

Interviewee: Elizabeth D’Errico
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Abstract: Elizabeth D’Errico was born in Forest City, Pennsylvania in 1939 and works as a Registered Nurse in the city of Worcester. Before her first child was born she had worked as a teletype operator at Norton Company, but her husband didn’t believe a woman should work. When Betty became a widow in 1974, she needed a way of supporting her family. Betty decided to do what she had always wanted and that was to become a nurse. In this interview, Betty discusses the rewards and challenges she faced while pursuing her dream. She describes how hard it was raising three small children while going to school but the rewards she received in the process outweighed the costs. Betty also stresses what getting an education meant to her as well as what it means to young people today and also recalls her memories of the Worcester Tornado of 1953.

SO: We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women’s Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women’s education, health, work, and politics/community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with work and community involvement. Thank you for your help with this important project!

BD: You're welcome.

[Laughing.]

SO: Betty, what is your full name and your married name?

BD: My full name is maiden Elizabeth Yarnes Kramek D’Errico.

SO: What is the name of your current husband?

BD: His name is Vincent.

SO: And what was the name of your previous husband?

BD: Was Richard Kramek.

SO: Where were you born?

BD: I was born in Forest City, Pennsylvania.

SO: Do you have any children?

BD: I have three children and two step-children for a total of five.

SO: Total of five. What about grandchildren?

BD: Grandchildren; we have 14 and one great grandchild.

SO: Wow.

KG: It's a lot.

SO: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with or your family background?

BD: I'm Lithuanian. My mom was Lithuanian and my dad was kind of mixed so I was brought up Lithuanian mostly.

SO: Okay. Tell me some more about your parents, what they did as far as jobs, where they lived in the city?

BD: We lived- we originally came from, from Pennsylvania. I was born at home, not a hospital.

KG: Oh wow.

SO: laughs.

BD: I was a big baby. I was nine pounds.

KG: Wooh.

BD: My mom was basically a housewife. She basically stayed, you know, at home and then my parents got divorced when I was very young and I lived with my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother was Lithuanian, talked very fluent Lithuanian to me and my cousin who is a year younger than I lived in the same house. We had like a two family house so as children we would play outside and we would talk Lithuanian.

KG: Oh wow.

BD: And my mother had to teach me English as a matter of fact to go to first grade because I knew just Lithuanian.

KG: Oh wow.

BD: And the kids would come across the street and they would kind of listen to us but they didn't know what we were saying.[Laughs.]

BD: We just talked very fluently in Lithuanian. That's a little bit of a background. My father was a bartender and that was mainly his line of work. And even though they were divorced, you know my mom never spoke harshly about my dad but allowed me to go visit with him almost every weekend. And it was fun 'cuz he had this old '39 Ford and we would go like 5 or 10 miles an hour back and forth and I thought that was...

KG: That was awesome. [Laughs.]

BD: That was a big deal for me you know. But I was just a little kid and used to like to sit sometimes if the bar room wasn't busy I could sit at the end of the bar and listen to all Burl Ives records and you guys probably don't even know who Burl Ives is but..

SO, KG: No.

BD: We would sit there and I would always say- and he would give me a root beer or cream soda and I would sit there- but very close to, to both my parents.

SO, KG: Good.

BD: And you know, very close.

SO: And you said that your mom was a housewife?

BD: She was basically a housewife yea.

SO: Did she ever, when your parents got divorced, did she ever work outside of the home or did she still stay a housewife?

BD: Well sometimes she worked at some of the mills like what they called a parachute factory. This was way back in the war, war time. So, she would be, you know, sewing, you know, sewing some of the parachutes, you know ,so that was basically her line of work. So I guess she did work. I misinformed you both. Sorry about that.

SO: No, it's okay.

KG: It's fine.

SO: During your life, where else have you lived besides Pennsylvania?

BD: I came to Massachusetts when my mother remarried and I was living with my grandmother and she came out to Massachusetts because there was no work in Pennsylvania so my step-father came out here and I later came out to live with them. And that was back 1949 or '50 so we came and we lived in Shrewsbury and, you know, we lived, we lived- I lived in Shrewsbury for the rest of my life and I'm still there. I'm still living there in Shrewsbury.

SO: Now when you first came to Shrewsbury, was it kind of like ethnically divided like how Worcester was kind of like Worcester neighborhoods?

BD: No, Shrewsbury was kind of mixed. There were a lot of ,you know, Italians and, you know, there were different nationalities-they were mixed.

SO: Okay. Do any of your other family members live in Shrewsbury?

BD: My family members...I have two children that live in Shrewsbury and two of my children live in Shrewsbury and one of my step-sons lives in Shrewsbury and I have one daughter that lives up in New Hampshire.

SO: Where did you go to school, high school, grammar school?

BD: I came here and I started I want to say it was the fourth grade and it was Shrewsbury again it was Calvin Coolidge School in Shrewsbury. And then from there it went we were there for all eight grades, junior high school was at Calvin Coolidge and then from there we went to Shrewsbury High School which is now, I think it's the middle school and now they have that beautiful new school in Shrewsbury. I never had the opportunity of course being older so...

SO: Did you go to college or did you pursue any kind of vocational training?

BD: I always wanted to be a nurse and my parents didn't have the money to send me to nursing school so what happened was I got a job at Norton Company. I was a tele-type operator, you know, at Norton Company so we would send all these little telegrams. This was before before computers came around. Then for fun we used to send, we used to exchange recipes and I always knew what the weather was going to be because we had, we had contacted people in Chicago and they would always tell us the weather and we always knew that if there was a snow storm we were going to get that weather within the next couple of days 'cuz it always came out, came out east. So I went to work when I got out of high school. I graduated in '57 and then I went to work right away at- I got a job at Norton Company and I was there and got married in '59 to my first husband Richard. And I worked at Norton Company until I became pregnant with my first child which was in 1963.

SO: So you started there first to put yourself through nursing school?

BD: No, I started there basically because I needed to work and so I started working there and then I got pregnant. It was a long time before I got pregnant, we waited almost four years I think, things just weren't happening so I had to wait that time and then had my first child in '63. And then before I knew it I got pregnant again with my second child in '64 and then came my son in 1966 and then I became a widow in 1974. And prior to that you know, in those days, your husband, or my husband, didn't believe that a woman should work so I didn't work. And finally, you know things were, you know- we were

living from paycheck to paycheck just like everybody else. And I said, “Gee and I’d like to go and just get a job you know working at Christmas time.” So that’s what I did. I picked up... I worked at Spag’s in the toy department as a matter of fact. I worked with people and then that was just over Christmas and then after that I said, “Gee, I really want to work 'cuz now I get spoiled and like this spending money that you know that I had.” So I got a part-time job down at Friendly’s which is still open down at White City. So I worked there and I worked there until well-1974 was when my husband died and I said, “Well now what am I going to do?” You know I needed to support my family and then I said ,you know what, I’m gonna do what I always wanted to do so that’s when I decided to become a nurse. So I went to Hahnemann [Hospital] for an interview and the girl there said, “You know what, Betty, why don’t you get your feet wet and go take a college course and take a college course at Quinsig [Quinsigamond Community College]?” So there I went and did Chemistry. Chemistry I was fine you know I breezed through that 'cuz I remembered and then Chemistry II, I needed a lot of help with Chemistry II but I did pass it. And that gave me the confidence, you know, to put an application in to the Hahnemann School of Nursing and I was fortunate enough to get accepted and I did three years of school there and with that, I went to Worcester State College and I think I did one year at Worcester State. And it was very hard, it was very difficult 'cuz I had three children, you know, so my bedroom door was always closed but I was home. You know so they were going to have a coming out party for me when I finally graduated. So, I graduated the same year from nursing school which was in 1981 and that was the same year my daughter, my older daughter Pam graduated from high school.

SO, KG: WOW!

BD: So that was my brief little synopsis of how I got into nursing school but that’s how I, how I, got into nursing school.

SO: And besides trying to go to school while having children did you face any other challenges while pursuing trying to be a nurse to go to nursing school?

BD: Challenges, I would... just, just sitting and studying was you know was enough. So then I decided, well I was going to take the first summer off. Sometimes that’s not a good idea because then you kind of lose what you’ve learned in the first year. So, I decided after that that I would work. And we were fortunate enough that we were able to get a job right there at Hahnemann at Hahnemann Hospital. So I worked after that in the summers that we were, you know, that we had off . So the challenges were basically bringing up the children and like I say, my children at the time that I started were, I think, they were seven, eight, and 10. So and then years continue and you guys know what it’s like to be teenagers so

[Laughs.]

BD: those were challenging enough that I, you know, that I had.

SO: What particularly to you has nursing meant, how has it changed your life, and how

do you think you have affected the lives of others?

BD: Well, I've always liked people, you know. I always enjoyed working with people, helping people, helping the patients. Loved working in the hospital, love the elderly; they get very dependent ,you know, on you and it was it was a dream that I always had about going to school. It was very good for me to do that. So the fulfillment was just helping, you know, helping others and just hoping that I did make a difference in someone's life.

SO: I could say now and before you became a nurse, what were your primary responsibilities in terms of housework? And how has that kind of evolved since like the role of women has kind of changed?

BD: The role of women has changed, you know, as far as working I think because as I said to you before, my husband didn't think that a woman should work and I went right along with him. My job was to stay at home and ,you know, cook the meals and, you know, do the ironing and the washing and, you know, doing everything that a woman was supposed to do in those days. But times have changed. I remember when my daughter first got married and I went to visit her and I was there and her husband said, "Excuse me, I have to go get my shirts out of the dryer." You know so I said, "My god I said to my husband, can you imagine she doesn't even do his shirts." And then I went home and I thought about it and I said ,you know, I'm working full time and I'm still doing all this I said so my role had to change and I changed. I changed the way that I looked at things and I said, you know, if I'm working full time and he's working full time, we have to do some of these things fifty/fifty. So that was how it has changed. You know so I guess I came a long way.

SO: So would you say now that you and your husband share the housework equally?

BD: Absolutely, absolutely. Well now my husband is retired and course now I'm older but I'm still I'm still working so he does the meals now. I go home to a supper that he cooks at night.

SO, KG: Nice.

BD: You know and he'll throw a load of laundry in on occasion. There are still some things that I prefer to do on my own like men sometimes don't clean the way that a woman will clean. But you have to say thank-you all the time and make them feel as though they're really doing a good job. So you make them feel appreciated and sometimes you hope that they'll do a little bit more. And he's very good to me and like I said, I go home and supper's ready every night.

SO, KG: Good, good.

BD: So I guess it has, the role has changed an awful lot.

KG: Wow.

BD: Um hmm.

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

BD: Well we each share the load as far as, you know, as home. You know, my husband takes care of the bills and I do some of the housework; he does help a lot since he is retired. So that kind of balances that way. And in interests, what do I have for interests? Sometimes when I go home I'm kind of tired, you know. I do belong to a women's club that I have joined so I kind of do that like once a month. I play bocce every Monday night at the Italian Club which is right next door, you know, to my house so...

KG: That's convenient.

BD: But I think it's good for a husband and wife to have outside interests and then to actually do things together. And we enjoy going to the movies and we go out to dinner and we have friends over so we do do a lot of things together but we do have our outside interests also.

SO: Can you tell me a little bit more about the women's group, is it a volunteer organization, a community organization?

BD: It's a community organization and they meet, they meet, once a month. And they have different- like April is coming and you know everybody brings like a pot luck. It's done very nicely, you know. They have people that pour the tea and the coffee and it's all nice silver and it's really very nice, you know, it's very very nice. And then they give out scholarships out to the community. They give out several scholarships and they do different walks for cancer and so it's a great organization you know. My daughter happened to get it and I liked that one mainly because she did get a scholarship from the women's club when she graduated and I wasn't even involved with them at the time.

SO: Based on your life experience, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

BD: Well I always tell my children that, you know, you should always get a good education because you never know when you're going to need it. Years ago, it wasn't for a woman to go out to work but today I always tell my girls, you know, a perfect example you never think that things are going to happen to you like what happened to me. I was a widow in my thirties, had three children to bring up so you basically need to get your education, get a good job just so that you can survive today. So that's the advice that I would give to anyone.

SO: And now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women than has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

BD: Oh I'm at a loss for words. I just think education is just a very, very important part and I think that would be the top of my list, I think is just to go out and get an education.

KG: Absolutely.

KG: What are some of the fondest memories when you were younger like with your family, your siblings or anything like that?

BD: Well one of the memories that I have and I don't know if it's a fond memory but I was in the tornado.

KG: Really.

BD: Back in, was it, 1953 I think. I had made my Confirmation and we had come home and my mother told us to all go down to the cellar. And in those days you didn't lock the doors and had she locked the door we would have all been dead okay. But, my mother was pregnant with my brother and you know so we just went down in the cellar, did a lot of praying when we were down there 'cuz it sounded like a thousand jets going, going over head. And when we finally came up, there was... our roof was off and...

[Interview interrupted by medical staff]

BD: Where was I? We went- so we came up and there were trees in the living room and I remember my mother said- my mother at the time smoked which, you know, so she said, "Betty please go down and get me a pack of cigarettes from Kim's." At the bottom of the street where they have this Kim's boathouse so there I am traipsing through, there's live wires and everything, and at the time I thought our house was the only house that, you know, that something happened. And of course the store was gone, the house next to me was gone and this couple, an elderly couple, had died in the lake 'cuz we lived near Lake Quinsigamond and they, they found them in the lake.

KG: Wow, so that was here?

BD: That was here. This was here in Worcester. It was the first tornado that they had ever had. You know, so this was way before your time, girls. But that was not a fond memory, but a memory that I'll never forget. Okay there. I have fond memories every year we go to the beach. We go to York Beach, Maine every year and my three children all come up with their families so we have a houseful. And the kids, you know, I do special breakfasts for them with the waffles. And we just, we had a cake fight one time. It was my daughter's birthday and we just had a good time and I think it's just nice to be together and to share memories. And to this day, they still the kids always say, "When are we going to the beach, Gram?" And every year we do go up to the beach and the beach is within walking distance but then we do have a lot of we just have a lot of fun being together.

KG: Good, good. So it's a tradition now?

BD: It's absolutely it's a tradition right.

SO: Well I think that's it. Thank-you very, very much.