Interviewee: Deborah Hall
Interviewees: Caitlyn Greenwood, Colin Lawrence
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Abstract: Deborah Hall is the Executive Director of the YWCA of Central Massachusetts and the founder of the Worcester Black History Project. She has a passion to keep the mission statement of "eliminating racism and empowering women" alive. Her family origin and personal experiences has led her down a path of advocating for people who cannot advocate for themselves. Debbie focuses on domestic violence and helping people in these situations find safety. She is passionate about spreading awareness and guiding people to independence and security.

CG: OK so if you just want to tell a little bit about yourself and then we can ask a couple questions.

DH: Alright, I am Debbie Hall, let me see the list of your questions and that'll help me let me—let's see the list of your bio page and I'll get started because it's a little bit harder, you've got to be specific, but I'll go down this list and that'll be helpful to you all I think. So, I am Debbie Hall. And I am married I have no children and Debbie, I usually go by Debbie. My mother is German—was German. She was born in Germany where she met my father, and he was in the Air Force so that's how they met and they got married in Germany. She's a white woman from Germany—this is important in 1952—and he was a black man from Clarksdale MO. It was still illegal in the state of Missouri where I was born eventually, to marry—for interracial marriages. They got married in Germany and had my two oldest brothers there and then moved back to the states I think when my oldest brother was about 8 and then had the rest of us. There were seven of us total children, six boys and I was the only girl born today to that union. So I identify as black for social and political reasons, and as Christian. I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri where I lived for 35 years or so and then moved to Kansas City Missouri, and I was there for seven years prior to moving to Worcester, MA about 9—will be 10 years in July. And "Why did you move here?" Love that. I've always liked New England so it was a perfect fit. I found myself working in the areas of—my background really isn't domestic violence. I think I've done that from the time I was undergrad I had started volunteering in different roles managerial leadership roles in agencies and when I moved here, I was just trying to figure out how to get acclimated to this environment which is very different from Saint Louis and Kansas City. Although it's the second largest city in New England it felt more like a town to me. So one of the ways I did that was just to volunteer. I joined the Advisory Committee on the Status of Women for the City of Worcester and was able to give back, but also to network and get to know

people. I've worked in the housing area for key solutions and eventually took on a board role as another volunteer experience here at YWCA. And that's how I came in contact with YWCA just in the role of board member and also with the race and gender equity what they called the Racial Justice Task Force committee at the time and the Public Policy Committee. And then eventually some work in Rhode Island Providence, RI with the housing agency who had merged with the largest provider of shelter for survivors of domestic violence. They knew housing, didn't know much about domestic violence and said, "Can you come over and help us?" and I did that for a couple of years before moving back here for the position as Director of Domestic Violence Services and also was time to move back. I was ready to run for office and so it was a good idea to be back here. COVID hit and I still ran but then at that point Linda Caviaoli who had been here 29 years as the executive director announced her retirement and there was an opportunity that I took and applied for the position. So, I transitioned into this role almost two years ago—two years in July—July 1st will be two years. I always think it's important to note our mission is to eliminate racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, and freedom. In our 135 year history there had never been a woman of color and now this is a black woman leading so I thought that was important for the community and for the YWCA Central Massachusetts. And so here we are. That's kind of a good short bit of it. I'm going to get these back to you.

CL: I think I'd like to kind of start off and talk about how you've moved a lot like you said so you kind of stayed in Saint Louis, Kansas City, you said you did some time in like Providence, how do you kind of like compare the communities you've been involved with and how do you see different challenges in a given area?

DH: So, differences in demographics, differences in terms of population, so you come from a what I consider bigger city Saint Louis to a city that's similar in size and ethnic and racial and gender makeup as Kansas City MO. They were pretty similar it's more urban more diversity right? And then you move to Worcester which was somewhat of a shock actually for me. I mean it was Worcester, but I was like, "How far is that from Boston?" because I know Boston knows Worcester right and I read about, of course, the row and a lot of people Kennedys growing up as a child I was just fascinated. So love coming to New England and just the history of New England, but like I said Worcester felt more like a town to me and more like a small town really to me although people would pride themselves on saying is the second largest city in New England. I was like, "But that's not Boston," and then so it was even nine years ago when I came. I like the art, I like community theater, I like a lot of those cultural things that just didn't exist so I found myself in the first few years going other places particularly to New York to get what I needed to feed my soul. And it really felt that Worcester wasn't an industrial town and it really felt that way and so that was hard. That's why I said I have to reach out and find my tribe of people because I don't know if I can stay here. It's not what I'm used to. Food was different, the majority minority population here at the time I think we're kind of running neck and neck now was Latinos right? And I wasn't used to being in a city where black folks weren't the majority just to be of the minority population and it has a lot of implications politically but in terms of

culture it was just different, very different. You couldn't just go—things weren't open all night and even where do the foodies go? Where do you have one of the different restaurants on the shoestring. Oh there's a few restaurants but not really what I was talking about. So it was a lot of adjustment and again thinking can I get what I need here. But the city has evolved right? I mean then you had Pow Wow, come see public garden murals, and I was like, "OK we're starting to do some things," and then the renaissance they talk about some of that happened getting involved in community theater music in Worcester. Jay Mack came along and there's opportunities there for all sorts of things. Also started Worcester Black History Project which [?] and one of my undergrad degrees was in African American Studies so I just wanted—OK this is a connection I can make. A lot of things happen in the north, let me find out what Black folks did in Worcester. So I called some people together. I think I did a Facebook post and some people came together and that was one of the things—I was like, "OK we can do this and that can be exciting and bond with people and meet different people." It's evolved over the years so those things have kept me here but it was very different. I like Providence, you know, I didn't see too much of a difference. It did feel more like a city, however, than even Worcester did and still does to me in some ways, but other than that at the end of the day people are people wherever you go. We're more similar than we are not and so it's just been a wonderful—I think New England's a wonderful part of the country so I've adjusted—adapted—and obviously I'm here now.

CG: Our school actually has ALANA [African, Latin, Asian, & Native American] and Cross Cultural Center and BSU [Black Student Union ] I was wondering in your undergrad were there any of those kind of programs or clubs and did that kind of influence you to go into your passion

DH: Absolutely, the at Washington University and at Drake—I went to Drake University in Des Moines IA of all places my first semester of college—and that that really—I got a political awakening. I kind of then align myself with the young social science but it was this wonderful book club that outlook store that would go to and there were people who thought in very similar ways and so I think my first marches were in the Des Moines Iowa and then I returned to Saint Louis Washington University and of course there's Black Student Union at both of those places and then other opportunities to Black and Jewish alliance and then women's support were probably that—I started from the support groups a lot of those were started there. But definitely they gave some grounding some context and some words for things that were happening in the world and that I was experiencing and with like-minded people who like to read and share ideas. I encourage everybody to engage. I don't know what ALANA is I'm not familiar with it.

CG:: It's African Latino Asian Native American and I forget what the A stands for but it's kind of like a group or club that promotes equality.

DH: Do you all belong to that club or no?

CG: No.

CL: I do not, no.

DH: You're like, "we're just here to tell you about it."

CG: I go to a lot of their programs they did a Caribbean dinner night, it was really good

CL: They have, they host a lot events on campus and definitely, I'm working alongside them given some of my roles so they do awesome job and great attendance

DH: They have good attendance at events?

CL: Oh yeah.

DH: And what was the other group you named? You said ALANA...

CG: BSU, Black Society Union or Student...

DH: Student Union probably, it can be black society. That's interesting that so the Alana is African is that what...

CG: I believe so, African, Latino, Asian, Native American...

CL: Alliance?

DH: I'm finding it curious at the same time you have the African and then ALANA out and then the Black Student Union still it's just because that's a whole nother…..

CL: So you previously mentioned you're the first person in your position being from African American heritage what kind of does that mean to you and personally and what kind of leadership are you looking to lead down the line.

DH: Yeah, yeah, yeah, so you know a transformational leader is what I consider myself. After 29 years of any one person regardless of color leading an organization, there's going to be a culture shift in the organization. So it's a different way of kind of operating, but being the first, you know, this is not lost on me. I'm tired in 2022 we still are the first of anything—or when did I do this—2021—but yeah, it's knowing that you're the first, that you are the example. Now it's been done so other folks don't have—Black girls don't have the pressure, Black women don't have the pressure, or women of color. It's already been done so we can move on from that, but know that you can do it because it's been done and I definitely don't need to be the last. It was a long time coming so the historic significance, I tell people even when I think about history, I'm doing interviews or whatever like history is what happened yesterday history is what happened even five minutes ago they don't have to be 1896. I'm well aware of that because it's where my interest lies that is historic in that sense and I'll say in the context of just Worcester right now and nonprofits you're seeing a shift of people. Those back in the '70s and early '80s a lot of the nonprofit executive directors were part of movements. I know in domestic violence those were the people who are out in the streets and then when executive director will come start this and

stayed in this role forever. I mean make room for other people. I'm here now, here to do whatever needs to be done in this time. I came on board during COVID of course a pandemic none of us had ever experienced, and George Floyd, Brianna Taylor. It was in that environment where that's the first time in Worcester and I don't know it was a combination I think people saw that video of George Floyd which really had to move people because it's happened before right? Emmett Till, historically black people have been lynched and that was a lynching but it was in that environment that I would say that was the first time probably over 1000 people gathered in the common over here to demonstrate for this. I don't know that a lot of us have been in the house forever [due to Covid lockdowns] so I think it was the reason we could give to get out to breathe and see other people in that context, but also I believe people just awareness had been raised and seeing anybody call for their mother, in that moment in time we saw a shift happening in our community. And so my appointment came during that. Because what we called out there's a lot of things why aren't more people in positions of power it's not that you're not qualified. Black women are the most educated demographic in America, in the United States, so we know it's not that. It's opportunities, all of these things, so in that vein a lot of us even as a board member would call out where are the women of color in these positions of power and you know it you see that happening across the board you see a lot more transplants in position so people are coming from different areas and just constantly picking from the same pool of people. And there's no new ideas necessarily but people have different experiences so you can bring that and kind of fighting your net in terms of who you know, who you're serving, and what you're doing is so important. Representation does matter. We just had a black doll exhibit at JMAC [Jean McDonough Arts Center]. This year's theme for Black History Month was Black resistance and these are the ways in which your concepts are popular. We didn't include certain people right? And so now you can see Black dolls. When I was younger you can't just buy a black doll but now Barbie has the women's signature series and so they're more inclusive so I think that's the importance of it. Like Kamala Harris, that's the first, but we won't stop there. Now it's been done, we need to make sure everyone has an opportunity to succeed, and I think in that way we all lead in different ways it doesn't have to be formalized, but it's in the mentoring it's in the support that you provide just being an advisor to someone and offering people opportunities so that's how I see it. Oh you all can do too no you say paper you don't like paper you better save paper.

CG: Save paper, save the trees. So you did talk a little bit about the pandemic, yeah, just talking a little bit more about it about how it affected the YWCA.

DH: Yeah absolutely. One of our larger—we're multi service organizations so one of our biggest departments is childcare and, of course, probably the next biggest department is domestic violence and in both of those areas when people have to shelter in place first for domestic violence how do we do this work? The safest place for you to be is home but we know that's the most dangerous place for survivors of domestic violence to be. So initially there was "Stay at home stay at home," we got it but right away we became really worried about people being able

to reach out because most of them were sheltering in place with their abuser. So although he may have been at work, she may have been at work during Covid everything shut down. How do we get in contact, how do we know what's happening? And as I told people at the time that we don't know how many folks that affected because they can't call us right? We adapt it and the way we could pretty quickly with technology is a lot of nonprofits got them up to speed because you had to in order to provide services so we were doing all kinds of things. And really Tele-advocacy played a role because at that time not long after you know the children were at home working remotely or doing virtual schooling and so a lot of women a lot of our people who come here had to be at home they couldn't leave. It turns out the biggest issues we've always had with people coming, particularly women, is that either they have children and we didn't have childcare for them, right? Or transportation, they couldn't afford it, they didn't have a car. COVID was good for that reason. I can just talk to you, there's no reason for somebody to come. There's a lot of us have learned now we can do zoom, we don't need those meetings that we didn't really need –could have been a phone call, right? Because we can just do these things virtually now. That was a big issue and it took a while and so initially the numbers that we saw coming in through the helpline, as we call it, were really low but that's to be expected. I said wait until we can go back out in the world and sure enough as things started to live we got all these calls and we were inundated. We still are. The world's a dangerous place and the pandemic—of course any additional stress, it’s not why abusers abuse, but any additional stress is not good and so we saw a lot of murder/suicides initially, back-to-back, it was just ridiculous and it still happens. Health care—initially everything was shut down, but then people were like, “What about the first responders? We need them to work.” I have nowhere to put their children so we, along with some other childcare providers, banded together and some of us were allowed to stay open for those people who are first responders. We were limited. Our childcare numbers went down tremendously. That affects our revenue because it's one of our revenue drivers but luckily things got figured out. I mean it was initially that first year of doing what nonprofits do best and particularly people like us respond to crises and then these last 2 1/2 years or so we're trying to figure out how to keep people working, how to recruit people, because folks didn't learn they could work from home right and so like everybody else it's not just nonprofits for profits. The other day I heard some guys in IT just talk about how difficult it is to hire and retain people so the one person's like I have to go everywhere because I can't hire a manager so those things happen I mean we saw the disparities anywhere from the testing and vaccinations. A couple of weeks we had a couple of clinics here, vaccine clinics, but I also did some volunteer work at YMCA so we're trying to hit areas where the disparate impact in some communities became quite evident. Some of us always knew that and then other people found out so it was trying to get the vaccine with the testing to those underresourced and underserved areas so we were busy and I will say we're still trying to come up for air. It's a little bit better but it was just initially you were just on automatic, but it wore people out, and you were virtual, everybody kind of...

CL: Yeah, yeah, that our senior year cut short and then freshman year was kind of that in between phase where it kind of worked right back into it but yeah.

DH: But you miss out on those parties, getting together with friends, meeting new people from new places, and that I remember I found that was for me in college or anxiety ridden whatever the case but I just imagine like those pivotal times in in your life. Those people, those high school seniors that were graduating really couldn't enjoy all of that and people in college especially if it's your first year which is hard enough, but will forever be affected by it and that's long-term stuff.

CL: Absolutely. Alright, so did a part of your life influence you to be part of the mission of eliminating racism and power women in particular?

DH: Absolutely. I mean I as I said I was born to a white mother and a black father in the Midwest and, yeah, I'll tell you about 1968 when I was born. I was born in the year where Martin Luther King was killed. A lot of things were happening in 1968 so I think it was just I was born to do the work first of all, but also my parents, one of the things they taught us early on my brothers and I is that we had to give back and so we started off going with them to do volunteer work as children. One of the things they did is they volunteered at a couple of women's prisons in Missouri—unheard of at the time. Now we talk about school to prison pipeline, we talk about sex trafficking, we talk about DV [domestic violence] survivors defending themselves and ending up in jail, and that's not OK. We have to, you know, better women's defense and all of that they were doing that work back in the late 70s and early 80s when people, if they were doing work in prisons they weren't going to women's prisons. So we would go every Saturday as my memory as a child just going to visit. My father was also a minister so you offer Bible classes but you didn't have to take Bible classes to enjoy picnics and softball tournaments. And so our church at the time, church members would engage I mean you could—mom did what we would consider case management now, but you just talk to women. How can we get most of the women what they want for their children. They're going to want to see their children and so we would often rent Greyhound buses and take children to see their mothers on a Saturday which was fantastic. We all did that and that translated into us continuing to do volunteer work wherever we were whether my brothers were doing basketball camps or whatever they decided to do. But when you're at home before you go to school it's just mom and dad. And then you go to school and then your parents come to parent teacher conferences and they come to what they had then PTA meetings and they're like, “Oh your mom is white,” and I'm like, “Yes, it's mom,” or whatever. But you become aware of race early on because people look at you differently and so why is that the case? And so there was always the understanding of the consciousness of OK and then why are people treated differently based on that and so there was an early understanding of the dynamics of racism first and foremost and that's just something you grew up with and you do, right? And so anywhere in time there was some injustice, “OK we have to do the right thing,” and then in high school and college—and this is more of an awakening—you take cool classes like feminist readings of what I thought cool classes are, you know, political science which is another undergrad degree and that's just the study of power. And you kind of with more readings and meeting other people, kind of get to put some of your ideas about it into theories

around it and how you can dismantle racism, for instance. And before we were talking about intersectionality, I was like, “Well where do I fit,” because I'm Black and I'm a woman and so I think it just set me up—I mean I think that I couldn't help but be conscious of it and then it just became part of my passion.

CG: What do you think the biggest challenge was for you as an important figure?

DH: I think the biggest challenge is that you do realize you do represent more than yourself all the time and it's a pressure you feel that you always say the right thing that you're doing the right thing that you're thinking about things and you're doing what your conscience tells you to do which doesn't always make you popular. You know we like to be liked I've come to terms with the fact that people don't always like me and that's OK now it's going to get along that's alright. But I think you know particularly in roles like this you want to do the right thing. You want to do the right thing for the organization and you want to have some impact. You want to make some change and somebody said have I done enough am I doing the right thing. So, it's understanding that you have a responsibility with that leadership. If that person you just want to make sure you are respectful of that you don't take that for granted and you also realize that you do have a certain amount of power and that you use a powerful power is not bad and you're bad so use it for and that means helping someone out anytime. But anytime students call I'll make time for that because I was a student. Some people made time for me and I appreciate it. I can help open doors for people, it's my job. That's why somebody did it for me and I think that’s similar to what you know Toni Morrison said. I do believe that when you get these degrees—I mean that quote when you go out there, you have these fancy degrees, your job is to help somebody else. It's not just a sit in that because what's the point? That's just selfish, but your job will be to help someone else come along. You open doors for someone else. If there's anybody you can help you should do that. That's your power, so that's the greatest responsibility I think we have.

CL: Who would you say has been the most impactful figure in your life when working for such a powerful movement?

DH: My dad and my mom. I got to think about this the other day. I mean I just came back from a trip yesterday from Mississippi. So one of the things I was playing those games with on Facebook and how many states have you visited. I realized that I have visited 46 states so let's knock them off right before we go to Europe and all those good things and different places. We travel America. America's beautiful it really is a beautiful place. So Mississippi state and my father's born Clarksdale, Mississippi, so I had to visit Clarksdale. I think I wrote somewhere the most influential, the greatest man I know, is my dad. It starts at home—my mom and my dad really that's where you learn your lessons in life if you’re lucky. Not everyone is able to do that. But to think about what they both accomplished and particularly it's like men born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, that I can't find a birth certificate for because he probably was born in the house and so just going there made me feel connected. I don't think I have any relatives left there on his side but just learning the lessons and again going back to helping people that's I don't know what

else we're here for if we're not helping to make the world a better place. People say to me in the interviews all time, “I just want to help,” but it's true either you do or you don't and you get it or you don't and so they were role models for that and they still are by far. I admire a lot of people but they are my greatest influence.

CG: Is there any advice that you would want to give to someone else or is there advice that you've carry every day?

DH: I think from this place right now when I tell my nieces and anybody I run into of the same age, I would say encourage people to face your fears. Work through them and do what you want to do. Life is short and it's true if you if you're blessed or however you see it, you're lucky enough to live because living past your age is a blessing really it is but it takes a while, like I said I have these lessons if you want to listen but most people have to find things out for themselves you just do. I was like that. I wish I would have listened a little bit more. But I still think in your own time like you just learned that you have nothing you really have nothing to lose take all the chances. Do travel as much as you can. Instead of things, travel because what you learn it really is a great cure to ignorance is that through it all what we have in common—we have more similarities than we don't. We really do all pretty much want the same things in life. We all want to be fit, we all want a place to live, we all want love, you want good friends, family, you maybe want to raise a family, you want your children to do better than you. Nieces and nephews in my case. But fight the fear. Fear kills more dreams than anything else and if you understand that early on there are so many things that you can do and you are capable. You really are good. It is a world that really makes us question ourselves and not just women, or people of color. But for all of us we have the fear of failure and we just stop. So just do it anyway, so what if you don’t get it. It’s just like okay go into a popular job, Debby. Go ahead and run for office, Debby, you said you were going to do that when you were 23, here we go. Do it, just do it and I think a number of things came together. You have nothing to lose and if nothing else do what you got to do because tomorrow is not promised. Mostly you want to make an impact, if you leave this world what can you say you gave this world. Not what you did for yourself, but what you gave the world. Leave it a little bit better and those things really are true. Yeah, do what you really want to do. That’s it. It is so powerful. Just do it. Do it and be okay if you don't make it the first time or you don’t get that job you applied for it’s okay there is something else coming. I cannot say you just get here; you don’t just get here. You work at it and you take chances. I think about it, nine years ago I moved and now you sit at the helm of one of the most iconic places in Worcester. This really is. It is a gift really. I cannot tell you how many things have happened and how many doors have opened when you do it. So that’s my advice. Do it!

CL: You talked about having a long-term goal of running for council or seat. What else would you like to achieve down the line or do you still have plans to kind of possibly work towards this goal?

DH: Yeah, you know, I don't know if I'll run again, I may. Like you know in part of being appointed to the position they say you have to suspend your campaign, but it wasn't a good idea it really would have been smart to try to start this big position and also be on City Council. I don't know there's something in me that still says I have another office run, we'll see don't give up on that. Maybe there's a book along the way. Maybe I'll be a curator at a museum, I do love art. I think it's my other life and maybe I'll open a gallery. That really, it's true we got some other things going on.

CG: How do you get back into the zone when you feel burnt out or over worked?

DH: I like to travel or go to an art museum. I really do, that's life for me so I know when to take a break. Nature is good just walking around hiking whatever. I love flowers. So, New England is really perfect. Water—I will go to Rhode Island for that. My favorite lighthouse is near the water. You just rejuvenate, but I make sure I do that every weekend. I have no problem leaving work where work is and just have an adventure as I would call it.

CL: How would you say that the YWCA has helped you in your journey and achieving the ultimate goal of raising awareness?

DH: I think I came to the YWCA with the awareness but I think the mission makes it easier to get that message out to other people. We did a piece of the Worcester Business Journal, maybe a few weeks ago about the YWCA being an incubator for women's leadership. I do think we offer that. We still are one of a few nonprofits that have an all-women's board and we do that on purpose because we know when women may get in spaces regardless of how nice they are dynamics change and women don't often have time to or opportunities to be in a leadership role. As we see there is still [?] on board, in terms of state wide, commission, seats, etc. So, I think just with the background with what I bring to the YWCA and that mission that really is just a radical mission, a mission that is our mandate. It allows us the opportunity to do all sorts of things and to question things and to learn things. Also, to help mentor young women and women period, who maybe be seeking different opportunities. Whether that may be vice president, CEO positions, running for office we have had a lot of women do that, just stepping up. So, it is a wonderful place to do that and I think I continue to grow just because I continue to meet other people and you learn from everybody all the time. But yeah, it is a great place and I say I love my job because I get to come to work to do the work I would be doing anyway.

CG: What is one thing every woman should know about being a person with major responsibilities?

DH: You know the women here including myself and I tell people to not do this. But you know we're really busy. If you want something done ask a busy person because you tend to get it done. It is not really a compliment though, it does burn you out. I was at dinner with a few people last night, mostly women, and one of them brought up how she came up in the banking world. You had to come to work and women would often bring their children because they are still the

primary care takers at homes etc. You just have to realize you cannot have it all. There was some push back and I was like oh they make the baby, but men can do stuff too or another woman. You have partnership and you have people who help you but also at the end of the day you can have it all. For me I chose not to have children for a reason but also, I realized the other day talking to somebody talking about visiting all 50 states she said, "Oh so you have children." I said, "No." So, she said, "That's why you could do it," and I laughed. I do want to do it but I do understand particularly for women that they work a second shift and you do the work you do at home and then you do the work you do during the day, or whenever you do it, your job. Women do have a second shift to look upon and I don't care how egalitarian things are women are seen as the primary care taker of children and home. So, I think yeah, we got to take a little time. We don't have to be busy all the time. We reward woman still we do this. To the City of Worcester Women of Consequence, I remember sitting at the table and making a decision on who would get an award because we are judging people first of all just based on subjective stuff. But also, I realize that we were giving awards to people who were extremely busy. Like if you were doing 15 things you were not deserving of the award. I'm like look we are doing the same thing we accuse society of doing to women. We have to be exceptional, whatever that means to them and we have to do multiple things. I'm used to all that and I said all that. You just want to do it all, and I think women are naturally the organizers, I do think that. You coordinate things and you might not get all the credit for it. You're in the civil rights movement, 80% of that were women but you'll hear about Doctor King, rightfully so, Andrew Young and different people but we just stay busy. Prioritize and prioritize yourself. I do believe if you don't care of you it doesn't matter—I tell my best friend this all the time—if you don't take care of you first you won't be here for anybody else. But you don't have to be there for anybody else. Have people be there for you. Prioritize you and you don't have to just be busy. You don't have to do what somebody asks you to do. Do what you like. So that's the key doesn't kill yourself trying to do everything.

CL: Was there a moment in your life where you kind of say was a setback or anything of that regard that kind of made you question going into this field and how did you always persevere and continue to push on?

DH: I would say it probably happened 10 years ago before I moved here. I think I was questioning a lot of things that I think people question anyway, but as you get like, "What's it all about? What am I going to do in life? Am I making it?" I actually left the field for a while and went into something totally different and just had to rethink where I wanted to be, how I wanted to exist in the world. I had to make a decision to be here, and I don't look back at all. Yeah, you get on a plane one day and you're like, "What did I do, did I just leave my life?" and yeah, I did. But I was looking forward to the adventure and it was a little bit scary. But I cannot imagine being anywhere else or when I think about it is when people say I can't imagine how different my life is now than it was, it really is true. I look around now and think how did I get here, why am I talking to these people? You don't necessarily think about yourself as an important person, but it renewed my energy in a way to get back. I think I used to think it is important and I still do

because it is what it is but how you are going to pursue or make things happen or make that contribution. Yeah, that requires some thought, but I think that was a pivotal time for a lot of different reasons. If I had to point back or look back at a time that really made a difference it was making that decision to be here. But a good decision!

CG: Was there a historical figure that influenced you to your journey?

DH: A lot of them, a lot of them. I will say in high school, my senior year, I read the *Autobiography of Malcom X*. That sent me on a different course all together and if you haven't read that you should read it. But it really was an eye opener, it really sent me on a path. In undergraduate, *Kaffir Boy*, by Mark Mathabane. I remember him coming to the Black Student Union, had him come to Drake University and I read that book then. A senior had recommended it and she said, "You have to read this." It opened my eyes just internationally, politics and what that looked like. Again, gave me some framework to kind of discuss what was happening across the globe. Of course, Ida B. Wells was a major influence, Alice Walker, Desmond Tutu, I can name a whole lot of people and those were early readings. Janis Joplin, Frida Kahlo, a lot of those just influenced the way I looked at life, politics, the way people should be, or treat each other. Bob Marley, there's a lot but there is a lot of different areas. But Malcom X at the end of the day, that book changed me and then Fredrick Douglas and Harry Jacobs and all that good stuff. A lot of those books are good.

CL: What kind of partnerships are you looking for when you open up to the community and ultimately make it more of a just society for everyone?

DH: Looking for those people I think are not just allies but comrades. I say yeah, they might be allies, but comrades are the people who will get into the trenches with you as exactly as it says. People who are authentic in their desire to see change and people who are willing to learn. Those are the folks and people come all the time. But I want to know do you know what the mission is of the YWCA. Just making sure that aligns with our values. A lot of people say especially after George Floyd, you can get money because you were doing certain work. But anybody that makes somebody's plate a little easier will align with. Whether that's food justice or rec. I appreciate their work, artists in a community, creative hub that work with different communities when we did the Black Lives Matter mural, twister, Music Worcester, we do all of that, Mass Humanities. Whoever is doing that work and is advancing humanity in any way that makes sense with how we do it and priorities as equity we'll work with.

CG: You said that your father was a minister was that Catholic or Christian?

DH: Christian.

CG: Do you think that his work influenced you a lot?

DH: I don't know if that influenced me a lot, I cannot say that. I mean we were brought up the way we were and again it was non-denominational. It was more in the acts of Christianity than

an act of a church and that was not something again. You're taught this but it was not in any way a damning religion, kind of dogmatic kind of thing. So, I think as far as values and morals go the basic tenets of any religion starts with be good to each other. I don't care where you come from, we all have certain tenets, feed one another, house the homeless, do what you can in the world. I kind of say that they all start with that then go their own ways. But the basic tenets of Christianity definitely influence the way I believe.

CL: You said previously you liked working in the larger cities previously and you love New England. Have you ever considered working in other major cities such as Boston for example?

DH: Maybe not Boston, I have thought about other major cities, I do. I have thought about just traveling and I see the beauty in a lot of different places. But Boston, it would have to be something wonderful for me to go to Boston I always say that. I like to travel. Just like Providence for that small period of time, it was fine you get the job done but even though it is a pretty ride on 146 the travel doesn't impress me or the parking. I would consider it, but it would have to be a pretty cool opportunity.