

Interviewee: Tracey Hippert-Kenny
Interviewers: Samantha Hanam and Brenda Gutierrez
Date of Interview: March 8, 2019
Place: Clark University, Worcester MA
Transcriber: Samantha Hanam and Brenda Gutierrez



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Abstract: Tracey Hippert-Kenny is currently the principal of Leicester High School. She was born in Washington DC in 1972 and grew up in and attended high school in Narragansett, Rhode Island. Tracey moved to Worcester to attend Assumption College as an undergraduate, and then pursued her graduate degree at Worcester State. In this interview, Tracey highlights her evident leadership skills she embodied as a teacher and as the current principal at Leicester High School in Leicester MA. She also describes projects or initiatives that she is taking on in the school, including going one to one with Chromebook devices, and participating in cultural educational exchange programs such as the one in China. Tracey has made education to her daughters a main priority in her home due to her parents enforcing education in her life when she was younger. As a mother and a principal, she reflects on the challenges she has encountered on balancing work, family, and social life, and how she is able to maintain a healthy lifestyle. She also discusses her potential future plans to continue studying abroad in order to learn more about other foreign countries educational systems, as well as furthering her own education.

SH: Today is Friday, March 8th, 2019, and we [Brenda Gutierrez and Samantha Hanam] are conducting an interview with Tracey Hippert-Kenny. Do you agree to record this session?

TH: Yes.

SH: What's your full name including both your maiden name and married name?

TH: Tracey Hippert Kenny, my maiden name is Hippert, last name is Kenny.

SH: When were you born?

TH: February 3, 1972.

SH: Do you have any siblings?

TH: I'm the oldest. I have one sister and one brother.

SH: Where did you attend grade school and high school?

TH: I went to Narragansett Elementary, and Narragansett Junior Senior high school, both of which are in Narragansett Rhode Island.

SH: Did you join any clubs or extracurricular activities?

TH: I was involved in many activities. First of all, I was on the honor roll for four years, I was part of the Academic Decathlon, the Debate Team, Student Council, Students against Drinking and Driving, I was part of—I was inducted into the National Honor Society as well as the National French Honor Society. I also played Varsity Basketball.

SH: Where have you lived during your life?

TH: Interestingly enough, I was born in Washington DC, and I lived in Bowie, Maryland. Then my family moved to Virginia, and we had a vacation home down in Narragansett, Rhode Island, and eventually we moved to Rhode Island which is where I went to elementary school, and then for college I moved up to Massachusetts and I've been living here for about thirty years since.

SH: What were your experiences growing up in your neighborhood?

TH: I was fortunate enough to grow up by the beach, so I feel very lucky. It was a very relaxed neighborhood and childhood. It was very safe, we rode our bikes, even as young kids down to the beach. Because we had grown up at the beach, our parents let us be there alone at a very young age. But we knew water safety and we knew how to swim, sun care, sunscreen, always. That was probably some of my best memories, and growing up by the beach, we enjoyed the beach all year long, not just in the summertime. But we also had, everything was in walking distance, so, back in the day there was a penny candy store and I remember trying to find change in our parents couches to get money for the penny candy store, and to the playground.

SH: Do you have children?

TH: I have two children. I have a daughter, she's 18, she's a senior in high school, getting ready to go off to college next year, she just got accepted to her fifth school, so trying to make some decisions. And I have another daughter who's a junior, who is 16.

SH: Do you try to raise your children similar to the way your parents raised you?

TH: I do. I make sure that they were raised—I wanted to raise them Catholic, so being part of the Christian community, Catholic community. We became very involved. I was their religious-ed teacher for about eight to ten years; we still go to mass every Sunday, to me that's very important. Putting focus on education is also a priority. It was how I was raised and school comes first, before anything else, but also to be very involved in activities and sports and to live a healthy lifestyle, to enjoy the outdoors, we like to hike and do camping and things like that, so it is very similar to how I was raised.

SH: What's your family background?

TH: In terms of nationality, or what do you mean by background?

SH: In terms of nationality and culture.

TH: So, I'm Irish German and French, French Canadian.

SH: What are some beliefs your family has?

TH: So again, our Catholic faith, we have a strong Catholic faith, I believe in family first, taking care of each other, I believe in having a good character, ethics and morals, values, and being kind.

SH: Does your family have any traditions?

TH: We have a lot of traditions. Again, my girls are in high school now, but a lot of these traditions are really when they were younger, and most of the traditions surrounded around holidays, but I remember always wanting to be around family and cousins, and I'll speak to Christmas specifically because that was always a big deal for us, but you know baking the cookies for Santa and leaving carrots for his reindeer. The kids used to make what they call "reindeer dust" and they'll sprinkle it on the lawn outside with cheerios and glitter, so that the reindeer could find our house. Then we always opened up stockings first and then our gifts. Christmas was just always a big deal, and then we'd always go to church after that. Easter, again, very religious, so we're big into Lent and either giving up something or doing something special just to bring the focus to the sacrifice that Jesus gave his life for us. So that's very important in my family and leading up to that is Easter you know and Good Friday—Holy Thursday and Good Friday. So that's something my family's always put emphasis on, but coming on Easter day, whatever the kids gave up, whether it was chocolate or gave something up, they got to splurge and have their big treat, but I always would hide their Easter baskets for them in different places and they'd have to find them. Couple other traditions, they love to go to their grandmother's houses. My mom in particular loves to cook and bake fried, fattening foods that the girls love so they love their time with their Grammy to make fried dough, crepes, and a thing called thurkies which is, I guess different cultures have it but it's pretty much just dough with cinnamon sugar and butter and you roll them and bake them. People call them different things but that's a little treat that they always had a tradition when they go to Grammy's house to make.

BG: Do you know how to pronounce—how to spell that out?

TH: The way we've spelled it, I don't know if its correct but it's T-H-U-R-K-I-E-S. "Thurkies". We think its French Canadian, that's what my mother says, but I don't really know for sure.

SH: Is there anything else you'd like to add about your family?

TH: I guess I would just like to say that my mom was a teacher, and my father was a lawyer. So as you can see, education was always an important factor, and the way my siblings were always raised was there was never a question about college or not it was always, "When you're older you will go to college, and when you're older you will get a job and save." And it was just something that was instilled in us early.

SH: When you graduated from college what were some jobs that you wanted to have?

TH: This is funny, so I was a French major and when I graduated—first of all I went backpacking around France by myself, right away and I dreamed about lots of different jobs. I thought maybe working in the French embassy or the American embassy would be something I was interested in, but then I had a dream I would go live on the Ivory Coast in Africa, and teaching English over there. So I enjoyed French; the culture, the language, but I also was in education, a concentration in education, so I knew I wanted to be a teacher, so I ended up getting hired right after that in Worcester, so that's kind of what shaped my future and my career.

SH: So, what was your first job like?

TH: So, my first job, are we talking about ever in my whole life or after college?

SH: We could talk about both.

TH: It kind of leads into the work ethic that I have. Back in the day we were allowed to work at any age, there was no cap on it, so I remember my mom and dad at age 13 telling me, "If you think you're going to want a car when you turn 16 you need to save your money," so at 13 I got my first job. It was at a restaurant called Terminises (ph.) and I started off as a dishwasher and I was able to bus tables, dishwash, I became hostess, but I did this when I was 13. I would—again it was a summer job and every day I would ride my bike to the beach with my friends, spend the day at the beach and then I would ride right to work and I would work the evening shift. And then my parents would pick me up, but I did that for a few summers to save money, once I turned 16—oh I also had a paper route early in the morning again riding my bike to do a paper route. But I was able to save a lot of money before I was age 16 and I was able to get a by myself a Dodge Charger. My parents helped me but I was able to save and I had to pay my own insurance and gas, that was the deal. And when I turned 16, I got a job at Dunkin Donuts, and I had that job through the rest of high school and then when I would come home for breaks for college, they would let me work, pick up some shifts there. I always—while I was here in Worcester at Assumption [College] I worked as a waitress in many different restaurants. There was one on Park Ave, it used to be called Pippins of Park Ave and it's now—oh gosh I should know it's right here...

SH: Is it Peppercorns?

TH: Peppercorns, thank you. It's right there. I also worked at Culpeppers bakery and a few other places while I was here in Worcester. And then again that's while I was at school, so did you want to lead into my career job now?

SH: Sure.

TH: So, as I was saying before, I went backpacking right after I graduated from Assumption College, and then I came back and North High School, here in Worcester, called and they gave me my first teaching job. So, I taught at North High School in Worcester for twelve years, and then I became an assistant principal. I was at Quabbin Regional High School for four years, and then I moved to Leicester. I was an assistant principal for eight years, and now I'm in my fifth year as a high school principal.

BG: So, what is the work that you're doing now, being a principal at Leicester High School, what does this work mean to you, and why?

TH: So, I think I have a natural born skill of leadership skills, and I think that was evident as a teacher. I learned how to build relationships with my students and make the learning material relevant to them, make them excited about it, even students who necessarily didn't love to learn French or love to learn Spanish. I made them excited about the culture or the food or whatever it was I could find a connection for them, and most of my students ended up loving the classes. From there, I started to find professional development type things where I was leading professional development for my colleagues, and I realized that people respected the work that I did, they learn from my workshops or my seminars. So, I learned that my skill could be enhanced there and to move to the next level. Again, being an assistant principal, I was very involved with the students and their activities and their day-to-day lives and I loved being an assistant principal. I really really enjoyed that that job. However, the position as principal opened up, and I really wasn't sure. I was very hesitant about whether I wanted to move into that role, because I love working with students and that's why I went into teaching in the first place. And I had a mentor say to me that I can make the role as a principal as much about the students as I choose to do. So, I decided I would give it a go, and see if I liked it. And I think as a principal I'm very actively involved in the students' lives. I know every single student in my school by first name, it's a small school but I still know everyone by name, I'm very active in their activities: the plays, the sports, the musical events, performances. I spend all three lunches in the lunch room with students every day, I greet students at the front door every morning, I'm in the halls I'm in classrooms, and I'm able to still make the difference in the climate in the school while remaining involved with the students so I like what I do.

BG: And then can you tell us more about the environment within the school, or the environment around the school, like in the neighborhoods, the environment overall?

TH: So in Leicester specifically, so I chose to move to Leicester when I had—right when my girls were little, when they were babies, because I did a lot of research on the different towns and communities around Worcester, and one thing that I really liked about Leicester was that I had heard that it's a small very close knit community. You can walk to things, they have a lot of events at their town common, they preserve their traditions and history they just—I just heard it was a really nice community. So when we moved there we moved right into the center of the town so as my children grew up, you know, they were young enough but to have the independence they could also ride their bikes, like I did when I was younger, ride their bikes to the park or to the school playground, to the town common where they had concerts all the time in the summer. But they could also walk to Cumberland Farms or to Dunkin Donuts or Subway. My youngest daughter loves to fish so she'd go down behind the Castle Restaurant all the time and just fish for hours. I mean she was only in like fifth grade, and she would just walk down with her tackle box for hours in the summertime. So, I really like that about the community in terms of the school that we're at, both of my girls are at school with me which I love. They don't necessarily love it all the time, but I would say the same about the school. We've preserved a lot of traditions that have been held in the school for years and years and years, and I try to make sure that that's important to the people that we keep them, because a lot of the students that I have, their mom and dads both went to Leicester High. I've learned that people when they live in Leicester, many times they'll leave and go to school, but once they're ready to raise their family they come back. I've learned that about that town. So, a lot of the students, their parents or their grandparents or aunts uncles cousins whatever all have been through Leicester, so I think maintaining traditions is really important. But we have a wonderful community at school, very kind students, respectful, it's a happy place to be, it's a very positive culture and climate.

BG: And, we know that you've said that the community is very close together and a good community to be in, but what are some challenges—even though it is a good community, or even though the school is a good school—what are some challenges, since you've started what are some challenges that you're still trying to work on and improve on in the school?

TH: Just in the school specifically?

BG: In the school or in the community.

TH: The biggest thing we're faced with is a financial crisis in the school, and also in the town. We have a large elderly population and when we go to town meeting to make votes, to vote on important decisions, primarily in the audience it's an older generation that their kids are not in school. And so, they're not voting to want to put money to improve the schools. So that's something I've been really trying to work on with our students, is getting the message out you know as soon as you turn 18 you should be voting, you should be getting to town meeting, your voice matters. So I bring our town moderator every year to meet with our seniors to talk about the importance of their vote, and then to get that, I always get the students involved in committees, and I have liaison positions for students so they're part of our school committee, part of my principal school council, part of our board of selectmen's office, so that they have

their hands and that they realize that their vote—their voice matters. But a challenge is that we don't have the money coming in, so we have to—this year we're closing one of our elementary schools, which means we have to take three grades and merge them into our other grades. So, I will be merging a preschool program into my high school next year for the first time ever, so that has some challenges. I'm actually looking forward to the challenge, because I think I can see some internships etcetera coming out of it. But because we don't have the money, and there's not a lot of money in that town, and there's not a lot of money going to the schools, it's a huge problem, you know. And the other piece in terms of the challenge within the community is we don't have any new economic development. Therefore, people aren't moving into town, there's no new real estate, it's just we're not generating money so we're kind of struggling.

BG: And within the school what are some accomplishments that you've done since you've started being a principal at this school?

TH: So, I think—well one of the first things I did is right before I started, I was able to be an exchange administrator in China. So, I'm very interested in the education systems of other countries, in particular Finland. That's another school just a school education system that I would like to explore. But right before I came, I went to China and I stayed for two weeks, I stayed with another administrator over there, and shadowed several different schools in China, and I was able to take back some of the things that I learned that I think they do very well. I think there are certain things we do much better than they do, but there was also some educational systems in place that we could definitely change in our country. But I also—that same administrator that I shadowed and stayed with, he came and lived with me the following fall. Since then we've brought in international students from China for a year in an international program. After that we wrote a grant through TCLP which is Teachers for Critical Language Program out of Washington DC and we wrote a grant for an Arabic program at Leicester High and we were able to get a native speaker from Egypt last year, who taught Arabic for a year, and this year we were fortunate enough to get a teacher from Morocco at our school teaching Arabic. So our students are loving, loving learning about the countries and learning about the Muslim religion, learning about the Arabic culture. It's been an eye-opening experience for our community because so many people think that when you bring Arabic in, that Arabic is a religion, and it's a language, so we've been trying to change the mindset of our community by bringing this in and it's been a really nice addition. The other big initiative that I'm proud to say is that a couple years ago we went one to one with Chromebook devices, where every single student is given a Chromebook and our entire school is a Google Chrome school, and it's allowed us to really bring our school to the twenty-first century with technology. So, we've opened WIFI, and students, when you walk into classes you know most students are on the device playing Kahoot or Quizlet live or they're very active and engaged with the technology.

BG: And do you think that with the Chromebook initiative, do you think that you see a big change now in the school? With regards to like the student's improvement in their grades?

TH: If anything, I think the most important thing that we've done with this process is to teach digital citizenship. Because these students are going to be going off in a short few years to college and they have to learn the appropriateness of their technology and when to be on their phone and when not to be on their phone, when to be texting and not, when to turn off so when they're in the class put it away unless you're engaged in it. I think our students multitask a lot more than ever before I see it with my own kids who are sitting there doing homework while Fortnite is on and I mean it drives me crazy I can't stand it. I mean how can you be playing a game and doing your homework? You can't do both you, just can't. So, I think they try to multitask a lot more. But in terms of improvements with the students because of the technology, I think it enhanced the way we deliver instruction. I don't think it's taken place with anything with curriculum I just think it's been an enhancement; it supplements the learning, so our students are a lot more tech savvy. I find a lot of students are able to teach new teachers, or teachers who maybe are older teachers who maybe don't know how to use the technology, and our teachers are very comfortable saying to a student, "Does anyone know how to set up this game or this whatever it is we're doing?" And the students are very comfortable getting up and explaining a new tech tool. So, I think that's really preparing them for the future. You know, another big piece of this is to make them globally aware of global citizenship, and just how they can connect so easily around the world with these devices.

BG: And in addition with students having this open ground of new technology being brought into the school, what other ways do you feel that students should be empowered and become successful individuals?

TH: So like I was saying before, I'm very big into student voice and asking the students to give their input. So you know I always am encouraging students to be part of my principals council, but to get involved in their community and when I have to do like a Google survey or what Google form I try to get the students to be active participants in decision making. So our Student Council is very large and many times before I make a change or bring a new initiative, I'll bring it to my Principal Council first which is parents, students, teachers, and community members, but then I always bring it to Student Council and ask them to weigh in on a topic, and give me their thoughts. For example, we just brought a documentary from the district attorney's office on a boy Clay Soper who died by mixing prescription pills and alcohol, and so we've brought that forward and I needed to hear from my students, "Do you think this is something we should show to the younger kids like the ninth and tenth graders?" I wasn't sure and they really felt I should show it to them because kids are being exposed to these things earlier and earlier. But I think I answered your question about how do I get them to be successful, really to be active participants in the learning process and to be part of the change.

BG: How do you incorporate – Now, how do you improve teachers and how do you make them become, you know these good leaders and these good examples to these students within the school?

TH: So first of all, I really believe in distributed leadership. I don't feel that because I'm the principal that I make all the decisions, I have a leadership team which are my department chairs, and I run most decisions by them. But a lot of what I do, I reach out to my staff and I am always asking them for feedback and ideas, and I form committees if we want change of schedule. I don't just do it- I don't believe in a top-down approach, I very much believe in bottom-up. And I think through that process natural leaders emerge, you see those who take on tasks, and take on responsibilities, and those who shy away until they're asked. But there are the ones who just move, take a project on or say, "Can I do this?" Take the initiative and run with it, those are the natural born leaders, they just many times naturally emerge. But I also do a couple things that I think are really important to note, number one is that at my faculty meetings, I have each department sharing best practices, so they have to choose a topic and every month share one thing that they're doing that they are proud of in the classes, and they're learning from each other. Another education term that is being thrown around lately is called 'pine-appling.' The pineapple, the international symbol for welcome. And so, our teachers are using the pineapple outside of their door when they welcome their colleagues to come and learn or come watch them teach, and they many times ask for feedback. But the pine-appling is becoming so much more part of our culture and of what we do, where teachers are constantly going into each other's classrooms and watching each other teach. And then at the next staff meeting I say, "I want to hear some shout outs, some pine-appling this past month, and they're like, giving high fives to their colleagues on, "I learned this from this teacher, I learned this from this teacher," and they're growing each other. We also do in-house professional development, where we might take a full Professional Development Day, and give topics where people will sign up to teach a session, so again they're teachers teaching teachers. And I think that's the best way instead of hiring some guru to come in that they don't know to be a guest speaker. Our teachers would much rather learn from each other. And especially when they have a skilled set that they feel like they can help develop their own peers that works best.

BG: And let's say when it comes to looking for a new teacher to come to the school, what are some strategies, what are some different strategies that you use in order to like hire a new teacher?

TH: So, the first thing we do is post the job internally, meaning in the Leicester Public Schools, or whatever school district we are in, we always post it internally if anybody inside wants the position first, we give them a first crack at it. Second we then post on a search engine called School Spring, and the positions are posted there, and I then form a committee and all my committees for every interview, I don't care if it's for a care professional or a student liaison, whatever it is, I always put a student on the interview committee, a parent, a teacher, an administrator, and then maybe one other. So at least five or six people on the committee, and then I have them all sift through the resumes and look at the applications. The very first thing I start with is looking at the certification. Do they have the certification necessary for the job? Because I can see something perfect on paper or their letter is great, or their transcript is great whatever it is, but if they don't have that certification then—or on School Spring if they have not filled out all the components to the application process, I don't even give them a chance. So,

once we've narrowed that down, we try to narrow it down to like five people to interview. Personally because I'm so used to doing interviews, I keep my interviews to 30 minutes. I think that's a good amount of time for interviewing for a position and about ten questions. And I think you can tell a lot about a person in that amount of time, and you always call them back if you have extra questions, or for a second interview or you want them. Many times, if I'm having a hard time between two different applicants I have them come back for round two to teach a lesson. And I give them both the same lesson with the same of group students, that way my students can weigh in. I usually give my students three to five questions to think about, and I want the students' feedback, do you want to learn from that teacher? Tell me why you think that. I think they are the best people to get feedback from. From there, one thing I pride myself in doing is always calling the candidates to let them know either they got the position, or they didn't. So that you'll find in your future that when you apply for jobs and you go for an interview sometimes you never hear back, and it's the most frustrating feeling.

BG: If the position for this teacher, they didn't get called in or they weren't the specific candidate you guys were looking for, how do you manage to sort of break that news?

TH: It's hard. Yeah, it's very uncomfortable, and in some cases one thing I think is really important—it doesn't happen often—sometimes people ask for feedback, “Could you tell me what areas I could improve on, that way if I'm interviewing with another school district, I know to work on that.” I am always willing to give feedback if asked. But I will usually say, “Thank you for the interview. We did find a different candidate that fits the position a little bit better, so good luck in your search, if you need anything let me know, or have questions.” So, I have had others call back, “Can you give me a little bit of feedback in my interview and why I wasn't the successful candidate.” So I do, I'm very honest.

BG: Let's sort of go back to your experience in China and the education system. So, is there a potential sort of trip in the future with like a different country?

TH: There's nothing in the works, but I do have a desire someday to go to Finland. There's a two-week program in February, to study the education system over there, because they are number one in all of the schools around the world. So, I'm very interested to see what they do differently.

BG: Okay.

TH: I follow the program on LinkedIn and read the articles about the school system.

BG: Okay, and now, it's sort of more of a reflection now. So, you said that you went to Holy Cross I believe.

TH: No, Assumption College.

BG: Assumption College, yes. So, in Worcester, correct?

TH: Yes, and Worcester State University, for graduate school.

BG: So, seeing you know how the Worcester community is, what are some differences that you noticed in Worcester compared to Leicester and the community there?

TH: So where I was at Assumption College, and that was where I lived right when I graduated was the Newton Square Area. I liked that area because I was familiar with the neighborhood, I think it's a very nice neighborhood, I think it's a very safe neighborhood. I also could walk to places, and again I like that. I was able to walk to, it's no longer existent, but the Coffee Kingdom, which is right off Richmond Avenue. And I did a lot of studying and grading papers at the Coffee Kingdom. I also was able to enjoy running and I could job down to Elm Park, and I spent a lot of time down at Elm Park. Things were close, the stores were in close distance, the neighborhood was nice, they were friendly, I felt very safe. So, I think Leicester, I wanted the same sort of thing, but in a smaller scale environment. I researched the school systems in Leicester, so I think I was able to achieve a similar situation just outside of Worcester in a small town but walking distance near the stores.

BG: Yeah.

TH: Things like that, but I think there is a lot of similarities.

BG: And do you think that there's any sort of changes, like dramatic changes in both?

TH: I would say Worcester yes, Leicester no [laughs]. I haven't seen any changes in Leicester for economic development, but Worcester—so I came to Worcester in 1990, and I can tell you the downtown area has exploded in development, economic growth, I'm very proud of the direction Worcester has gone. When I first started college [Assumption College], obviously it's a college city—ten colleges or universities in Worcester alone. We used to hang out—it's no longer existent, but the Common Fashion Outlets, and I used to go to plays at Foothills Theatre all the time. But that's kind of where the city—behind City Hall, I don't know if they call it 'the oval,' it has a skating rink there.

BG: Yes.

TH: Things like that you know. So [Worcester has] developed all of Union Station, and made transportation so much easier, the roads are easier to navigate, and they've just really made that the 'hub' of Worcester. I think they've done a great job with it, excellent restaurants, lots of nightlife going on, lots of culture and history, and art, and I really love, love the city of Worcester. I've really liked what they've done, they've mimicked it very similar to what Providence, [Rhode Island] did. I don't know if you're familiar with the Waterfires in Providence, Rhode Island, but they've done a nice job in that area, and I think Worcester has

kind of taken off. They also added the bike path from Worcester to Providence as well, so that's awesome. One thing that I noted was that Worcester is very proud of their triple deckers, and their diners, and even with all the changes in Worcester, I think they were able to preserve both of those, Parkway Diner on Shrewsbury Street was always my favorite. John Evangelista owns the Parkway Diner, and it's changed a little bit, they've improved it a little bit, but they've been able to preserve both of those.

BG: And do you have any sort of like- do you disagree in sort of like some changes Worcester has made, that you're not sort of like with it, you don't agree with it that much?

TH: No, I'm thrilled that they're bringing in the baseball team the 'Woo Sox'? The 'Pawsox'?

BG: The Pawsox, I think, yeah.

TH: The Polar Park, I think it is? I am thrilled for that; they've brought in the hockey team. So, I really think they have a draw to not just the athletics, to the arts, I mean I've gone to the Worcester Art Museum many times in college. And then, while my children were younger, I think Worcester really celebrates art, I mean the graffiti, they have art on the street which is a fabulous festival. They do the food trucks, the vegan- I just feel like they've really made an effort to lots of different groups of people and the diversity, I think is something that's a big difference from Leicester, but I respect that and value that in Worcester.

BG: Now, in terms of education within Worcester. Does and Leicester and Worcester, do their educations differ, do you guys work together?

TH: That's an interesting question. So because the principal ring [in Leicester] is so tight and so small I've been connected in for so long, I do a lot of work with what we call SWCL which is the Southern Worcester County League. And so, we do a lot of sharing and professional development. So, we do a lot of sharing so that's part of the Worcester County, so we play sports against each other. We share ideas, I think the education system in general is similar. We many times have students transferring from South High School to Leicester High [School], vice versa. You know because I've been out in Worcester and then I was at Quabbin, which is out in Barre, which is like farm land.

BG: Yeah [laughs].

TH: I'll be nice, and [in] Leicester I can tell you kids are kids. You know I've been in three very different school environments and students are students. And they all want the same things in life, they struggle with the same things, anxiety, social, emotional issues, and they are prevalent no matter where you are. And they want the same things.

BG: That's true. Okay, and now, speaking about how do you balance all these responsibilities, as a mom, you know as a principle, you know as a citizen?

TH: It's great question. I have struggled with this quite a bit in my life. Because I've always been, I've always been a career mom, and I think in a high-powered position, and a mom, and also always wanting to go back to school and take more classes and improve myself, I want to get my doctorate degree, I'm waiting, anxiously to get involved in a doctorate program. But I think I've taken a back step in the last maybe five years to really, really reflect and say I don't really do a good job in balancing everything. Something always sacrifices and at different times I have to give more attention to the family, or at different times I have to give more attention to my job, or to my career. It hasn't been til recently that I feel that I've found a balance, so I'm in my 25th year in my career and I really think only in the last five years that I've found some balance. So, I think that's probably pretty typical of most people who are career moms and have a lot on their plate. It's really hard to find a balance, but I feel that it's so important. So there are days where I look at my desk and I know I have a ton of tasks that need to be done, but there are some days that I can say that will be there tomorrow, walk away, it's not going to be any different [laughs] whether you stay there for another two hours or not. But then there are other times where it's Sunday and I much rather go do something with my family, when I have deadlines, I need to get my job done, I need to go into work on the weekend. So, I think trying to find a balance has been hard, it's been difficult, but for my own social, emotional, mindfulness, I try to really put everything into a little more checks and balance and I can say no to things. I can say no I can't come to that meeting or no I cannot make it or I'm going to be in that committee anymore, because I want to be at my daughter's' games, or I want to be here. It's really hard to say no, but I've learned to do that in the last five years.

BG: And do your like parents, how does your family, your kids, how do they view you as a principle? How do they think of you being a principal, or your parents?

TH: Well my parents are really proud of me [laughs], they've always been really proud of me. You know I feel that would've been a good question for my two girls, but that I feel that I've been a really good role model for both of my daughters. I think I was raised as a very strong independent female. I was always taught to make sure you take care of yourself, make sure you can provide for your family, if you ever have to. So, I was raised that way, and so I think my daughters have followed in my footsteps. They're both very strong willed, strong independent thinkers. And I know they'll be very successful. You know something that I've always noted in my job, and to my students, to my children, is failure is part of life. It's okay to fail, it's okay to make mistakes. I believe in redos, I believe in redos for assignments, but I believe it's important that they feel failure in life, and they have to be able to pick themselves up and they have to—as long as they don't keep making the same mistake over and over, because then you haven't learned anything. But learn from your failures and your mistakes, and they'll see, and they'll feel success.

BG: And who do you think, or what do you think motivates you every day to go to your job, and who keeps inspiring you? And why?

TH: [laughs] Well, my mom was my inspiration. And I think she was very career-minded mom, and always busy, always doing something and both of my parents were that way. My dad is 77, he's retired three times, and he still is working [laughs]. So, I think I'll probably follow in those footsteps, but what motivates me, I think I said it when I told you when I was thirteen, and I got my first job and I was working every single night at the restaurant, five days a week, was I wanted a car. I was motivated by extrinsic things. My parents always said if you want things, if you want to go places, if you want to have x,y, and z, you better work for it. It's not going to come to you, nothing is going to just be given to you, so you work for it. So, I'm motivated because I want to provide a good comfortable life for my children. I love to travel, I'm always planning the next trip, but I couldn't do that if I didn't work. And from the day that I graduated from college and I got my first job, I started saving for my retirement. And my parents taught me that at an early age and I'm thankful that at age 21, 22, I started my retirement. Because as soon as I can retire I want to be able to enjoy and life and look back and say I worked my butt off and it's time for me to live life. And I want to get my kids through college and provide them with a good life.

BG: And you think that having your parents push you into becoming this independent person that you are, do you think that's probably something that has impacted you and made you become the person who you are right now?

TH: Yes, absolutely. I mean school work and education was nonstop at my house and same with my two daughters now. I mean they're in advanced placement classes, taking dual enrollment courses at college, and involved in everything, part of three sports, and it becomes ingrained in who you are. And you're always looking for something more and to learn—life long learner for sure. Like I said, my 18-year-old daughter is getting ready for college, and the two of us go back and forth as to who's going to get their doctorate degree first. So, I'm going to beat her! [laughs]

BG: [Laughs] And sort of like the last question. How do you define success?

TH: So I believe success is finding your happiness, I really do. It doesn't matter how big or small it is. But find what makes you happy, and set a goal, and have expectations to how to meet the goal, and then have determination and grit, and just do it. You know I've done some remarkable things in my life, but they wouldn't have happened if I didn't have a goal. And there's no way I would've been successful if I didn't have a goal or expectations for myself. I can give you one example, right after I gave birth to my second daughter—and they're only sixteen months apart—I gave birth to my second daughter, I was working full-time, and I decided I'm going to train and run in the Boston Marathon. And I was not a runner, and two babies at home, working full-time, I was just like, "I'm going to do this!" [Slams hand on table] And as soon as I say something out loud and I set a goal, and here's my expectations, I trained from January, to April. And I ran, I finished the Boston Marathon, and again, not a runner [laughs].

BG: What year was this?

TH: 2003. Right after my second daughter was born. And that's what I do. I just set goals; I just find something that I think will make me happy. Trust me, the training to run a marathon was horrible. I wanted to quit, every Sunday I cried, every Sunday I called my mom, which was the worst person to call because she would be like, "Why are you doing this hunny, it's okay, you don't—just quit, just give up." And I'm like, "No. I said I'm going to do it, I've joined this running- training club, I'm doing it." That's what I do. And I just set my mind to it and do it.

BG: Can you tell us more about that experience?

TH: [Laughs]

BG: Like how was it when the actual moment came?

TH: Oh, so the day of was amazing. I mean, that was nothing. Running the marathon? Was amazing, because I did all the hard work. It's a perfect metaphor for everything else in life, but we had run all the way through Heartbreak Hill, as part of the training, which is the worst part, because it's four miles just up hill, you know, gradual uphill. But we had through our training, got that far, so I knew I had a short while to go after that, but I had different people jump in and ran different legs of the race with me to motivate me. You have your name on your shirt, so the whole way through people are screaming your name and it just motivates you. The day of is exhilarating. But to finish it, I had two goals. I want to finish it before the clock goes off, which the clock is on for six hours and that's it. I finished it, let's just say in under six hours, it was very long. But I wanted to enjoy the experience. That's it. I had no expectations of a time or how I would do. If I had to stop a couple minutes to take some breathers, I was okay with that. I did not put pressure on myself to have a certain time limit. I was what they call 'bandit run,' because I had never run another marathon before. So, I was at the back of the pack, so I didn't have an actual number to run in. But crossing that finish line, I remember looking at my family like, I would do that again, someday. I haven't [laughs].

BG: What was [your family's] reaction?

TH: Nobody could believe it! Nobody could believe it that I was going to do it. Again, I was never a runner, I didn't run. But again, if I say it, I set my mind to it. I'm a very determined person, and I will never say I'm going to do something unless I've already thought it through in my head. As soon as I say it out loud, it will happen. So my backpacking experience in France, I went by myself, and this was before cellphones and I knew I had a plane ticket into Paris, a plane ticket out of Paris, and I was there for my first backpacking trip was four weeks, just France. And I did the year rail pass and stayed in youth hostels, and just went, and I just did it. And I was also an exchange student in high school with a family for two months in the summer.

BG: Were you able to meet different people [in France], were you able to connect with all these people?

TH: Oh yeah, it was awesome.

BG: While being by yourself?

TH: Yeah. Yeah, because the youth hostels you have backpackers staying from all over the world in the hostels, so I spent a day or two with people, never spent more than two days with anybody. But met lots of people and I guess I kind of learned how to get really close with somebody and then say bye. Because of who I am too, it's hard to build a close relationship and then people leave, but I've done that because I've done a lot of travel and meeting people.

BG: So now, this is actually the really last question [laughs]. So, are there any goals that you have set in mind right now that you're thinking of doing later on? Not only involving with the school but like, with your own personal life are there any goals?

TH: Well definitely, like I said, I would love to go to Finland to study their education system, that's something that I would like to do. I definitely would like to get my doctorate, at least my Ed.D. I would like to do that. I would like to have the Dr. as a title before my name. I would want to see through my girls off to college. I want to help them just get their lives settled and be in a good place. And then honestly, I am looking forward to a retirement and being comfortable just being able to travel and I do see myself going somewhere warm. I'm thinking South Carolina. But I'm looking forward to that somewhere in the next ten years or so to doing that.

BG: Okay, is there anything else that you would like to add before we finish the interview today?

TH: I don't think so.

BG: Alright, well thank you so much!

TH: You're welcome!

BG: It was nice getting a chance to meet you today and taking time out of your day to come and do this interview with us.

TH: You're welcome.

BG: Thank you so much!

TH: You're welcome.