

Interviewee: Claire Constantin
Interviewer: Pat Doherty
Interpreter: Betty Filipkowski
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Transcriber: Victoria Iannazzo



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Abstract: Born and raised in Worcester, Clair Constantin has lived in Sturbridge, MA for the past twenty years. Clair is married with two children, a twenty-five-year old daughter, and a twenty-two-year old son. After losing her hearing at the age of three, Clair was torn between the hearing world (to which her family belonged) and the Deaf world she desired. After changing schools during childhood, Clair found and loved the Deaf culture. She has since played an important role in the Deaf community. In this interview, Clair discusses her family's reaction to her Deafness and the struggles she faced. She describes the way the city of Worcester has improved over the years as well as the difference in women's role within the home. After a successful career working for the government in the social security office, Clair spends her time volunteering at the Deaf Senior Center and the Rape Crisis Center.

Pat Doherty: Testing 1, 2. Deaf studies interview, Pat Doherty. Worcester Women's Project, again my name is Pat Doherty. My interview is with Claire. Your full maiden name?

Claire Constantin: My first name is Claire and my maiden name is Gabery.

PD: Okay, are you married?

CC: Yes I am.

PD: Now you're not married?

CC: No, I'm married now, and I've been married for seven years.

PD: Oh, okay.

CC: And my husbands name is Fred.

PD: Last name?

CC: Constantin.

PD: Oh, okay. You were born where?

CC: I was born in Worcester; let me spell that out for you, Worcester (spelled out).

PD: Do you have any children?

CC: Yes I have two children. I have a daughter who's 25 and a son who's 22.

PD: Are you a grandmother?

CC: No, not yet.

PD: Oh alright. What culture do you identify with? Your culture, is it the Deaf culture or more the hearing culture? Which one?

CC: Well a long time ago, when I was growing up, I identified more with the hearing culture but now I identify with the deaf culture.

PD: Tell me about your mother and father.

CC: My parents? Let me think here. I became deaf when I was three years old; at first my father did not accept it. I wasn't able to speak, and he did not allow me to sign so I had to learn how to speak all over again, and that took about two or three years, and finally my father started to accept it but he wanted me to stay involved with the hearing world, and stayed within the hearing world until I was about ten. That did not work and I did eventually transfer over to a deaf school in Boston. But I did go to a hearing high school. But still my parents never accepted me fully as a deaf person, and did not learn to sign.

PD: Where did you live growing up? Worcester?

CC: Yes, Worcester.

PD: Okay. What community, your neighborhood? Like where in Worcester?

CC: Right in Worcester, it's right near Holy Cross, you know? On the top of the hill.

PD: Yup, on the hill. You came to Worcester with your family?

CC: Yes.

PD: When? Did your father come to Worcester or was he, did he move here or was he born in Worcester.

CC: My whole family was born in Worcester.

PD: Oh okay. Now are you still at the top of the hill?

CC: Nope, I moved to Sturbridge and I've lived there for about 20 years.

PD: Oh, okay. Do you have other family members who live in Worcester now?

CC: Yes, my brother lives in Worcester.

PD: What challenges does Worcester have? What do you think Worcester needs to change?

CC: Do you mean for the deaf community?

PD: The entire city.

CC: What needs to change...let me think...

PD: Deaf, hearing, whatever you think.

CC: It would be really nice if the hearing people could understand the deaf people more, for communication, I think that's what needs to change.

PD: What has changed over time from the time when you were growing up 'til now in Worcester? What do you see as a woman?

CC: A lot has changed; we have interpreters now. We have a lot of deaf services such as the Mass Rehab Commission. We have the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. We have the Center of Living and Working, the Senior Center -- there's so many services now, not like it was a long time ago.

PD: What makes Worcester good? Like, how do you feel? Do you like, what do you like about Worcester?

CC: Worcester, they have a lot of deaf services, um, like I mentioned before, the Center for Living and Working, and the Mass Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and the Massachusetts Rehab Center, the Senior Center as well.

PD: Your experience as a woman in Worcester has been what? Growing up here like what were your experiences like?

CC: Well my experiences and being involved in the deaf community it's, I really like to help and work with the deaf community. I like being the coordinator here at the Senior Center. Right, I went to a hearing school when I was younger and then I did transfer over to a deaf school for a little while.

PD: Oh, okay. So you went to a hearing high school and then you went to a deaf school?

CC: Yes, that's right. Actually it was an elementary school when I was younger, then went to a high school probably around middle school age, and then went to a hearing school for high school. So I did go to a deaf school for middle school.

PD: Did you go to college?

CC: Just for a short time.

PD: Okay, for a little bit. What year?

CC: It was around the 1970's; it was a long time ago.

PD: Okay.

CC: Long time ago [laughs].

PD: What was hard for you about education growing up?

CC: Well I didn't find it hard if I actually had an interpreter there.

PD: I mean in the hearing schools it was hard. Right?

CC: Right, the hearing schools were more difficult.

PD: Compared to deaf schools, it was better...

CC: Deaf schools were easier, but I think if I had an interpreter it would have been much easier for my education, but it was hard without the interpreter. My friends would actually help me out in school by taking notes for me and I would sit up front in the classroom and watch the teachers so I could read their lips. But it was difficult.

PD: When you finished school what were your options? You were around 20 years old right?

CC: Right, around 20, 21.

PD: What were your options, what did you think about doing? Didn't know?

CC: I actually always wanted to be a social worker, but for some reason I didn't do that, and I did work for the government. I've worked for them for a long time, and I work in the social security office.

PD: Growing up, what support systems helped you?

CC: There really weren't any support systems. You mean like agencies?

PD: Like family, friends?

CC: Well my family was very supportive and it really, it had a lot to do with because I could speak, but I really did wish they learned how to sign. It would have made communication a lot easier.

PD: Okay. Do you work outside the home now?

CC: Only here at the Senior Center on Thursdays.

PD: Okay, Thursdays? How did you start coming here?

CC: Well about three years ago, when I retired, I would come into the Senior Center just to visit, and I deci- they asked me to be the coordinator so I decided to help out that way.

PD: Who do you work with? Do you work alone as the head, or...?

CC: Do you mean here?

PD: Yeah, here. Like, do you have a partner here?

CC: A partner? Well we have the officers...

PD: Okay.

CC: We have the president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and we all work together.

PD: What does the work here mean to you?

CC: Oh, it means so much to me. I really love to help the seniors, and sometimes it's hard and sometimes it's easier. But I really like to help the seniors go on field trips, play bingo, have workshops, so there's many things that we do here at the Senior Center.

PD: In terms of housework, washing cloths, different things; what are your responsibilities?

CC: Oh my husband helps.

PD: Oh your husband helps? That's good.

CC: Oh yes, definitely. We each take a share. It's 50/50.

PD: So you share the housework?

CC: Absolutely.

PD: Do you think housework has changed over time from when you were growing up 'til now? Is it different? Was your mother's work different? Has women's roles expanded?

CC: Well when I was growing up, my mother did most of the housework, but now it's a shared responsibility. It always used to be the women's work.

PD: Oh, okay. You chose your professional path and your personal path, your personal work, how do you feel about that choice?

CC: I'm not sure what you mean...

PD: Your work that you chose, no, no, before.

CC: You don't mean here at the Senior Center?

PD: Before here. How do you feel about what you chose to do? You feel good?

CC: Oh, about my choices? Yes, yes I feel good about my choices. I worked for the government for 30 years and that was good for me, and it was a good steady job.

PD: Sorry about that.

CC: That's okay.

PD: Your husband does what for work?

CC: He's retired as well.

PD: Before?

CC: And he worked at the Boston Globe, but he's retired now.

PD: Oh okay. Are you active in politics?

CC: Politics?

PD: Yes politics. Are you involved?

CC: No, not really. Yeah, I'm not really crazy about politics.

PD: Same. Do you volunteer? Did you help others growing up, or services you were involved? Like how do you volunteer now? Do you volunteer?

CC: Well here at the Senior Center.

PD: Okay, any other place?

CC: And I actually go to the Rape Crisis Center, and I'm a counselor there, and I do that on a volunteer basis.

PD: Okay. (Long Pause) What role has religion played in your life? Has it? Religion, religion, I knew that sign. Has the role of religion changed growing up to now?

CC: When I grew up I, I had to go to the Catholic Church every Sunday, I had to sit through the sermons and I didn't have any interpreters at all so, you know, I didn't really understand what was going on. So it was very difficult, so...

PD: Has your health been good growing up?

CC: Yes, it's been fine.

PD: No impact? (pause) No impact on your life? It's been good health?

CC: Yup, no impact.

PD: Have your experiences in obtaining good healthcare been good?

CC: Yeah, no problems. I feel that it's been the same as any other hearing person would get, so, no difference in health care services. I didn't find anything to be special for healthcare just because I was deaf.

PD: Are you responsible for any other health, besides your own health? Your husband's or....?

CC: Right, I take care of my husband, and then I took care of my mother before she passed away.

PD: Okay. Just a few more. Your life experiences growing up 'til now, what would you give, like some information to other women? What would your advice be, to other women in Worcester?

CC: You mean from my experiences? What advice would I give to other women?

PD: Yes, yeah, like what advice would you give?

CC: So from my experience, like with my counseling, I like to be able to help other women. Let them know that they don't have to actually stay in an abusive relationship, so I want them to have better lives for themselves, to be more independent.

PD: Independent? Do you have thoughts about the past? About World War II? No?

CC: Yeah, I'm too young; I'm too young for that.

PD: Yes, yes, I agree. This is a personal question... How do you get through, like hard times?

CC: Like what do you mean?

PD: Like different emotional times with family, work. How do you get through them? Like how what do you do? Volunteer?

CC: Like when I have to go through like a crisis?

PD: Yeah, like a crisis.

CC: Yeah, if I'm just having a hard time in my life I go to counseling, I talk with my friends, I just try to work it out...I try to work through it.

PD: Okay, finished, that's all.

CC: Okay, bye.

PD: Thank you very much.