

Interviewee: Filomena Cesareo  
Interviewers: Emily Chandler and Noah Clewley  
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Filomena Cesareo was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1964 to Italian immigrants. She is the second of three daughters and attended Albertus Magnus College in New Haven. During this time, she studied business and political science and met the man who would later become her husband. After graduation, Filomena continued her study of political science as a law student at The University of Bridgeport. She went on to live in a few different states before moving to Worcester when her husband became the President of Assumption College in 2007. In this interview, Filomena discusses her career as an estate planning lawyer, her life as a mother and a lawyer, her relationship with the city of Worcester, and the significance of professional women in the 21st century. She is involved in the community through her role as Presidential Spouse and as an actively involved citizen of Worcester.

Quote:

I can't even tell you what triggered it, besides my mom telling me that I liked to argue, but I always said, "I'm going to law school, I'm going to be a lawyer." I [now work] in estate planning, where I don't even see a courtroom. Estate planning is very detailed work...but I think it gives people peace of mind...It just makes people feel like, "Okay, I know when I leave, everything is taken care of, I don't have to worry about that." [My children] saw my work ethic because they knew a lot of times when they went to bed, I was going to work [at home]. It was probably the best fit ever, because I was able to work from home when my kids were little.

**EC:** So, can you tell me your name?

**FC:** Filomena Cesareo.

**EC:** Great, and do we have your permission to record this interview?

**FC:** Yes, you do.

**EC:** Wonderful, let's begin.

**FC:** Sure.

**EC:** So, when and where were you born?

**FC:** I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, at Yale New Haven, [Hospital] and I lived in Connecticut, Branford, so not too far, and in '64.

**EC:** Okay. [Emily and Filomena laugh.]

**EC:** Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood? Just your upbringing, if you had siblings, that kind of thing.

**FC:** Sure, let's see, I have an older sister and a younger sister, and I...My parents are both immigrants from Italy, from a little town in south of Italy, very different from the U.S., [Emily laughs.] and came to the U.S. for a better life. Actually, this is a cool story, but I don't know it might take a little time. But my Dad came here when he was, right before he turned 21, because his dad was here before the Depression, and became an American citizen. When the Depression hit, he went back because, he used to send money back, but he went back because there was no work here either. So, he went back. So, when my Dad was born, he was born an American citizen, and he would lose it if he didn't come here before his 21st birthday. So, that's how my Dad came here and that's how we are here. [Filomena laughs.]

**EC:** Very interesting,

**FC:** Yeah, it's kind of cool, because I never --- you know --- didn't know the rules back then, but it's cool. [Emily laughs.]

**NC:** Yeah.

**EC:** How did you meet your husband?

**FC:** Actually he---I met him through friends. I had, I graduated from Albertus Magnus College in New Haven, Connecticut, when it was all girls, which you guys probably don't even know that it used to be all girls. [Emily and Filomena laugh.] Actually, my senior year it went coed and there were like four boys in it, four guys. But actually, he started teaching there the year after I graduated. But I had friends there, who were older students, who were coming back to get their degree. And so, they hadn't graduated yet, but I had done ---got to know them well because we did business projects together, and they had him for a history class. And they said he was too hard and needed, and needed, a social life. [Emily and Filomena laugh.] So, they decided to introduce us. But, of course, when they asked my husband he was like, "I can't go out with you guys while I'm teaching you, you have to wait till the class is over." [Emily laughs] So, it was the next semester that the four of us got together for pizza, at That Piece of Pizza in New Haven. I don't know, do you guys know that? It's a pretty popular pizza place on Worcester Street in New Haven, and who knew we would end up in Worcester. [Emily laughs] And the owner's, [name was] Francesco, my husband's name and his wife is Filomena, [my name] so it must have been fate! [Filomena and Emily laugh.]

**EC:** That's funny. What was your major?

**FC:** My major was, business management and political science.

**EC:** Interesting. Let's see, so how long have you lived in Worcester now?

**FC:** Let's see, we moved here in summer of '07, so, what is that? Thirteen years, it will be 13 years. [Emily and Filomena laugh.]

**EC:** Have you lived in different neighborhoods of Worcester? Or just around here?

**FC:** No, just here because we came here for my husband's job.

**EC:** Right, and that's just in this area around Assumption College?

**FC:** Yes, yup. We have been in different states. [Filomena laughs.]

**EC:** Okay, which other states?

**FC:** When we first got married, we were in University Heights, Ohio, which is a suburb of Cleveland, because my husband was at John Carroll University. And then he got a job as a dean at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, and we were there for three years. And then he got the job here as President. So, been here ever since. [Emily and Filomena laugh.]

**EC:** Looking to Worcester sort of as a city, as a community, what challenges do think that it faces?

**FC:** Okay, I guess in general?

**EC:** Yes.

**FC:** Let's see, I think for one thing if you don't know the area, thinking of when I first moved here, there are so many different neighborhoods and they are all so different, that I think it's hard to know which --- the character of each, you know, when you first come here, and I think just getting around Worcester is hard if you don't know [the area]. Just kind of learning the one way --I mean I think one of the biggest things is, when we first moved here, trying to just go to the grocery store and realizing Gold Star [Boulevard] is one way, one direction, and then... [Emily and Filomena laugh.] You know, little things like that, that I think getting around Worcester can be hard, if you don't know... Now with GPS [Global Positioning System], but it was, you know, we didn't have ---we did have it then, but it was just kind of a new thing, it was more MapQuest stuff, [Emily and Filomena laugh.] that shows even then, not even that long ago. But, I think getting around Worcester, I would say probably one of the hardest things, learning my way around Worcester.

**EC:** With regard to, sort of, issues that the city itself faces, maybe education, poverty, social justice, healthcare, that kind of thing, what would you say, if any, are sort of the major issues that you observe in the city of Worcester?

**FC:** You know, I think education is a big one and the poverty that I think goes hand-in-hand. I think we have a lot of immigrants in Worcester, and I think there are refugees as well, and I think a lot of --- I don't think we --- I wish we had more resources because I think a lot of these children are, are, just learning the language. And I wish we could --- we had more resources to help them, you know, just get into the mainstream of the educational system quicker. Because I think they're already starting with a deficit, because they don't --- it's not their native language and they are coming here, kind of probably thrown in a class. And I wish we could help them more. [Filomena laughs.] And you know, and then I think there's also a lot of areas where ---- that the school districts themselves, within Worcester, I think there's a lot of disparity, that if it was more of an equal. I don't know how to do that, but if it was more a equal thing where everybody was getting, depending on the school, was getting the same education. I mean you have probably seen the rankings, I think they come out, but the schools in Worcester, after they take, the state, the statewide test, there's such a disparity. But I think that's probably a big city issue in a lot of big cities. [Filomena laughs.]

**EC:** Right.

**NC:** Yeah so, what caused you to study political science at college?

**FC:** I studied political science because I always wanted to go to law school. So, so that's why, kind of like you. [Noah] [Noah and Filomena laugh.]

**NC:** Yes.

**FC:** That was always in my head. My mom used to say that I loved to argue, so I did go to law school. I went to the University of Bridgeport Law School, which then became Quinnipiac [University School of Law]. It moved. So, I am a graduate from there and I do practice law. I took the Bar [Exam] in Connecticut right after I graduated, and I passed the Bar. And then about six months after that, I got married and moved to Cleveland, Ohio. So, I [Filomena laughs.] --- you have to practice [law], you'll learn this, five or six years before you can waive into another state. If not, you have to take the Bar again. So, I had to take the Ohio Bar, which was fine, I was really lucky. I found a job within six weeks and then they, they were just like, "You know, as long as you pass the Bar, when you take it, you're good." So, they were really good and gave me some extra time to study and stuff. So, I took the Ohio Bar, passed the Ohio Bar. And I practiced there, and I kind of fell into a job in a trust department of a bank because of an article I had

written while I was in law school. That's what I'm telling you, those articles are important to put on your resume. [Noah and Filomena laugh] That's how I got my first job. And it [the article] was on conservatorships and guardians, so then I got the job in the trust department. And I did that for four years, and then I had our daughter. And then I worked in the trust department. I worked with a lot of different firms. And there was an all-woman firm who said that, because we didn't have any family out there, so I was like, "I don't want to put her [my daughter] in daycare the whole time." And they [the all-woman firm] were like, "You can just, draft trusts for us. We'll give you the info and you can draft trusts from home." And I have honestly been doing that ever since. I changed law firms at some point. I think we were still in Cleveland when I changed law firms, and I still work for a firm in Cleveland. So, that's the short version of... [all laugh.]

**NC:** Yes, what challenges, if any, did you face during your educational career, whether it be in college or law school?

**FC:** What challenges? Let's see... Well probably, I guess I would say maybe the biggest challenge is... My sisters and I were first generation going to college, and my dad worked in a factory, so, a wire mill. So, it wasn't like we had tons of money for my parents to send us to school. And then I wanted to go to law school, so I probably put another, like, oh my God how much is that costing? [Filomena laughs.] I would say that that was probably, financially, the biggest challenge, but I had great parents who did all they could to make it easier on us, so we didn't have to take out a lot of loans.

**NC:** Yeah, are you happy with your educational career and choice of law school?

**FC:** Yeah, you know what I guess if I look back one of the reasons why I chose it [the University of Bridgeport Law School] is so I could commute, so it wasn't necessarily based on the best one or anything. But, you save money when you commute, [Filomena laughs] and I also commuted when I was at Albertus. [Magnus College] So, I think when you look back, you're like ---you think, oh, maybe if I had done it differently. But, in the end it kind of all works out and, so it's fine. [Filomena laughs.] I don't think it ever held me back, that I chose that one for that reason or whatever. I don't, in the end I don't think so.

**NC:** Yeah.

**EC:** Right.

**FC:** So, things happen the way they should. [Laughs]

**NC:** Yes.

**EC:** So, have you had any other jobs, at any time, other than lawyer?

**FC:** After, you mean, after my college career?

**EC:** At any time, while you were in college...

**FC:** During college yeah, during high school and college, because I commuted, I worked in the meat department at Stop and Shop, I know all my cuts of meat. [All laugh.] Oh, and I worked at, a short stint, at a bakery, that wasn't bad either. [Emily and Filomena laugh.]

**EC:** So, what got you interested in pursuing law or more specifically estate planning, is that what you said? [Filomena confirms this.] So, what got you interested in that field?

**FC:** I guess that law --- I don't know why. I just always had, from when I was little, I always said --- I can't even tell you what triggered it, but I always said, "I'm going to law school, I'm going to be a lawyer." I can't even tell you what triggered it, besides my mom telling me that I like to argue. And then after doing estate planning, where I don't even see a courtroom... But, you know, it's okay. [Emily and Filomena laugh.] But estate planning, it's very, it's more detailed work. And it --- and so --- but it's kind of --- it's not totally black and white. But it is a little more black and white than other legal areas, [laughs] but I think, like I said, I think I kind of fell into it, because I wrote this article. Because...you'll [Noah] learn when you go to law school, that you might be asked to join a law journal. And I was asked to join the Connecticut Probate Law Journal. So when you're doing Connecticut Probate Law Journal, you have to write on that. So I wrote on conservatorships and guardianships, and I was like oh, this is kind of interesting stuff. So then when I was looking and we were moving, I worked actually at an accounting firm, Arthur Andersen, while I was in Connecticut before I moved, but it is interesting. I did enjoy that kind of work. And I was moving, and I was kind of like... You know, you panic when your're

moving, and you have to find a job. So, I was like, “I don’t care, I don’t care, I have to get a job.” But, I think I fell into it because of my article, and it was probably the best fit ever because I was able to work from my home, when my kids were little. And even back --- my daughter’s going to be 25, when she was first born I actually... There were no attachments on the computer, that’s not how I got my work, a courier would bring me my work to the house, and it’s not even that long ago, [Emily and Filomena laugh.] But there was no such thing as attachments and sending emails, it evolved into that obviously, but a courier used to bring me a packet, an envelope. I used to do my work, and I’d call them. They’d send the courier to pick up the envelope, so...

**EC:** That’s funny.

**FC:** But, I was lucky that I got to do that, for each child and I still do it now, so. Now it’s much easier because everything comes with the computer, but. [all laugh]

**EC:** So, what do you find most meaningful about what you do?

**FC:** [Thinks] Let’s see. You know it... Even though, you know, some people will say, “Alright you’re helping people save money when they die.” That’s not --- it’s not all that because right now, even with our --- the limits... Really before you pay federal taxes, a married couple, you know, it’s 10 million dollars. How many people have to worry about that? But, I think it gives people peace of mind, for should something happen while they’re younger, that their children are going to be cared for. And everything is going to happen how they want it to, if they put money in a trust for them or whatever. And even when they’re older and they have older children and there’s different family dynamics, and, they don’t want them to fight after the fact, it really, it just makes people feel like, “Okay, I know when I leave, everything is taken care of, I don’t have to worry about that.” It’s a hard thing to talk to with clients. You can imagine it’s not like, it’s not like I’m planning weddings or anything. [Emily laughs] I mean you’re talking to people about end of life kind of things. But, I think it does give them peace of mind.

**EC:** Absolutely. So, sort of going off what you said about being thankful that you could stay at home while your children were growing up, while being able to reap the benefits of your work and stay in that field, how do you think your work, if at all, has influenced your children? Do you think they took after your passions in any way? Anything like that?



**FC:** I think so. I think...I think that one thing they saw is work, work ethic because they knew a lot of times when they went to bed, I was going to work. So, they saw that, and very --- I think with my daughter probably she just saw when you, you know, for a woman that you have to be strong and you have to be out there and you can't --- just because you're a woman, you can't let being...[turns to interviewers] You guys know what's going on now and all that stuff! [reference to MeToo and feminist movement] that you have to put yourself out there, and you can't be afraid to put yourself out there, and you're just as smart as anybody else, and you can do whatever. And, she's [her daughter] a very, very strong woman, she's an oncology nurse. She has to be! [laughs] So, I think that influenced her in that way, and the boys, too, [her two sons] they saw that, you know, mom doesn't *just* stay home and take care of us, she's a *lawyer*. You know? And they would tell people that! [grins] "My mom's a *lawyer*!" And, actually my son who's graduating now is actually thinking, potentially law school.

**EC:** So interesting, definitely! So, sort of in that same vein, how would you say you balanced your different priorities and roles and responsibilities? Because you know, we all hope that each day goes by smoothly, but inevitably [Filomena laughs] maybe one kid is sick or something like that. How did you sort of juggle that?

**FC:** Yeah, you know, some days were ---trying to do work and, depending ---with my husband's job when he was a professor at John Carroll [University, Ohio], it was easier, he was home a lot more, you know? And then when he became a dean, his time was a little more taken. And as President here, [at Assumption College] even more so! So, I kind --- a lot of times, especially once we moved here, [Worcester]--- kind of had to do everything because he wasn't around. So, you know, my role is... But then I also threw another role into that which is Presidential Spouse, so I had to go to a bunch of things. But when they were little, he was here to help. But there were times when, you know, trying to get work done and it might've been in the afternoon and I would have a sitter, but when a kid is sick, they don't care about the sitter, they want mommy. [laughs] So, I'd have to go quiet them down, or bring the child with me, and try to get whatever I had to get done, *done!* And like I said, a lot of stuff got done late at night and I worked for a... At first, I worked for an all- woman firm who was very understanding; very, very understanding. And they were like, "Don't worry about it, don't worry about it." But, you know, there are deadlines sometimes so no matter what they say you're like, "Yeah, I know, but you need this!" [laughs] But it all kind of, it all kind of works out in the end. And I was lucky once we moved here. They understood that my priority was my children. And if they were going to take his time, [her husband] they couldn't always have my time. [laughs] So...

**EC:** Right, right! What is your --- do you have a specific title or role here at Assumption College other than spouse, [Filomena interjects] Presidential Spouse? [Both laugh and nod.]

**FC:** No, but I've taken on different roles, like I've, 0 I've kind of brought back a parents' association. So, we're getting the parents very involved. I found that --- that I guess, you know like me when you're a mom that's very involved with your children, and then all of a sudden they're going off to college, you still kind of want a connection. So, we only started that about a year-and-a-half ago, but it's actually going strong and getting bigger and growing and we're doing a lot more things, so that's one thing I do. I host teas at my house where we put --- we get together students like yourselves, but [pauses] women actually! [All laugh.] It's more done for the girls, it's a networking thing, and we invite friends of the college to speak, and it's really informal. But it's just kind of practice networking, women to women. So, I've done that. I'm also, [pauses and thinks] well you'll probably get to community involvement I guess, but I do try to go to --- there's certain --- especially now that my youngest [child] is your age, so he's not home, I do go to a lot more alumni... I did go to alumni events in the past, but now I do go to more events like that, and more events on campus. We've always gone to sporting events and music events and even taken our kids, when kids would come to the basketball games or football games and choir concerts, the shows. We just kind of want to support our students, we're there! [laughs]

**EC:** So, I was thinking...could you speak to sort of the environment of women because I'm sort of picking up this pattern of an all -women's school, an all -women [law] firm, working with women in the community. Do you think that being in a very female-specific environment, where there is sort of that environment of empowerment, do you think that sort of motivated you in what you do or what you did later on in life?

**FC:** [Thinks] You know, probably. I think you're right. You know what, until you said that I'm like, "I never --- I kind of never noticed that until you said it. [Emily and Filomena laugh]. Hmm, I guess so! Just because I think it's very important to try to strive for women being on par with any position that a guy might have. And to try to empower women and girls and let them know -- -I don't know, is there a question on community? Because I could...

**EC:** Yeah.

**FC:** Okay, I'll wait. [Emily and Filomena laugh.] Because there's another women's issue in there that I could stick in, but I'll wait until you get to that question. But, yeah I do think it's

important and when we get there [to the community portion of the interview], there's a middle school girls thing that I'm involved in that I'm very passionate about as well.

**NC:** Alright, so do you consider yourself politically active?

**FC:** Let's see, probably not in the sense you would ---yeah, no because I'm not involved in (\_\_\_???) but I'm very politically "up on things." And I do have very strong views, and I think just recently they've come out even more so... [Addresses Noah and Emily directly.] But you guys probably don't want to know my political views, so I won't go into that right now! [laughs] But I've become much more right now because I'm like, "What the heck is going on with our country?" [reference to results of 2016 presidential election and upcoming 2020 election] But that's another story! [laughs]

**NC:** So, community involvement...we talked about this women's thing that you do. [Filomena nods] Can you talk about that a little bit?

**FC:** Yes! [Turns to Emily] And I'm going to get you involved in it! [both laugh and look at Noah] Sorry (\_\_\_??) but we're going to start a boy's thing so I might! But, it's through the United Way, it's called the Women's Initiative, it's been around 14, 15 years? I don't know. But, it was women leaders in the community, started before I got here. But it was women leaders in the community, who got together and saw a need for middle school girls. And it started, it really started with just --- a lot of these girls were in situations, were in homes where every day they had to deal with violence and even emotional abuse, things like that. So, it started with just dealing with that, and trying to raise money for that. And I think throughout the 14 years they've raised, millions [of dollars]. But, so it's been great, but it started with that and now it's grown. And to so many ---and it's all, it's Worcester County --- to so many middle school girl initiatives. So, we do a financial literacy [workshop] for them, which we actually hold on campus here. And actually, one of the founding members I think, I know she was really involved, is Kay Bassett. I don't know if you know that was your *former* president's wife? [of Clark University] So, I don't know if you've ever heard, she was wonderful. She was very involved, but she was on this committee at first when I first... [thinks] I think she was the one who first got me into this, actually. But they do stuff for that. They do after -school programs, they do positive... They do mentorship programs, and they also give money to different programs that are already out there for girls in the community to help, just to help them with self-esteem, empowerment, so many different things, physical fitness, I mean it kind of run --- it's kind of everything that can help middle school girls. And right now I'm on the committee that does the financial literacy because a lot of these girls ---it's funny some of them are pretty clueless and some of them...

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You hear their story and they know a lot about balancing a budget because they've had to do it for their family. And you --- we're talking eighth grade girls here, and it just breaks your heart. But, there's so many things we do for middle school girls that I (\_\_\_??) [to Emily] we'll get you to one of our seminars. [laughs]

**NC:** Has religion ever played a role in your life?

**FC:** It has, yeah. I was born Catholic, so my faith has always been important to me, and I think it's what grounds me [laughs]. And keeps me sane! No matter what's going on, in the church I'm like, "I just have to keep in my mind that it's my spiritual life, they don't have anything to do --- what's going on doesn't affect my spiritual life and my relationship with Jesus and God. That's *my* relationship, so it's always been there for me, and helped me through the good times and the bad. [chuckles]

**EC:** So, I guess sort of in that same vein, how do you – how would you get through tough times? What sort of propels you through turbulent moments in your life?

**FC:** Okay, I guess my religion and my family, my family and close friends. I've ---[laughs] Italians are close, really close Italian family, and I'm very close with my two sisters and my mom. My dad passed now. Just, a phone call away! [laughs] You know? Because they're not close by. I have a sister in Pelham [New York] and one in Norwich [Connecticut], and my mom is in Branford, Connecticut which is about two hours away. And when I lived in Pittsburgh and Cleveland, they were even further, but these phones are a good thing! [all laugh] And my husband! Don't want to forget... that's a no-brainer, right? [laughs again]. He's always there.

**EC:** How do you define success in your life?

**FC:** I think just being happy and my family being happy, and healthy, and safe. I think, very basic! [laughs] As long as everybody --- that's what I always say; happy, healthy, and safe. All the other stuff, you'll deal. [laughs] You know?

**EC:** Sort of based on your life experience and your views of the world, what advice would you give to today's women either pursuing a career in law, or business, or you a field where they might encounter discrimination on the basis of gender?

**FC:** That it's a fight worth fighting because it still is hard, and it's probably better... I remember when I first started and I went through a merger at a bank, because first it was just me and this other guy who mentored me, and we had pretty much an equal relationship. And then we had a merger, and it was me and these two guys, and I always felt like I was like the odd man out. So, I really had to fight like, "I'm equal to these guys, *hello!*" So, I think it's not being afraid to speak up, and just keep fighting the fight because it's worth it, and you will succeed. You just have to, you can't give up, you know? And you can have it all. You can. [Laughs] It's not easy, but if you're willing to, give it your all, you can do it.

**FC:** So, thinking more broadly, now that there are these organizations like the Worcester Women's History Project that are looking to tell the fuller story of the history of women than has been recorded in the past, what would be – what do you think would be important to include in those histories? What kind of questions? [Filomena laughs]

**FC:** Hmm...

**EC:** Or to somewhat rephrase, what aspects of women's histories make them distinct from just you know a [male] Caucasian settler in the New World who's known for creating a civilized society? What distinguishes women in that rhetoric?

**FC:** I think what's important to know is the backstory, how they got to where they are. Not just this is what they did for Worcester or whatever, or contributed to women. I think it's their backstory; how they got to where they are. [Emily nods] I think that's really important to know. Because I mean I think everybody has a story to tell, we all have our story, so I just think, I just think that's an important part, just knowing the... I don't know, did that answer your question? I'm not sure...

**EC:** It did!

**FC:** [Emily and Filomena smiling] I'm not sure, because that was part of your question and then you changed it on me, and I'm like, "Wait a minute, which way do I go?" [both laughing] Is that okay?

**EC:** No, no that's fine! Absolutely, it's sort of a convoluted question! And a little bit...

**FC:** It's a two-parter and I think I only remember one! [both laugh]

**EC:** Alright, so that concludes the interview, thank you very much!

**FC:** You're welcome!