

Interviewee: Joan Barry
Interviewers: Isaiah Huff and Carlins Platel
Date: October 17, 2019
Place: Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcriber: Isaiah Huff and Carlins Platel



Overseen by Prof. Carl Robert Keyes and Prof. Lucia Knoles, Assumption College

Born in 1947 in Lowell, Massachusetts, Joan Barry moved to Worcester at four years old, so her father could run his business as a funeral director. Joan attended Framingham State University where she earned her BA in administration. Shortly after she attended Columbia University for her master's degree. Joan got a job as an assistant principal at Saint Mary's Middle School where she worked for 8 years. She explains that she got her first job as a principal during a time when it was very unlikely because the positions were mostly filled with football coaches. Joan was on the front page of the newspaper and they made it seem as if she was not qualified enough for the job. She talks about the changes in Worcester from when she was growing up to present day. She says that growing up in Worcester it was more of a predominantly white town and as time went on it ended up becoming more diverse with minorities. Back then minorities, especially women, needed mentors or more resources to be successful. Now Joan says that minorities have a lot more opportunities. Joan's advice to women today is that you can achieve anything you want, you just have to be willing to work hard at it.

CP: What is your full name? Maiden and married?

JB: My full name is Joan Teresa Barry.

CP: When were you born?

JB: I was born in 1947 in Lowell, Massachusetts.

CP: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify?

JB: American, white, and Irish.

CP: Can you tell us a little about your parents?

JB: My mother and father grew up in Lowell, my father was a funeral director, my mother was a nurse, they both served in the war, my mother was the navy nurse during World War II, and my father was a medic. They married and they moved to Worcester to start a business. My father had a funeral home here in Worcester for 40 years. I have a brother and a sister, we all actually

grew up in the same funeral home. We lived on the second and third floor and the first floor was the funeral home. We all worked to help my dad with the funeral home.

IH: How was that? How was growing up in a funeral home?

JB: It was fine because it was all I knew, my parents bought it when I was four, so that's all I knew. Living that way didn't bother me at all. It was fine.

CP: I know you mentioned earlier that you lived in New York, did you have any other places that you lived in?

JB: I lived and grew up in Worcester, went to college at Framingham State in Framingham. Moved to New York lived in New York City for twenty years. I moved back to Shrewsbury and I lived in Shrewsbury ever since. So in Shrewsbury now for about 25 years.

IH: How was living in New York?

JB: Oh I loved it, I loved living in New York, but it got to be expensive and I wanted more space and I finished my degree in administration and I didn't want to be a principal in New York City. It would be too hard at night. My brother and sister had children so I came back here and became an administrator back here.

CP: When you lived in Worcester, How was the neighborhood like?

JB: It was very much a middle-class Irish Catholic neighborhood, I would say. On Lincoln Street, I had friends who lived next door and at the top of the street and we all kind of went to the same schools. We went to St. Peter's Central Catholic which is in Worcester then I went to Notre Dame Academy and my friends either went to Assumption Prep or Notre Dame Academy. So we all kind of grew up together. We couldn't get into trouble or if we did get into trouble your parents knew about it before you got home because from someone else's mother or father. I had two parents but all the other parents were watching out for me and if I went to go visit a friend and they were doing housework or whatever I got to help them. I'll get a dust rag and help until they can go out. I grew up in a neighborhood that was very much everybody knew everybody. You had to behave or else your parents knew you weren't.

IH: What challenges do you think the city still faces?

JB: I think now in the city of Worcester the challenge is the schools. If you live in certain neighborhoods you have good schools, I mean I think the schools are all good, but I think there are some that provide more challenges and I don't think that they enough support. You know, my

niece is a principal at one of those schools by the housing projects and she had a lot of challenges. She loved her kids and they loved her, but she didn't have enough services for them and I think that's a hard thing. I also think it's becoming a city that's coming back. Neighborhoods are improving, opportunities are better and people are more aware and I also think the city is changing. It used to be a white majority city and now it's becoming more black and Spanish and it's not bad. It's just that I think some people fail to recognize it, fail to see that there are services that are needed, but I also think it's a good place to grow up. I think it provides challenges for some kids and great opportunities for others.

IH: Is there anything that you would change about the city if you had the opportunity too?

JB: I would change the way schools are funded and give more money to those schools and give more support to those schools and neighborhood association. I used to be on the board of United Way and I worked with schools and I saw what things are needed after school. I think more opportunities for kids after school. The colleges are great you have lots of schools and I think the fact that Quinsigamond [Community College] exists and if you do well you can go on to Worcester State [University] and pay the same tuition. It's a great opportunity if you're willing to work.

IH: Another question I had is, I know that you said you came back from Shrewsbury and lived in Shrewsbury for about 25 years. Since you lived in Shrewsbury ever since you came back, what changes have you seen?

JB: In Shrewsbury?

IH: Yes.

JB: It pretty much stayed a middle-class community. Diversity is increasing, I've seen much more diversity since I first came back. I was an assistant principal in a middle school in Shrewsbury which was primarily white and then it became more African American and then Indian. I was the principal of St. Mary's which is a small Catholic school in Shrewsbury and in the eight years I was there, we became a much more diverse population which I think is good. I was happy to see that. So I would say the diversity, industry, and buildings, too many buildings. Too many homes you know we getting too crowded. But that's everywhere.

CP: What do you think women's experience in Worcester has generally been?

JB: I think if you're middle class and White there are lots of opportunities. I think if you're African American or Spanish you have to work harder. I think you need to find mentors who are willing to support you and give you opportunities. Then I think you can achieve. I've seen

certain organizations form that help girls and help women and I think that's great. I'm trying to think of the name of it, an organization that a friend of mine belongs to and it helps girls and women. Girls think it's great; it provides opportunities for young women. There is an organization that helps women succeed in business and I think those things are good and I think more is needed.

CP: I know you said you went to Framingham State, did you see any challenges in getting your education?

JB: No, I didn't and I was very lucky. I got into college and my parents could send me so I was very lucky. I went to New York and did my master's at Columbia [University] and I paid for it, but it wasn't as expensive as it used to be. I think the first challenge I faced was when I became an administrator. That was the first time I saw there could be a prejudice against women.

IH: Could you tell us a little more about that?

JB: Sure. Primarily if you look at any research with educators most principals were football coaches and they became principals.

IH: Okay.

JB: This was back 30 years ago. So women in administration were very rare when I finished my degree. I actually got a job back here in Holden which was amazing. I applied and got this position and I got a lot of criticism in the newspaper because I was an out of townner, I was a woman, how did I know the community of Holden. The irony was I grew up in Worcester, went to Notre Dame Academy, and most of the people who moved to Holden grew up in my neighborhood. A lot of them moved. That was the first time I faced a challenge with being a woman in charge.

CP: Was that your first job?

JB: No, no, my first job was teaching and that was fine and when you're a teacher that's a nurturing profession. When I graduated from college most women were either teachers, nurses or social workers. They weren't lawyers, doctors, they weren't the majority. When I went back to my high school reunion no one in my class was a doctor, no one was a lawyer, we were all teachers, nurses, or social workers. A few years later when my sister went, there were people in med school, people in law school and women went much further. In my generation, expectations were that you got a job for a few years, you got married and raised your family, and maybe you went back to teaching or nursing. But other professions just weren't open, it wasn't what people thought about doing.

CP: What other jobs have you had and what do you do now?

JB: Well I'm retired, so I volunteer at Saint Mary's, the school I was a principal at. One day a week with the kindergarteners, which I love working with the little ones, and I also take a lot of courses at the WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] program right here at Assumption [College]. Are you aware of that program?

IH: Yes, yes I am.

JB: I take quite a few courses there and travel. So I enjoy being retired. But I want to keep busy and keep my mind going.

CP: What has teaching and being a principal meant to you?

JB: It's meant a lot. I loved it. I love teaching and was teaching home economics when I started teaching. I had only girls, but then they decided it had to be both boys and girls. I love teaching the boys, they were fun. I had to get used to them because they worked differently, but it was fun. I loved working with them and then I went into administration more because I wanted more of a profession. I liked teaching, but I wanted to do something that was a little more challenging so I went into administration. I really enjoyed and liked that. I would say that the challenges that I faced were men who had difficulties working with a woman as their boss. I would say to them, "Well, this is the way we need to do it," and they would say, "Well, that is not the way we did it." "Yeah, but now we are going to do it this way." I tried not to be dogmatic and say, "This is the way we are going to do it." I would try to bring them around and encourage them. I would say, "I had pretty good luck, with that." Then I was a principal in Westford, I opened a brand new middle school out there. I liked it. I really enjoyed it. But I wanted to try something else mainly because of the parents driving me crazy.

IH: [Laughs] what were they doing?

JB: They would complain because they didn't like what someone did, you know some of them were very challenging about their students. Students did things wrong, and if you were correcting them and letting the students know they made a poor choice and these are the consequences, parents would come in and defend them. Well, you know, everybody makes a poor choice. You take your consequence and you go on.

IH: You know what type ethnicities those people were?

JB: We were a pretty diverse school, but I would say our most challenging parents were white or Indian. They were the ones that I had the hardest time with.

IH: Okay.

JB: So I went into consulting after that and I worked for a couple of years as director of professional development for a consulting firm and I liked that. But I had a boss who wasn't ethical and I had a hard time with that. Then Saint Mary's opened up and I took that job. I loved it, the parents were great, the kids were great. It was from Pre-K to 8th, so I watched kids grow. Come in as shy little kids and graduate so that was a great way to end my career.

IH: What do you think the pros and cons of the career path you have chosen?

JB: Pros were it helped me grow as a person. It made me more aware of what I believed in, I did more research and I also learned how to be more collaborative and to work with people. I had to create a collaborative spirit and that was a challenge, but I also liked having to do it. Cons I would say probably the number of hours. It was long, long days and probably the other things were I was never finished. I would go in in the morning with a list of things I was going to do and it would be four o'clock and maybe I had two things off the list. So I think that that was probably the hardest for me was that I couldn't get to do all that I wanted to do every day just because of the nature of the job. Another was it was hard sometimes to work with parents or administrators who didn't value women to the degree I think—they didn't like smart women.

IH: Yeah and I think that's terrible.

JB: Yeah, they didn't like it. It's changed, but in the beginning, it was very much that way. You sort of had to prove yourself over time. So, you were never a part of the old boy network. You know, all these men would come into a meeting and they would joke, but never with the women administrators. But more and more women became administrators. Then they had no choice. And now if you look, more and more women are school principals than ever before.

CP: How do you feel about the choices you made to get to this point of your life. Do you have any regrets, are there any lessons you learned?

JB: Regrets? Well one I didn't get married. But in a sense, it's a regret, but at the same time I think if I had married young, I would have been divorced. So that's a regret I just don't go along with.

IH: [laughs]

JB: [Laughs] You know, because I'm different than I was at that age and probably—no I don't think everything I did I liked. Nope. Maybe gone into administration sooner. But no.

IH: Now I know this can be a touchy subject to people, I try to stay away from this but do you mind answering. Do you consider yourself actively politically?

JB: Yes.

IH: Okay. Have you ever been involved in a volunteer or community work and if so what groups did you work with or for?

JB: United Way was where I was really most active when I was on the board. I worked at Higgins Armory Museum. That's about it. When I say politically active probably it's not accurate because I was never in a public school. I never talked about what was right or wrong for politics, the only thing I said was that you need to make sure your parents vote because I do feel it is important that people vote. So I never held signs or anything like that. But I would financially support people who are running. I am certainly aware of what's happening.

IH: Okay.

JB: So you know I don't ignore it. I guess I can't be politically active because of the nature of what I did. By law you can't.

IH: I know this can be another touchy subject, do you mind answering what role religion played in your life?

JB: It has been very much a part of my life. I went to Catholic schools and I go to church on Sunday. I don't feel guilty if I don't get there. You know, being a principal in a Catholic school, I loved it. It was great. I could talk to kids about God, I could talk about Christmas and other holidays too. I just felt it was the calmer place. I still am religious, but not to the degree that I shut out other things. I'm not a fanatic. It's more personal.

CP: Have health issues impacted your life?

JB: Yeah.

CP: It has?

JB: Yeah. I am in recovery, I am in remission from cancer.

IH: Oh okay.

JB: I was diagnosed four and a half years ago with multiple melanoma. So I went through chemotherapy, a stem cell transplant, chemotherapy, and now I am in remission. So yeah, it did change my life.

IH/CP: Okay.

JB: You know, I don't sweat the small stuff anymore.

IH: Well I'm glad you're still here.

JB: Yeah. me too [laughs]. It was quite the experience. I went back to work and I finished my stem cell and I was okay and I finished out the year and I said I was lucky because 230 little kids were praying for me every day. That does change your life, but it also made me determined that I was going to get over it.

CP: That's a blessing. That's a blessing right there.

JB: Yeah.

CP: How do you get through tough times? What kind of thoughts keep you going each and every day.

JB: Well, when I had cancer, when I was diagnosed I said to the doctor, "It's a bump in the road and I'm going to get over it," and so I just did what I had to do and just went through it because I was determined it wasn't going to get me. When I had other challenges, I just believed that God would help me and I pray to him and just don't give into feeling sorry for myself because I think when you feel sorry for yourself you lose out. You really do. You just have to say this is something I have to do and I'm going to do it.

IH: How do you define success in your life? Has that definition changed over time for you?

JB: Success for me was doing a good job, having some money so I could travel and do things like that, but having a lot of money wasn't the guiding thing. I think it was doing a good job, being an honest person, and I value honesty very much. Caring for other people. And just basically—let's see, I would say basically I just want to be a good person. So if I'm a good person who has had success and I have financial independence, I'm lucky, I feel I'm lucky. I don't have to worry about am I going to have enough money for this month or something like that. You know there are many women, especially those who haven't professional careers, who have a tough life.

IH: Yeah.

JB: Luckily, I have been lucky. That hasn't been me.

CP: Based on your life experience what advice would you give to women of today and women of the future?

JB: I would say you can do anything you want, you just have to be willing to work at it. Go and seek help from people, go and talk to people to find someone who can mentor you. I'm always willing to do that with young women starting out. Be strong about things and don't always take the easy way out. The easy way out isn't always the best way, so you have to work hard. Look at your vision and see whatever you would like to do. I think for some girls it's hard because if you are growing up in a single-parent family and there isn't a lot of money there are lots of challenges and you need to find people who can help you. Find a mentor or find someone you can relate to and very often that is in a school. You can find a teacher or someone who will take you under their wing. But you have to show that you are open to it. It's easy to say to somebody you can be anything you want to be, but if you don't have the resources it's hard. So you have to seek them out and I really do think you have to be willing to work hard.

IH: We are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women that has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

JB: Be sure to include that women are smart as men.

CP/IH: Yes.

JB: Women can think and be independent, women have great instinct and can work with that instinct and I'd say to work with that instinct. I think that I found over the years that instinctively for me my instinct has helped me solve problems or see who to be friendly with or see who to guide. So I think that would be part of it and to believe in themselves. Believe that they can do whatever they want to do they just have to work at it.

IH: Okay. Is there anyone that you would suggest that we talk to?

JB: I have a niece let me see if she's around, because you have to have all this done next week right?

CP/IH: Yes.

JB: Yeah, alright. Let me see if she is available and I'll let you know. She's the woman who is in Worcester and actually she's interesting because she left the public school system as a principal and is now creating a reading program.

IH: Oh really?

JB: So she might have some good information. So let me see if she has some time.

IH: Okay.

JB: She's right now in a conference in Syracuse but I will ask her and see. She works every day, but can you do it late in the afternoon or something?

CP/IH: Yes.

JB: She would be interesting. It's interesting because my sister—well this one of the things I'll say. If you grow up with a strong mother you are a strong woman and I truly believe that. And I think if you look at some of the people you interview and you probably yourself if your mother was a strong mother, she made you do things that maybe you didn't want to do, but she didn't care. You know what I mean? And I think that's a huge opportunity and a huge benefit, where you have a strong mother who makes you do things. It's going to help your success. So my sister, my mother was very strong, and you'll probably appreciate this because you're both at Assumption, but when I would complain to my mother why can't I do this or that or why are you making me do this or that or whatever, she'd look at me and say, "I have to answer to God for you." Now what are you going to do then? Are you going to complain and you'll think what did I do to my mother now she's going to have trouble when she goes before God. This is when I was little.

CP/IH: Yeah.

JB: But it shut me up you know? And so I think, my sister has her doctorate and my niece has her doctorate and my other niece is a doctor, she's a cardiologist, but they all worked hard at what they were doing. So let me see if one of the two of them could talk to you.

CP/IH: Okay.

JB: I'll let you know.

CP: That's the end of the interview.