

Interviewee: Dr. Mary Lou Anderson
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Abstract: Mary Lou Anderson was born and brought up in Worcester, in The Island and Vernon Hill. She went to Anna Maria College, then earned an M.A. at Assumption College and her Ed.D. at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She taught English in the Worcester Public Schools, later became Dean of Graduate and Continuing Education at Assumption College, and now is Dean of the College and Graduate Studies at Assumption. She comes from a political family and has been active politically throughout her adult life, including a stint as Vice Chair of the Worcester City Manager's Advisory Commission on Women. She reflects on attempting to break down gender stereotypes in her own teaching, and discusses women being held to different standards than men, and preference being given to men in a variety of settings. She reflects on the debate over whether gender differences have physical or environmental bases.

AO: Alright, so on your bio sheet it says that you live in Worcester?

MLA: That's correct.

AO: So what area did you grow up in Worcester?

MLA: Well I suppose I could say I grew up in two areas of Worcester; one which is called The Island, and that's an area that they're renovating. It's an area that that was historically in the 19th century separated by The Blackstone Canal that ran through the city of Worcester. So I grew up in The Island area which would be Lamartine Street, Lafayette Street and then my family moved up to Vernon Hill. So they're, they're contiguous to one another. So I could say I grew up in those two areas. How's that?

AO: Did you like growing up here? Do you have good experiences of growing up here?

MLA: Yes, yes, very much.

AO: Alright so, with your family it says you have two sisters.

MLA: I do.

AO: Where do you fall under them?

MLA: I'm the oldest.

AO: You're the oldest? [Laughter] Do you like being the oldest?

MLA: Yes.

AO: Yeah. Did your family treat you guys all the same as far as dating and when you were allowed to go and do things?

MLA: Oh that's an interesting question! [Laughs] I think so. I, you know, there were three girls so, yeah I don't think they made too much distinction, you know, we were, we were treated very well and we were always taught to stand up for ourselves so I don't think there was a sense of us, well to some degree given the time we grew up, we were probably sheltered but I think we were always taught to stand up for yourself, speak up for yourself, don't let anybody tell you, you know, what you're going to do. It was a kind of household where my father at least kind of questioned authority so [Laughter] that probably fell more on me to question it. Oh and maybe a little less on my sisters. But it was a very political family. So...

AO: Oh so your family's views on things and your family's behaviors definitely like reflect how you are now?

MLA: Right, 'cause my family was involved in politics and so when that happens, if you grow up in a very political family where people run for public office and hold public office it's a different kind of family. I think than if you didn't...

AO: Yeah. Do you feel like you were more privileged than your parents? Like politically and just, what you were allowed to do when you were growing up?

MLA: Well, being more privileged, well I suppose well sure. Well my parents didn't get to go to college and I did. And my younger sister, my middle sister, did not go to college. And then I went to graduate school. So my parents didn't so in that sense, sure. I think that's true. I mean they were first generation Americans and, and 'cause their parents came from Europe, but so sure in that sense, yeah.

AO: With your college experience did you feel like you had a hard time transitioning from high school to college?

MLA: No, no. I didn't.

AO: Okay [Laughter]

MLA: Well, I think, you know, that sounds, you know, it's an interesting comment to make because I think I've been thinking a lot about this 'cause I read a lot on women's history and women's literature so when I went to high school, there weren't many young women that went to college. So, it was a bit unusual if you went to college. I mean many girls in my high school class would have gone to a two year college because they would go into secretarial work or they would get a job with an insurance company or the government; so it was not, it was kind of rare to go to college, but I was a big reader all, my whole life. So I've always been a big reader and,

and I was always I think a bit confident about myself, I wouldn't say overconfident, then when I looked back at my daughter who's thirty and she went to a small private high school in Worcester and every young woman in her high school went to college. And so people would talk about, you know, the transition. But when I went to college nobody talked about transitioning from high school to college. I mean they just, it was -- the word transition existed but I don't think one used it in that way.

AO: Right.

MLA: It shows it's a different, you know, I'm more the sixties generation.

AO: Did, you said that a lot of the girls you went to high school with were planning to go to two year college, you didn't want to do anything like that? You didn't want to go into secretarial work?

MLA: No, no. I wanted to be a teacher. I always wanted to be a teacher.

AO: What kind of teacher did you want to be?

MLA: Well in the end I ended up being an English teacher because my first career was teaching in high school. So I liked English I majored in English in college and I went and got a Masters Degree in English and then I, then I started teaching in the Worcester public schools. So I taught at Burncoat Senior High School.

AO: So even though, you know as a women growing up in, in an era that college wasn't really something that a lot of women thought about, you feel like you had a lot of options?

MLA: Well, yes and no. I mean that's a good question. I don't, I think maybe given my background and my household on one hand you know there was this, you know stand up for yourself, speak up for yourself, so very political family. It was very Irish and very Catholic, and so I even though, I, I was accepted at a couple of colleges my parents would not let me go away to college. I mean I had to go locally. They would not let you go away to college. And you know with, apart from them, they just-now that was not true I think for other women in my circumstance, and of course my daughter wanted to go to college. She did go away to college out of state.

AO: Oh jeeze. [Laughter]

MLA: Yeah ,yeah well I, you know I sort of I believed my husband's at Holy Cross and I'm here [Assumption College] so for my daughter if she came here or to Holy Cross she'd always be known as, you know, "so-and-so's daughter." So she sort of wanted to do her own kind of thing and even though I-I missed her going away to college, I didn't want her to have that same situation that I did.

AO: So you definitely, you definitely were supportive of her going to college and-

MLA: Oh yes, absolutely, absolutely.

AO: So did you, you said that you were an English teacher. Did you like doing that job?

MLA: Oh very much, absolutely I had wonderful students. Yeah right, no, I liked teaching an awful lot.

AO: So how did you come to do this line of work?

MLA: Oh well that's kind of interesting. How'd I get into becoming the Dean at Assumption? Well I, I got married and when I had my daughter I, I had taken a leave when my daughter was born and at the same time that I was teaching at high school I also taught a course or two at Assumption College. And so I decided that I would take an additional leave and continue to teach part time at Assumption College. And so I then, I ended up resigning from the public schools because you couldn't be on leave indefinitely. And then I went back to school to get my Doctorate and then I, an opportunity made itself available at Assumption. President Joe Hagan, who was the President before President Plough, called me and asked me if I would be interested in being the active Dean of Graduate and Continuing Education at Assumption. My daughter was ten and a half and I said 'Yeah, I'd like to do that. Under one condition, that I can be a candidate for that job.' And he said "Oh of course you can be a candidate for that job.' So, that's what happened. I ended up, I finished my doctorate and I did the job for a year and became a candidate and got the job.

AO: That must've been really exciting that they asked you do it instead of you just coming to them.

MLA: Right well, right yes.

AO: Alright well one of the things that we wanted to ask you was growing up, with your like, obviously you grew up in the sixties and stuff, do you feel like since you've been in, in the education system, do you feel like you've seen any changes in girls growing up?

MLA: Oh absolutely, oh incredible changes. Absolutely I, when I was teaching English I was teaching in 1968-1969 at Burncoat Senior High and there was a, in my own view there was always this kind of division of labor. Now this is going to sound ancient because we didn't have DVD players and we didn't have computers. So if you wanted to show a film, suppose I was teaching, I always taught Shakespeare I would always show the class a clip from Shakespeare being preformed and but you'd have to use the movie projector. Now you always had the boys, the boy was to go to the media center room and he would get the projector. And he would, you know, wind up the film and put up the film and he would show it. And if you had anything involving even light physical labor it was automatically the boy and the girls would deliver a note or do something like that. And I began to think in my own head that there was something wrong with this. So I, [laughs] you know I, would have a girl go and do it. It was my own little, you know to some degree they, the girls were, they didn't say "oh I can't do that cause I'm a

girl!” They would just; they would go and do it. And so even on a little minor scale, yes there was always, even the literature that you taught there were very few women writers, for example, that were in the curriculum. And so I would try to introduce women poets and writers, so sure there is a big change; yeah an enormous change. And a lot of that had to do with, partly with the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement and the resurgence of The Women’s Movement. You know once we got the right to vote, I think there was a kind of, well there were still some things that women were doing but I think when women got the right to vote then the war intervened. Although, women went to work in the factories during World War II, but anyhow, sure it was a great disparity between education of boys and girls.

AO: And since your family was politically active do you feel like the movements impacted you? Did you, did you take part in any of that?

MLA: Oh yes, yes, yes. That’s true I did. I mean I was, let me think I, I was the, Worcester has what’s called a City Manager form of government so the City Manager runs the city. It’s a charter by, I know this, several other charters for city governments and we don’t, we do elect the major, but the major is a figurehead and is a member of the Worcester City Council. But the City Manager runs the city. So a group of us as women who met regularly called ourselves the Worcester Women’s Network. We got the city manager to create a commission called the City Manager’s Advisory Commission on Women, and I was part of that and I was the Vice Chair on that committee. And the current mayor of Worcester was the chair.

AO: Are you still politically active?

MLA: Yes, to some degree. Yes.

AO: Was it really exciting for you the first time you got to vote?

MLA: It was but you couldn’t vote until you were 21.

AO: Oh really?

MLA: Right, when I became eligible to vote, yeah. That law didn’t get changed I think ‘til the 70’s. It was, I’ve never missed an election in my entire life. I vote in presidential primaries, I vote in all primaries. I vote in every election and I’m a member of the Democratic Party and I go to the caucuses. I’ve been to democratic conventions, so yes.

AO: Were your parents also democratic?

MLA: Yes, well my mother was a republican for a while and then saw the light and became a democrat. [laughter] Yeah, (laughs) so you know my politics right?

AO: (laughs) Yeah. Are your parents proud of everything that you’ve accomplished?

MLA: Well they’re dead, but yes certainly, they were.

AO: That's good. You've obviously had some interesting parts in politics and your job and everything, what do you feel like keeps you going when you're struggling with something or you feel like you're very stressed out?

MLA: Well that's a good question to ask an administrator.

AO: (laughs) Yeah, I'm sure you deal with stress all the time.

MLA: Well right, that's because, well at least in the past, I've dealt with a lot of personnel issues. Well I would say right now I have a lot of outside interests beside my job and I've always been a great reader so I read all the time. But certainly my family; my husband my daughter, my son in law, my grandson are important to me so they're the number one, you know, they're the number one people in my life. And my sisters, you know, it's nice to have sisters they can be, we're a little bit different, but sisters can be very supportive. And I have a lot of good nieces and nephews and I have a lot of friends. But yes, I still stay active in politics a bit, and so yes.

AO: Does your husband do the same kind of work. You said he works at Holy Cross.

MLA: Well, he just retired. He's, he was an American history professor to the history department of Holy Cross for many years. He's also, he was in politics. He was a member of the Worcester City Council for 22 years and the mayor of the city of Worcester. So I've always been involved in politics and my uncle was the mayor of Worcester.

AO: Oh really? That's really interesting.

MLA: Yes, so that's always got me interested in politics. I still like it.

AO: Your daughter, your daughter has a little boy.

MLA: Yes, yes, yes she has a little boy.

AO: Do you think that that's a lot different from her? Do you think that he's a lot different than her, since you raised a girl?

MLA: Well he's 6 months old right now and I think what happens with families, when you look at him I'll always think he looks like my daughter except a male version. And I think that my son in laws parents see something in him of my son in law. So you see, I think to some degree, you see what you want to see. But no, he's a very delightful boy, very good natured. So that's always nice. He likes to laugh and smile a lot. He'll try to say some words now so that's kinda fun.

AO: I bet being a grandmother is rewarding.

MLA: It's a lot of fun and he likes to, I was gonna say he likes to read, good lord I'm jumping ahead of myself [laughter]. My daughter's a great reader so of course he has a lot of books, so

the new thing now is he can hold a book when you read a book or if he looks at something he can really hold the book.

AO: Oh, that's so cute!

MLA: Yeah.

AO: Based on your life experience what advice would you give to, to younger women that are, that are well, obviously like we go to college, what would you have to say to girls growing up?

MLA: Well I think that you should pursue what you want to pursue. And I don't think that you should let anyone stop you and I think that you should be confident enough that you can do what you want to do. I don't think that things haven't changed. I think that many things have changed in our society so that there are more opportunities for, for young women and for people of other ethnic and racial backgrounds. Certainly things have changed. Bu they haven't changed so much that the obstacles aren't there. In my own experience sometimes somebody will automatically think to ask a man before a woman and that still exists. You also have to always be aware that when you come into any kind of a position that you have to double check that the man is not being paid more than you are being paid and there are all kinds of ways of getting around that. And women are held to different kind of standards. I was, I am a great supporter of Barack O'Bama and I voted for him in the presidential primary because I really believed that he was the person in the end that could be the stronger of the two even though I liked Hillary Clinton. But I always felt in one sense that the media were being very unfair to Hillary. She was always criticized because she wore pants suits but if she didn't wear the pants suits and she wore a skirt, if she didn't wear the skirt below her knee there would be some comment or there would be some comment about her shape, or her figure, or that her legs were heavy. There's always a comment that's made about women that's not made about men and I think that still exists. So I think that there still are struggles out there. I mean, as I said I think there are more opportunities. You see now more women go to law school, more women going to medical school. But notice when they go to medical school what fields they go into, they become pediatricians, or they become, they go into internal medicine. You don't see many women going into surgery. People will argue it's because they aren't strong enough, you know to be an orthopedic surgeon you have to be strong, a cardiac surgeon you've gotta be strong. I, so you do, you do end up seeing a little, you see that, so I think my advice would be is to decide what you want to do and then to pursue that and don't let anything stop you.

AO: Can you think of any times that you faced, yourself, an inequality? Like did anyone ever treat you differently because you were a woman in a position of power?

MLA: Oh sure, yes, yes, sure. I think that's, yes, many times.

AO: When you were the candidate for the dean were you running, was there any men you were running against?

MLA: They were all men.

AO: They were all men? Ah, and you beat them! (laughs) You won.

MLA: I did. (laughs) I could debate that, did I win it. Ah, well no, I mean in the end that's true. I mean keep in mind that the president had appointed me the interim; I was a provost at the time. So no, I ended up getting the position. Sure, sure I mean, sometimes it's things like a slight and you either decide that you're going to go after it or you ignore it. I mean, you end up having to choose your battles on things. I'll give you an, I'm trying to think of an example, it's probably kind of silly but I'll give you an example. [laughs] Now of course we're gonna talk about the Catholic Church that's male dominated right? [laughter] My husband and I are Catholics, practicing Catholics, we go to the same parish in the city and at our parish during Lent they decided to have every Tuesday a luncheon and a speaker on something in regard to Catholicism. Alright now, my husband retired, he still teaches of course at Holy Cross, he's a professor so one of the priests of the church asked him if he would give a talk at one of these luncheons so he said 'alright,' he would. Now I'm the dean of a college, a Catholic College, I wasn't asked to do it. And then they asked my husband to do it again because people like him, that he was so good. Well he is, he's a good lecturer, he's great. But when he said 'no, I can't do it again I'm doing something else' and then it never then dawned on them 'well we could ask his wife, you know, she's the dean of a college.' Now I didn't go and pursue it because you know I probably, if they did, I probably would have said yes then pulled my hair out because I don't know what I would have talked about. [laughter] But I think it's, I do think it's indicative of, of things. That's a minor thing, in the scheme of things it's minor. But I think, yeah there still are just little slights out there and there still are preference given to men on some issues, sure.

AO: Now the feminist movement is divided up between people who think that fundamentally men and women are different, and then men that, well people that think that, that women and men are no different it's just that we're raised to be different. And how do you feel about that?

MLA: Well, you know, I've gone back and forth in my own mind about that, I think there would be a period in my life that I would have said I don't think that there is any difference it's just that we're raised differently. I think now I might, you know, qualify, now this is only my own view. Now again, I'm a woman so I'm saying this is only my view, men don't usually say that do they? I think there are differences. I think there's certainly physical differences, I mean certainly there are even differences in the way, I mean, a men can begin the life but it's a woman that has to, you know nurture that life and carry that baby to full term. So I think there are differences, physical differences, between us. I'm also, I think that there are sometimes ways that men and women we come at things differently. But I certainly think that we're also raised differently and I think that environment has an awful lot to do, and shapes us into who we are and what we become. So I will, I know that's kind of hedging and I don't tend to hedge I tend to be pretty straight forward but I think there are differences. I think that, I was reading the best seller list, there's some book out there that I don't think I'm going to read but it's called *Think Like A Man and Act Like A Lady* or something. I don't know what the book means but I think there's been all these kinds of debates in terms of women's management styles. I mean, is our style different from man or a friend of mine who's a man had been sick, not, not deathly ill but had, couldn't get rid of a cold had called me, it's one of the professors here so the person will remain nameless, said 'you know I ended up going to a clinic and I got a woman doctor and boy she

immediately, she figured out what I had and my own doctor couldn't and you know what? She really listened to me and she asked a lot of questions' he said 'you know women do, women do listen.' And I think that's true I think as women we do listen a bit more and I think we also we probably are more understanding and we are more compassionate. Now I think that has to do more with the way we're raised and environment and so you get into these discussions in management and in colleges you're management so is a women's style different from a man's style or are we more understanding? Are we more willing to give somebody a chance? So there are all kinds of debates about that. But I do think that it's environment and the way that we're brought up that shapes us to that. I think an advantage to being in administration and management, I've always thought one advantage I had is that I grew up in a very feisty political family and so I tend to think politically and I think that can be helpful.

AO: Do you feel like your views about, about the similarities and differences of women shaped how you raised your daughter?

MLA: Yes, I would say that. I would say that sure, although you wouldn't find her out there, how should I say this? Out on a picket line or something, although she does very much stand up for herself and she very much has her views about, about things. So she does, she does, she's quiet. She's a little more quiet than I am. I think that sometimes she has her father's personality. She once said to me 'why do you think that's bad mum, you keep saying to me 'oh you're just like your father' why is that bad?' and I don't mean it's bad. My husband is a bit more reticent than I am, his style, oh but he certainly is talky and was in politics for 21 years so he has to have some kind of fight in him. You can't be in those jobs if you don't.

AO: Was your husband raised with a family of boys and girls?

MLA: One brother and he's the oldest but, not in a political family.

AO: Do you think that, do you think that you guys were raised differently?

MLA: Yes, very much.

AO: Did he, was he allowed to do more when he was younger do you think?

MLA: Well I suppose the typical kind of things that you did, you know, he became a boy scout. He did all those things, he was an altar boy, you know he did all those kinds of things. So, he was the oldest, so a lot, his father died when he was very young so I think a lot more was put on his shoulders.

AO: And he was in boy scouts, did you ever feel pressured when you were younger to be, to be involved in the girl activities. Like girl scouts and stuff?

MLA: Oh, well I remember going to the girl's club afterschool and you would be in a class where you learned sewing and knitting and things like that. And also, when I went to grammar school, you know it is interesting because some of the courses you'd be segregated because boys

took woodworking or shop or something and girls took sewing and I have to tell you this is really true that I did terrible in sewing. I hated it. I never liked to sew so it was the only poor grade I ever got. To this day I don't sew; I won't even sew a button. [laughter] And that's really the truth, and I was lucky when my daughter was little my mother was still living and my mother liked, my mother didn't mind to sew. You know I would bring some buttons or my mother would do my ironing, I know that's an awful thing to admit to but she liked to iron and she wanted to do it. And now I send it off to the cleaners and they will sew buttons and things like that. I hate, I don't like anything like that [laughter]. But I like to cook I mean that's probably you know in a family one would say, at least in my day growing up, it would be the women that would cook. I think today you find more men as well as women will cook. My son in law likes to do some cooking; certainly my nephews like to do some cooking. My husband hates to cook, doesn't cook and tonight I had to leave instructions for him to put something in the oven before I come home because he hates to do it. [laughter] So I'm admitting I do that.

AO: Did your daughter do anything like that when she was younger; girl scouts or anything?

MLA: She was in brownies for a while, that's right she was.

AO: She didn't continue on with that?

MLA: No she didn't like it. No she didn't.

AO: Ok well I think that pretty much finishes it up, thank you for letting us interview you.

MLA: Well it's nice, and it's nice to be interviewed. You're good interviewers.