

Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project, MC 356
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Institute Archives and Special Collections

Carol Geisler – Class of 1968

Interviewed by Tiffany K. Cheng

August 9, 2009

Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Carol Geisler (SB Mathematics '68), a clinical psychologist, was interviewed on August 9, 2009 by Tiffany K. Cheng (SB Environmental Engineering '12) at her private practice office on West 13th Street in Manhattan. At the time of the interview, Geisler was also Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychology in the doctoral program at New York University's School of Social Work.

CHENG: Where are you from, where did you grow up?

GEISLER: The very first year I was in Brooklyn Heights, on Henry Street, and then we moved to someplace called Stuyvesant Town, which is in Manhattan, until I was about five. I only have a few memories of that. And then we moved out to Brooklyn, all the way out to Sea Gate, which is where I spent most of my childhood, until I was sixteen.

CHENG: Was that on Long Island?

GEISLER: No, it was in Brooklyn. It's past Coney Island. It's the most southwesterly part of Brooklyn. Actually, Coney Island is an island that is long and narrow, so it was on the tip. It was surrounded by water on all three sides. It was a great place to grow up, but not a great place for a teenager. I actually went to MIT when I was sixteen.

CHENG: I'm assuming that you skipped a grade in high school and graduated early.

GEISLER: Well, I went in early because of my birthday – the way it fell. I was younger already anyway, and I skipped eighth grade. They had a program [SP, or Special Progress program, which was later called RA, the Rapid Advancement program] – and I think they may still have it – where you go from 7th to 9th grade, skipping the 8th grade.

CHENG: Did you have any siblings?

GEISLER: Yes, I have two younger brothers.

CHENG: What did your father and mother do for a living?

GEISLER: My father was a lawyer and he worked for the city [of New York]. He was an assistant corporation counsel, and defended cases brought against the city. And my mother was a housewife.

CHENG: So you say that you went to MIT when you were sixteen. Where did you live? Which dorm?

GEISLER: McCormick. There was only one.

CHENG: Really? There were no co-ed dorms?

GEISLER: No. They have co-ed dorms now?

CHENG: Yes.

GEISLER: When I got there, I think the building was two years old. I think we were required to live there, because before then women were required to live in apartments. We had a curfew up until Thanksgiving of freshman year.

CHENG: What was that curfew?

GEISLER: Something like eleven o'clock, I don't know. But there was a curfew. (And after that, no curfew.) Men were not allowed in the rooms, but they were allowed on the first floor. There was a lot of space and private rooms, but they were not allowed upstairs – although one of my boyfriends came up anyway, with my permission, of course. And we were allowed in the men's dorms. We could go anywhere we wanted because there was no curfew.

CHENG: I guess that worked out well.

GEISLER: That was total freedom, basically – although again, men weren't allowed up in our rooms.

CHENG: They have a guest list feature in McCormick now. You create a list of guests who should always be allowed in. That way, they don't have to sign in every time.

What was the gender ratio when you were at MIT?

GEISLER: It was crazy. There were 40 of us and 1,000 men.

CHENG: And all the women were scattered across different majors, right?

GEISLER: Basically, when you walked into your class there were about 30 people and three girls. And it was very intimidating. The front row were all these guys that were raising their hands and they knew everything. I just sat there.

When I was at MIT, there was no Spanish offered, and Spanish had been one of my favorite courses in high school. Humanities was one course: all of it was in Course 21, and that was it. I have friends who are younger and were from MIT. One majored in history – you couldn't do that then.

I was in mathematics. There were chemistry and physics, and we were required to take that the first year and the second year as well. We had to take a test every Friday. It was grueling. And all one thousand people– What was that hall called? The Armory. Do you still have that? It's a huge building. They would put tables about this wide [gestures 4 or 5 feet], and you would sit at a table, and the other tables were far away so you couldn't cheat. Every Friday, you'd have to take a test in physics, chemistry or math.

CHENG: So all the women lived in McCormick. Did you feel that there was a sense of community, since the women were such a small group compared to the entire student body?

GEISLER: Well, I can't speak for how they felt. I had some women friends, and I had some friends that were men. It was more my immediate friends, it wasn't so much a community. We ate together in the cafeteria, but I don't really have any clear memory of that. I remember the specific people I knew, and then there was the rest. We formed certain bonds with specific individuals. I remember there was an incident where a girl was found using drugs. We were aware of that and she was kicked out. That was a community event, but other than that, I think it made it easier for me, because we were together.

CHENG: Previously, you mentioned that in the classroom, the number of girls was just very, very few; that it was intimidating. Can you elaborate a little bit more on that? The professors were probably also all male – no female professors.

GEISLER: Not that I recall. Not only were they male, but they were not friendly. I mean, one of my major memories of MIT was that the professor-- There were these blackboards that spanned the room, and you had to move back and forth to fill them. He would start at the left-hand corner with his back to the students and write. He would go through the whole blackboard and then go back to the beginning. He never looked at the whole class. This did not encourage you to feel relaxed. There was only one professor who was friendly, and I remember laughing in that class – only one, in the Math Department.

It was a very highly competitive – you know, with these guys in the front row, competing like crazy. You didn't want to say anything that would draw attention

to yourself. One of my memories, which is not great, is at the very beginning – in this huge group, an auditorium with the sloped ceiling – I forget the name. We had a famous physics professor-- California had their guy, and we had our guy. Do you remember this?

CHENG: I know--

GEISLER: Richard Feynman.

CHENG: I know Walter Lewin was very popular. But I don't know if he taught then.

GEISLER: He taught, he wrote textbooks. And we competed with Caltech. They had Richard Feynman and we had Anthony French.

[Professor Anthony French assisted in nuclear bomb projects in England and at Los Alamos before joining MIT in 1962, where he developed a new curriculum for introductory physics and became an influential physics educator. In addition to teaching the Institute's large introductory course, he wrote four of the MIT Introductory Physics textbooks. When he arrived at MIT, Prof. French began teaching his experimental introductory mechanics to the entire freshman class: "Physics: A New Introductory Course." As he noted in an interview years later, he didn't realize it would become known as the PANIC course. The Department of Physics published an excellent remembrance of Prof. French in its [News Spotlight](#) on April 18, 2017.]

The very first day of class, we were all sitting there, and one of the freshman coeds walked in, dressed fairly conservatively, but with heels, stockings, skirt and a blouse – like a woman, like a female. And the boys made all kinds of sounds – hissing, booing – I mean, negative sounds. And that day I said to myself, "There is no way I am getting dressed up like that!"

I changed into their costume, which was a sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers. That was the costume that they wore, and that was what I wore. I was going to blend in and not be noticed. I mean, they were heckling her. It was horrible. It's hard to imagine that they would allow something like that to happen.

CHENG: Was there a point person for women students to go to? Did they have a dean for women students?

GEISLER: There might have been, but I never looked. I vaguely remember there was some kind of women's lounge or somebody, some professor--

CHENG: I think the women students' lounge is on the third floor in one of the main buildings. They still hold a lot of women's events, like lunches after finals and that kind of stuff.

GEISLER: Never went! Guess I was too busy studying.

CHENG: I'm just curious, what were the academic requirements for students back then? There were no core classes?

GEISLER: I think there were two years of physics, probably one year of chemistry, if not two – I'm not sure. I know that it changed radically after I left. I was a math major, so that just continued. The one advantage of that major was that there was no thesis requirement. A lot of the other departments had a thesis requirement.

CHENG: Did the Math Department offer a variety of different tracks for math majors? I know that they do now. There are four different types of math majors. There's 18-C, which is computational science in math, and there's applied and pure math--

GEISLER: I know there was only one track. I know a lot of guys switched into computer science because they were being practical and realized that's where the jobs were. I took a few computer science courses.

CHENG: Was there a Humanities requirement?

GEISLER: Yes. In one course, we read great works of literature. The Bible, The Odyssey.

CHENG: Were cross-registration programs available then?

GEISLER: Yes.

CHENG: To Harvard?

GEISLER: I took one course at Harvard. I also took a lot of elective courses at MIT that I had room for, because I had advanced placement in math and the requirements were minimal in the Math Department.

I took two years of photography, and I did some poetry – probably literature courses. And this one course, in the business school, which really is what changed me in terms of what I do, was a course that was really a T-group, a sensitivity training group, taught by two people, one of whom was a philosopher

– Huston Smith [author of *The World's Religions*] – and the other one was Warren Bennis [Economics '55; known for his work at MIT in the 1960s on group behavior, and later, as University Professor at UCLA and Founding Chairman of UCLA's Leadership Institute], who I know left to become a dean somewhere.

The way they organized it was that all 30 of us sat in a circle on the floor and we talked about our feelings. The class was divided into small subgroups that studied the specifics of psychology, say, a group of four or five students. We read all of Jung in my group, which was a lot. And the class itself was very therapeutic for me. It was expressive, and I had never-- In those days, high school did not have psychology courses. I had never heard of it! I knew nothing about it.

This was my first introduction to psychology, and then there were no other courses in psychology. There was no major in psychology, so I couldn't switch majors. This was my junior year, so I wasn't going to switch schools, but I found a course at Harvard that was similar to this. I took it, and then eventually transferred into psychology after I got my master's in math.

CHENG: There is the Brain and Neuroscience Department, but I don't think that focuses on psychology. They do a lot of work with robots and that kind of stuff. My friend is majoring in that. She initially took some of the classes because she thought it was going to go into psychology, but it went on a different track.

GEISLER: I actually majored in psychology as well as mathematics.

CHENG: So looking back on your four years at MIT, do you feel like you felt lonely there? What is the first thing you would think of you felt looking back at those four years?

GEISLER: I didn't feel lonely. I had lots of friends. I was working very hard, studying. In some ways, I think I was in the wrong school because my interests lay elsewhere, on the one hand. On the other hand, I got an excellent education, so I have mixed feelings about MIT. The fact that I went to MIT and had a computer background allowed me to get a full scholarship to graduate school, and pay for graduate school.

CHENG: Where did you go to graduate school?

GEISLER: NYU. The Psychology Department. They were just then starting a program in cognitive science, and they were starting to use computers. Not just for data analysis, but for experiments related to reaction time and memory. The fact that

I knew how to program and how to use that [knowledge] – they grabbed me. I mean, they were really excited. They insisted I come in and paid for five years of work, as I took an extra year of course work.

CHENG: Were you involved in any extracurricular activities at MIT?

GEISLER: Apparently, there was no physical education for women. It didn't exist. And there was no football league for men. So whatever you did, you had to do on your own. I started a coed volleyball team. My main memory was organizing these students on Sunday in the gym to practice. And what's funny is that when you Google it, what comes up is a little blurb that our team played Brandeis and we lost. We lost, but we were enthusiastic! I'm always organizing things and I'm always enthusiastic. It must've been me!

CHENG: Well, they definitely have a volleyball team, but I think it's now separated into women's and men's.

GEISLER: Yeah, we were just doing it for fun, and we had great fun. I enjoyed that. I think I had a bike, so I rode around on my bike. I walked around a lot with a camera. In fact, I also organized a group of children, all African American, to wander around the city and take photographs. I had gone to Polaroid, whose headquarters was on Memorial Drive, near MIT, and asked them for five cameras. They gave them to me, and I started the group. We had a great time.

CHENG: So, moving on from MIT, you said that you got your master's at NYU?

GEISLER: I didn't know what to do with myself. I was thinking of staying in Cambridge and going into photography. But I didn't have any special talents in that area and the professor did not encourage me. This was Minor White, who I think has passed away. But he had his own building.

CHENG: That's great.

GEISLER: He's a very well-known photographer and it was a wonderful experience. But in the meantime, I thought I had better apply to something. I had to do something. I got into NYU's Courant Institute [of Mathematical Sciences], and my parents were begging me to come home. I moved back to the city, in Manhattan, and decided, "I'll go and see what I think." Basically, I was not interested, so I went around the corner to the Psych Department, and I worked for a year at Addiction Services Agency (ASA) – a city agency – and basically realized you need a degree.

When I went to visit, I visited two faculty members at NYU Psych. One was experimental, one was clinical. The clinical guy said, "There's no way. You'll never get in. You have no background in this area whatsoever. You have to work in the area – do this and that – to get in."

The experimental people were drooling over me because of my MIT background, so I made a deal with them that "I will come to your department if you will let me take one course per semester in clinical [psychology]." And they agreed to that. It became a problem later, but at that time, it was not a problem. So I took both classes and I also studied outside, which I kept a secret.

After I got my master's, I went to a psychoanalytic institute. There were hundreds of those in New York City. Some of them require Ph.D.s, but most of them required a master's degree.

CHENG: What kind of work did you do at the psychoanalytic institute?

GEISLER: I didn't work. I took courses.

CHENG: Is there any particular specialty?

GEISLER: Psychoanalysis. I never specialized, the way they talk about specialties now in managed care.

What I ended up doing— I took my four years of courses, plus one year of internship at a hospital. I started seeing patients through the clinical course for psychological testing, which is a two-year sequence, and includes seeing patients at an outpatient clinic.

After the internship, I got a job, a half-time job at a clinic in Brooklyn, where they hired students and supervised them. So I received a lot of experience in a very broad way. It was a community clinic – everything. Children, old people, schizophrenics, more healthy people – every diagnosis you can imagine. So I got very good experience there, and I figured, "You know, I'll open a private practice after I get my license."

But I never left. I continued on, and then I became a supervisor. It was a great place. There was a lot of education. We had seminars, and we would read all the latest books that were coming out. It was a great experience and it was a great community. In fact, we still keep in touch and get together. I stayed there way longer than I thought I would and actually became an administrator, which is a whole big story.

Meantime, I was working on my dissertation. I was doing the two things concurrently. And after I finished my dissertation, I wanted to find a job. I wanted to do both. I didn't want to let go of my science background, because I didn't think I was going to switch into clinical psychology. They had even offered to me to switch. But I wasn't switching, since the experimental psych department was paying for it. I felt loyalty! They had been paying for me all these years. Why should I switch when I could do both? You only get one degree, a Ph.D. in philosophy, which is – I mean, that's what they call it. I essentially met all the requirements for both departments, and [I was] learning my psychoanalytic stuff on the side.

I wanted a job that combined both, and basically, I found a position at NYU. The School of Social Work needed someone who had both backgrounds. I was perfect for that. They had a psychoanalytic clinical social worker track – that was their only track. Some schools have four tracks, or whatever. They focused specifically on that, the clinical work, and they had just started the DSW, the Doctorate of Social Work program. They had no research. They were starting from square one. They didn't know that much. So they needed someone to supervise the students, and they didn't realize that after one year, the students would still be working on their dissertations.

This was the second year or the third year, and they had all these extra students coming in – like 20 students in each class, and no more professors [to be thesis advisors]. The director of the program said, “Let's hire someone for one day a week.” Then it went up to half-time. I had an office, a secretary, was teaching courses.

I actually taught some clinical courses first, and they then got me into statistics and research. Oh, they had no statistics, and, certainly, you have to have statistics! So I got involved – at that point, I got involved in their administrative committee. They had a monthly meeting of the doctoral committee, and I was the guest of the director. The director and I were close, and I pushed for anything in terms of the thesis. I didn't know about the other stuff they were doing. I would listen, but my expertise was dissertation, research, statistics.

The first course was a seven-week course that they carved out of the research course – a seven-week statistics course, which I taught. You can't really teach statistics in seven weeks; it's usually taught in two semesters. So I convinced them to give a whole semester, but it was in the summer. I wasn't planning to teach it in the summer, but they thought I was. I never said I wanted to do that! I wrote the course but I didn't want to teach it.

I taught it in the first summer, but [then] I said "Give it to someone else." It was twice a week. I had my private practice, my clinic – it was like, "I can't do this." And it was 10:00 at night. I mean, you get a little tipsy! I remember when I got up to [teaching] ANOVA [analysis of variance], I started making a Russian joke, because it rhymed. I forget the joke. Now, I could have done it, but the students cannot learn statistics at that time of night! Have you ever had two night classes?

Anyway, they got someone else, who was terrific, and that was taken care of. As far as writing the doctoral manual – which included all the rules and guidance for the doctorate – I wrote the section on the research proposal, the dissertation and a section on qualitative research. Eventually, they applied for a Ph.D. from the state. The clinical psych department fought them.

CHENG: Why?

GEISLER: Territory. Too many Ph.D.s! Politics! And because I was the one who developed the program, they had a very rigorous program, and easily passed the state's requirements.

They had to add a research course, which was fine. I mean, they needed those. But now they had two semesters of research and a statistics course – still in one semester. So I did that.

There was a dissertation seminar – I used to teach that. That was fun. They would take that after they took all the other courses to start the dissertation. And then, of course, there were students going on and on and not getting anywhere. They were stuck. So we developed these workshops, which were very popular: five weeks to help them get un-stuck.

CHENG: During the semester?

GEISLER: Yeah. So they were now finished with their coursework. They were doing their dissertation and getting nowhere, and they could elect to take this course. I think it was free; I'm not sure. It wasn't for credit. Yeah, because they were already paying for the dissertation credits.

When I took over, we had five or six adjuncts who were doing what I was doing. They just kept building and building the staff. We came up with this workshop thing, and whenever I taught it, the students didn't want to stop. So I turned it into an ongoing group, which was great, because it involved both my clinical

skills and my technical, statistical skills. It was a fantastic experience.

CHENG: Sounds like a great combination.

GEISLER: For me, yes. Yes, exactly.

CHENG: Did you find it extremely difficult to do all of this?

GEISLER: Well, it took me a year and a half to get the job. I mean, I had the leisure to do that.

In the Psychology Department, my advisor was always very generous. She gave me an office for the job after I graduated. They had space then. Now, there is no space – but at that time, they had space and lots of NSF grants for what I was going to be working on: teaching, research assistantships. She got me the fifth one from some university. Somebody she knew needed help, so I went and worked for him for a stipend.

I looked for a year and a half until I found what I wanted, and I almost took a position somewhere in New Jersey – at Fairleigh Dickinson. I was in the top group of possible people they would hire from the Department of Psychology, but I decided that, first of all, it's a big field. Second of all, they expected you to do a lot of grant writing. And the job at NYU really fit my schedule. I could walk from my house in fifteen minutes! Number one. Number two, I would keep my clinic job and keep this research position, which turned into research, teaching and administrative development. But this way, I had half and half, which is exactly what I wanted. With the Fairleigh Dickinson [position], it would have been full-time, tenure track. It would have been different. I think I made the right decision.

CHENG: Well, it's definitely turned out very well.

Can you speak a bit more about your work at the clinic? It seems to have been an important component of what you've accomplished.

GEISLER: I started as a student, then I became licensed, and then I became a supervisor. The clinic had been founded by two psychologists, and they basically aged out. They gave the clinic to somebody who had an MPA, but with very little actual experience to run the place. And so, myself and one other woman who had been there a while now – we were the senior people, psychologists – we took her under our wing to help with the transition. And what that turned into was that we became administrators, because we never stopped helping her.

Basically, we were helping her run the place.

There was a board that we really didn't know about. It was one of the high points. See, what happened was that the NYU thing changed. They dropped me out of the committee. I forget what happened. They shrank it down until my position there was finished as far as administrative [work]. Then, I luckily picked up this thing just at the same time. It was right around after 9/11 happened. FEMA came in and we became extremely active with that. We got a grant for \$4.4 million.

That was a high point for me administratively. We were doing a lot of stuff. We were a tiny clinic, but we did a huge amount of work – outreach, treatment, all kinds of stuff. Lectures, going to meetings that FEMA was having. We were very active.

CHENG: What do you think has been the most rewarding part of your career?

GEISLER: Of my whole career?

CHENG: Yes.

GEISLER: Well, everything. I told you about the groups. That was extremely rewarding. I do love clinical work – you know, working with patients – and I continue to do that. And I like administrative work. That was the thing I discovered. The word never came into my head, but I was just doing what I do. Like I said, the [MIT] volleyball team, I organized it! I'm an organizer.

I'm also a dancer, and this is a whole different thing. It's a specific form of dance that nobody's ever heard of, contra dancing.

CHENG: I've heard of it.

GEISLER: My friend from MIT said that MIT now gives credits for contra dancing. They have a course!

CHENG: Yeah! We have a whole variety of dance classes. You can take them for PE credits every semester.

GEISLER: I was so shocked! When I was there, they didn't even have contra dancing. It blossomed! They had a little bit but it got extremely popular after I left. Boston is now the hub. If I had known, I would never have left!

In New York City, we have a Saturday night dance that I go to. I also became involved in different aspects of administrative work. We have a Friday night, once-a-month dance that I didn't know about, because it was a gender-free dance – meaning it was run by the gay and lesbian community. They invited me to come, and I was afraid. Like, what do I do? So I found a friend and dragged her with me. And I loved it! It was great! I started going to that with another friend that I was dragging along. And eventually I got really into that.

Eventually, I started doing the booking. The person who was doing it for the gender-free group wasn't doing much. I was doing publicity at that point. They didn't have a board or a big bureaucracy; it was just two guys. I could do whatever I wanted. It's the same approach. I kind of got in where there was a need. There was clearly a need after a few years for someone else to do the booking. So I asked one of the guys – Tom – if I could be his helper, and he said sure. Then I just did it. He wasn't doing anything, so I just ended up doing it.

It's great, because I go to all these festivals. I go to all these dances over the Northeast area. I go to the Pinewoods [Plymouth, Massachusetts] area. I've got a Pinewoods T shirt [here].

CHENG: Sounds wonderful. Sounds like a lot of fun!

GEISLER: It is fantastic fun! It's aerobic, it's social, it's community. When you do booking, you get to talk to all the musicians and the callers and the bands. You have to get in with all these people. And I get to pick all the best bands!

Tom's an amazing guy, but this was not his focus. He works in Afghanistan and all these other “stans.” He teaches the kids English, brings them back to the United States. He's always traveling. He's in India now; I don't know what he's doing there. He's always gone! He loves traveling. He has a blog, so it's very interesting to see where he's been.

CHENG: Well, I bet he's probably picked up many different types of dance.

GEISLER: He's into cooking. So he's learned that. He's not so much into dance. I mean, he's into contra dance, but he's not like me – he doesn't go to all these other things. There are two dance camp weekends for the gender-free group. He was booking for them until they got rid of him – guess he wasn't doing his work. But I've been going to those also, and they are fantastic. Turns out there are other straight people going as well, which I didn't realize.

I got onto Facebook – the whole community is on Facebook! Because what

happened was that in New York City, young people started coming. So a lot of the dance groups, there are a bunch others – international, Balkan, which is where I started – are aging out. There are fewer and fewer people. They're getting older. All of a sudden we had hoards of young people. They come in groups of 10 and 20. We have all of Columbia [University] coming down, from the graduate school, the undergraduate school. And kids from high school – tons of young people. That's how I know these MIT kids. They graduate and they come contra dancing. So we have a huge contingent.

One of the young people, an organizer type, put us on Facebook, and everybody joined. And for a few years, I was thinking, "What are all these people excited about?" I finally got on, and everybody I know is there – from Maine, from Massachusetts, from North Carolina. Everybody is on Facebook from the contra dancing community!

CHENG: Facebook is definitely one of the best ways to reach out to people in their early 20s, and in the teenage community.

GEISLER: The fastest-growing contingent is women over 55. Do you know that? Here we are! The young people were there already but then everybody else joined – all the older people.

CHENG: Sounds like the more the merrier!

GEISLER: Exactly. I'm having a blast. I'm doing the booking. I was just up at Pinewoods, and we had a fantastic time. They have fantastic quarters. I can double book, because I have the Friday night and the Saturday night dances. So they said, "Sure!" Just today, I sent out an email to this guy who's terrific, and the band was terrific. I said, "Wow, how about November 2010? Are you available?" You [have to book] way in advance. So I'm having a blast. I'm dancing as much as I can, seeing patients, supervising research.

CHENG: That sounds wonderful. Thank you for taking time for this project.

GEISLER: Thank you for asking me.