

Interviewee: Suzanne M. Buglione
Interviewer: Sarah Masuzzo
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Abstract: Suzanne Buglione was born in 1959 in Methuen, Massachusetts. She moved to Worcester to attend college, and graduated from Worcester State College with a Bachelor's Degree in Natural Science and a Master's Degree in Education. She currently lives on Oak Hill, and is working toward her Doctorate in Education at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. In addition to running her own company, Community Building, which provides training and consultancy services to local non-profits, Suzanne also teaches part-time at Worcester State College and UMass Amherst. In this interview, Suzanne speaks about her work in the community, both through her company and as a community volunteer, and the importance of building connections among people and among neighborhoods. She describes the changes she has witnessed since her move to Worcester in 1981, including a positive sense of growth and development in the downtown area. Suzanne acknowledges the many problems that Worcester faces, but speaks with a sense of hope about what needs to be done to help fight poverty, empower women, and continue cleaning up the city.

SM: Alright, this is Sarah interviewing Suzanne Buglione for the oral history project. Where and when were you born?

SB: I was born...you want to know when? I was born in 1959 and I was born in Methuen, Massachusetts.

SM: Ok. How did you come to live here?

SB: I came to Worcester to go to college.

SM: Where did you go?

SB: First I went to Anna Maria for one semester; then I came to Worcester State.

SM: Alright, what year did you graduate?

SB: I graduated in 1988 with my Bachelor's.

SM: And what was your Bachelor's in?

SB: Natural Science.

SM: Very exciting...Tell me about your family? How many brothers and sisters did you have, if any? What kind of work were they in primarily?

SB: I have one sister, who is an elementary school teacher in Methuen—still lives there. Then there was my mother and father. They were very involved with community work. My father was an elected official.

SM: In Methuen?

SB: In Methuen.

SM: What was the neighborhood like growing up?

SB: My neighborhood was probably your typical lower middle class neighborhood. We had a single- family house, but most of the neighborhood had multi-families. Nice, sidewalks... Methuen isn't a big city and at that point it wasn't too populated.

SM: Where do you live in the city now? Do you live in Worcester?

SB: I live in Worcester. I live on the East Side in the Oak Hill, Vernon Hill neighborhood.

SM: Have you lived in other parts of the city?

SB: Oh yeah. When I first moved into the city I lived in a housing development because I was a poor student. Yup...on the West Side called Washington Heights. Then I lived in the Main South area near Clark University. And then I lived on Perry Avenue up on Vernon Hill. And then, now I've lived for just about ten years in my location on Oak Hill.

SM: Did you always feel safe?

SB: I've had two times when I didn't feel safe. And both times were when my homes were robbed. And once when I was on Main South, and once when I was in the public housing development. But I've been in the city and been involved with the city for so long that I don't have those feelings of being unsafe.

SM: Anymore?

SB: Yup.

SM: Do other family members live in the area?

SB: No, I don't have any biological family members in the area, but I have created a lot of new family members.

SM: So you have hobbies or do any regular leisure activities that you like to take outside of your home in Worcester?

SB: Yeah, I like to do a lot of volunteer work, and I also play the piano and that's a relaxing thing for me. I love to spend time with my friends and I have some pets that I enjoy being with, as well.

SM: Do you work outside the home other than just your volunteer work?

SB: That is an interesting question because my office is in my home. But, I have a company called Community Build and that organization does training and consulting with individuals and groups in the community. Actually all throughout New England, but most of our work is in Worcester.

SM: So what exactly...How did you start Community Build?

SB: I had been working in the community for about 25 years, and had really wanted to get out of the traditional non-profit organization and work with organizations and groups to help them build their capacity. So that is when I started Community Build.

SM: So Community Build helps other non-profits build themselves up?

SB: Yup, other non-profits or sometimes just community groups. Like it might be a group of parents, like from a PTA, or it might be a group of—like right now we are doing a project with a group of youth workers in the city, people who work with youths who are trying to build their skills.

SM: How did you learn to do this?

SB: Well some of it happened because of the education that I have. I have a Master's in Education from here at Worcester State, and I am also a student right now. I am in a Doctoral program at UMass Boston. So some of it I've learned along the way in the classroom, but some of it, *a lot* of it, I've learned from the people in the community. About what people need and what the best approaches are to work with the people. And having worked in non-profits for a long time, I got a lot of training.

SM: What is your Doctorate going to be in?

SB: It's going to be in Education, exactly in Higher Education.

SM: Are you going to be a professor?

SB: Well, I teach here at Worcester State and I teach—that's sort of my part-time job. I teach here at Worcester State, and I teach at UMass Amherst in the University Without Walls. I think that my goal will be to do some teaching when I finish my doctorate, but also maybe some research.

SM: Do you want to write a book?

SB: Maybe. I really enjoy doing research with the people you are studying themselves. They call that participatory research. So I'm really hoping that I will be able to do some research that will really help develop new ideas and help others.

SM: What was the first non-profit that you ever joined?

SB: The first non-profit that I ever joined was Pernet Family Health Service, and it was a strange kind of situation because I had quit school, yet again—because I had quit school a number of times, that's why it took me so long to get my Bachelor's. I quit school yet again, and I was doing some work in the housing development that I was living in—volunteer work. And I was going to a meeting on Millbury Street, and I saw a sign in the window that said they were looking for help. And I went in and I had an immediate interview and they hired me right away. And I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing. But, that was the first non-profit I worked in, and I worked there for eight years.

SM: And you've worked for several other non-profits along the way?

SB: Yes, I've worked for Rainbow Child Development Center. I've worked for Henry Lee Willis Community Center. I worked for—I ran a shelter in Marlboro for a little while. Most of my jobs, though, I've stayed at five, eight years. So I don't have too many jobs, but I've done a lot of different kinds of things.

SM: Are there any non-profits that draw your attention particularly?

SB: Well, right now, yeah...I think I am interested in non-profits that really work with families and communities, neighborhoods. So right now I'm on the board at Oak Hill Community Development Corporation, which is really a good project for me as a volunteer. So those are the kinds of non-profits that really excite me.

SM: So let's talk about Community Build. When did you exactly start Community Build?

SB: In the year 2000.

SM: So it's a fairly new organization?

SB: Fairly new organization.

SM: How many organizations do you think you've helped?

SB: Oh my goodness... We usually work at any point in time with about ten or 12 organizations, so I would say that we have helped somewhere around maybe 100 organizations.

SM: What were the organization's main goals?

SB: It varies quite a bit...

SM: Because you are just trying to help individual...

SB: Yeah, so for example right now we are working with a Youth Worker Training Institute which is for youth workers in the city, but we are also doing some work with UMass Boston. They have a Federal grant to help them work better with the communities and the neighborhoods that are surrounding them. We also work right now with the Worcester Public Schools. We are doing a project with them helping them to support families where there are children who have emotional problems. So it's really a lot of variety in our work.

SM: Because you are just trying...because your company helps other non-profits. So are you a non-profit?

SB: We are not a non-profit, no. We work with a lot of non-profits and with the colleges. We work here with Worcester State College through the Next Step Initiative, which is for health and human service workers to go back to college. So it's a real variety. The folks we are working with are either non-profits or they are colleges.

SM: So you charge a fee for your services?

SB: We do charge a fee for our services.

SM: But that's good because you have all the contacts, and you know how to set up and what they need to do to help the community better.

SB: Yeah, and we have a lot of experience among us. I'm not the only person that works at Community Build. Other folks are also faculty at some of the colleges, and other folks also have a lot of experience in non-profit work.

SM: What are some of the things that you offer to the non-profits?

SB: Sure, we help people to do planning, we help people facilitate meetings, we help people build collaborations and partnerships, and we help people with skill training so that we teach them about different kinds of skills. We work with them around issues that have to do with diversity and inclusion, to help them be more multicultural. We help people to develop a plan and to meet their goals.

SM: That's awesome... What would you consider the group's major accomplishments?

SB: Our major accomplishments... Well, I think one of the things that has been a major accomplishment with the colleges and universities that we worked with has really been

building a bridge from the college or the university to the community. That's really been a major accomplishment. I think the development of something like the Youth Worker Training Institute that we are doing—four years ago the folks in the community came to us and said, 'youth workers need help.' Youth workers have a lot of tough jobs working with inner city kids. So we went around and we talked to youth workers, and we talked to their supervisors, and we talked to a lot of youth and we found out what people needed. And that helped us to develop the Youth Worker Training Institute. So, it's those kinds of things that are exciting. Last year we worked with UMass Medical School on a project, and one of the products of that project was that we had a conference on diversity and inclusion. And we had over 100 people come, and that was at Clark University. So we've had more...

SM: More personal accomplishments...not necessarily widely...not necessarily an award or something like that, but that you guys have personally helped to build a community and built Community Build to help out other colleges.

SB: We have and a lot of our passion is personal, so the reason why we get involved in a project is because we really think it's an important thing for the community. Or the community has said that it's important. So I think that a lot of our goals have been driven by our passion.

SM: What impact has Worcester had on you as an individual and you on Worcester?

SB: Well, you know, one of the things that happened to me when I first came to Worcester is that I began to realize that even though it was a city, it functions a lot like a small town and that the neighborhoods are really important because each neighborhood is very different. I've lived in a few of those neighborhoods, and it's really taught me a lot. I did a lot of work in Plumley Village when I worked at the Rainbow Child Development Center, I did a lot of work in Great Brook Valley, actually in many of the organizations that I worked in, so I know that the neighborhoods are very different and they have a unique strength that they bring to the city. That I value quite a bit. But the other thing that I found out about Worcester pretty quickly is that you can make a dent. It is easy to make a difference in Worcester.

SM: What challenges does this city still face and what would you improve about the city?

SB: I think that sometimes the neighborhoods are disconnected from one another; that's a real big challenge. I think that certainly downtown has had some challenges and that's why it's exciting to see some of the new things that are planned for downtown. I think that there are a lot of opportunities for people to have a voice in the city and that would be a nice if there were more opportunities for people to get involved and to be more active. We try to create more of those opportunities wherever we can.

SM: By helping other groups...

SB: Yeah, exactly...exactly.

SM: What changes have occurred in Worcester over time?

SB: Oh, lots of changes. When I first came to Worcester it was 1981 and a lot of things were very different. We didn't have the Centrum, we didn't have train service to Boston, the mall was downtown, and it was thriving at the time. So there were lots of differences that happened at that point, and I think that the changes I have seen have been very, very positive and very exciting. We are certainly moving in the right direction.

SM: What are the major events that have happened in Worcester during your time here?

SB: Major events...let's see... I think that some things that have been important to me has been the development of the Centrum. I think that really was a way that a lot of other people got to come to Worcester and see what it was like. Another major development for me has been the activities around voter registration that have happened around the city. That is really exciting to me because we have been able to increase the voter rates. We've been able to see more people participating as voters in the elections, and that's exciting to me. I think that the new library is exciting. So there are some things that have happened that are more visible; then there are things that are invisible. Like in my neighborhood, it's very exciting that we are seeing a lot less dumping, trash dumping. The areas that were ridden with drugs no longer have drug activity going on.

SM: Worcester has cleaned up a lot?

SB: It's cleaned up *a lot*. I also think it's exciting for me, even though some people are concerned about it, to see private developers coming into Worcester and developing Worcester. Because they see it as a good investment, and to me that is a good sign.

SM: What distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

SB: Well, I think that Worcester has that hometown kind of feeling, yet there is enough of a city that there are many opportunities for people.

SM: How did Worcester help you get through tough times?

SB: How did Worcester—well, I think one of the things that I loved about Worcester and I still love is that it's easy to get connected to people. You can show up somewhere and volunteer and you will meet a lot of people and you will learn a lot. People will invest in you. You can have a problem in your neighborhood and you can talk to your neighbors and together you can do something about it. It's not so big that you can't fight city hall, so to speak. There are lots of ways in which Worcester has supported me because I have reached out to other people, and I think it's really about connections. That's what makes us stronger—being connected. And I think that that's what Community Build is about—helping more people to get connected.

SM: Are those the kinds of thoughts that keep you going through the hard times?

SB: Those are the kinds of thoughts because, you know, it's challenging when I look around and I see some of the non-profits struggling. Or when I look around and I see, oh my gosh, we have lost some more youth programs. Or when I talk to people and they are—and we just had a job fair in our neighborhood this week, and we had 170 or 180 people show up looking for jobs. That is a lot of people who need jobs, and it's kind of discouraging to me. But at the same time we had a lot of employers who showed up and we made some good connections once again. So I feel if we can connect each other to one another then they can support one another. And that's really what sustains me.

SM: And that is what Community Build is all about.

SB: That's really what it's about.

SM: Tell us about your own family, children, and husband—do you have a husband? Are you married?

SB: I have a significant other. We have been together for about 17 years, and both of us really have strong involvement in the community. We don't have any children but we have pets. We have a dog and a cat—very exciting.

SM: What type of work does your significant other do?

SB: He does work in the community as well. Most of his work is about reaching out and helping people who need some information. He is in the process of changing fields. He's been in construction for many years, and he's actually going to be going back to school in the spring.

SM: That's exciting.

SB: Yeah, we'll both be students; that should be scary.

SM: You will be a well-educated household... Now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the past of women than has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

SB: I think that we need to make sure that we remember our history. I think that it's important for women as we make gains and we make a dent, we need to not forget how short it's been since we didn't have the same types of privileges. And there are still many environments where women still don't have privilege and still don't have equal treatment and I think we have to not forget that. I think the other thing we need to do more of is women who have found some strength and who have found some connections need to reach out to other women who haven't yet found that strength or those connections. We have a responsibility to one another to help each other go forward.

SM: To help women help each other. What do you think women's experiences have been like generally in Worcester?

SB: Well, I have had the privilege of working with many different women. There are many women, like women who work in Community Build, who have had many exciting opportunities and who have had lots of ability to make a difference in Worcester. There are many other who are struggling greatly. There are single parents, there are students, there are people who have been in low-wage jobs. We have a lot of poverty in Worcester and a lot of that poverty has really centered around women. And I think that again we need to create more opportunities for women to be able to move forward, and to link up with other women who have been able to go forward on that path. Not in a formal mentoring sort of way, but more in a way that helps people connect. When I tell my story and you tell your story it brings power to other people. It inspires them and helps them to think that—you know, I tell my students all the time, it took me 11 years to get my Bachelor's. When I teach night classes here it's important to me to tell my students that, you know, it took me a long time because they are feeling like, oh my word I am taking one class at a time, I'm never going to finish. So it's important, that it's worthwhile and it's not hopeless.

SM: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

SB: No, your questions were very comprehensive. Great job!

SM: Awesome, thank you so much for your time today.

SB: You're welcome.