

Interviewee: Denise Darrigrand
Interviewers: Selina Gallo Cruz & Milagros Montenegro
Date of Interview: May 31, 2018
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcriber: Milagros Montenegro



Abstract: This interview details Denise Darrigrand's journey as a curious social sciences undergraduate to an on the ground social activist. Ms. Darrigrand, former Dean of Students at Clark University located in Worcester, Massachusetts, has worked most of her life towards the betterment of her students. A triple major in sociology, anthropology, and psychology while an undergraduate, Ms. Darrigrand has used her diverse educational perspectives to help various marginalized communities throughout Worcester county. From raising awareness of the growing dilemmas of the homeless to helping young teenage mothers in their time of need, Ms. Darrigrand's commitment to the betterment of her community shines throughout this interview. At her core, Ms. Darrigrand exemplifies the power that occurs when individuals are seen not as issues to be solved or pushed aside, but as fully fleshed human beings with undeniable rights to their humanity.

M: For the record can I have your full name?

D: Sure, it's Denise Darrigrand.

M: Perfect, and can we start a little bit with your family history where you grew up?

D: Sure, also I don't hear very well, so if you could speak up a little bit that would be really helpful.

M: Yeah.

D: My family history let's see. I grew up in upstate New York, in basically central New York, in a very conservative Republican household. My father was a politician; he was the district attorney and then county judge, so I grew up in that kind of environment. At the same time, my father was pretty open to different ideas, but he still had a very conservative and male-centered sense of the family, so when my sister graduated from high school as valedictorian and wanted to go to Brown [University] which at that point was \$5,000 a year, he basically said, "Why would I spend \$5,000 a year to send a girl to college?" But he did and then when she got out and went to the Peace Corps, he had a fit but she went anyway. So that was the kind of environment I grew up in, but somehow my values were very different than the rest of my family, I would say including to some extent my siblings. They were all politically conservative and I think I probably almost never was and I'm not sure why, but that was an interesting environment to grow up in.

M: And you just finished saying you don't know why, you were a little bit, can I say liberal? I don't want to put words in your mouth, in your political views.

D: Yeah, I'm not sure why I was different, we had the same parents, we all grew up in the same household, we all had the same education through high school so why I was different I'm just not sure.

M: Okay, and can you speak a little bit about your education.

D: Sure, I went to high school then I went to college where I felt very at home because I was a triple major in psychology, sociology, and anthropology but I loved doing that and then I took three years off. My first job was with emotionally disturbed boys in a residential treatment center. I worked there for a year and then I became the assistant director of residence halls at a local community college and that kind of spurred my love of higher ed. I had been an RA [Resident Advisor] when I was in college and didn't realize that you can kind of do that as a living when you got out, so I applied to one graduate school, got in, and kind of took off from there so. My degrees are in higher education, in counseling psychology and student development.

M: Okay, and do you mind me asking where you went to college?

D: I went to college at SUNY Potsdam [State University of New York] and then I went to graduate school at SUNY Albany.

M: And why did you choose the triple major of sociology, anthropology, and psychology? Like what drew you to that?

D: I think I chose sociology right off because it was what I was most interested in and I've always been interested in people and the way they interact and society and the different organizations within society and things like that. Anthropology to be honest came on because I took an anthropology course and loved the faculty member, so I ended up taking every course he had to offer but that was kind of an interesting complement too and having the sociology and anthropology together. With the psychology it was more that I got offered to do a program during my senior year which was to go to one of the nearby psychiatric institutions and work there full time so I did a full-time internship with two different placements. One was working with very long-term people who had been in there for thirty, forty, fifty years and then another group which was really short-term treatment where at that point they were doing electric shock therapy and so that was an interesting mixture of things. We'd get up every morning and drive over there and then one afternoon during the week a faculty member would come over and there were six of us who did it, and we would have a seminar. It was an incredible opportunity.

M: It sounds like an incredible opportunity. I guess to go back to your family, if that's okay, how did your father or your mother feel about you going into more liberal arts education?

D: You know I don't know. My father never really saw that, he didn't see his daughters having careers as necessary so I guess he figured it was go and study what you want and then you'll get married and somebody will take care of you. So, I think he didn't put on any pressure in terms of

that, so I think he just figured that's who I am and that's what I was interested in, so it was fine with him.

M: And then your—I think you said higher education in graduate school, what drew you to higher education?

D: It was really working in that job as assistant director of residence halls because I love higher education. I love the potential of the four years and I love watching students come in and then who they are when they leave, so that's why I just knew once I worked in the residence halls and I got to do a lot of different things. I just knew that's what I wanted to do and so I applied to the one graduate school and got in and that was it. Got internships along the way, which was really helpful, to kind of help me focus in a little bit more in terms of what I wanted to do.

M: And can you speak a little about those internships?

D: Sure, I did a really intensive one at a counseling center. The graduate program was a summer and a year of classes and then a year's internship so I did a couple of internships in career services and things like that when I was taking classes and then I did an internship in residence life and counseling. So from that I kind of realized what I wanted to do. I didn't want to do counseling full time but I wanted to work in residential life which was broader and had a lot more opportunities in terms of teaching people.

M: Are there any particular stories that you remember about working there that made you think, that this is the path that I want to take or is it over time? Through the experiences?

D: No, I don't think there were any, it was just as I got into that small institution and got to see all the various pieces it seemed like the broadest stand would be in residential life/student affairs.

M: I'm just going to look at the little question guide that I have here, and can you tell me a little bit about your first job out of graduate school?

D: Sure, my first job out of graduate school was at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and I got hired as assistant to the dean of the college and it was the absolute and utter perfect job because at Wesleyan they combine academic affairs with student affairs. So as the assistant to the dean, I was the first class dean, and I got to do everything with them. I also had residential life, I had the student union, and community service. So it was just the absolute and utterly perfect job, I mean it was just—because I never believed in separating the academic from the non-academic pieces, I think they are all one and the same and they have to complement and walk hand in hand so it was the perfect job and I got to be the class dean. I got to do new student orientation, I got to do their academic review at the end of each semester and absolutely loved it.

M: Did you like working with the students in that kind of capacity? Would you say there is a difference?

D: Yeah, I am a very student-centered person.

M: Were you able to use what you learned both in, I'm trying to connect the higher education with the sociology and anthropology and the psychology and combine those two together?

D: Absolutely, it was perfect.

M: What kind of jobs did you have after that?

D: I've actually had two jobs my entire career; I stayed at Wesleyan for sixteen years, kind of moved up the ranks and eventually became dean of student life and then in 1996 I came here to Clark [University] as dean of students here.

M: And are there any differences that you see between Wesleyan and Clark?

D: I have always called Clark a kinder, gentler Wesleyan. So Wesleyan was always a very, very interesting and challenging place to work, particularly from 1980 to 1996, students are incredibly bright, but they are also incredibly privileged. They are independent and there were times when we kind of bucked up against things. We went through so many protests, so many—they took over the administration building, they had sit-ins, they had hunger strikes, it was fascinating,

SGC: Not at [College of the] Holy Cross that would never happen [laughs].

D: It was fascinating, I mean it was absolutely and utterly fascinating.

M: Do you remember what the protests were about?

D: One of the hunger strikes was about racism and about equal treatment, so that was huge. A lot of it was apartheid and our involvement and so they were a lot of bloody pennies they would throw at us and things like that.

M: This was at Wesleyan, right?

D: Yes.

M: And then at Clark, you said ...

D: Clark is interesting in that it has a lot of the same activism, but it's not as extreme and so I remember one of my first days at Clark. I had a very good relationship with most of the students at Wesleyan, but for instance all of the administration got disinvited from coming to student government meetings. They didn't want us in the room because we were clearly the enemy so it was difficult whenever an issue would come up it would erode the trust that has been built up. One of my first days at Clark, I'll never forget it, two of the major campus activists came in and knocked on my day and said, "We want to introduce ourselves to you," and I said, "That's nice." And they told me who they were and I said, "You actually want to talk to me?" [Laughs] And that was really the difference at Clark. Clark students I think had in some ways had more respect

but also they wanted to engage you more and they saw you as—or they saw me at least and I'm sure others—as people who could help them with what they were trying to get done.

M: And have you seen any changes over the years since you started at Clark at the school, not even just demographics, but just what they focus on or what they protest, has that changed?

D: Clark changed sort of at the end in the sense that for me they were admitting fewer of the outspoken, more radical, people like that and so it became in some ways more middle of the road. I spent nineteen years there, so in my nineteen years at Clark things definitely went down in terms of protests, in terms of disagreements, but they were also easier people to work with. I'll give you one example. One day two students came in; I'm with the director of res life and they said, "We want to live together next year," and I said, "You can't." [They asked], "Why not?" I said, "Because you're male and you're female," and they said, "But we are both gay and we both feel comfortable being with each other, we would rather live with each other than somebody of our own gender." And I said, "Okay develop a proposal." They came back with probably the single best proposal I have ever seen in my entire career. It was phenomenal. It was an eighty-page proposal, they had done all of their research, and at that point we had a very conservative chair of the board of trustees, and within three months we had gender neutral housing and that was 2002. It was 1990 at Wesleyan, because Wesleyan was one of the first schools to go gender neutral but it was amazing. They had done their homework and they convinced everybody that this was an okay thing to do.

M: And had the culture around LGBTQ and gender-neutral politics and just gender-neutral dorming in general, over the years, even when you look at Wesleyan and Clark?

D: I think it got stronger and stronger as we went on, so first we did gender-neutral housing and then we did gender-neutral bathrooms and then we actually got hormone replacement therapy and gender reassignment surgery put on the student health plan.

SGC: Wow.

M: That's amazing, that's awesome.

D: It was amazing.

SGC: Were you drawn to Worcester because you were looking for a new job and so you applied to Clark or was there something that also attracted you to live in Worcester or any kind of personal?

D: No, to be honest when I first started at Wesleyan I decided I was going to stay two years, you know because that was my first real job out of graduate school and so around the end of the second year, I started looking around and I interviewed at a bunch of different places, including Clark and it came down to two finalists. I came up and met with Dick Traina, who was then the president and did my whole day of interviews and then he called me back and said, "Come on up we are going to have lunch." And so, we went out and had lunch and then he called me and said,

"Well it came down to one out of two, it's not you, but you are going to make a great dean of students some time," and I thought, "Okay." The woman they hired was twenty years more experienced than I was etc., but then I wasn't really looking and all of a sudden somebody said to me one day, "Didn't you always talk about Clark as a really good school?" And I said, "Yeah," and they said, "Well dean of students is open." And it was the first time since I had done that application ages ago that the job had been open, so I applied for it and the next thing I know, I was up here interviewing and the next thing I knew they were offering me the job which was crazy because my husband was a tenured faculty member at Wesleyan, so it just became kind of crazy but I just, you know, I came up and I remember we walked around campus and I sat down on this bench on campus and I just looked at him and I said, "I have to be here," and he said, "Okay, we will make it work so we did."

SGC: And he stayed on at Wesleyan?

D: For about six years and then took two years leave of absence and worked at WPI [Worcester Polytechnic Institute] and now he is at WPI permanently. So now he can walk to work as opposed to driving an hour and half each way.

M: He moved up here with you and then he would commute to work?

D: Yes.

M: Oh, wow that's amazing.

D: Well, being dean of students I had to be here and he is an amazing man.

M: Right.

D: Basically, I was on call twenty-four seven.

M: Some people wouldn't make that sacrifice, so that's why I think that's amazing. Do you have another question?

SGC: Yeah, can you talk before we get back to current, and I don't know if you asked this, when I was out of the room, but can you talk about kind of the experience of being a woman and your profession and maybe start with working at Wesleyan and then bring us up to date.

D: I mean I think it's always been, it's always had its challenges, let's put it that way. Even Wesleyan, which was a very liberal institution, still had its inbred sexism, it had its inbred racism for sure and it was always a question of trying to prove oneself. They had never had a female president for instance in their entire time there. They finally got one, she didn't last very long and they haven't had one since, and Clark has never had a female president.

SGC: Really?

D: Never, never. And, in fact they never—they had one female chair of the board of trustees and that was Alice Higgins, who is well known around Worcester. And I was really, really close to one of the trustees, a woman named Lois Green, do you know about Lois?

SGC: mm mm [no]

D: She started the Women's Initiative, she was the chair of the board of directors at UMass Hospital and Lois was just an amazing, amazing person but she wanted so much to be Chair of the Board of Trustees but there was just so much sexism. I think I always felt it and I think it was always there and it was always that you had to be one step ahead and you had to be one step better.

SGC: So, you felt, extra scrutiny. Did you ever feel dismissed in meetings or decisions making, or how did you feel, the dynamics of..?

D: I think it's dependent on what was going on, but as I mentioned I am a very student-centered person and so that is not always the priorities and in fact in my last couple of years in Clark, the priorities shifted and so it became much more about the finances, but it wasn't being there for students, about going out on a limb for them, about understanding who they were and what they were all about and what they needed at this point. So a lot of the programs that I thought were incredibly important got cut. A lot of decisions were made that I thought were very student unfriendly. Let me give you a good example because as a student you will appreciate this but people could choose to buy out their doubles, so you could pay half as much again for the other bed but then there were also students whose roommate moved out, so one day I got into this big tussle with the financial person and my supervisor who was the provost and I said, "Well what happens if the person moves out and they have an empty bed, they should be able to have that," [and] so she said, "They should have to pay for it." And I said, "But it's not their fault that their roommate moved out so why should they have to pay for it?" [She said], "Well okay fine but they have to move in with somebody else." [I asked] "Why?" [and she said] "Because they can't have a room all to themselves, there is no way they can have that double room to themselves without paying for it." So that was the kind of attitude; it sounds like a petty thing, but for me it wasn't, it was just huge, and it was emblematic of the way that priorities had shifted and the way that they were all about the money and we weren't about the students and the students' needs anymore and that was very frustrating.

M: And I guess to go back to the question that professor asked you about, sorry, being a woman in the college and working as the dean of students which is a very high position, did you notice a shift for the better over time or did it kind of stay the same? Get worse?

D: I mean I think there were women in more leadership positions, there were more female vice-presidents when I left Clark then when I got there but I didn't see—interesting, I don't know if I saw a lot of activism on the part of those women and it was just always, you know, the discussions were still dominated by males and so it might have shifted a little bit but not in a way I thought and it even fell down to the students, like we had very few female student council presidents, which frustrated me no end. I looked at the board, the board of trustees is always

male dominated. The administration is always male dominated, the student government is always male dominated. And at a place like Clark that's fairly open and progressive that was frustrating.

M: This is a question a little more about Clark, if you don't mind, where do you see its relationship to Worcester in general? Have you seen that relationship grow over the years while you were there, or have you seen it I don't know change?

D: One of the things that attracted me so much the first time I interviewed at Clark was its relationship to the community in particular its relationship to the Main South community, so to me that was a very attractive piece of it, it was something that I really wanted to be a part of. UPCS [University park Campus School] I think was a brilliant innovation in the city, in the terms of looking at those students and how well they do and where they go on. I think Claremont Academy is another one where I think there had been some real progress made and one of the groups I work with does a peer mediation program over there and I think those kinds of progressive initiatives are really important to do. I have no criticism of Clark whatsoever in terms of its role in the city, in the sense that I think it's made a huge impact on the neighborhood that it's a part of. I don't know that I see its broader stretch across the city, but in terms of the Main South neighborhood and the fact that it is not gated off and the fact that it's open I think is just an incredibly positive thing.

M: Yeah, very part of the community when you drive past it the area which I did a couple days ago, compared to Holy Cross which is a little more, literally up on a hill.

D: Right.

M: I guess to go back just a little bit, I didn't really ask you, if you don't mind talking about your personal life, maybe talk a little bit about your husband, how you guys met, if you have any kids, you don't mind talking about that?

D: Sure, I have a very interesting family [laughs]. My husband and I met, he was a faculty member at Wesleyan. They had faculty and staff housing and he moved to the lower floor of where I was living, so it was all history after that [laughs]. He was a single parent who had custody of his son, then we had a biological son together and then we adopted a child from Korea. So, long story we have three kids none of which have the same biological parent, because my husband is not his son's biological parent but when he and his wife split up, he got custody, long story but anyways we have three kids none of which have the same biological parent which I love and they are all phenomenal people.

SCG: How far apart are they in ages?

D: Joe is forty-three, Michael is twenty-seven, and then my daughter Mara is twenty-three.

SGC: Oh okay.

D: They are all just the most amazing people, I mean I could not be prouder of each one of them if I tried and they are doing interesting things. Joe works for the government and he has a PhD in Chemistry, my son is working in Baltimore at an inter-city charter school working with special needs kids, and my daughter works for the New England Center for Children, where she works with ten to fifteen year-old non-verbal autistic kids. They are all doing good things.

M: If you don't mind me asking you about the adoption. How was that, raising a child who comes from a different culture and kind of implementing that culture, if you did, in the way they were raised?

D: Okay, interesting. So maybe more than you want to know but having the first child was a piece of cake. He was born on our ten month wedding anniversary; number two wasn't going to come along despite everything so we just started talking to people about adoption and it was a really long process and very frustrating and openings and closings and promises and whatever and then she was going to show up. I remember talking to two of my students at Wesleyan both of whom had been adopted from Korea and one of them said, "I was a week and a half old when I left Korea. I am not Korean. I want nothing to do with it. My parents tried to give kimchi, they tried to get me to celebrate the holidays, blah, blah. I want nothing to do with it." Then another one said, "Oh my God, it was so important to me that my parents raised me in the Korean way and exposed me to the Korean culture, we did our Hundred Day Ceremony, they would cook the foods, we would celebrate." And I'm like great what do I do with that? [laughs] So alright we will try it, you know. So, we did some of that, we did the Hundred Day Ceremony, which is basically where you put the kid in the middle and surround them with a bunch of things and whatever they grab for is supposed to be what they will be when they grow up. Bought her a Hanbok, which is this beautiful gown. We took her to Korean Culture Camp but she wants nothing to do with Korea, she doesn't have any interest. She was six and a half months when she left. So, she has no memory and even her foster mom ended up coming over when she was about two or three to visit the agency and we got to have dinner with her. I'll give you the perfect example, okay, and this is going to sound a little bit maybe racist, but I don't mean it to, but we were sitting one day at one of the Vietnamese restaurants on Park Ave and she looked at me and she said, "Mom do you realize the only white people in here?" [Laughs] And I went well okay that's perfect about the way that she sees herself, you know. She doesn't see herself as Korean at all, she doesn't see herself really as Asian at all and she's welcome to it, you know? If she wants to go on the home tour, whatever she wants to do is fine with me, if she ever wants to go back and find her birth parents, you know that's fine with me, but I've taken my clues from her and that's what she's chosen, so that's fine with me.

M: I'll go back to Clark, I assume you no longer are the dean of students?

D: No, I left three years ago.

M: And can you talk a little about why you wanted to leave the position?

D: Because the clash of philosophies, there were so many things that I wanted to do that I thought would benefit the students that were just not happening and again I cannot be more

philosophically divergent from my then supervisor. So one day my husband looked at me and he said, "You have been miserable for the last two years." And I said, "You're right I have." So, I left and most of my staff left but it's the best thing I've ever done to be honest.

M: And what do you do now?

D: The first thing I did was join a group called Jericho Road, which is now called ONE Worcester, and ONE stands for organization for non-profit excellence and so what we do is, we match up non-profits with skill based volunteers. So we have somebody who is really good at fundraising and this group is having a really hard time fundraising, we match them up together. I've been on that board for three years. Another one of the first things I did was go back to the LGBT Asylum Task Force because I had been involved with them while I was at Clark because one of my students was connected with them. I walked back in that door and thought, "I'm home, this is where I need to be, this is the work, I need to be doing." So I rejoined that group and now I chair the Steering Committee which is the group that oversees it and it is maybe the best thing I've ever done in my life. I've gotten really, really close to the asylum seekers, they are the bravest, most resilient people I've ever met in my life, their stories are so compelling, and they're just so strong. I've never been a fundraiser; if you had said to me, "What's the one thing you won't do?" [I would have said] "Ask people for money," and now I have no problem whatsoever. I'm shameless about it. Because I found that if I really believe in something I can go and ask and I have no problem. I mean I take them out, we got to different churches, we went to SURJ [Standing Up for Racial Justice]—it's a group in Worcester. So they invited us to come down so I took two of the asylum seekers down there and we talked to them about what we do. As Selina knows I'm busily promoting the gala left and right. We made fifty two thousand dollars last year and I mean when you realize how much it costs for us to support each one of them and then they show up on your door step sometimes—four of the last six have just shown up on our door step and said, "I'm here, can you help me?" So that's what I spend a lot of my time doing, working with them, taking them places but you know going out and speaking and doing the gala. I'm also on the Department of Children and Families board; I got on that probably three years ago but I chair the LGBT subcommittee of that as well, so we do a number of different programs right now, we are working with different agencies in Worcester to set up a group for parents of trans kids because there is just not much out there for parents of trans kids and they desperately need it—that's what I'm hearing from teachers and guidance counselors. Abby's House is another huge commitment of mine. I had a very good friend who actually wrote a play, a one-woman play about Abby Kelly Foster and Jane was one of my heroes in my life and so I promised her that when I stopped working I would work at Abby's House so I did, so I started volunteering at the thrift store.

SGC: Who is it?

D: Jane Dutton

SGC: Oh, okay cause Caroline Howe also wrote the play with her.

D: Jane was a fascinating woman. She was the children's librarian at the Worcester Public Library and then she became the Head Librarian at the Gale Free Library in Holden and Jane was a playwright on the side. So Jane and her then wife wrote the play on Abby Kelly Foster and Susan who was her wife acted in it but then about six years ago Jane moved to the Netherlands to be with a woman she fell in love with and she was diagnosed with cancer. So another friend of mine—another author actually—flew over to the Netherlands and spent an incredible day with her and then we were with her the next day when she died. So, I always felt like I needed to pay tribute to Jane and so I started working at the thrift store and to be honest I actually loved it. I loved the women I was working with, but I also loved the people who were coming in because I would get to know them a little bit and get to know their stories and then this past January they asked me to join the board so now I'm on the board of Abby's which I really enjoy as well. I co-run my church's food pantry, so I've been doing that for a long time but basically we have a food pantry once a month and I go up every week to the Worcester County Food Bank and get meat but then we got to a point where we realized it was one thing to give them food once a month and it was another thing to help them get food. So three of us spent about six months getting training doing food stamp counseling so now we working with individuals both from our food pantries as well as from across the city, who are applying for stamp benefits and help them out so that's another thing I do. I'm also on the Worcester County Food Bank's advisory committee. Another thing that has been incredibly meaningful has been working with the homeless. Two years ago people realized that—well people have realized for a while—but two years ago three people, three very unlikely people, a Catholic priest, a Unitarian Universalist minister, and a Pentecostal minister got together and said, "What's happening to the homeless isn't enough, we need something more." So, we started—and its really under Pastor Gonzalez, Richie Gonzalez, and he runs a group called Net of Compassion and Richie is somebody who came through as being homeless, was out on the streets when he was a kid, ended up in jail, boom, boom, boom turned his life around and now he is doing the ministry out there. So, every Saturday he is out on Main Street next to Compare Foods giving out hot food, cold food, and clothing. Richie and again Father Madden from Saint John's and my minister Aaron Payson started an emergency overnight shelter last year. It was when it was 20 degrees or below, this year it was when it was 31 degrees or below, we opened up the basement of Saint John's church and they come in at seven o'clock and they get a warm meal and they get a place to sleep and they get a place to be cared for and then they get up at seven o'clock the next morning and go, so that's been an incredibly important piece of my getting involved with Worcester. I've always had, it sounds weird, but a curiosity about the homeless, in terms of where do they come from, where do they go and things like that and these past two years being able to sit at night and getting to know the people and their stories and who they are it's just an amazing thing. So, I absolutely adore those people and I miss them [laughs] so every now and then I see one of them. But it's a huge issue in Worcester and Worcester is not doing a good job of it. And then probably the last thing, do you know Ascentria?

SGC: They've come here, they've come to Holy Cross.

D: So, our church took on a family last year and then last summer I got called by one of the directors over there to say, "We have somebody who just got here from Syria, they're transgender and we don't have a whole lot of experience, can you help?" So, I went over, and I

met Adam and kind of took him under my wing and shepherded him along through a period of time and so then this year they called and said they were looking for mature women—there is this place called Florence House, which is a place for teenage moms—meaning over fifty women who will come and basically take care of the kids while the moms—but then also try to create a relationship with the moms, so I've been doing that for a few months which is very interesting. So we go over there and we take care of the kids, but we also make connections with the moms and that's also been really interesting so through all of this it has increased my involvement of Worcester in a way I never had an opportunity to do before. You know Clark was twenty-four seven and the only part of Worcester that I knew was Main South and now I know a lot of other places and I'm connected to a lot of other people. So that's a little bit of what I've been doing since I left.

M: That's a lot, good lot.

D: It is good.

M: How do you see Worcester now? You were saying you get to look at it from different perspectives.

D: I was somebody who was really down on Worcester; to be honest I didn't like it. I thought it was very—I didn't think it was very progressive at all. I would get asked very rude questions when I would have both of my kids with me, things like, "Is he yours?" "Yeah." "Is she yours?" "Yeah." "How can that be?" or "How much did you pay for her?" I mean it's incredible when you are an adoptive mom what some people will say. But now with getting to know Worcester, with getting to know different pieces of it, I just have a lot of respect for it. I think it has an inferiority complex which it doesn't deserve to have. I think it has some amazing talent that's out there. I think the leadership is strong. You know recently we had the mayor and the city manager come over to one of the apartments we rent for some of the asylum seekers and the asylum seekers told their stories. The mayor ended up buying a table for the gala, he said he would be very, very supportive of us and the city manager as well so I think that I look at the leadership and I look at some of the people that I have met in different areas and I just think they are phenomenal. I think we have a long way to go but are definitely on the right track and moving in the right direction.

M: I agree because you see downtown all the development that's being made and that can go either way.

D: Yup.

M: Which is a little scary but the fact that you just finished saying that the mayor and the city manager like went and they actually talked and listened, I think that's amazing.

D: Yeah and I have the mixed feelings too. I mean I read, you know, especially working with both our food pantry clients as well as the homeless folks and I look, and I see that the cheapest apartment in the new building in Front Street is going to be \$975 for a studio. \$975 a month and

I'm thinking who are we taking care of here? You know? Who are we taking care of? And when I look at the state of the homeless, in this city, I would much rather spend the money on building low-income affordable housing for the people and get them off the street then I would build the \$975 a month apartments for the rich so, yeah.

M: I guess I worry, personally, where will certain people go because downtown, I mean it still is to a certain extent people who are homeless go and congregate which is completely understandable, but now we have the lofts or studios coming in.

D: Well, people are changing antiquated policies. There is a task force right now, a twenty-eight person task force on homelessness in Worcester. First of all it is too big and I don't think some of the right people are on it, for example Richie Gonzalez is not on it but they had an open meeting and I went to it and landlords were talking about the fact that they can't have more than four unrelated people living under the same roof and they are like if that rule wasn't in place we could be putting more people in housing and it wouldn't be detrimental to their lifestyle, it would just be helpful cause they'd have to pay less rent and that's just a stupid. In my opinion it's a stupid rule that Worcester put in for I have no idea why. I mean I think it was a lot because landlords were jamming college students in there, you know that kind of thing, but I just think it's dumb. And we don't have many co-ed shelters whatsoever and that's a problem as well as the one shelter that gets all the money in Worcester is disgusting, it's really horrific and it has a horrific reputation but they get all the money, it's called SMOC now, it's Southern Massachusetts Opportunity Council, but it's on Queen Street and they can't turn people away but everything that I heard, I've heard too many horror stories from a lot of my homeless peeps about what goes on there including stealing medications off clients.

M: Oh wow.

D: Yeah, this one woman came the other day—a couple weeks ago—to Abby's Thrift Store and she was just in tears and I said, "What's the matter?" and she said she'd been in SMOC the night before, she and her husband, she had tucked her medication inside her underwear and woke up and it was gone. That's the kind of stuff that happens down there, it just not, it's not a good place at all.

M: No, it sounds really dehumanizing but I guess to go back to everything, working at Abby's House, working in the Task Force, working with ONE Worcester, working with the homeless do you see any connections there? They are very different, yet maybe similar?

D: Oh absolutely there are a lot of connections, I mean what it all yields to me because you have the homeless first of all, then you have the people who are needing food on a desperate basis, then you have the people at Abby's House who are also pretty down and out, and you just see this lack of services. Maddie Castiel who is the Commissioner of Social Services in Worcester calls it wrap around services and housing first, which I totally agree with her philosophy, you know in order to get them to really change their lives, in order to allow them the opportunity to change their lives, you have to first get them into a stable environment. So housing first you bring them in and then you do the wrap around services, you do the food and the counseling and

the job opportunities and all the rest of it, but that has to happen and that's what Worcester is not doing at the moment and it's expensive but it's also, I think, incredibly important. The Task Force people are kind of in a different sphere, the way that they are connected for me anyways in terms of the housing, so right now they are living in a bunch of different apartments that are all disconnected from one another and they are a community and when you are an asylum seeker it is very hard to find somebody who can relate to you. People have no idea what it is like to be LGBT in your home country, to be beaten up, to be raped, to be disowned by your family, to have to stay in hiding all the time and so they need each other, so one of the things we are trying to do with the gala this year, is we are calling it, the theme of it is "A Place to Call Home." So what we want to do is raise enough money so we can either put a down payment on or preferably buy a triple decker where we can put at least twelve of them together so they can be, cause otherwise they are all dependent on bus routes, getting to each other. The federal political climate is disgusting right now and it's just hurting us left and right and we were afraid that a version of the food bill was going to go through which would have cut people's benefits like crazy and it didn't go through, thank god. [Speaker of the House] Paul Ryan even called for a recount four days later to try and get that to happen but there is another program which we call HIP, which is Health Incentives Programs, so basically what that means is if you are getting food stamps and you go to a farmer's market or a farm stand, whatever you spend on fresh fruits and vegetables automatically goes back on to your Snap Card so you can spend it for other food.

M: Wow.

D: They suspended it; it will get reinstated but not until July.

M: Of this year?

D: This year

M: It's still a month away.

D: But again and when half the summer is over and it was really put into effect because of the farmers; it was put into effect by the department of agriculture to try and improve farmers' lots, so again, you know you can't go to the grocery store and buy fresh fruits and vegetables and have it count, you have to go to a farm stand or a farmers market, but people were benefiting from it left and right. And there is this whole misinformation about poor people don't eat fruits and vegetables well that's crap they do, and they will do it and they will cook it, especially when you can get it for free so why not?

M: I guess to go back to your point about the federal government have you seen any negative impacts with the [President Donald] Trump administration that has that impacted any of the programs that you worked with?

D: Most of them.

M: Most of them?

D: Well there are very few refugees coming through any more. We have another family that we are working with, with our church now but it's dried up. So how do you not let people into the country? One of the great things—great being sarcastic—that Trump did recently was—how do I example this? So when an asylum seeker comes in, they can't work for six months, they have to apply for a work permit, so they can't work for six months which is why we support them to the extent that we do. After six months hopefully they get a work permit, then they can get a social security number, then they can kind of move on. It's usually—right now it's four or five years before one gets asylum, but one of the things he instituted recently or that his government recently instituted was that the first people to come over needed to have their asylum hearing within 21 days. So, the problem with that is that when you walk into the country and say, "I'm seeking asylum," 21 days later you probably don't have a place to stay, probably not living anywhere, made no connections whatsoever, you haven't had time to hire a lawyer, so guess who is the first one out? So, they go in to have their asylum hearings and get asked are you working? Do you have a place to live? Boom, Boom, Boom. So that's the problem, that's his way of trying to get rid of them before they have the chance to establish any ties here whatsoever. It's pathetic, that's really bad. Food, I continue to be worried about the food and about the farm bill and all of the cutbacks there. People are literally being forced to choose—do I want to be warm or do I want to eat? And that's not right; I believe food is a right, not a privilege, so seeing what was trying to be done with the farm bill in order to cut back and change the standard in which people can get food stamps which is ridiculous but you know that has taken so much work and so many people calling, writing letters and all of that, showing up at the state house. We've taken clients of ours down to the state house to testify to say, "You can't take this away," you know? The fight for fifteen is another one, minimum wage it's like how do you survive on such low wages? That's all tied up in that too.

M: And do you see, I don't know, this administration, just where we are politically right now in this climate, I guess I focus the question more in Worcester, do you see that we are heading towards—if people make the right choices—towards hopefully better change? Do you see the politicians working towards doing something like that?

D: If there was one state that I would want to live in the whole country right now it would be Massachusetts, just because I like that we are as progressive as we are, but I don't lose sight of that fact that I go seven states south and it's not that way. So I have faith right now in our city government. I even have faith to a large extent in the state government and I'm glad we have people like [U.S. Representative] Jim McGovern and [U.S. Senator] Elizabeth Warren but I also realize how lucky we are for that and that doesn't make me want to stop fighting whatsoever. I mean Jim McGovern is the biggest advocate for food that you could image. I mean he is just amazing, He has come to our food pantry and served food to people and he is just always there for people, for everything. Right after Trump got elected our asylum seekers were nuts, I mean they all thought they were going to get deported tomorrow and if they go back to their countries they would be killed. I mean that's almost without a doubt, most if not all of them will be killed the minute, as soon as they get back into the country. Jim came over and just talked to them and said, "I am proud that you are here, I'm proud that you are in my district, I'm going to do everything I can to protect you," that kind of thing. So my disgust with the federal government

is mitigated a bit I think with my faith in the local and state governments that hopefully we will continue to do the right things.

M: And one of my final questions is there anything that we haven't talk about that you think is important to your story and who you are as a person that we haven't touched upon perhaps?

D: No, I mean, first of all I don't feel like I deserve to be here because I'm not Pastor Judy or any of the other amazing women who are making things happen. But in terms of Worcester, I think Worcester is a really special place and I think it is a really important place and I'm glad that we are talking about celebrating not just Robert Goddard but also talking about Abby Kelly Foster. Again I think there are so many good things that are going on in the city and so many good people that are working to do things in this city, so I'm just really so incredibly happy to be a small part of that and to be connected with the people I'm connected with and to hopefully moving things forward, just a little bit.

M: I completely disagree that you shouldn't be on this, you just told me everything you have done over the years and it's all amazing, so I kindly disagree with you on that respect.

D: Thank you.