

Catherine Mehigan Interview, February 2017

J: June

C: Catherine

J: Hello.

C: Hello.

J: Oh, hello, this is June, is this Catherine?

C: Yes, this this is Catherine Mehigan. Yes, June, how are you?

J: I'm fine. I'm sorry to keep you waiting there. I lost track of the time for a second.

C: That's ok, no problem.

J: Ok, good, well, thank you very much for making yourself available this afternoon for our little interview.

C: It's my pleasure.

J: Good, before we get started I just wanted to go over a couple of things. First being the purpose of this interview, and I've done a number of them with literally hundreds of residents of Watermark communities all over the country. And it's really a great privilege for me to get to know all kinds of fascinating people. And then find out really, what has driven them to want to make a change in their lives and make the move to a retirement community? What we do, Catherine, with the information that we get from the interview is, we share it with folks out there who may just be starting to think about planning their future and may not know much about retirement communities and what they have to offer. So what we have found is, by sharing our own resident's experiences and stories, that people appreciate having that glimpse into life at a retirement community and kind of the process people went through to decide on moving to one. And so that's really what it's all about. That's what we're after in this interview is just your candid thoughts. Another note that I'd like to make sure you're aware of is that we are recording this conversation so that we can have an accurate transcript. So we want to get your sentiments and your words exactly accurate. And I tell you that so that you are aware and also so that should you say something that you feel might be too personal to share, you can just say right then and there in conversation, "Oops, I don't want to share that part of my life with anybody," ok?

C: Alright, of course. Thank you.

J: Ok, very good. So at this point, my part of doing most of the talking is over. I'm going to let you do most of the talking from here on out. And I'm going to invite you, first of all, just to introduce yourself. Talk about, you know, where you were born, where you grew up, you know your life, your family, whatever you want to share with people about what makes Catherine, Catherine. And then, from that point, you can talk as long as you want, share as much as you want and then, from that point, I will ask you some more specific questions about your decision to move to a retirement community, ok?

C: Of course, anything. My name is Catherine Mehigan. I am retired, believe it or not, for 30 years. I was born in the Bronx, New York. I had parents, of course, and my sister. The three of them were born in Ireland and came here. My sister was ten years older than I. And she was ten when I was born. We got on extremely well. Thank God for that. You know the childhood was like the childhood of any young kid living in an area. You went down, you played games, played rope, the usual games, etc. Then, when I grew up, eventually I went to college, got my B.A. at the beginning. I worked as an elementary school

teacher. I had gotten the license for it. And I loved it. It was a lot of fun. Kids are kids no matter where you see them and you can make life interesting for them. And that is the job of a teacher. I knew many of the parents. They were more than welcome to come in and speak with me. Sometimes they came in even after school because they had something private they wanted to tell me. At times one of the children did say to me, "Miss Mehigan, I have to tell you something. My mother said I should tell it to you quietly." So we would shut the door, go out in the hall and we'd have our conversation. I listened. I learned to listen and the children appreciated that. Some children needed more help and a couple went into special ed, as we called it in those days, and some needed other help, which we tried to give them. I taught for 13 years and then I eventually went on to become a licensed assistant principal. And I worked in a school within the district, not the same school; you were better off in a new school. Our schools in my time ran at least 30 kids in a room. We were crowded, we were very crowded and you had to maintain discipline. You did learn to lay down rules that were kind and they understood this and eventually they accepted them. It was easier on them and I could leave the door open if the day were hot. What else could I tell you? Of course I got my advanced degrees after that but that's not the point. The point was you had to relate to children. I would have been given a principalship but I had my sister, my one and only, how can I put this? She couldn't walk well, she was lame. And this had happened to her, believe it or not, when she was about seven years old, before I was ever born. She was hit in the ear with a ball and if you go back to the '20s or beginning '30s, medicine is not today what it was then. Luckily, she got a doctor who was interested, who did the best possible thing he could for her so at least she was able to walk. And she did and she had a brain and she knew she had to use it. What else can I tell you? In my notes that I sent, my father of course died and the strange thing was my mother went into a nursing home. I would visit her after school. She went in and she didn't remember me. The only thing she would say, "You were Catherine." June, you would have been Catherine. Anyone was Catherine. That was the only thing she said. Once, in her time in all the ten years, she turned to me and she said to me, "Where is Jer?" She meant my father, Jeremiah, Jerry. I said to her, "He's dead." She said, "He didn't leave me?" I said, "No, he's dead." "Oh." And then she forgot all about him and never said anything.

J: Aww.

C: I know, funny I can remember that to this day. I can still see it.

J: Wow.

C: After ten years to the date of his date of death, my mother died. And the strange thing about it and it wasn't funny; it was Maureen's birthday. We never enjoyed celebrating her birthday but that was life. Of course, I have no other family. Then, I thought, "the house is too big, what am I going to do with this?" You know, you had the upstairs, the attic, the downstairs. I mean, I had people in to do some things but let's face it, there are things you've got to do yourself. So, I decided to sell it. I was lucky it didn't take me more than about four or five months and it was sold. I always try to keep houses, anything like that, in good condition, as good as I can do it. Time went on and I thought, "Catherine, you've got to move." I did move. That's why I did ask, my last remark on my page, I asked, "How do you feel about cats?" Believe me I would never have moved if I couldn't have kept my cat. I'm an animal lover, have been all my life. I used to have dogs until about 15 years ago when physically I couldn't be cleaning up the backyard. Even if I let them out in the backyard, I had to clean up. I couldn't expect anyone else to do it for me. And I did that and then I changed to cats. At one point I had two dogs and

four cats. And you know what? They all got on. They do; animals teach people a lesson.

J: I grew up with six cats and two dogs so I know exactly what you're talking about.

C: They do. So this one, I had been in the hospital in May 2014 and my cat died. And my friend Donna said to me when I got out, "We got to buy you another cat." We went up to the animal shelter and we're looking and suddenly we see something walking across the hall to us. It was this cat. I said, "If he wants to come he should come." He's now about eight years old and I called him MGB. You would not guess what that means.

J: I can't guess. What does it mean?

C: My good boy. He is so good. In fact, the other day Donna took me out shopping and I got him a new bed. The bed he had was old; I had it for years although he sleeps in mine at night. Or I sleep in his; I never know which. You understand that.

J: Yeah.

C: So anyway I got him a new bed. It's right next to my chair. And we're right there together.

J: Nice.

C: He sleeps on my lap at night when I watch television.

J: Isn't that great?

C: He's so good it's hard to believe. Even the women who come in to do the room, one of them said to me, "I'm afraid of cats." I said to her, "Come into mine and you won't be." I said, "I'll always be there." And I do. I always stay in the room while she is cleaning the room and the cat sits on my lap and there is no problem. He's happy and there's no problem.

J: Well, let me ask you a question about your move. So the house that you sold, how long had you lived in that house?

C: 40 years.

J: 40 years and so when you decided that you wanted to make a change, how did you go about deciding that The Fountains would be where you wanted to live?

C: To be honest, it was not my first choice because I had never heard of it. But I went elsewhere and I was there for a little over a year. It was nice. The staff was lovely but I wasn't happy. I wasn't content, let's put it that way. So my friend Donna said to me, "Why don't you go to The Fountains?" I said, "I've never heard of them. So she said, "It's nice." She hadn't been here. She just knew of it. So she brought me over here. By this time I had to give up driving. My eyesight wasn't getting better so I gave up the car and Donna brought me over here. And I liked what I saw. I liked the people. The food was very good. The room was lovely so that's why I'm here. Of course, as I told you my last question, "How do you feel about cats?" And I got a very nice answer and that settled it.

J: Yeah, did you have your cat in the previous residence?

C: Yes, I did.

J: And so what was it about The Fountains that you liked better than where you had been living?

C: I have more space, that's true. I only had a small one room. This is more room. I can leave the cat to wander the room. He is always loose. I don't believe in animals being tied up and I let him go around and he sleeps wherever he wants. I could bring more of my furniture. It was more roomy, I think that's the first thing. The staff in both, I have to admit, they're alike. They're very nice; thank God for that. The food was better here, I have to admit that. I don't think they'd like me to say that but I do. The food was better here. Ok?

J: Ok and so let's go back to when you sold your house and you had, I presume it was a larger space you'd been living in. How did you go about deciding what you wanted to get rid of and what you wanted to bring with you?

C: Ok, very simple. I looked around my neighbor across the street from me, not Donna, another one. She had a son of about 50 who was just recently married and I said to her, "Well, you ask Michael if he wants

anything." She said, "Sure." So Michael came to see me and I said to Michael, "Look around, there are some things here I know I don't need and if you want them you are welcome to them. I know he took a couple of chairs, living room chairs because I wasn't going to use them. I forget what else he took but he took it and that was all. That's why I did it. Then, the man who moved me, I said to him, "I don't want these things." He said, "Do you want me to keep them?" I said, "Yes, thank you, do." So he did.

J: Well, that sounds pretty easy. People wanted your stuff and you just gave it away.

C: Oh yeah, why not?

J: Yeah.

C: Why not? If someone else can use it, isn't it better than having it sitting in someplace unused?

J: Yeah and so now that you are living at The Fountains, you've been there how long now?

C: Heading for four months.

J: Four months, ok.

C: I have two rooms here which I really didn't have. I have my bed, I have a sofa in the living room that I've had for over 20 years. I'll just tell you briefly about that. My sister and I lived in our rooms upstairs. But then she said to me she had to go downstairs and stay there. We had a bed down there so she did. But then I knew I had to be there for her. If she got up she could fall or whatever. So I went out and I bought this sofa bed. It sleeps one and that's why I have that sofa bed. Now, after she passed away, I kept it. I'm glad I did and I never use it. My cat sits on it but I don't. It's weird reasoning, huh?

J: Yeah.

C: But that's why.

J: Yeah, well, why don't you tell us a little about your life there at The Fountains? What's a typical day like for you there?

C: You know what's absolutely lovely? The exercise, I can use that. I can use that every day. Then on Wednesday the Eucharistic minister comes and gives us all Holy Communion. Wednesday morning the beautician comes and does our hair and that I miss. Our weather today isn't so great or it won't be so great so it's not done. No hair done today.

J: You're getting a storm I understand, a big snowstorm?

C: Yes and of course some people have a touch of the flu. But on the whole, I keep saying that and it's true, the staff is very nice. Food is always pretty much on time. We have lunch let's say 12 to 2 and dinner 5 to 7. That works out. I've met some friends there, new friends but we get on very well. And we sit and eat together and talk. That's good.

J: And did you know anybody there before you moved in?

C: No, not a soul.

J: And you grew up not too far from there or you worked not too far from there, right?

C: No, I don't know if you know anything about the city. I lived in the city. (Inaudible) the boundary into Westchester. I was very fond of that and I worked in the New York City Public School System which was big.

J: Very big.

C: Very big and I taught in a low socioeconomic area. Now, this is not far from it but it's another kind of environment.

J: Right.

C: In Westchester. Where are you by the way, what state?

J: I'm in Tucson, Arizona.

C: How is the weather out there?

J: Well, you're not going to like it but it's pretty nice. Sunny and about 80° today on a February day, which I like.

C: Good, I can understand that.

J: But I grew up not far from where you are. I grew up in Connecticut in Fairfield County so I'm familiar

with your area.

C: Ok, good, good.

J: Yea, so you like to do the exercise classes and you've met some people. Is there anything else that people should know about the lifestyle there that either you take advantage of or other people do?

C: You know what, you have activities and it's up to you if you want to partake in them or not. You ever try to think of the names of things and?

J: All the time, it doesn't come to you. I know.

C: You can go in, you can always meet one of the people I call the managers. You can always talk to them. There's someone here that you can always talk with. They're willing to listen to you.

J: Nice.

C: I mean that's the general thing, that you can do what you want, when you want, more or less. You get help. Anytime you want help, you are given it. And that I appreciate.

J: And since you don't drive, do you take advantage of the transportation that they offer there?

C: Oh yeah, I was supposed to have gone to CVS today but of course with the weather we didn't go. The people who have the flu, we didn't go. I went to a chat luncheon in a couple weeks ago. It's the Old Stone Mill which is very important in this area. The ground has been around since about 1798. And it's, of course, a more modern place today. But we go in there and you have a lovely lovely lunch. They went to Kohl's, I didn't go. I would have gone someplace next week but who knows with the weather. You know what I mean?

J: Yeah.

C: I'm going to learn to play stud poker. Isn't that exciting?

J: That's fun.

C: Have you ever played it?

J: I've never played it, no.

C: I took notes off the computer so I'm reading them because I never saw it either. There's a small group of us starting and I thought why not join it? That will be Thursday afternoon. So that should be funny. It's something I've never done in my life.

J: And do you find that you have a lot in common with the other residents there? Have you met any other teachers?

C: No, I haven't met anyone like that. You know, people go where it's convenient to them, where their families are.

J: Right.

C: Strangely I went to a luncheon in December, this Old Stone Mill which is right down, it's a two minute drive from where I am. The Fountains drove me down. It's awkward to get down there. But it was a meeting of my union, the supervisory union. There were about 50 or 60 of us. We met just to celebrate the holidays.

J: Nice.

C: Wonderful.

J: That was convenient, huh?

C: Yeah, that was very convenient. And this is a nice place to eat. And two minutes away, what more could you ask for?

J: Right, well, let me ask you what your advice might be for folks who might be living in a big old house that is becoming a little bit too much, and maybe they don't know they have options. Do you have any recommendations or words of advice to share with someone like that?

C: I wonder if AARP would give out any advice about that. I belong but it's been a while. I can inquire about that.

J: Well, I'm interested from your perspective, since you have been through the experience of getting rid of a house and getting rid of some of your belongings and making transitions to different options.

C: I'm very realistic and I knew I had to. Some people, if they have families, they really should come and see this. It's not enough for just the family member to come. It's important that the one who is going to be here comes and sees for himself or herself what it's like. And then even talk to someone like me who is here and ask the questions that you wouldn't ask at a formal luncheon. You know what I mean?

J: Yeah.

C: Ask someone like me and I will tell you. I do tell the truth. I firmly believe in it.

J: Well, that's good advice. At any point did you have any fears or trepidation about being on your own and making a difficult decision like this, or did you just decide to jump in with both feet?

C: No, I have made decisions; don't forget I made the decision regarding my mother. I made the decision regarding my sister. These were important decisions. I never did nothing in the house. I volunteered because I believe you should do something while you're out and while you're growing up, even at this elderly age of mine. I spent years in the botanical gardens. I spent years working in the thrift shop. There I talked to a lot of people. They would come in, most of them knew me. And they would talk and say, "What happened? Let me hear." And I'll tell them the truth. You've got to talk to people. That's the biggest thing. I just had to make my decisions so I did. Some of the women coming in, or men, their children are making the decisions for them, which in most cases is good but parents should hear the decision. You know what I mean?

J: I do.

C: If I were going somewhere I would want to know. Donna takes me different places, she'd take me anywhere I wanted to go but we both listen to what's being said. I know some of the people coming in, too, unfortunately, are beginning to lose their faculties. You know that as well as I.

J: Yes, it happens.

C: It could happen to me tomorrow. People come in, you have to listen to them. Maybe sometimes they can even pick up some other resident there and say, "I have a little problem. Will you tell me how to solve it?" Sometimes it's as much as, "Where do I find my lunch? Where do I find the dinner table?" Simple little things like that have to be answered.

J: So people help one another is what you're saying.

C: Oh yes, it should be. I mean that I'm quite willing to do. I never question. I had dinner with, I think four new people came in. Michael asked me, "Would I have dinner with them?" I said, "Sure." They came in and we talked, they sat down and we had a good evening talking. It's the way it should be. You've got to talk and sometimes person-to-person can relate better until they get on their feet.

J: I'm sorry, I didn't hear what you said.

C: I was watching the red light but I understand what it means.

J: Oh, ok, well, do you have anything else you'd like to know? People who may be interested in coming in and taking a look, any encouraging words you'd like to share?

C: Is there any magazine or something that lets say a topic like this could be introduced and you would be told to call this place if you'd like to see it? And let them come in and seeing it is what they really have to do. That there is someplace here that they can even sit down in the good weather outside but inside they're always cared for. Anything is done. I never knew, for example, that my wash would be done. It's minor but when I thought about it was major. You know, the sheets and stuff, I didn't know that would be done. These are some things you don't know anything about. All I knew was, I had to leave the house and I had to have someplace that I could sleep at night with my cat. And then I learned about the food, the lunches, the dinners, the things that they do for you, but I didn't know anything about this. And yet I do read.

J: Interesting, yeah, it's interesting that in this day and age it's still such a secret, this kind of living arrangement. So many people like yourself don't know they exist until they visit.

C: And we don't know, for one thing, that they are 100% safe, that we can still have our friends, we can still make our own phone calls. There are things we can do for ourselves, that if we want to go into a

group we can do it, if we don't feel like we like it, we can depart with no repercussions.

J: Sounds great to me.

C: You know what? I'm very glad I came here. I'm perfectly safe and that's the best thing I can tell myself. Even my friend, Donna, she said the same thing, I'm perfectly safe. Oh by the way, Donna is at least nearly 30 years younger than me.

J: She sounds like a good friend.

C: She is a good friend and so is her husband.

J: Well, I'm glad she recommended that you look at The Fountains and I'm really glad that you're happy there and that you took the time today to share some of your thoughts with us. We really do appreciate it.

C: I thank you for asking me. It was very nice of you to ask me.

J: Well, it's our pleasure. I will let you go now and enjoy the rest of your day. It's probably going on dinner time there and maybe you'd just like to watch the snow fall out your window when it comes.

C: I think it's wonderful weather you have out there.

J: Well, I'll be sending you some sunny thoughts from Tucson.

C: Thank you very much.

J: All right, you take care, it's been a pleasure.

C: Thank you, God bless.

J: God bless, bye-bye.

C: Bye-bye.