



Maureen Daly Finnigan
ROBS History Project
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Maureen retired from Brentwood Schools in 2002 after providing thirty two years of service to the District. Her given full name is Maureen Daly Finnigan. Her knick name "*Reeney*" was acquired when she was approximately ten years of age and her friends began to use the appellation up until she graduated from college. At that time she first came to Brentwood and people began to call her by her given name Maureen for the first time. Her middle name served to connect her to her family roots and Irish heritage. Maureen is derivative of "*little Mary*" which was her mother's name. John was her father's name. All four grandparents were born in Ireland. Her father was conceived in Ireland but born in the United States as had been her mother. The family hailed from Roscommon in the geographic center of the country, Cork a city in the South West and County Mayo on the west coast.

She, her husband and both their children visited the old country a few years back after she retired. She told us how on meeting some of the cousins she was surprised to see such a remarkable resemblance in their facial features. The family face seen through generations was nothing short of amazing. They were introduced to a cousin who was a plumber by trade and lived in a house lacking indoor plumbing. It had its own outhouse.

She and her husband were then living in Sayville. As mentioned previously they have two daughters. One who lives in

Bayport and teaches in Middle Country. The other, also a teacher, teaches computer science to students in New York City. She was looking for a teaching position on Long Island, planning to be married in August and hoping to also live on Long Island. Her other daughter is married, lives out here and has two daughters both in day care. They're names are Sidney and Caroline. Caroline is the baby. The oldest at four is very organized, careful with everything. The youngest is simply having fun.

Maureen met her husband in a bar in Sayville during a snow storm. A group of four teachers had a house on Fire Island and it had been snowing for two days. They agreed it was time to get out of the house. They stopped at the first open bar they found. Her husband to be was already there. He eventually came over to where they were and introduced himself. He asked if he could come over the next night and cook dinner. He arrived with all his pots and pans and cooked Hungarian goulash for everybody. They all had been curious to see who he might be interested in. Her friends soon found out and left her the next year after she married her love interest and they both went back to Massachusetts from which Maureen had come to teach in Sachem on Long Island. It was 1964.

Her oldest daughter is Susan. Maureen thinks she and Susan are most alike because they're always butting heads. Katy, her other daughter (Katherine), is very easy going and is the one with two children. She is also the one who knows when not to ask a question and knows when to make a cup of tea for her mother. She described Katy was very easy going.

Some of her earliest memories are of a time when she was six years old. Her mother was getting ready to give birth while the family was gathered around for a Fourth of July celebration. She

remembers her mother calling out to the others *“get the children outside.”* Her uncle gathered up all the children outside in the back yard when all of a sudden the doctor came up the front stairs to the ground level, because the house was located above the street. The doctor was carrying a little black leather bag.

A couple of minutes later her aunt held a baby up out the window and six year old Maureen said *“where did that baby come from, or words to that effect”?* *“Oh”*, someone said, *“You know that little black bag, that’s where the baby came from.”* So they went to the hospital with her mother. At the same time the family was in the process of moving. It was an exciting time. For a few years after that every time she saw a doctor who had a little black bag, making house calls Maureen would say, *“Oh, there goes another baby!”*

Her childhood was spent in Massachusetts until she got married. During the summers and on many weekends she would go back to Massachusetts. Her father owned a fish company and during World War I and the Korean War he sold all the fish to the armed services. He had a huge freezer in a big, big building. One of their neighbors was Clarence Birdseye and he did some testing of different foods by freezing them. Her father didn’t profit from any of it. It was during the Second World War. She remembers Clarence Birdseye. He became quite wealthy and then moved away.

Her father moved the family to Gloucester in 1939. When war broke out they expanded. At that point they had a fleet of six fishing boats. They’d go fishing and then freeze the catch. They had a team of full time government inspectors on site all the time. Her father was a very busy man. He was also a Councilman. They were doing urban renewal then. He was politically active at the Town level.

When her mother was sixteen she was hit by a car, following which she lost a kidney and thereafter developed a rare kidney disease. She went on to have four children, then became extremely ill and died. She was only thirty three. Maureen got very close to her father after her mother died. She was then only twelve years old.

Her maternal grandfather had come to the United States and worked first on building the railroad by laying tracks. Next he worked for an iron works in Boston as his family grew. They made large cast iron frying pans. Everyone in the family had examples of every size available. You could barely even pick up the largest of them. Her father was fourteen years older than her mother. She had only few memories of her grandparents on her father's side of the family. While she was alive she remembers her mother enjoying playing with the children. She carried on that practice into her own life when her own children were small. She could be doing laundry and suddenly be asked to play a game with her children and immediately would cease doing that in which she had been engaged. She has two brothers and a sister but she is the oldest of forty nine grandchildren. Her maternal grandmother had nine children. Hers was the smallest of the families with just four children. A lot of responsibility fell to her being the oldest. It greatly affected the way she saw life while she was growing up. Maureen was always the boss and "*I still am*" she added.

Other adult influence included her Aunt Helen, who though only ten years older than she, was like an older sister and was always available for her and her siblings. She had just visited with her the previous weekend in Boston - where she still lives. Her husband stayed with Aunt Helen while Maureen attended a Class Reunion. In fact there are still so many relatives in the Boston area that they have a Ferry commuter pass to New England from L.I.

When Maureen was a child in sixth grade (about the time her mother passed away), she had been blessed with a wonderful teacher who treated each child as an individual. Her name was

Miss Hull. She was very helpful to Maureen. She remembers making her father buy her shoes just like Miss Hull's. She was a person she looked up to and someone who most importantly became a role model for Maureen's career choice when education became her calling.

She was born in 1939, at the beginning of the World's Fair in Flushing Meadow and prior to the onset of the Second World War. She still has scary memories of blackouts. She remembered the rationing of the war years and her father's being political because he never had to worry about shortages. They always enjoyed plenty of butter and other foods that were hard to come by due to his connections. He always seemed to know the right people to help him attend to family needs.

It was during these times that responsibilities of family were shared. Maureen was the organizer. After her mother died they were fortunate in that they had a neighbor who would come in every morning and make sure everybody had breakfast and got off to school. They all made their own beds. Her youngest brother at the time was six. The neighbor would clean up after breakfast and do a laundry.

Her father may have had his own business but he was always home by six o'clock. The lady would return at four. Her father would call a store to have a box delivered that contained whatever they were having for dinner and then their neighbor would start dinner preparation. The kids would have to fold clothes and do ironing, a chore with which everyone took turns.

Maureen also worked with her father at the fish market. The fish came in ten pound boxes and for 50 cents per hour (which was a lot of money back then), her sister and she would put the covers on boxes. They did that during the summer. It was her first paying job. She also did a great deal of babysitting.

Family holiday gatherings usually on Saturday or Sunday took place as the size of her extended family grew and they were held at her grandmother's house in Boston. She remembered how her grandfather, who was younger than his wife and still working, would get confused. She would go and say "*Hi, I'm Mary's first born.*" "*You didn't give him your name because he would never remember it*". There were a lot of children. One year she remembered how all six girls in the family were pregnant at the same time.

She loved going to school and was interested in sports; softball and tennis, sledding and skiing all of which kept her very busy year round. One of her favorite toys was called *an Irish Snail*, it was like a wooden scooter that you sat on with handlebars that you pushed and pulled to move forward. She went everywhere on that. It was unique.

When asked for her favorite season of the year Maureen smiled and said each of them had their own special charm that she enjoyed. Favorite aromas frequently evoke powerful reminders of past moments. Upside down cake cooling on a rack in the kitchen after coming out of the oven had such an effect upon her as did the aroma of fresh fish for reasons already explained. She remembers lobster races that took place at home on their kitchen floor. She hasn't had a fresh lobster ever since she was in her mid twenties. She told us about her first day of school. Her brother had just been born on July 4th, they had moved in August and she had to go past a Fire Department and asked the adults, "*what happens if those fire trucks suddenly come out*". Her father said he would drive her to school. Coming home she didn't want to leave. The thought of the trucks coming out when she was in front of the fire house always frightened her. She remembered her Kindergarten teacher and thought she was very mean. She was also very old. Much, later after her sister had gotten married and moved to Austin Texas she said "*You're not going to believe this.*" Miss Tissfer lives next door and that was from a time when they were in Boston. By their

calculations they figured that when they had been in her class she must have been twenty-two years old. She was very, very strict. She had a love of math when she was in school but did not enjoy art which was one of her least favorite classes because she didn't think she was good at it

Maureen graduated from college with a BS in English. She had been employed during every summer at the local newspaper in Gloucester, Massachusetts. It was there that she had met John Fitzgerald Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline, which she said was very exciting. He had asked her where she was going to school. She told him and was embarrassed because she'd hoped he would have seen her as being more grown up. She told him the name of the school and said it was a small Catholic College in Boston and he said he knew of it and told her it was a fine school. She thought he was just being a good politician but when she came home she discovered he was on the Board of Directors for the school and he had been telling her the truth. She decided to volunteer for his presidential campaign.

She obtained her degree at Emmanuel College in Boston and recently returned for her 45th reunion. She roomed with an old friend and had a great time while there. Much of her Graduate work was done at New York Tech where after some years her husband had been employed. It was free for her to matriculate. She did, earning her Masters in 1992. Her older daughter got her Masters there as well. They attended school together. Her other daughter got a degree in architecture there. She continued to do post-graduate work while she was in Brentwood, attending local colleges and universities in New York, on Long Island and in Massachusetts.

We talked about the assassination of the president in Dallas and how she heard the news from a student but didn't believe him and then followed those traumatic events in shock for the next four days. She was home when she learned of Robert Kennedy's death.

It was in 1961 that Maureen first came to Long Island and accepted a position teaching in Sachem. She stayed until she became pregnant. In those days once you went to the doctor and discovered you were expecting you had to let the district know and they would release you after four months. She didn't start the class that September because she learned about her pregnancy that summer. She stayed out until 1976 and went back as a leave replacement. They weren't awarding any tenure and she thought they would change their policy. She stayed until 1985 but wasn't building seniority. Every year it would change but there wasn't even a seniority list. She was either teaching 4th, 5th or 6th grade and had been living in the same house for forty-one years. In 1976 in Sachem they had a hundred and twenty-nine teachers on leave replacements. In 1985 there were 12 left and she said to herself, "*something's not right.*" She was very good friends with the Harney family and Austin Harney asked her, "*Why don't you put an application into Brentwood*", because they were opening up the Kindergarten Center. She did. She met Les Black and he interviewed her. They had a terrific conversation. He told her the job was hers if she wanted it. It wasn't exactly a done deal but almost as good as one. That was in 1985. She was told she needed five letters of recommendation and Austin said he wanted to be one of them. When she got home the phone was already ringing off the hook and it was Austin who said "*They love you!*"

During her interview with Les he asked, "*Why should we hire you over somebody else?*" She said, "*Let me put it this way. Sachem is sending you one of their best*". Sachem and Brentwood didn't seem that different to her. During summers she was always taking courses and would meet and speak with teachers from other districts and they would ask her "*Where do you teach? Brentwood?*" Even her old friends had a terrible impression of what it was like but it wasn't all that different for her at the Elementary level. She believes it isn't that different anywhere else.

She moved to teach third grade in Brentwood and got her Masters in computers and that was a big help to her. She got that degree at New York Tech. Her husband had retired from the government – he was able to do that – but it was an interesting process. He had to be in good standing to retire because he had been fired by Ronald Reagan as an air Traffic Controller and was only six months away from retirement. Reagan fired people who were in the hospital, on vacation, and they went to court over it. There were tapes from the FAA containing relevant evidence in the case that were discovered to have all been erased.

It was Memorial Day when we got a call at home from the IRS. It was a woman who said “*I want you up here immediately to sign some papers*”. She had heard a story about him. The next day, June 1st Reagan announced no government agency would be allowed to hire any of the dismissed employees from the FAA. That’s how he got a job as a tax examiner at the IRS and loved it. He only had to stay there for one year but he loved it and stayed for three years. He was made Chief of Security. Her daughter asked if they had a job for her. Both daughters got free tuition. It was like hitting the lottery for the family. He got his retirement and a happy ending to what could have been a devastating end to the story. Maureen told us there were many divorces and several suicides among families affected. Her husband and she had always been frugal. They had no outstanding debt; no bills. Some people she talked to had Visa Bills of \$60,000 - \$70,000 and that was decades ago.

A few years later President Clinton gave the FAA permission to hire back some of the young controllers that her husband had trained. The old way had included a team approach to doing their job and if you needed help others would jump in and help you. That didn’t happen anymore. The government higher-ups had concluded that working as a team made individuals stronger. This other way it was more competitive.

For a while she had been actively teaching assertive discipline at the Brentwood Teacher Center. It was a very positive way of dealing with problems by ignoring a lot of things that were beyond her control. In trying to come up with an approach that made the entire experience more enjoyable for herself she had evolved this program but unfortunately it wasn't continued. It was Maureen's impression that in the intervening years the evolving culture had changed challenging old ways of being and acting. Once upon a time if you asked students to do things a certain way they would. If you needed help from home there was always someone there to assist you. Even the attitudes of young teachers had changed. Now, they want to do things their own way.

About ten years ago she had a memorable class. At the end of the year the mothers of her students were wonderful. She was surprised how they presented her with a scrap book of pictures of the whole year. For twenty two years she had been taking a class to the beach. She had a salt water tank in her class and they'd go to the shore with nets. She used to go without parents but then the district said, "*no more.*" The parents would all meet at Southwest School and they would take vans to the South Shore. We'd bring lunch and go there together.

She was suddenly reminded of a story she proceeded to tell us about a class trip to the beach that happened when she was teaching at Schem. Everyone would get a chance to go but she would pull five names out of a hat. It just so happened that all the names belonged to boys. There had been a string of beautiful days in January. She told them "*tomorrow is going to be a warm day and I'm going fishing*". She had a little white Honda and was glad she never had had an accident with it. She had them all squished into the car. They went up to Mount Sinai. There was a nice place up there. She said they found shrimp, crabs, hermit crabs and a different kind of seaweed in the winter than in the summer.

She was so excited. They had buckets full of things and were going back to the parking lot when it started getting dark. That was when she discovered she had a flat tire; with no cell phone because it was the 1980's. The boys wanted to know, "*What are you going to do now?*" She said, "*I'm going to change the tire.*" So they sat in a circle watching her change the tire while they were eating a snack. She finished changing the tire, brought the fish back to the school then drove everyone home. This being the fifth grade, the next day she asked them to "*tell everyone in the class all the things we found yesterday.*" And Tommy Colon said, "*She can change a flat tire!!!*". He, nor any of the other boys, cared about the fish at all. It was a moment Maureen will always remember.

Apart from her teaching assignment and lesson objectives Maureen's central purpose for coming to class each day was to make each and every day a good day for everyone. What made her laugh? "*The times when she could fool everyone.*" She believes if you can be positive then you have the power to make other people positive. She was never afraid at any time when she was teaching. She was angry, yes! but never at the children. She has felt anger at another teacher perhaps but not very often.

She was active with the union both in Sachem and in Brentwood, first as a Delegate and more recently as Chief Delegate for six or seven years.. She used to go to Fire Island with a lot of the women teachers from Sachem during the last week of June. They would rent two houses. Roberta Honey knew someone when they needed an extra person. Sue Manchanton was six foot two inches tall. You don't forget her. We had a party there when just got her job at Brentwood. Maureen said "*next year she hoped she could do that at Sachem.*" The next summer they were having a party for Maureen and she ended up in Sue's school where they had car pooled for all those years. They were like an old married couple after

a few years finishing each other's sentences; "*We wouldn't have to say anything we almost knew what one another were thinking*". Anything that was spoken in that car it was agreed didn't go any further. It stayed in the car. So when I came home and my husband would ask - "*How did the day go*"? I'd say, "*Fine*", "*No problems!*"

Prior to teaching in Sachem she had never done any student teaching. Elsie Dougherty who became a good friend, sat down with her and showed her how to fill out a plan book. Maureen was never a fan of plan books because there was always something that happened unexpectedly you couldn't ever have anticipated.

Her husband had had a serious heart attack and her daughter became pregnant at about the same time. She wondered how she was going to be able to manage both of these challenges. However, he did make an excellent recovery and was playing golf five days a week, was still enjoying cooking and their daughter had given birth to a second child. Maureen and John have been doing lots of traveling, she sings barbershop with *The Sweet Adelines*, plays bridge, and golf. Her favorite all time read has been *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She does miss being with the children very much; and seeing the joy in their eyes. There was an awfulness in having to teach to the test. The toll it took on the profession as a whole she said, was never worth the cost of providing it. She gave priority to discipline programs she instituted and routines she favored providing positive feedback, making positive phone calls after school and in the evening to parents. She spoke of the many positive results achieved through her expectations communicated to both students and parents. She has observed the ways in which language and morale of the new teachers has changed and how the quality of performance overall of new teachers is without doubt and in a word – Wonderful!

Maureen retired in June of 2002. It was a difficult decision for her to make. She loved what she'd done for thirty two years.