

Interviewee: Amanda Collins Bernier
Interviewers: Rose Horell & Emma Lang
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Transcribers: Rose Horell & Emma Lang



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Abstract: Amanda Collins Bernier, *Baystate Parent* editor, was interviewed on October 9, 2018 at the Worcester Magazine Office. Amanda was born in 1986 in California and now is the editor of *Baystate Parent* Magazine and works in the Worcester Magazine office in Worcester. Amanda is a very passionate mother, worker and communicator. She has worked her way up through the media ladder, from working at a small-town newspaper to being the editor of a major Massachusetts magazine. In this interview, Amanda discusses her transition from a west coaster to a New Englander, her disjointed college experience, and difficulties being a mother in the workplace. The interview concludes with Amanda's first significant experience with loss and her career advice that everyone should find something they enjoy doing every day.

EL: So, we are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester. We are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work and politics and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with being a career woman in Worcester. And we thank you for your help with this important project.

AB: Cool!

EL: Yeah awesome. Alright.

RH: So to start, what is your full name including both maiden name and married name if applicable?

AB: Amanda Collins Bernier

EL: That's what it is! Oh okay! We were practicing your last name in the car ride over here. And when you introduced as "Amanda" we were both so happy, like thank goodness okay.

RH: So when were you born?

AB: In 1986

RH: That sounds like a good year. [laughs]

EL: Have you ever been married?

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AB: Yes, I am married.

RH: And what is the name of your husband?

AB: Jonathan Bernier.

EL: Okay, do you have any children?

RH: [laughs]

AB: Yes, I have a 15-month old son, his name is Max and he's really cute.

RH: Oh, I love that.

EL: What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with your family background?

AB: [pauses] I think, I guess just American. My grandfather was from Portugal, so on my mom's side we'll do some Portuguese food on Christmas. But I don't speak Portuguese, that's not really my culture. So, I guess just a New Englander?

EL: Are there ethnicities your husband identifies with on his side of the family?

AB: I don't know I think we are kind of the same, like mish mash of everything.

EL: Speaking of your heritage and background, can you tell us a little bit about your parents?

AB: Yep, so both of my parents were born in California—actually no that's wrong, my dad was born in Massachusetts! I just remembered! So my dad was born in Taunton, Massachusetts and when he was five he moved to California. And then it was kind of funny because he ended up back here. And my mom was born in California. My mom is a nurse, and my dad—I have an estranged relationship with my dad—he is in business. I don't know exactly what he does, but he is a businessman. What else do you want to know about them?

EL: Your mom? She was a born in California...

AB: Yes.

EL: Okay... and does she do anything now?

AB: So, she's a nurse, but she's not working right now. She works part time and she takes care of my son all the time for me.

RH: That's so sweet.

AB: Yeah, she babysits for me so she's the babysitter. Yeah, they're divorced. I'm trying to think what else I can tell you. My mom went back to school when I was in middle school. So my parents got divorced and my mom was then having to raise three daughters on her own.

RH: Right. Oh wow.

AB: And she had always worked part time and had been supported by her husband. So, when I was in middle school she went back to school full time to be a nurse. Which was kind of like an amazing thing for me to see as a kid, because she was still running her house and taking care of her kids and working and going to school. So, she's pretty cool.

RH: That must be so inspiring.

AB: Yeah definitely.

RH: You mentioned you have two sisters?

AB: Yeah, I have two older sisters.

RH: That's great, I have two older brothers. I always wished I had a sister. What was that like growing up with two older sisters?

AB: Well, it was a very girly household. I mean I had my sisters and it was just my mom for a while. So, I mean we're kind of just—we have a strong bond, the four of us. But both of my sisters I would say are kind of—there's not really a tomboy in the family so everything was just sort of a very girly kind of family.

EL: So, where did this girly kind of household take place?

AB: I lived in Modesto, California until I was 10, and then we moved to Belchertown, Massachusetts which is right next to Amherst in Western Mass.

EL: And did you have a preference? Did you like California or Massachusetts better?

AB: I spent most of my life here so I definitely consider myself a New Englander. But my extended family is all in California so I might go back and visit them, and I am always shocked at how many people live there, like it is so much more populated. And I always think, "I don't know if I can do this!" I like the weather there, but I would definitely say I like New England better.

RH: I'm a big fan yeah...

EL: That's very unique to have both the west coast and east coast experience. Like two parts, having family there but also living here. Yeah, that's a very, very unique experience, it's cool.

RH: Did you move around a lot or just that once?

AB: Just that once.

RH: Well actually do you do any other traveling? That's a little off topic, but we're here.

AB: No, I haven't in a while. The last vacation I took was my honeymoon when we went to Quebec City. I haven't really done that much traveling. I went to England while I was in college and did a semester there. But I guess I'm not that worldly.

RH: I mean why leave New England, right?

EL: So, going back to New Belchner?

AB: Belchertown.

EL: Oh, okay that's it.

[all laugh]

EL: What was that neighborhood like? And living there?

AB: Belchertown is like—I'm trying to think what I can compare it to. It's definitely a small town. When I moved there, there were only two stop lights in town. It's kind of small. I don't know if I would say rural, but definitely like the classic small-town New England. I did live in a neighborhood with kids and houses, so it wasn't like nobody was around. So, the schools there were all pretty small, I think there was 150 people in my graduating class.

RH: But I'm curious how does that compare to working in Worcester? Not like in Worcester, but it's a very different dynamic than like growing up?

AB: It is, it is, it's totally different, and even where I live right now, I live in Brookfield right now so there's people who drive 4-wheelers down the road and turkeys and wildlife and so it is definitely different to come into the city. But it's kind of a nice change of pace.

EL: Absolutely. Where is Brookfield in relation to Worcester? Like what is your commute like?

AB: It's 35 minutes.

EL and RH: Oh, that's not bad.

AB: Oh yeah, it's really not that far. Do you know Spencer? It's right next to Spencer.

EL: So, when did you first come to Worcester to work? What was your first experience in the Worcester area?

AB: Well actually I just started working in this office in the last couple months.

EL: Okay.

AB: But I have been with the company for probably four years. And so the way that this company works, so there's *Worcester Magazine*, and there were some different newspapers, *Baystate Parent*, we're kind of like a family of smaller publications. So, in March of this year, this company was sold to Gatehouse Media which is a huge media giant that owns tons of media, papers and stuff across the country. They own the Telegram. So, when that happened the office that I was in which was in Millbury, closed down so I moved to Worcester. I really haven't been here for that long. I've been in this office now for a couple months, and then down the road I'm going to be moving into the Telegram building.

EL: Okay that is a very interesting turn of events with media and publishing. So you were in Millbury.

AB: Yep, yep.

EL: And then came here, so are you part of the *Worcester Magazine* or are you with *Baystate Parent*...

AB: Okay, yes, I'm with *Baystate Parent*, we're all under the same umbrella. So I don't have that much of a connection to Worcester. I've literally worked in Worcester for a couple months so...

RH: We're interested anyways.

EL: We are gonna pick apart those couple months.

RH: So, we will move onto education. So, you mentioned you did a semester abroad in London, where did you go to college?

AB: It was Oxford.

EL: Did you go on to any other degrees like a master's?

AB: No.

EL: Can I ask what your major was?

AB: I was a double major in communications and political science.

RH: Nice.

EL: Oh, can I ask when you graduated?

AB: I think it was 2010, the spring of 2010. Right? Or wait no, it was the winter.

EL: Oh okay, winter 2010.

RH: So like at the end of 2010. Oh interesting, so you didn't—you weren't with the rest of your class?

AB: No, so I went to school all over the place. I first went to school at Hofstra, on Long Island. I went there for my freshman year and then half of my sophomore year. Then I transferred to UMass Amherst. [laughs] I went there for like another three semesters. And then I took a little bit of time off. And then I ended up at Simmons College and that's where I finally ended up and graduated from. I went to three colleges for just that one degree.

RH: So, your degree is from Simmons? Cool yeah.

EL: And then Oxford is while you were in England?

AB: Yes, that was through UMass.

RH: Oh, okay that's interesting.

EL: This is cool! You get to have sweatshirts from everywhere

[laughs]

RH: Was that a challenge transferring schools so often?

AB: Yes, yes definitely was. It was stupid and looking back I probably should have stayed at Hofstra. I think that that was where I had my most college experience. I don't even really know why I didn't stay there. I don't think I really found my social group there, like I did really well academically there and I think I was—you know when you go to college and you start to learn new things and you get inspired and I picked up a political science major but I didn't really find my group of people there. Like being on Long Island a lot of the people there were different from me, growing up in a small town. So, coming back and going to UMass, literally 10 minutes from where I grew up, so that wasn't really right either because then I was kind of like at home you know? I wasn't at college anymore, I would go home all the time and I would do laundry at

home. I would hang out with my friends who didn't go to college. So that wasn't really right either. And then with Simmons it was kind of just where I ended up, honestly.

EL: Did your major stay the same? Did you always know that you wanted to be communications and poli sci?

AB: Yep, yep.

EL: And you just ended up at different locations? Oh okay. I know many people transfer for academics and majors and programs, but yours was just trying to find your niche?

AB: I think kind of like the right fit for me in that time of my life.

RH: Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

AB: Like career wise?

RH: Like career wise.

AB: Okay, so I was living in Boston when I first graduated and I was in working in retail, and I was just constantly, constantly looking for jobs. I would take my lunch break and there was a bookstore across the street and I would take my laptop and I go sit on my laptop and search for jobs and set up my resume. And there was just nothing happening in Boston, which you would think since there are so many jobs there that you would have so many more opportunities, but it was just really hard to break into something there. I started to look for jobs back towards home, and I found my first job as a reporter at a really small-town weekly newspaper. But that probably took me a year to find and now that I think about it wasn't really that long but at the time, I thought it was forever, like "Ah, I have a degree and I work at Marshalls!" But yeah it, so it happened that I needed to move out of the city and be somewhere just a bit smaller. So I started as a reporter for the Charlton Villager which just covered the town of Charlton. And then that also had, that was also a group of newspapers. And they had daily papers I was working on for a while. And then I moved into this company.

RH: So that's how you broke into journalism? That's really interesting.

EL: What was it like working for such a small newspaper? What were some of the stories that you covered?

AB: That was a lesson in itself. Because, I mean I didn't know anything about town politics and local politics and local government. Like the way things really work. I don't think a lot of people really know that or really pay attention to that, and it's really important and it really matters. And so, I think that I really learned a lot about that, like how much change happens in a town or at a very local level. I learned how town government works and boards of selectmen and town meetings. But I had no idea what it even was. And I learned about that and it was really an

opportunity to kind of introduce neighbors to each other. Telling someone's story and putting it out there for their neighbors to read was kind of a cool thing too.

RH: How does that differ from your job now?

AB: It's sort of the same. I'm very much a feature kind of writer. I really like human interest and those kinds of things so I think that's naturally what I gravitate towards when I'm writing things or deciding the editorial for something. But now it's just with a different focus. Now I'm with Baystate Parent, which is a parenting magazine, this job came up right after I had my son, so it was like, "This is perfect for me." So that's sort of how I ended up here.

EL: What was that like having that opportunity to work for Baystate Parent and having your son at the same time? Was that tricky to balance?

AB: Yeah, and it still is honestly. Being a mom is--anybody will tell you this and it sounds like a cliché, but it just changes you in every single way to have a kid. It changes your priorities completely. So, it's hard to be a working mom. I feel guilty to leave him and feel like I'm missing out on things. But at the same time, you need that break from them too and I'm lucky that I have family that watches him too. But it's definitely different to come to work and be a mom, like you saw me I'm like, "I've got to get my phone." Nothing is going to happen to him in the forty minutes that we're talking but it's always on your mind, it is always on your mind. So I think it changes—you're not just focused on work anymore you definitely have more that you're thinking about once you're a parent and you're working.

RH: What would you say is the biggest challenge, balancing being a mom and a career woman?

EL: Like on a daily--

RH: Yeah, like on a daily basis?

AB: The biggest challenge? I think guilt. [laughing] Honestly, I think just feeling guilty that I'm not with him all the time, or feeling guilty that I'm not giving as much—well I probably shouldn't say that—well, I guess it's okay, right—that I'm not giving as much to my job as I probably did before. Probably not caring AS much as I did about work. Because that was just my life before, I could work whenever I wanted and really dive into it and now it's just, "I work, but this is my life."

EL: Kinda that shift in perspective.

AB: Yes, definitely.

EL: Going back just one step, was there any people or network or individual that helped you find this balance? Or was it really just a personal journey like becoming a mom and also being an editor. Was there any guiding hands in helping strike that balance?

AB: No, I don't think so. No. [laughing] Sorry!

RH: And you said your mom watches your son most of the time?

AB: Yeah, my mom and then his other grandma, so he has both his grandmas.

RH: Aw that's really sweet. That probably makes it really easy on you.

AB: Yeah definitely, plus child care is so expensive that I probably wouldn't--I don't know what I would do if I had to pay for daycare for him. But I also don't want him to go to daycare. I'm crazy. I'm a crazy mom! [laughing]

EL: Having a much younger sister, she's nine, I completely understand the child care thing like when people are home and you have to make it all work and you want them to spend time with family rather than other people, so I completely understand that. Especially just coming from like... [inaudible]

AB: Right... Another thing I'll say though, since this is about women's stuff, the maternity leave laws--first of all in Massachusetts the maternity leave is 8 weeks unpaid. Federally it's 12 weeks unpaid, but in order to qualify for the federal 12 weeks you have to work for a big enough company. Which at the time, I didn't qualify for it. So, I would've only gotten eight weeks. I mean can you imagine leaving an eight-week old baby? So I would've only gotten 8 weeks off with my kid, unpaid, and then I would have to be back to work. And I mean that's not even the worst, there are states that are much worse than that. But it's definitely something that I think needs to be addressed and fixed. I was lucky enough that I talked to my employer about it and we were able to work it out and come up with a plan that worked. I went back at 12 weeks, I went back to work. But I mean when you think about that, like a twelve-week old baby is really, really little! So yeah that was a big big--not burden but it was something that was really hard for me to do. I had to save up money so that I could take time off. Because—I mean I don't know what the right answer is, should you get paid for maternity leave? But it just was really hard. And then once you go back to work and you're like pumping and doing all of that. Like its just --its difficult! And I worked for, like I said, a really small company. I didn't have a place to pump, so I was like sitting in the bathroom pumping. These are the kinds of things we should look at for women for sure.

RH: Yeah absolutely.

EL: Those are really great details to back that up like. Like to think... You're sharing some real-life pain like hey I had to save money, I'm in a bathroom. It's like insane that it's not-- like 8 weeks?

RH: That's not long enough.

EL: That doesn't seem appropriate.

RH: No. Given those challenges, are you considering having another child at any point?
[laughing all] I mean, is that a factor?

AB: No, yeah probably, yeah I probably would. Not right now but probably. My husband is like all of a sudden, literally in the last two weeks, he's like, "Hey, we should have another one." I'm like, "No. Lets calm ourselves down here." But I think so. I want him to have sibling. I grew up with siblings so I feel like he'd be missing out on something if like.. Are you? No. You're not. Yeah I feel like he would be missing out if he didn't have a sibling and yeah.

EL: Siblings are important.

RH: Yes.

AB: I think for me to have another kid—and this is what I've told my husband, I think I want to be able to stay home. Like right now we're so lucky to have people watching our son and I don't want to be like, here watch two kids. So we just need to be in a different position where I would feel like I could stay home for like a year or two with the baby.

RH: Absolutely.

EL: One child care is different than two, yeah, I understand that. This is now an interesting question to ask after our conversation. What do you think are like some pros and cons of the career path that you've chosen?

AB: Some of the pros is my job can be very flexible, even going back to when I first started out as a reporter it can be really flexible. You can to some degree decide when you're working and what you want to cover and those kinds of things. Even more so as an editor is that you can be creative. I can decide what this month of the magazine—this is Baystate Parent if you want to see it [sliding magazine], well that's not my favorite one, but you decide what your theme is going to be and what kind of stories you're going to look into and how you want to present things to a degree. Some cons I think are like how I told you we got sold to a big corporation. I think it's just sort of an uncertain time for media. Especially print media, I mean we're obviously online too, but I think things are just really changing as far as media goes, even since I graduated from college.

RH: Yeah definitely. Is it online at all?

AB: Yup! baystateparent.com

EL: Is there any other... like how media is changing and especially print media does that impact kind of the daily operations here? Aside from like the big purchasing? Does that affect like this office like on a daily basis?

AB: Well, I mean for me, I went to school to learn how to write and those kinds of things, so I didn't really learn anything about web. So I've had to learn that. How to do the website and those kinds of things. And so, I mean I don't know if that's really answering your question.

EL: No, more like the changing of daily responsibilities, like for an accommodating audience kind of stuff.

AB: I mean I think so. I think we're always trying to come up with the best ways to engage with your audience or find your audience or have them find you. So it's not like a day to day, but it's an overall goal.

RH: Do you think in the future it'll be more online than in print? Or where do you see Baystate Parent going?

AB: I do, I mean I don't know about Baystate Parent necessarily, but I think that there is always going to be room for some print. I think that there's always going to be people who want to pick things up and read it, but I think -- I mean I am the audience for that, I am a mom. You know? Like I am a young mom, and I basically read everything online you know? So yeah.

RH: Do you think that'll... I mean, do you think that'll like affect your job here or ... ?

AB: I don't know! [laughing]

RH: That's kind of a risky question. [laughing]

AB: I don't know. I guess one of the cons of this career path is—well I guess they still need people to make the content right? It's just the way that it's presented to people. So I think that I'll always have some security as far as being the person that generates the content, but I probably will just have to be adaptable to any changes that come along and the way that I need to present it to people.

EL: Absolutely. They always need the people to create something.

AB: Yeah.

EL: So shifting away from your work position. We're going to ask you a few questions about your politics and community involvement, even though you don't reside in Worcester, but are just working in Worcester for the past couple months. Do you consider yourself active politically?

AB: No, not really.

EL: Okay.

AB: Sorry this is probably going to be a short section for you.

EL: The position one is great.

AB: Yeah.

RH: Oh, do you do any volunteer work?

AB: No...

RH: I mean I'm sure you're plenty busy with a kid at home and between that and this. Oh, what role has religion played in your life?

AB: Sorry. I don't really have a religion that I follow at all. My husband's family is super Catholic, so that's always kind of a point of contention. His mom can be a bit super in your face about it, and especially now that we have like a kid, they want us to raise him that way. And we don't necessarily want to. It's not that I—I would love to find a religion that I fit into, it's just that I haven't really found it. I'm not anti-religion, it's just not something that I've found that really speaks to me.

RH: Should we just move on to the health?

AB: You can ask me!

RH: Well there's... ..yeah...

EL: Moving on to just from our religion and politics, onto a small section about health. Just...

RH: Yeah spiritual, to physical, there we go...

AB: Okay. Oh does it give you guys like a guide?

RH: Yes, we have some like general questions to follow along with.

RH: Well have you had any like significant health issues that have impacted your life or your family?

AB: Like my own health issues?

RH: Yeah or anyone in your family if that's anything significant....

AB: Okay. I have had no health issues. I've been very lucky.

RH: Lovely.

AB: And also, my family too has been pretty healthy. I mean grandparents have been sick but I think that's pretty normal. So, this is probably an interesting part of my story. Before I met my husband I was engaged to someone that I had known growing up, and he died from cancer when we were twenty-four. So that definitely has had a big impact on my life. And I took care of him. I quit my job. I got my first job at the Charlton Villager, and he found out he was really really sick, and I quit my job and took care of him. That's definitely the biggest health thing that has impacted my life.

EL: Wow. So did you know him through your childhood?

AB: Yes.

EL: And you guys got engaged,

AB: Yep.

EL: And, how long was—can I ask like how long he was sick for?

AB: Yeah, so he first found out he was sick when we were like twenty-one, twenty-two. I was at school in Simmons, and he was working; he didn't go to school. We lived together in Boston, and he went through treatment at Dana Farber [Hospital] He had melanoma and he went through surgery and chemo. That was about a year stretch of his treatment. Then he was in remission really really good for a year and then when he got sick the second time he died within five months.

RH: Oh wow.

AB: Yeah.

EL: I'm so sorry.

RH: That's rough.

AB: Yeah.

EL: Who would have thought the health questions would have caused such discussion.

RH: Right?

AB: Well I want to try to give you guys interesting stuff and really let you know my story.

RH: I mean that definitely sounds like part of your story and that's what we want to hear about. Well, tying into that, what are your experiences in accessing quality and affordable healthcare?

EL: Like was there healthcare provided for that situation or were there financial stresses around it?

AB: No, I mean we were lucky that he was fine with healthcare. I think other states maybe not, because this was, I don't know how many years ago this was, ten years ago. Once he was not working anymore so he went onto Mass Health so that was state health insurance, but I think in other states he would've had a harder time for sure. And being in Boston, too, there's like no better place to be treated for cancer.

RH: Yeah.

AB: So I think the experience would have been different if we lived somewhere else, but I think he had great great like care and insurance.

EL: Thankfully. That's a really good, like positive part of that story. And obviously being a mother you're responsible for like the health of your son and your family which is-- what has that been like, like adjusting to the health needs of a fifteen-month old?

AB: I'm so thankful that he's healthy, so I don't know how much I can say about that but I take him to the doctor when I'm supposed to. I guess I'm just like any other mom. I always have tons questions and you're always wondering if everything is normal and on track and I think that that's just the way it is.

RH: Yeah.

EL: So we're going to move more into our conclusion of the interview because I feel like we've really...

RH: ...covered pretty much everything [laughing]

EL: ...went down the line.

[inaudible mumbling between EL and RH]

RH: I like the last question especially, but we should...

EL: So going back to a few moments ago about that death during an engagement. How did you get through that really tough time in your life? What was that like? Kind of the time after that was over?

AB: How did I get through it? I don't even know, honestly. Like when I look back I think I was so fragile and I think anybody who's experienced grief and loss it's just something that just evolves. I wasn't working, like I said, at the time I wasn't working. I quit my job. And so taking care of him—his name was Travis—taking care of Travis was was my job for those five months. And then when he died it was like I didn't have that any more. So I took some months where it was just kind of like grieving and then I was lucky enough that my job just offered me my job back. And that I think really helped me to have something else to go do. And that I think allowed me also at that time of my life, that made me really just focus on work. And I probably climbed the ladder a little quicker than maybe I would have nothing else to focus on but work because I needed to. So I think really just taking some time for myself helped, and then going back to work helped and just having a really close family helped. Yeah...

EL: Absolutely. That's just such an incredible part of your story, and I just want to thank you for sharing that.

RH: Yes. So based on your experiences, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations? I don't know. If you feel like you have any nugget of wisdom to pass on, we're here to receive it. I guess. [laughing]

AB: I would say, trust your gut, that's always a good one. If career-wise you're passionate about something or you really enjoy something just do that and don't worry about how much money you're going to make, or your title, or anything else. Just do something that you don't mind doing every day, for sure.

EL: I like that, don't mind doing any day. So I think we're coming to the conclusion of our interview...

[page flips]

AB: [laughs] oh looks like you've got another page there!

RH: Well, additional questions, that we don't necessarily need.

AB: There are probably more questions because I think that people are more interesting than me.

RH: No!

EL: No!

RH: This has been super interesting. I love just talking to people and learning more about other people's lives. Like my dad always says, people are so interesting, no matter what.

AB: That's so true, yes everybody has a story, that's so true.

EL: So, thank you for sharing.

RH: I think what you've been sharing with us is really valuable.