

Interviewee: Sandra Congdon
Interviewer: Abigail Harkins and Brooke Shatney
Date of Interview: October 14, 2019
Location: Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcriber: Abigail Harkins and Brooke Shatney



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

Abstract: Sandra Jean Whitehouse Desaulniers Congdon was born in 1945 in Storrs, Connecticut where she attended Ashford Elementary School, E.O. Smith High School, and the University of Connecticut. However, she withdrew from the university when she married her husband, had a daughter prematurely, and began a career at the local telephone company. She lived in numerous small towns around Massachusetts, but when the company relocated to Worcester, MA, she moved with them. When her company provided scholarship funding, Sandra earned a BA degree at Clark University, where she majored in environmental sciences and minored in women's studies. Here she says she learned for the first time the discrimination that women were facing in the world, while also getting to study what she loved, the ecosystem. After graduating, she began working at the EcoTarium of Worcester where she said she fell in love with her job finally. Sandra appreciates the cultural diversity Worcester has to offer and stressed how much she appreciates meeting others of different backgrounds everywhere she goes. She enjoys doing this through the Unitarian Universalist church she attends, which is also where she met her current husband. Together they volunteer as docents at the local art museum, and also at the city's library. She acts as a caregiver for her husband as he battles cancer to ensure he is comfortable. Sandra elaborates on how her experience with her husband's cancer has changed her perspective on life and has allowed them to enjoy the things they love together more than ever.

BS: Alright. So, the first couple questions are about like, just general questions, family and about Worcester. What is your full name including both maiden name and married name if applicable?

SC: [Sandra laughs] Ok... it would be Sandra Jean Whitehouse Desaulniers Congdon. [Sandra laughs]

BS: When were you born?

SC: May 2nd, 1945.

BS: Have you ever been married?

SC: Oh yeah. [Sandra laughs]

BS: Are you still married?

SC: Yes.

BS: Okay. What is the name of your spouse?

SC: Robert Fancy.

BS: Do you have children?

SC: I have one daughter.

BS: Do you have any grandchildren?

SC: No, unfortunately.

BS: Okay. What cultures/ethnicities do you identify with?

SC: Caucasian. My Father was probably English.

BS: Okay. Tell me about your parents? How were you raised? What were their roles in the family?

SC: Well I never knew my father. He and my mother married during the Second World War and it was one of those, “Oh I could die tomorrow let’s get married,” and so they were just not made for each other at all. In fact, I never met him, or I don’t know anything about him. My mother was lived in a farm in backwoods Connecticut in the house that she was born in. She lived there forever. Her father built the house that they lived in and I lived in it for a while. It used to be a big farm. Not a dumb woman, but not educated because she had to stop school I think when she was about fifteen or sixteen because her father got ill and her mother—who was taking care of this farm that had hired hands that had to be fed three times a day and animals and all this stuff. So my mother stayed home to take care of her father and so she never had any- you know never graduated high school, never had any further education. I think she was very difficult to live with. I think she had some medical- mental issues that my therapist always diagnosed [Sandra laughs], but I don’t think she was ever diagnosed but she was not an easy person to live with, demanded a certain you know, role, from all of us. And because she wasn’t educated it was hard for her to understand what I wanted. I think that I take more after my father who was a very

educated man, was in the merchant marines in the war. He left boxes and boxes of books at the house when he left. And I think, and I know, I look exactly like him which I think drove my mother insane. But she never encouraged me to go to school, or aspired to anything out of the ordinary. I didn't have a good relationship with her. Better when I was younger because I didn't understand what I was facing but as I grew into my teens, it was not good. [Sandra laughs]. As bad as she was to me, and she certainly did some things that just to this day I can't forgive her for, she was worse to my brother. Oh my god. She was terrible to him and I don't know why. Well he had a different father, his father was an alcoholic and beat her and all this so I think...

BS: That might have played a role in that?

SC: Yup, yup.

BS: Did, did you ever like after your father left did you ever want to meet him? Or did you ever try to meet him?

SC: I never tried, and I should have because I feel very much in my life a big hole. You know, even though my mother married again, I had a step-father, he didn't, he wasn't a father to me. I think because—and maybe this is just something I makeup to make myself feel better, but I think my father and I would have been more alike, and he probably would've encouraged me more than my mother did. So, yeah, I should have looked for him. I know he was in England somewhere because he stayed in England after the war. And he remarried, I know I have brothers and sisters somewhere. And I never did it but it's really something I really regret in my life.

BS: Okay... We'll move on to something else. Where have you lived during your life? Did you grow up in Worcester and if you did what neighborhood?

SC: Okay no. I grew up in Connecticut near the University of Connecticut.

BS: Okay.

SC: A very rural area.

BS: Okay, okay. Yeah that is the next question. What was the neighborhood like generally?

SC: Yeah, oh my god I spent all day in the woods. I would get up have breakfast, go, and then sometimes when I got hungry I'd come back and my mother never worried because that was the time you know. You just go off and well when she's hungry she'll come home you know, kind of thing, so.

AH: Did you have like a lot of neighborhood friends?

SC: I had a few, it was a small area so I had one younger girl that I spent some time with and then there was a boy the same age as me up the hill and we rode our bikes as I got older almost everywhere. And that's really—oh and my dog, I had my dog with me all the time so that was my companionship.

BS: Yeah.

AH: Dogs are the best.

BS: [Sandra laughs] Dogs are the best.

BS: Alright so, you said you were born in Connecticut, you came to Worcester at some point, when did you come to Worcester, or for what reason did you come to Worcester.

SC: Yeah. Let me just think about how this happened exactly. I lived in Charleston, I lived in all these little towns and Webster, but I always worked in, well I started out working in Southbridge.

BS: Yup.

SC: And then with the telephone company and they actually ended up moving to Worcester so I went with them to Worcester, and then there came a point where I realized okay... I'm working in Worcester, I spend all day here, when I want to go to the movies I come to Worcester, when I want to eat out I come to Worcester. You know, whatever. And I said this is stupid I'm driving all over the place so my husband and I looked for a condo in the area and he was getting older and I didn't want him mowing grass and doing that kind of stuff so we got a condo, which was, was, good. So that's how I ended up moving to Worcester.

BS: Where do you live in the city now?

SC: I live off of Grafton Street. Blithewood Avenue, in a condo.

BS: In a condo. Okay... Do you have other family members that live in the same area?

SC: No.

BS: No.

AH: Where is your family located?

SC: My daughter is out in Ware, which is near Palmer. So, it's in the western part of the state. Where are you guys from?

BS: She's from Florida.

SC: Oh... So you wouldn't know then. [Sandra laughs]

AH: Yeah. [Abigail laughs]

BS: I'm from New Hampshire.

SC: New Hampshire. Oh, my husband was born in New Hampshire.

BS: Yeah that's where I'm from.

SC: Yeah, yeah. So that's the northern part of the state.

BS: So you said you had a brother right?

SC: Mhm.

BS: Do you, are you still in contact with him?

SC: Oh, my brother unfortunately passed away about 4 or 5...

BS: Oh, I'm sorry.

SC: Yeah, I really really miss him because he was, he is all the family I have besides my daughter.

BS: Exactly.

SC: And I'm still in contact with his wife, my sister in law so...

BS: That's good.

SC: Yeah.

BS: Alright, what challenges do you think this city still faces, if any, and what would you change about the city if you could?

SC: I love Worcester, I'm a big booster of Worcester. There's so much to do here. I mean look at WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education], the things that we do. My husband and I are docents at the Worcester Art Museum so we meet amazing people everytime we go into that museum. The people that we work with are amazing. And we do, you know we are also volunteers at the library so I meet lots of people there. I really get angry when I hear people say "Oh, stupid Worcester, it's a terrible town." You hear it all the time you know. And I think, "Oh yeah? There's ten colleges here would you like to go to a lecture, would you like to take a class." So I get kind of angry when I hear that. Right now the construction is driving me crazy. Every single street, which is part of the reason I was late [everyone laughing], has construction on it and it's just, it's insane and they don't seem to coordinate, so I wish they were a little more coordinated in the city. [Sandra laughing]. Like they put a parking lot in the neighborhood playground which is right near where I live in the summer. So all these kids are out of school and you know, running around. Luckily, they could get to the playground but everybody had to park on the street. So I think sometimes the coordination in the city isn't good.

BS: Mhm.

AH: Like, you said how you always traveled to Worcester even when you still lived kinda far.. Is there something that drove you to always come to Worcester or come back to Worcester over other cities?

SC: Well, working for the phone company, the friends that I made, most of them lived in the Worcester area because that's where it was located. So, you know, "Come to the movies," so then I would be the one to drive. Or, "We're gonna have lunch, come have lunch with us," so that was mainly the reason. I'm not a city person, and I do a lot of traveling, and my least favorite places are always cities. I didn't like Rome, I didn't you know? Like give me those little towns on the outskirts, I love those. But that's mainly why, following my friends and doing things with them.

BS: Alright so you mentioned a little bit about the colleges, and the other stuff that makes Worcester the place that it is, do you have any other reasons that you think makes Worcester why it is?

SC: I think I love the fact that I can walk down the street and and I can see a women in a saree, I can see a black person in—I don't know what they call them, but the men wear those suits that the pants and shirt match, and then you'll see I mean, just every nationality. We go out to eat, we can go to a Brazilian steakhouse, we can go to get Italian, there's an Afghani restaurant in the city, I mean you can just reach every culture and me being a big mouth, I talk to these people. And I love that. You know? I think that's one of the things about Worcester it's really a cosmopolitan city in that we have such an enormous immigrant population.

BS: Alright, what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been, in education, anything else really?

SC: Well, I cant speak about young women because I didn't spend much time here, but I have to tell you a funny story. I went to Clark [University], I started going to school at the University of Connecticut, and I, being a woman of my times decided, "Oh I'm gonna get married, what is this college stuff." Oh well. Got married, had my daughter, then I found out that the telephone company would pay for me to get my degree and I'd be stupid not to do that. So I came to Clark and I said, "I'm gonna go to the best school, or one of the best colleges, I'm not gonna just go to any—you know Worcester State." [laughing] So, I went to Clark and I got the catalog and I open it up, and I said, "What! Women's studies? What's that?" I mean I'd never, never, heard of that before, because when I went to college, there was no such thing. And so, it really changed my life coming to Worcester and going to school. Mainly because I met amazing people. One of my professors is now a friend of mine that I see occasionally. I just learned so much, and it really woke me up, as to what women were facing in the workplace and the world, and so I think it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

BS: That's awesome. Alright...

AH: Wait, I just have a quick question. So, you said how your mom kind of had a different lifestyle, do you feel that that lifestyle kind of limited you to pursue college in the first place?

SC: Very much so. We had no books in my home growing up. We had no music except for just popular music, you know, just turn the radio on, kind of stuff. And we never, our friends, my mother's friends, were, _'m not saying they weren't good people, but they were farmers, they were people that worked in the factories around here so I had no aspirations. I didn't know anything else so then when I finally came to Clark and saw "wow" then I was, it really just got to me that there is more to what I can do.

AH: Was she, or did she expect you to follow the footsteps of like the farming lifestyle?

SC: I think she figured I'd just get married, have babies, maybe work a part-time job. You know, the typical life of a woman of that time. You have to remember that was a time when women couldn't even get credit cards in their name. Their husbands had to sign for it to get a credit card. So, you might as well get married so that you have someone to take care of you. And I, just to tell you, I hated to play with dolls so I was never going to have a bunch of babies. [Everyone laughing]

AH: How did your mom feel about you going to college?

SC: Well, she was okay with it because I got scholarships so she didn't have to put up any money for it. I got scholarships to go and then I dropped out, and then I went back. Her whole thought was why are you doing this, why are you putting yourself through this. You're working all day going to classes at night, why are you doing this?

BS: Okay, take a step back for two seconds...

AH: Sorry.

BS: No you're fine! Before Clark, where did you go, like did you go to elementary school, high school? And what are the names of those schools?

SC: Okay. Ashford Elementary School. And then I went to E. O. Smith High School on the campus of the University of Connecticut.

BS: Oh, that's cool.

SC: Yes, that was another thing in my life.

BS: Okay, what year was it that you went to Clark?

[Sandra pauses]

BS: Or a rough estimate if you can't remember exactly.

SC: Well let's see, probably I started In 1985/1986. Somewhere around there. And it took me a long time to finish because I was going to night school.

BS: Exactly. Okay, upon finishing your formal education, so when you finished at Clark, what did you see as your options for workforce or...

SC: Well, I was working at the phone company at that time, and I was earning really good money for a woman. And I had all these days off, and holidays, and all these perks that went with the job and I just felt I have to stay here because this is how I'm going to support myself. And it wasn't until my husband and I divorced that I realized well now I can do something else because it's just me that I have to take care of. So I retired from the phone company when I was really young because they wanted to kick out people that were making the big money and get all the holidays and everything so they could bring in young people and pay them less. So at that point I went to work at the EcoTarium which I just—oh my god that was the best job in the world. Loved it, loved it. And I really felt like I was using my degree because it was in environmental science. I got to work with all kinds of wildlife, so that was...

BS: Was that in Worcester too?

SC: Yeah, yeah. Oh you haven't been to the EcoTarium? Oh my God. Get a taxi and get up there.

BS: Where is that?

SC: It's right next to North High, are you familiar with where North....?

BS: No.

SC: No, okay.

BS: Can you give me like a landmark or something that's like near it?

SC: If you go up Shrewsbury Street, you would just take a right turn as you're going up the street, you would take a right turn and the EcoTarium is in that section of the city.

BS: I'll have to check it out.

SC: You know, one of my friends is a teacher there and she'll bring preschool kids in and she'll read them a story about an animal, then she'll have the animals there because they have a zoo, we have bobcats there now.

BS: That's cool.

SC: And, then they'll have a craft that they do. It's so crowded that she has to have like four people help her while they do it.

BS: But that's awesome!

SC: It's the place where you can learn about the environment, you know?

BS: Okay, that's cool. Alright, last one about education. What support networks and mentoring have been most important to you?

SC: Well, I think the teachers that I had were always really supportive of me. I remember my ex-husband saying, "What are you doing this for?" It was really my teachers that kept me going. And my own desire to learn, which is why I'm in WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] today.

BS: Exactly. That's awesome.

AH: I have a couple questions to go back to. So you said that your high school was on the UCONN campus, and you said that was interesting, what was the most interesting part.

SC: Well, this is going to sound funny, but a lot of the teachers in that school were professors—I'm sorry that's not what I meant to say. Most of the students in my high school, their parents were professors in the University. Well, Peter Tork of The Monkees was one of my classmates. [Everyone laughing]. But I was going to school with all of these kids who had completely different lifestyles and outlooks than I did and then you know we'd have parties and I'd go to their houses and go, "Holy crap! This is quite a house." And that made me start to think, wait a minute, do I want to live in a hundred year farm house, you know? No. So that, believe it or not that was. And I've always been a person who watches everything. I watched what the girls wore, what kind of makeup they wear, how they wore their hair, how they acted because I didn't act like them because I was really from a whole different lifestyle. So that's how I really learned to be a little bit more sophisticated than I was. Not that I am sophisticated now, I'm not, but you know. It just took me up a little bit.

AH: Did you, comparing yourself to the way the girls dressed, did that make you feel insecure and want to be more like them?

SC: Yeah, we didn't have a lot of money you know. And, yeah, my mother always bought everything at, well they don't have them so much now, but outlets, kind of stuff. Cheap outlets,

not like the big mall things. And so I was always aware that my clothes weren't as good as everybody else's, but I tried to kind of look like them you know. [Sandra laughs]

AH: And you said you are married, so how did your husband, you and your husband, meet?

SC: At our church. My husband is, I mean I have to give him credit, talk about support. My husband was a teacher and a principal for twenty-eight years at a school in Melrose. He's really really intelligent and like we went to see Judy this weekend and we just talk, talk, talk, talk about anything all weekend and it's just so wonderful to have somebody like that that we can, you know, we can discuss things. And when, my friend asked me if we would become docents at the art museum, and I said to Bob, "Bob, I can't do that I've only had like art 101, I don't..." He said, "Of course you can do it," and then just didn't take no for an answer and really helped me kind of catch up. So I feel like I just owe him so much because I've really met wonderful people and it's something I really enjoy doing. And I also found out that I should've been a teacher all of my life. I should've been a teacher. But, I didn't know that and nobody ever brought that up to me, but now I find that I love it. I love getting up there and talking to people. [Sandra laughs]

BS: That's awesome.

AH: Does religion play a really big role in your relationship?

SC: Well, do you know anything about Unitarian Universalists?

AH: No.

BS: No, I don't.

SC: Okay. It's a religion where in fact, it's debatable whether it really is a religion. What it is is that it's a church where you can go no matter what you believe. Whether you believe there is a God up on a cloud somewhere, or if you believe, nope, no way. Or, if you believe that our God is nature, that's where I find you know, serenity and peacefulness, or whatever. You're welcome in this church because we are all trying to find our way in a world that's difficult. And, so, that really spoke to me, because when I walked in to that church that first time, my friend asked me to come with her. There was a white haired women in the pulpit who spoke quietly and softly, and just was so wonderful. And I said, "Wait a minute, this is what I've been—I don't want some guy up there thundering at me or speaking in a language I don't understand. I want to hear what she thinks." So she's a Buddhist, so she will give us a Buddhist lesson then she'll preach from the bible, then another week it's just strictly kind of...

BS: That's cool.

SC: It is.

BS: I've never heard of that before, that's cool.

SC: And it's old and the church that I go to which is in Northborough, I live on Rt 20 by Worcester State, so it just takes me a few minutes to get there. But, the church that I go to is just.. God I just lost my train of thought... Yeah, there's a lot, there are many people who go there who are very intellectual, there are many musicians in there. If you go down to Tuckerman Hall right now, you'll see a sign on it that says there is going to be a duo piano concert coming up, our music director is one of the people that is playing in that. So, every service is full of music and for example, we have a thing every week, called joys and concerns, and you can get up and say, "My best friend died. I've known her since I was five, I'm so sad", and people will come up to you after service and say "I'm so sorry you've lost your friend, I know how..." You know? It's just "Or I'm happy because..." And we just say it in front of everybody and it's what we call a beloved community, and we support each other 100%. It doesn't matter that you believe God and I don't, or vice versa. And if somebody is sick, oh, bring meals, stay with them, take them to doctors appointments, just...

BS: That's awesome.

SC: It is awesome. You've got to check it out. Oh, that's right you are in a Catholic school.
[Everyone laughing]

BS: How long have you been at that church?

SC: Well, probably twenty years.

BS: Twenty years.

SC: Yeah.

BS: That's awesome.

AH: Okay I have one more random question before we move on to the next section. You said how your ex husband kind of criticized you for like trying to juggle home life and school. How did that make you feel?

SC: Well, by the time I was going to Clark, it was pretty much towards the end of our marriage so I didn't really expect any more from him from that. You know, he finished high school and that was it and he was a building contractor, so he had smarts in a different way, but he didn't understand what I was doing. So, it didn't really, I mean I would go "hmm", but I didn't really make me want to stop or anything. It was just, "Oh that's him". [Sandra laughs]

AH: Okay we'll move on. So we are moving on to "work". What was your first job?

SC: Oh, a waitress. When I had the work scholarship when I went to college, and when I was in high school I worked summers at a restaurant and that's of course a very good way to learn how to get along with people. [Sandra laughs]

AH: Yeah. [Abigail laughs] What other jobs have you had? And what do you do now?

SC: Oh, let's see. I mostly had waitress jobs and then I went to work in my first really big job was the phone company, and then I went to the EcoTarium and worked there for a while. I worked in a doctors office for a while, but I didn't like that. And then, and now, I'm just retired and I just love being able to do all the things that are fun for me.

AH: How did you come to do the, well you said you came to do the EcoTarium because it was more in your major?

SC: Yeah.

AH: How did you come to pick your major? Like how, what drove you to it?

SC: Well, I grew up in the woods. [Sandra laughs] And, I've always been interested in the ecosystem. It fascinates me how animals adapt and I could go out into the woods right now and pick up ten plants and say this is this kind of thing. I read about it a lot, and I just thought, this is the stuff I love. This is what I want to work with. But my minor was in women's studies.

BS: Oh, that's nice.

AH: Why did you pick women's studies?

SC: Because it was so new to me. And for a while, this is so funny, I think I kind of have sworn this off now, but for a while, I would read nothing but books written by women because I felt that they were saying things to me that I've never heard before, because when I was growing up, I can remember reading "Bastard out of Carolina." Have you ever heard of that?

BS: No.

SC: It was one of the first feminist books, and she grew up in the mountains of North Carolina, and her—it's been a long time since I read it, but her step father molested her and she just got out there and said this is what happened to me, and then I started to think about all of the rumors when I was young. Like we had a family and they said all the girls—the mother is gone and all the girls, you know, and I remember thinking, “Oh for pete's sake that can't be true,” and then I read this and it is true. More than we know.

AH: What has all your work meant to you and how has it impacted your life?

SC: Well, my telephone company job impacted my life because I learned again how to interact with people. When I worked at the EcoTarium, one of the things I did there was to work with visitors services, and I had to go up when somebody was mad about something and talk to them, and help them out. All the different times that I was doing those waitress jobs, the phone company job, talking to fifty, sixty people a day, I was learning that skill of how to talk to people and take care of them. And the phone company job especially was important to me because it was so well paying and for a while, I was a single parent and my daughter had a lot of medical issues. She was born very prematurely and so she's had surgeries, she's had all kinds of things since, so I had to have that job to support her and get her the treatment that she needed. So, I would say that, but then, when I went to the EcoTarium, it was like, “Oh, thank you God!” [Sandra laughs] Finally something that I really loved.

BS: That's awesome.

AH: What were your primary responsibilities in terms of house work and child care?

SC: Oh I did it all. [Sandra laughs] I did it all, you know, that just wasn't done by a man. My ex-husband liked to cook so every once and a while, “Oh I'm gonna cook tonight.” Big deal, okay, but I cleaned up the kitchen after, right? But, really, basically, I did everything.

AH: Did that ever bother you that...

SC: Yeah, but I have to tell you a deep dark secret. My husband now has fourth stage prostate cancer, and, so that means it's metastasized. And he's, oh, he's a really strong guy. He's always... ever since he was a kid; run, skied, you know, bicycle, and so he's really a strong guy 'cause he's kept it up all his life. He skied, ran up until a couple seasons ago. He's 89 now, he's 89, and he's a tough guy and he's fighting this with every iota of strength that he has. And so I feel, you

know, here's the traditional woman coming out. I take care of him, and I intentionally take care of him, because I want to make this time of his life, which probably will be the end of his life, I want to make it really good and I want him to be happy. But! So, I put all this stuff on me, running up and downstairs doing the laundry, changing the bed, cooking the dinner, you know, all that stuff and every once in a while—and he'll be sitting upstairs 'cause this drug that he's taking, which is oral chemotherapy, just exhausts him. He finds it hard to even get dressed in the morning. And so, sometimes I have to sit myself down and talk to myself and say, "You know this isn't how he would be. This isn't how he was three years ago". You know, he was up, "let's go hiking, let's go here, let's go there". And so, I find myself kind of devolving into that thing, that kind of person I was when I was younger, 'cause I had to, and now because I want to. So, that's the difference [Sandra laughs]

AH: How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles, and interests in your life?

SC: [Sandra sighs] When I was younger it wasn't so much of a problem, because I could work a full day and then go out and hike for an hour or take my daughter somewhere for a while and it wasn't a big deal. Now that I'm older, I find that it's more of a problem balancing because, for example, I know that as a caretaker, I should be taking care of myself first. And yet, to make myself get up and get out and take a walk is so hard because I feel my time is limited. I love to read, so I want to make time for that, but I know I should be getting physical exercise. The things that I do to keep Bob feeling well, takes a big chunk of time. So, right now I find it really hard to balance all that. Coming to class at WISE is really, really good for us, because we both get to sit down, [Sandra laughs] and listen and learn. It's really fun

AH: What do you think are the pros and cons of the path you have chosen?

SC: [Sandra sighs] I'll give you the cons, first of all. I feel I could've been much more than I am right now. I feel... and I... and I... this is something I lay in bed at night and I think about it. I think I would have been a really good teacher. And I think I wasted a lot of my life not understanding that and getting the knowledge that I needed to be that. I should've been doing that when I was in college instead of, "Oh, I'm gonna get married." There was nobody there to talk me out of that! Nobody there to say, "Yeah, but, why don't you wait?" [Sandra laughs] You know? [Sandra laughs] Nobody. I'm compulsive sometimes, and "Oh, I'm sick of this. I'm gonna get married". [Sandra laughs] But I really feel that I wasted a lot of my life by not taking my natural talents and doing more with them. I also love to write. I write a lot, and I could've done something with that, but I never had much encouragement, so I'm just kind of let these talents slip away and I feel badly about it, and it's really too late to do anything about it now, so. [Sandra laughs]

BS: What are the pros of this path?

SC: Well the pros I'll have to say is that I met wonderful people. I love people, I love to talk to people, as you can tell. I love to learn about people. My greatest joy is to—oh, I was volunteering at some activity and this guy came up to me, and he had a shirt with a big plane on it and I said, "Neat shirt! Look at that airplane!" And he just started telling me stories about how he flew that plane in the Second World War.

AH: That's awesome.

SC: And I think every person, you talk to them, you're going to get a story And, so, that's really a joy of mine; that I meet people. In the library all the time, "Oh, you're here from where?" "So, what brought you to Worcester?" "How come you left your country?" I'm always doing that, and I think that I'm lucky that I have that ability to talk to people.

BS: That's awesome.

SC: And, another pro is that I've always been able to take care of myself.

AH: Mhm.

SC: I've always been able to support myself and not have to go on welfare, or whatever.

AH: How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life? Do you have any regrets?

SC: Yeah. Yeah.. I do. [Sandra laughs]

AH: Okay. We're gonna move on to politics and community involvement.

SC: Okay. [Sandra laughs]

AH: Do you consider yourself active politically?

SC: Not as much as some of my friends, but I certainly know what's going on. I swear and scream at the T.V. all the time [Sandra laughs]. I read two newspapers a day, so I know what's happening. But a lot of my friends are out demonstrating and that kind of thing, and I do that every once in a while but not usually. That's not usually my style.

AH: Is there a reason why you're not really drawn to that?

Worcester Women's Oral History Project
30 Elm Street – Worcester, MA 01609 – info@wwohp.org
www.wwohp.org

SC:

Well, no, I mean I was in Washington, marching for abortion rights kind of things. I've done that. So, I think that if it's something I'm really feel strongly about, I'll do it, but there's so much going on now I feel like I can't even... [Sandra laughs] I can't even talk about this, you know. I can't even hear it [Sandra laughs]

AH: Have you been involved in volunteer or community work?

SC: Oh, tons... tons.

BS: You mentioned the art museum...

SC: Yeah we're docents there. So, that means—I don't know if you know about this, but in Worcester, every single fourth grader comes to the Worcester Art Museum for a day. It's part of their curriculum. And we take them—different programs have evolved. The last one that we did was called VTS Visual. But anyway, what it is, is asking questions about the painting. Look at this painting, don't say anything, just look at it. Now tell me what's happening here? Why do you think, that kind of stuff. And fourth graders are the best. They are so funny. [Sandra laughs] They are the best. So, you know, that's really fun for me and I love it. I love it, love it, to bring inner city kids into the museum. We had a group of fourth graders from Elm Street School, which is in one of the really poor sections of Worcester. And a kid walked in and he said [Sandra gasps] "This is a palace! I wanna live here!"

AH: Aww!

SC: You know, it's just so amazing what they think and I really believe that art is important. Art says things in a way that maybe a person can take in easier than—like right now we have an exhibition on pregnancy and childbirth. Have you read anything about this in the newspapers? It's pretty amazing. There is a painting by a German artist of a woman who is—well you haven't experienced this yet, but at a time when you're so pregnant your belly is out to here, your boobs hang down and sit on your belly, you just... your just a blob.

AH: [Abigail laughs]

SC: And, your skin is the wrong color. And all you thinking is, "Get this kid out of me. I need to have this child born." This painting; she's nude, she's looking away, so you can't see her face. So, the emphasis is on birth. A new person in the world. And it's very controversial, 'cause some people just hate the painting. But, there's a modern artist who has come in and she's done

photographs of women giving birth, every single step along the way of giving birth. When you go to a museum, you see death, dying, you know, the crucifixion. This, that, the other thing. And you see babies, the little rosy pink babies. This shows you... you know...

BS: Truth...

SC: ...blood and guts, kind of childbirth. But the reason that artist did that is because, this is after—he painted after the First World War, and Germany had no men left. So, the most important thing... more babies and that was... you know, he was kin... and he has one sketch of a dead soldier on the ground, and a pregnant woman standing by him. So, it's so obvious that he's saying, "Women just have to bare these children, just so we can kill them," kind of stuff. If you get a chance to get down there, it's another place.

BS: At the Worcester Art Museum?

SC: At the Worcester Art Museum, yes.

BS: That's awesome.

AH: Besides the art museum, what were some of your favorite community work that you've done?

SC: Well we do the library. We're on the Friends Board of the library and the Friends raise money to fund children's programs at the library because those are so important to get the damn kids in the library [Sandra laughs]. And, so, right now it's undergoing a big renovation. So, our secondhand bookstore there is closed, we previously had to earn money selling secondhand books. Now what we're doing is bringing out six or seven racks of books every Tuesday afternoon, every Saturday morning, and selling them to continue to fund the programs. So, every Tuesday afternoon, I'm there, Bob's there. Again, another chance to talk to people. "Oh, try this, sread this book, it's great!" You know, kind of thing. So, really involved in that. And let's see, what other volunteer work have I done? [Sandra laughs]

AH: [Abigail laughs]

SC: I don't know, it seems like I—oh, when I worked for the phone company, they had a group called the pioneers, which was a volunteer group, and I always belonged to that, and they would, raise money to buy books for schools, and that kind of thing. I was always involved in that.

AH: What was it like marching for the abortion rights?

Worcester Women's Oral History Project
30 Elm Street – Worcester, MA 01609 – info@wwohp.org
www.wwohp.org

SC: Oh my god, that was just so amazingly wonderful. I went with a couple of girlfriends and I mean it's like electricity going through you when you're with all those women, and Bush was in office at that time. And, there were also signs that would be like, "Stay out of my bush, Bush!" You know, kind of stuff! [Sandra laughs]. And the sign that most amazed me was that there was a picture of a woman on a bathroom floor with blood all around her, and it said something like, "No more deaths by coat hanger".

AH: Mhm.

BS: Mhm.

SC: And, and I can just remember looking at that. And one of my friend's, her daughter and her granddaughter were with us. And the granddaughter was only about eight... nine, and she saw that sign, and she said to her mother, "How come mommy? Why is that...?" And I was just, so blown away by what she said. She said, "Because women are always going to need abortions, and they need to be safe. You don't want to hurt women just because they can't at that time have a baby." And I thought, "What an amazing answer that was." [laughs]. But it was really electric, it was amazing [laughs]

AH: For the art exhibit, what led you to join that organization?

SC: Well, I have a friend who is now the artistic director at the at the Hanover Theatre, and she worked at the art museum at that time, and she's in publicity, and asked Bob and I to come down and stuff envelopes which we did and it was kind of fun... talked to her and did that. And then she's the one that said, "You two need to be docents." And I said, "I can't do that!" [Sandra laughs]

AH: What are the main goals of the art exhibit?

SC: Bob and I do a tour called the Sunday Overview of the museum. All of the docents do it. We take turns doing it on Sundays, and I love to do that, and we laugh a lot when we do these tours. We tell the stories behind the paintings, "Why is this painting here? How did it happen? What is this artist thinking?" And, the reason that we feel that we want to laugh, we are not making fun of things, we are just enjoying what we're doing because we want the people that are with us to enjoy being there and come back and bring more people. So, we feel like we're ambassadors for the museum.

AH: Mhm.

BS: That's awesome.

AH: What are some of the things that you work on typically in the art museum?

SC: Well, we mainly do tours. Right now I'm the president of the docents council. There are about 50 docents and all of them are amazing people. [Sandra laughs] We have retired doctors, lots of retired teachers, that kind of thing. It's really fun to meet them, but hey need representation because a big institution like that—not that it's huge, it isn't, but the people that are hired to work there, they're most interested in keeping the museum going, keeping it solvent, growing their membership and the visitation and all that. And we sometimes get the short end of things. We have two parties a year; a holiday party and a summer party, a barbeque. They won't even buy our lunch. Okay, I mean, docents who bring people in, teach them about what's there, you know, make them want to come back and they can't even get us a lunch [Sandra laughs]. It's a real bone of contention to people, but there are other issues too. Like, we don't have microphones that we could be using if there's somebody in our tour that's hard of hearing, scheduling is sometimes a problem. All these little things and so the docent council is a group of docents who try to work out these issues that people have with things in the museum and we kind of talk to the powers that be and work out issues.

AH: What are the major accomplishments that the art exhibit has had?

SC: Well, I think that Worcester is now becoming a really well known art museum. Boston does reviews on us all the time—the *Boston Globe*. And people from the MFA [Museum of Fine Arts] will come out and see our exhibit. And so we're becoming really well known because we have an amazing collection. We've always had directors who were really, really farseeing in the art world. One of our directors was one of the monuments men who went to Europe to recover some of the art that was stolen by the Nazis. Another one of our directors bought the first two Monets to be shown in an American museum.

BS: That's so cool.

AH: Wow.

SC: Bought them in 1910. And then he bought a Gauguin, which we also believe the museum was one of the first or second places where that was shown, but that's an amazing compliment to have. We have Monets before anybody else in the United States decided, "Wow, those are neat." I think the fact that the museum is so dedicated to keeping abreast of what's happening, and that we work with the colleges a lot.

BS: That's awesome. Alright, we're gonna move onto health.

SC: Okay.

BS: You talked about how your mother may have had some mental...

SC: Mhm.

BS: ...your husband now has cancer, and that your daughter was born prematurely. How have those specific things impacted your life or those in your family?

SC: Well, my husband's disease is impacting me, day to day, obviously. But we talked about that. My mother, I think I've kind of outgrown the influence that she had on me by looking back and thinking, you know, "How she reacted doesn't mean I have to react that way". My daughter is a different story. My daughter has many, many medical issues, and it's very sad, because I cannot carry on a relationship with her. It's even hard to talk about. But she's very—she's like a child. I mean she's in her fifties and she's like sixteen, seventeen. And last time I went over to see her I brought her—she has a cat that we bought her. She loves animals, and so at the bookstore I found all these cat books like how to take care of your cat and some of them were just pictures of cats, which she loves to look at. I had this arm-load of books, which is because I love her and I think about her and I know she would enjoy these. And I walked in and I went to hug her and she was like this... I could just feel this tension in her. And she was so angry at me, at her life, at everything, and it was nothing I could do anything about. And it's so frustrating for me to deal with that, and I don't deal with it well. I lose my temper sometimes, and I shouldn't. I should understand that she's ill [Sandra sighs]. And Bob, again, who, you know, had to be a psychologist all the time he was in school, will say to me, "Well, you need to act a certain way, you need to react this way", or, "This is how she wants you to react." So, it's very hard for me [Sandra laughs] to spend time with her because it's not fun. [Sandra laughs]

BS: If you don't mind me asking, are those all, like, everything that she's dealing with still to this day, is all because she was born prematurely?

SC: Yeah, she has a lot of brain damage. She has most of the brain damage near her pituitary gland. She has dyslexia. I don't know if that's an outdated term or not, but it's very hard for her to read. When she went to high school, oh my god, she was in so much trouble. She was into drugs, she was into this, she was into that. And the school psychologist said to me, "Can I take some tests, you know, do some tests on her?" And I said, "Yeah" [Sandra laughs]. So, he started doing the test, and what he found, every time he took a test, he needed to know more because she

has such damage. It's really difficult. I'm just amazed that she can go to the grocery store and shop, because it's really hard. Like, if you have a bunch of figures to add up and there's three of four digits in each number, when she looks at it, because of the brain damage, the numbers jump back and forth between the columns. So, she'll never get the same answer twice. So, she's got real handicaps to work against, and that makes her angry. I just—it's hard [Sandra laughs]. It's very hard to deal with.

BS: Does she have a caretaker or does she take care of herself?

SC: She takes care of herself. She was married for a while. She decided, "Nope." She didn't want to be married anymore. So, she left her husband, and she got an apartment by herself. And now she decides she doesn't want to be by herself. So, I mean, again, this is nothing I can do anything about, but I mean, I obviously talk to her when she was talking about leaving her husband. And, she made her own mind up. I can't tell her what to do.

BS: Yeah, exactly.

SC: It's hard. [Sandra laughs]

BS: Okay, what are your experiences in accessing quality, affordable healthcare? Maybe, like, talk about what it was when you were growing up versus what it is now.

SC: Well, [Sandra laughs] the way it is now is I have wonderful healthcare. I've had wonderful healthcare since I worked for the phone company, because they have amazing insurance that goes along with the job, which is another perk because a lot of the insurance today will pick up when a child is a month old. They picked it up the minute she was born, so all these birth injuries that she had were covered right from the beginning. So, that was wonderful. When I was growing up, the only thing—I mean, I never had any health issues at all that I can remember. The only thing that I can remember [Sandra laughs] is that I use to go to have my teeth worked on, and because my mother was a single parent at the time, he would work without anesthesia or without....

BS: Ow!

SC: Oh, I can still feel... [Sandra laughs]

BS: That's brutal

SC: Yes! [Sandra laughs]

AH: That's painful

SC: So, that's the only thing that I can remember. Luckily, I was not... well I did fall out of a car one time, and fractured my skull. I was in the hospital for a long time after that [Sandra laughs], but I lived.

BS: That's scary.

SC: Yeah!

BS: kay, the last question is whose health are you responsible for besides your own? We talked about your husband's...

SC: Yeah, that's it. Yeah. And, I'm very lucky 'cause I'm very healthy. Very healthy.

BS: Okay, do you wanna just move onto this or do you want to ask these first?

AH: Both those... we'll start with this. Okay, so we're getting closer to the end. So, our questions may be a little more random.

SC: Okay.

AH: Like, not within a certain topic. How old were you when you were allowed to date? Where did you go on dates and what was considered fashionable when you were a young woman?

SC: [Sandra laughs] Okay, I think I was probably 16 when I went on my first date, and it was with a friend of my brother's who was a lot—my brother was a lot older than me. So, Johnny was eight years older than I was. But he was a family friend, so he was okay.

AH: [laughs]

SC: [Sandra laughs] We would go to the drive in, the regular movies, we would go to dances, go to the beach to Rhode Island, to the beach. What was in fashion when I was young were the big skirts with the crinolines underneath them.

AH: [laughs]

BS: [laughs]

SC: I could remember the skirt would be out like this when you'd be walking around [laughs]
And sweaters that you wore, you know, the cardigan sweaters, you wore them buttoned down the back.

AH: Interesting!

SC: [Sandra laughs]

BS: Did you put it on backwards and then button it...

SC: Well, you could button it and pull it over your head, and you know kinda...

BS: Interesting.

AH: [laughs]

SC: [laughs] And, let's see, what else? Oh, Pat Boone sang, so I remember having a pair of—oh no, Elvis—blue suede shoes. I did have a pair of blue suede shoes when I was a kid.

AH: [laughs]

SC: Trying to think what else. Oh, and your hair was always permed and frizzy. You know, kind of like an afro. [laughs]

BS: That's how all my mom's pictures look. [laughs]

AH: My mom had really curly hair too.

SC: Did she? [laughs]

AH: Yeah. [laughs] How were the girls treated when you were in school?

SC: Well, I remember my second grade teacher was—we didn't know it, but she was pregnant and she had to leave, and then came back with a baby and we were all surprised. So we were not told she was going to have a baby or anything. I mean it's interesting enough that I remember it after all these years, you know? We were in a really small town for my grammar school, and I can't really think of bad things that happened to the girls or that we were treated differently. But, maybe it's just because it's so long ago [Sandra laughs] It doesn't stand out.

AH: How do you get through tough times and what kinds of thoughts keep you going?

SC: My go-to drug is a book. I can remember one time being really so sad about something and I was crying, crying. And my face is red and I'm by myself. I picked up a book and I, you know, just because I can't think about this anymore, started reading and all of a sudden, like, five minutes later I realized I'm really into this book, I'm not crying anymore, I don't feel sad. And I can remember just putting it down and going, "What's the matter with you?" [laughs] You know? What's the matter with you can get into a book and just forget that you were sobbing about 20 minutes ago. Reading is a real fantasy for me. I read all the time. Being out in the woods is very, very calming and helpful to me when I'm upset about something. Um, I think those are my two big. [Sandra laughs]

AH: How do you define success in your life? Has this definition changed over time?

SC: I don't ever think I had a definition of success. I really don't. It was just to get by every day and do what had to be done, like taking care of my daughter, taking care of the house, [laughs] just doing my job, that was it. Success today, I feel I don't really look for success, I look for the time and ability to enjoy something that's important to me.

AH: What is a major barrier you overcame in your life?

SC: [Sandra sighs] I think, the major barrier that I overcame was coming from the small town with very little access to, I don't want to really say knowledge, because I used to make my mother take me to this library that was as big as this room [gestures to how small the room was], to go and get a book to read. But I didn't see any other way to live until probably I got into highschool. So I think that was something big to overcome. And I also had the feeling that I wasn't as good as every one else because my mother used to put me down a lot, and so having a teacher saying, "Oh, that was really a good paper," or something like that, really helped me. But to this day I'll say, like I said to Bob, "I can't do that," or "I don't know anything about that," and he just says, "Well you can learn." So, that's always been something that I struggle about every day.

AH: Is there any discrimination that you faced as a women that you vividly remember growing up?

SC: Well I do remember the thing about not being able to get a credit card and having to have your husband sign for it for you. I feel that a lot of times when I said things it wasn't accepted, or not considered as important as what the guys were saying. I think guys in that era, really looked

down on women. A guy that I dated, John, has been a friend all my life because he was not like that. And I introduced him to my best friend and then he married her. [Everyone starts laughing]. They've been married some fifty years so [Sandra continues laughing]. But, he was the one, he was one that didn't treat me like I was not smart or anything, you know? I just think the whole attitude, you kind of walked around like well the guys are the powerful ones, they get the big jobs, that kinda thing...

AH: Looking back is there anything that you wish you knew?

SC: [Sandra laughing] Lots. I wish I knew that my brain was as good as it was, because now it is starting to fail [Sandra laughing]. We laugh, Bob and I laugh all the time about the joke about going into a room and "Oh why did I come in here." It's true [laughs]. I wish I had realized that I had the brain power that I did when I was younger. I don't think I've lost all of it, but I wish I had known enough to take advantage of it.

BS: Okay, so these are the last three questions we have for you. So... based on your life experience, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

SC: Oh I would say learn everything you can, and don't put boxes around what you learn. Even though when I was working for the phone company I was learning how to talk to people, that fell over the edges of the box and led me to other things. And experiment, and explore. I go to Europe every spring, me and a bunch of my friends, and we love it so much and we get out and we went to Scotland, we ate haggis [makes disgusted look]. But I mean if I'm going some place I have never been before, then I'm going to do what is there, I'm going to eat some weird thing that I've never heard of before, or that I've heard of and thought "Oh that must be awful." Just don't shut yourself down, keep yourself open to all new experiences, and learn, learn, learn as much as you can.

BS: Awesome. Okay we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women, as it has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include, or anything else that you want to make sure we include.

SC: Oh, I think... just that women are amazing, and when they have barriers set in front of them, or they are not encouraged, they can still live a good life and keep learning and be good to other people. In my life, that is the most important thing to me is to be good to other people. My friends are really good to me, I try to be equally good to them. And I think it's important because women are taking jobs now like in the senate. They have a different look at the world, and I think we need more women out there because our views are so different, and we need to influence things in another direction.

BS: Alright last question. Is there anyone else you would suggest we talk to if you could?

SC: Oh my god! A friend you mean?

BS: Yeah, anyone.

SC: Oh my god I wish she lived around here, she lives down on the Cape, she is the one I travel with all the time. She was the oldest of fifteen children growing up in South Boston. She is the same age as I am so that was in the fifties and she has stories that would curl your hair [Sandra laughs].

BS: That's awesome.

SC: She is amazing. And she, let me tell you, this woman. Smart, smart, smart. Couldn't go to college with fifteen kids, okay, couldn't go to college, married right out of high school, pregnant, married right out of high school, she is the one who should have been out in the world working. Her husband was the one who should have been home cooking dinner and taking care of the kids and doing the garden, because he is really good at all that stuff. She is a terrible cook, she manages a psychiatrist office, that is her job. And she is funny, funny, funny, she has that Irish sarcasm that just knocks you off your feet. She lost a leg because she has had circulation problems for a lot of her life, and so when we travel, she is in a wheelchair, a lot of the time, not all of the time, but a lot of the time, and we go out and I push her and we have the best times, the funniest stories. I ran her into a bus one time [Everyone starts laughing], "Genee look at that! Wham!" [Sandra laughing] I mean we, just funny, funny, funny, stuff that we do. And we were roommates and we always, we see each other a couple times a year, get on that plane, get to our room and just start talking like we were together yesterday. She is just... I wish you could interview her because she is amazing.

BS: That's awesome. Okay, alright! That is it! [Shuts off recording device]