

Interviewee: Elaine Francis Willy Bloom
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Elaine Francis Willy Bloom was born in 1947. Bloom, a member of the baby boom generation, was born in Worcester, Massachusetts and raised in Barre, Massachusetts where she has lived her entire life except for higher education. She graduated from high school in 1965, went to undergraduate school at the University of Vermont, and graduate school at University of Cincinnati. She taught for thirty-three years, spending the first half of her career in the classics department at the University of Cincinnati and the second half working in the history department at Ohio State University. Throughout her career, Elaine always made her husband a priority along with her teachings. She was married to her husband, Donald, who was also a teacher, and they knew each other for sixteen years before they got married at the age of 44 and 50. Elaine is a widow, her husband died due to heart disease. They had no children or grandchildren, but Elaine considers her sister's children as her grandchildren. In her interview, Elaine discusses what it was like as a teacher who taught subjects such as Latin, ancient history, and English. Bloom has been retired since 2008 at the age of 61. Elaine's interview includes many facets for understanding the recent history of women in America: family, career, and community.

AG: What is your full name?

EB: Elaine Francis Willy Bloom [laughs] which I certainly don't use. Since I got married at 44, my colleagues asked me if I was going to keep my maiden name or hyphenate it and I said, "No I'm not doing either."

AG: You changed it completely?

EB: Yes, I changed it completely. Well, we had known each other for 16 years and dated off and on for 14 years. So, to have him finally say at 50, "Will you marry me?" I said I have won that, I've taken that man.

AG: That's a long time! 14 years is a long time.

EB: Well we knew each other quite well by then.

AG: I would imagine!

EB: I would say he was a bit slow.

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AG: I'd say so at 50. Alrighty so you were married and what was his name?

EB: Donald Bloom and we met at work, he was a calculus teacher and I was a Latin teacher. So, we knew each other for a long time and gradually decided that we were kind of good together.

AG: So, you worked at Worcester Academy and were both teachers there?

EB: Yes

AG: Interesting.

LR: I played basketball there when I was in high school

AG: Me too!

EB: Probably in the new gym because you're that much younger. The old gym was fun, it had like a runway above the basketball court.

LR: Yeah, they still have that actually

EB: Oh yes, they do but as far as I know the JV or freshmen teams have their games there and sometimes, they have dances there.

AG: I almost went there, I did, but went down the street to Holy Name.

EB: Oh well that's alright

AG: Alrighty so no grandchildren? But two lovely great nephews?

EB: Great nephews, yes! I consider my sister's grandchildren to be the closest thing I have to grandchildren.

AG: That's all you need.

EB: This is true, and they have a special name for me. They call me Grauntie. My sister is Grammy.

AG: Oh so just Great Auntie, I didn't get it the first time. I'm a little slow just like Donald [laughs]

EB: Well, it's not a common term.

AG: No, but now that you say it, it makes sense. That's very cute.

EB: Yeah, and they like it.

AG: Tell me a little bit about your parents

EB: My father was born in 1916, in central Vermont. He grew up on a farm with no electricity.

AG&LR: Oh wow.

EB: Well I mean it was 1916 [laughs]. But even when we came along to go and visit in the 50s there was still no electricity, but for the kids it was an absolute adventure. I don't know how my mother stood it, but my mother was born in central Massachusetts and they moved to Barre when she was young. Her parents ran a garage/gas station/ Chevy dealership in town.

AG: Good for them.

EB: Yes, they did well. So, she's growing up in the Depression, but her life during the Depression did not seem at all depressed. They had horses, they had a very nice house with a barn so they had animals, all kinds of fun animals. She had a pet skunk when she was growing up. My father left the farm at 18 and came down to Massachusetts to the new world to get a job. They met while he was delivering milk in town and fell in love. Got married on Christmas Eve of 1941 just before he joined and went off to WWII.

LR&AG: Wow geez!

EB: They had a child before he left. So, I have an older brother, who was the first grandchild—only grandson for many years. While my father was in the war my mother lived with her parents and her older sisters because their husbands were also in the war and my brother was the little prince. When my father came back from the war—he came back in late 1945 and I was born in early '47. My sister was born in June of '48 and the family story is that my older brother looked at my parents and said, "If you're going to do this every single year then I'm just going to live with grammy forever." And the babies all stopped, so yes it was just the three of us. My parents divorced in '68, either '67 or '68. It happens and they are now both deceased, but that makes sense because I'm 72

AG: Are you? You don't look a day over 39. So you did grow up in Worcester?

EB: No, I was born in Worcester, but I grew up in Barre.

AG: Oh that's right, you grew up in Barre

EB: Which is a lovely town to grow up in. It's country enough so that we had four acres, and we had rabbits, and just in our backyard we had woods so we walked in the woods, but it was civilized enough so that we had dance lessons. I had five years of ballet and tap, a year of ballroom dancing.

AG: Really? What was your favorite?

EB: You did more ballet than tap but ballroom was definitely more practical. And 6th grade was ballroom dancing and in 7th grade you started going to the boys' club dances. And I know this is something you know nothing about, but that was the way life was when you were growing up in the mid '60s. I was a very good at cha cha and rock and roll.

LR: That's awesome. And have you lived anywhere else besides Barre and Worcester.

EB: Only for education. I graduated from high school in 1965 and went to University of Vermont in Burlington. So, I spent four years in Burlington, Vermont. Graduated from there in '69 and went off to graduate school at the University of Cincinnati. So I spent five years in Cincinnati.

LR: How was that?

EB: It was certainly big, it was fine.

AG: Nothing grabbed your attention that made you want to stay?

EB: No, I mean I spent five years there because they were paying me to go to school. It was very nice, but I didn't see much of Cincinnati. I saw an awful lot of the university library because the classics department, which was my major, was located in basement of the library. So I would go down to the basement of the department early in the morning and would come up from the basement at five o'clock which meant that in the wintertime it was completely dark. I did this so often that I almost ruined my eyes because I didn't get enough sunlight. I enjoyed it very much because I enjoyed what I was doing. Cincinnati itself was interesting, Cincinnati was where I started going to opera, so yes, I enjoyed Cincinnati. And then I had one year at Ohio State University where I was actually teaching in the history department. After five years, the classics department at Cincinnati said, "It's time for you to go out on your own," and I said, "But what will I do?" They said, "Don't worry we found a job for you"

AG: At least they were looking out for you!

EB: Well yes, they were very much so. There was a position for a one-year replacement at Ohio State because a member of the history department was going on sabbatical to Greece so they needed somebody who could teach ancient history and well there I was. I spent a year there and then I came back to Barre, Massachusetts, and my mother and my grandmother said, "Well now you have to get a real job," and well I was planning on getting my PhD and they said that no I needed to get a real job and I was just like, "Oh, okay, I guess." I applied for several jobs and I got an interview at Worcester Academy having not really thought that I was going to teach at the high school level, but I got an interview. The headmaster was very interesting and he said, Well, we are really looking for somebody who can teach Latin and English and coach football." I said, "Well that's very interesting. I know I could do two out of three. I know I can teach Latin because I was taught Latin while I was in graduate school I'm pretty sure I can teach English because I had English as one of my two minors when I was at UVM and I'm absolutely positive

I cannot coach football even though I was coming from Ohio State, I cannot coach football.” We didn’t have a football team in my hometown high school, so I knew nothing.

AG: So, football was out of the question?

EB: Football was totally out of the question and now it’s funny because I am a religious watcher of the [New England] Patriots.

AG: How did you come about learning Latin?

EB: It’s interesting. When I went to UV I discovered that I was part of the largest group of declared Latin majors that they had ever had in the history of the college and we thought maybe there was something like radiation of the atom bombs that sort of screwed up our chromosomes or brain cells that we decided we wanted to study Latin. I just knew when I was a freshman in high school and opened up a Latin I book for the first time and saw the chart of a Latin noun being declined of all its forms, I just thought, “That’s fantastic, it’s so logical, it’s so organized and you can tell by the spelling what the word is doing in the sentence. This is marvelous.” The rest of the world was off saying Latin is useless, it’s not doing anything, and that’s why SAT scores went down. School after school dropped Latin and since about 75% of all English words have some kind of Latin or Greek base, if you don’t know that base then you’ll have difficulty spelling and understanding large words. Because of my Greek background, I took nine years of Ancient Greek

AG & LR:Wow!

EB: Because of my Greek background, when my husband got his heart disease and we went to his heart doctor, I could tell him what the doctor was saying because I could understand the words.

AG: How sweet.

EB: Well it helped.

AG: I’m sure it did!

LR: But why Latin?

EB: I don’t know it just appealed to me.

AG: And it just stuck with you ever since?

EB: Oh definitely. My dream job I thought at one point would be to go out to Kansas and run a grain elevator doing a totally mindless job and read Latin and Greek on my own, but that didn’t seem very practical.

AG: Did you have any challenges in your education?

EB: Studying things that I really wasn't interested in. I graduated from high school as valedictorian and there were only 42 people in the class and almost every boy from my class joined Vietnam because it was during 1955 and it's definitely what baby boomers did. I went to UV as a declared Latin major which meant that I didn't take basic core classes my freshman year. My freshman year I took Latin and literature courses, introductory Greek, ancient history instead of European history, ancient art instead of just regular art courses and I had an English course. I loved everything I took freshman year and it was marvelous. Then my sophomore year my advisor said, "Now you have to take some of the requirements." Oh really? And then there was a science and math requirement and if you were a classics major it was recommended that you take geology because some day you might go on an archeological dig. I took geology, but I wasn't really that enthusiastic about it, so I got a C. Since I was planning on teaching for pre-education you had to take psychology so that you could take ed-psych later and it had 140 people in it. I wasn't terribly excited about that either, so I got a C in that. I had to take philosophy and I hated the philosophy course and we spent the whole semester talking about is there a god? But I knew there was, but the teacher said there wasn't, so we didn't get along really well. So I got a C in that too. Take all of those and the As for the Latin and the Greek classes, it ended up I still had a B average. I got most of my requirements done my sophomore year. My biggest challenge was completing my PE [physical education] requirement. In the '60s when you went to a state university, you had a physical education requirement that you had to do certain things, one of which was that you had to pass this swimming test and swimming wasn't a problem. Swimming was easy.

LR: Oh no, I suck at swimming, I'd fail!

AG: I hate swimming!

EB: Swimming was marvelous and the pool at UVM had underwater lights and they would shut the top lights off and turn on music and swim with underwater lights, oh it was lovely! But I had problem with non-swimming PE because I wasn't really interested at eight o'clock in the morning to take modern dance. I would skip it and then I would fail it so I had a two-year requirement that took me four years to complete because I would fail one semester and then pass another. I was very good at archery and golf and swimming and all of the PE courses that weren't really exercise so that was my biggest challenge I'm afraid I'd have to say. Everything else if I could read it in a book, I loved it, absolutely loved it.

AG: That makes sense.

EB: I've been a big book reader for a long time, one of the best things my mother ever did was read to us when we were going to sleep. She would sit in the hallway in between our bedrooms and read stories so we would fall asleep to these marvelous stories and when we were old enough, we would read the books ourselves. I have been a great reader of books.

AG: That's a really nice memory to have

LR: So, what was your first job?

EB: It was my summer after high school graduation, and I needed to make money to go to college. That has always been true. When you're the child of a mother that worked at a drug store and a father that drove a truck, there wasn't a lot of extra money hanging around anywhere. So, I worked at Barre Wool which was a wool processing factory in my hometown, and it was hot and filthy because you were working with the wool directly off the sheep. So, it was smelly, and you had to process it to get it ready to turn into yarn and Barre Wool started that process. Later in subsequent summers, I didn't work at Barre Wool, but I worked at other wool factories where I turned the beginning process wool into thread and more refined threads so working with machines I became so good at it that I began getting phone calls from the company in May saying, "Are you coming back this summer?" and I would say, "Yes, I am coming back this summer." I worked in wool factories for four summers and knew right away that I didn't want to do that for a career.

AG: Would you say that was your least favorite job?

EB: Yes, I would say that was my least favorite job since I never got the job at coaching football.

AG: What would you say your favorite job was?

EB: I can't just say teaching Latin literature or teaching Latin grammar and I loved teaching Latin, absolutely loved it and English, but also teaching ancient history.

AG: What did you love about it? Did you love spreading the education to children? Interacting with them? What exactly did you love about it?

EB: The children yes, I loved the children yes. I used to tell them I loved bending twigs. So there is this old phrase that as the twig is bent so grows the tree and I loved bending twigs just getting their little minds and letting them just see that this is possible and I taught at the college level for two years, I taught Latin for one year in graduate school and then my first job was teaching history at Ohio State and that was very nice, but I could already tell that I wasn't making much of an impact because—sorry, girls, but college kids already have their mind set on certain things. They may not know everything that they want to do, but they definitely have their mind set on certain things. When you get a 9th grader, you basically have a clean slate, and you basically try to teach them that learning is fun, not just useful but fun. I've had several times where it was, "Why do we have to learn this?" "Well, because you have language requirement at Worcester Academy and you chose not to take a modern language where you have to speak French or Spanish and you are in Latin and you will discover that this will help you understand your own native language of English much better. You will understand grammar of English much better." I've had English teachers who told me I couldn't expect them to teach English

grammar so I knew that as a Latin teacher I was going to be teaching them English grammar because I wanted them to understand Latin grammar. So, the very first quiz that I would give would be the first day and it was a list of English sentences where you would have to identify the type of speech.

AG: Oh god, I don't even think I could do that right now

EB: Well, see that was starting in 1975 so they had already been trained by a couple of years of Worcester Academy teachers and I needed to know if they knew or not. Like I needed to know if they knew what an adjective was and what it did and what an adverb was and what it did then they were going to be in trouble with any foreign language. So we had to start with the basics like what do you now know and then we will build from there and sometimes I would have to go very very slowly but its makes it easy to understand what an adjective does, in Latin it changes its spelling to match the noun that its describing then that it makes it a nice unit so that you can see that it works together and then you begin to understand that adjectives describe nouns like okay alright.

AG: So, put the pieces together

EB: Yes, correct put the pieces together

LR: When did you stop teaching? when did you retire?

EB: In 2008, so after 33 years. I was actually only 61, but my husband was having some medical problems and I had been planning on retiring at 62 and finally said wait a minute I could afford to retire now I don't really need to work another year financially.

AG: Yes, he had a heart attack previously and had gone part-time and then left the academy and was teaching one course at St. Peter Marian as an AP Calculus teacher. He was a good commodity, but neither he nor I wanted him to teach full time. So, I retired and took a wonderful trip in fall 2008 and started taking WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] courses in 2009 and had a marvelous time with that. It feels so good to be a student again!

AG: I'm sure we're taking this for granted.

EB: Yeah, your view of being a student will change until you get a real job and working 40 hours a week. I'm sure that you work 40 hours a week now.

AG: So, in terms of you and Donald, how was your housework and responsibilities like for who does what?

EB: Well, when we got married, he was a much better cook. We discovered that even though we worked at the same school we did not have the same schedule. We tried living with one car from July when we got married until December and in December, we agreed that I needed my own car

and so I went and leased my first Honda. So, what would happen was that he would normally leave school around four-ish and he would go grocery shopping and prepare supper. He was a firm believer in fresh food so he liked going grocery shopping every single day, but he liked to see what was available and what looked good and I would stay at school until five, sometimes later for two reasons to correct my quizzes there and I was also the advisor to the school year book. We would have meetings and work in the afternoon after school and that's what made me stay till five o'clock or later. I would come and supper would be ready.

AG: Sounds great!

EB: Because he was 50 when we got married, he knew how to do all kind of things like do his own laundry. This one time I did laundry for him and I mixed the whites in with some reds and he wore pink underwear for quite a while which was very sweet of him and he didn't complain, but then I didn't have to do his laundry anymore. It wasn't on purpose, I didn't do it intentionally, but we each did our own laundry. I guess I did vacuum more often than he did, but he helped.

LR: So, it was pretty even?

EB: Yes, it was pretty even. It was very much a partnership. He did not expect me to take care of the house.

LR&AG: That's awesome! That's great!

EB: Yes, he was very good man. I did become a better cook.

AG: See you learned from him!

EB: Yes, and supplemented his cooking ability. I became the poultry cook. I had at one point some kind of a little almost an Eiffel Tower contraption and we put chicken on it so that it stands up. When you cook it all the oil and grease just drips out and you got a very nice crispy chicken. We called it military chicken because when it stood up it was saluting you.

LR: That's funny!

EB: Well, humor was a very important part of our relationship.

AG: Yes, humor is a very big part in life.

EB: It is, yes indeed.

AG: How do you feel about the choices you've made?

LR: Do you regret anything?

EB: I really don't. At one point he said—this is after he had a couple of stents in his heart, when he was getting ready for his 50th reunion for Bowdoin [College], they asked him if there's anything he regrets in his life. And he said he regrets not being married earlier in his life which I thought was really sweet. And at one point we also went to a funeral for a student of his who lost his wife and his student was already early 50s and he said that he didn't know what he could possibly do if I died first and how he could survive and I said, "Don't worry darling your heart will go out first."

[Everyone laughs]

AG: How thoughtful of you!

LR: That's funny!

EB: Yes, and I'm glad he thought it was too!

AG: Do you consider yourself actively political? You don't have to answer that if you don't want to.

EB: Yes, I vote at every election.

AG: Do you volunteer? Or do like any service work?

EB: Yes

AG: Top three favorites?

EB: Well, I give a lot of money to charities, I work at the Congregational Church Corner Shop once a month which is interesting because I don't even belong to that church. My sister talked me into that. And I am a member of WISE.

AG: What role has religion played in your life?

EB: When I was growing up religion was a very important part of my social life. My minister arrived in Barre when I was five and was the minister at the Congregational Church for 20 years. He and his wife decided that they wanted to really promote education for the children and his wife was musical and she created a choir for children, so I learned music from her. He had previously been an English professor before he had the calling to be a minister and he started a children's theater at the church, so I learned acting. I have medals for perfect attendance at Sunday school, which is as much my mother's doing as mine, but I had 11 years of perfect attendance at Sunday school. I knew more about bible stories than my husband and more than most Catholic schools and Congregationalism were encouraged to read the bible. And my senior year in high school was bible study with the minister and my friends and I who were Girl Scouts took a specific thing called God and Community. You would study religion and

community service. For the first 18 years in my life, religion was very, very important, and I strongly am in favor of a religious training for children.

AG: Since then?

EB: Not so much. Since I left to go off to college, my minister passed away and I really hadn't been a part of an organized religion since then. I consider myself to be a Congregationalist. When we got married it just happened that a colleague who was in the math department was also a certified congregational minister, so he married us, and we married at Tower Hill. That was one of the first compromises my husband and I had to make and I said well, "We can get married at City Hall that's not a problem," and he said, "No, we should get married at the church," and I mean my hometown church was in the same building, but the minister isn't the same at all. So, we compromised and got married at Tower Hill.

AG: That was a good compromise, so what is your experiences in accessing quality affordable healthcare?

EB: They had health insurance from Worcester Academy and then we just kept the same insurance even after we retired. There is a Worcester Academy group at Fallon so you could go into this Fallon Senior Plan, but it still connected to Worcester Academy.

LR: So as of right now are you only responsible for your own health or?

EB: Yes, I'm only responsible for my own health.

AG: No pets?

EB: No. My husband was allergic to cats and I had had cats before, but I'd rather have him than the cat and he liked dogs, but I'm not really a dog person.

AG: How did you get through tough times? What kind of things did you do or think to keep you going?

EB: Well, tough times I think of when I became a widow. My husband died on Christmas Eve of 2012. I had gone into a depression for at least a year and how did I cope with that? I slept a lot; I ate too much and I spent most of my time reading very thick books. I just put myself into Game of Thrones and I just read all five volumes as quickly as I could get them and anything that was 600 pages or more, I would read it. So yeah, I read a lot and binged on some TV shows but luckily, I had family who was very close. My sister did not let me just hole up completely. I had to get out and do things with them. My niece was about to get married, so my husband died in 2012, and my niece was married in July of 2013 so there was all of the preparation for the wedding and I actually hosted a bridal shower at my house and my sister and I went out and got decorations and that was fun. And then my sister and my niece went traveling with me. So, my niece got married in 2013 and 2014 she and I went to Paris for a week. My husband and I had

been to Paris 2012 and had spent a week and rented an apartment, so I knew how to do that. So, then my sister and I took a couple of trips in 2014 and 2015, we went to Portugal and France and Normandy all the way down to Provence.

LR: That's awesome!

EB: So, I read, I slept, I binged TV shows, and I travelled, and I continued to be in WISE. I started joining the council, the committees, I ended up being the chairman of the communication committee for four years. That kept me busy.

LR: How do you define your success in life? And has the definition changed for you overtime?

EB: I have a necklace that I didn't wear today, but on it I have two things, my husband's wedding ring and my Phi Beta Kappa key. Certainly, those are both of the things I'm most proud of, my education and my marriage. So, I guess that's also how I define my success. My 33 years as a teacher are some of the happiest memories I've ever had. It never became old being in a classroom with students, but parents? Eh. The administrators? Eh. But the children were always fine they were always wonderful.

AG: Based on your life experiences, what advice would you give us and the future generation?

EB: Do what you like not what you think will make money because if you're going to do it you're going to do it for a long time and if you don't like what you're doing you're not going to be happy. And if you're not happy, what good is money? I know it may be hard to say, but when you look at how much things cost these days and how much you're spending to go to college, there's got to be some way to enjoy life and working is going to be a major part of your life for long time. I mean 33 years, 8 hours a day plus homework, my husband would do homework every single night. If you don't enjoy what you're doing, it's not worth it. Find something you enjoy, and you should be able to find a way to make it work for you so that it can work for you to make money. Find something that you want to do, and the rest of the world is saying, "Latin, good lord nobody needs Latin," you find a way that it works. There's still somebody that does need this. There were still some private schools that said this still seems to be useful let's keep it. Find a place where you can fit in and then you make it your own.