted a name similar to M.I.T. And he came up with F.I.T., although we knew that if anything it should be the Institute of Fashion Technology. But he wouldn't budge. He wanted it to sound like M.I.T. Even, oh, I think maybe in the '60s, when there was a movement afoot to change the name of the institution--I remember "Gotham" was a name suggested. Somehow, everybody, by that time, like the sound and the flavor of F.I.T., and it has become that. But if you think about it seriously, it is almost meaningless.

Q. Well, it's interesting....In New York, if you talk to any... Let's say cab drivers...If you tell them you want to go to F.I.T., they

always know it. You don't have to be more specific than just those three letters.

Well, thank you very much. It's been very interesting, and I've enjoyed it.

A. My memory doesn't hold up. I've been out ten years; eleven years.

Q. Yes. Right. No that's fine, and where things need to be filled in I will get them.

A. The funny thing about that story on M.I.T. was the fact that when Rosalind and I had to set up the curriculum for the management program, I immediately went to M.I.T., and it was only many years later that my own daughter got a doctorate from M.I.T.

Q. That's the way funny things sometimes happen. Thanks very much.