

Interviewer: Laura Smith
Interviewee: Debra Hopkins
Date of Interview: March 20, 2009
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts
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Abstract:

Debra Hopkins was born in 1959 in Worcester, MA where she was raised in the Main South and the Grafton Hill sections of town. She attended Middlesex Elementary School on Hamilton Street, Worcester Central Catholic for middle school, and Holy Name for high school. She briefly attended the University of Massachusetts, but she transferred to the University of Connecticut where she received her Bachelor's Degree in Theater Administration and Psychology. In this interview, Debra shares her experiences in Worcester and the Worcester community and highlights her experiences working for a number of non-profit agencies, including her experiences working with Junior Achievement of Central Massachusetts, where she is currently the President.

LS: Do we have permission to record you, Debra Hopkins, today, March 20th 2009?

DH: Yes you do.

LS: What is your full maiden name?

DH: Already a tough question because I am half adopted. My full entire name, prior to getting married, Debra Helen Hayes Butler.

LS: Wow. How old were you when you were adopted?

DH: Almost 13.

LS: And you were here in Worcester for the entire time?

DH: Yes.

LS: What is your married name?

DH: Debra Butler Hopkins, but I go by Deb.

LS: Okay and when were you born?

DH: I was born in 1959.

LS: Do you have any children?

DH: I have two children.

LS: Do they live around here?

DH: Actually, my oldest daughter, Ashley, lives in Pennsylvania. She just graduated from Clinton Park University and she is a choreographer there. And my daughter, Tasha, lives here during the summer and school breaks. She is a college student at Emmanuel.

LS: Do you have any grandchildren?

DH: No. Thank God. You're college students you know why I am answering it that way.
(laughing)

LS: How old are your daughters?

DH: My daughters. Ashley is 24 and Tasha just turned 21.

LS: Okay, and what is the name of your husband?

DH: Brent.

LS: Now can you tell me a little about your parents? I know you have a few adopted parents and the...

DH: Actually, actually I have my mom, has always been my mom. I'm only adopted on the paternal side. Was born to a single mom so my parenting experience was really my mom and her two, my two grandparents who were Scottish immigrants. Then when I was 13, my mom married and my stepfather adopted me.

LS: Oh, okay. Now did your parents-what kind of education did your parents receive?

DH: My mother was a teen parent. I was very proud of her. She got her GED when I was in elementary school. I don't believe either of my grandparents finished high school.

LS: Now where have you lived during your life?

DH: I have lived in Worcester, in Amherst, Mass., in Storrs Connecticut. and I spent a summer living in St. Andrews, Scotland.

LS: Oh wow. And so you said you grew up in Worcester, in what neighborhoods did you grow up?

DH: I was born on Main South. I think I lived there until I was about two or three with my mom, and then the two of us moved in with my grandparents in the Grafton Hill area.

LS: And can you describe to us what those neighborhoods were like? Are they similar or different? You probably don't remember but...

DH: Yeah, I mean Main South has always been a low income neighborhood and it certainly was at that time as well. Grafton Hill is probably known for all its three deckers. I mean it's really sort of that is the signature piece of that neighborhood. Primarily an Italian and Irish neighborhood which is a little unusual, being at a time having a single parent in a very, very deeply religious Catholic neighborhood...a little bit unusual.

LS: And so, how long did you live in that neighborhood?

DH: Actually almost until I went off to college. When my mother got married, she and my stepfather moved to Charlton. I tended to spend most of my time still in my grandparents' home.

LS: Okay. And where do you live now?

DH: I live in the Burncoat section of the city.

LS: And how long have you lived there?

DH: In that house, since my daughter was two, so 19 years.

LS: Oh wow. And have you lived in multiple areas in your adult life? In Worcester?

DH: After college, I had a few apartments in the city before we bought a house. Went back to the Grafton Hill area. Had two apartments there and then bought the house in the Lincoln/Burncoat area.

LS: Okay. And do you have other family members that still live or live in the area?

DH: My husband and I are the only ones living in the city.

LS: And since you have seen Worcester through the years, have you seen any changes that have occurred in the city over time?

DH: It's become much more multicultural which I think is absolutely wonderful. As someone who works within the field of education, one of the changes that I have seen that concerns me a little bit is sort of a middle class flight from our public schools.

LS: Are there any distinct characteristics that you think make Worcester the place it is?

DH: With my nonprofit hat on, I have to say that Worcester has got to be one of the most collaborative cities anywhere. You know, I look at a program like JA Academy where you have a public school, a college, a corporation and for us here locally, it was really easy to get those key stake holders together, not just for one model but to replicate with every public school. When I speak with colleagues in other cities in Massachusetts or even other states, I'm finding that is very unusual and it's not just with Junior Achievement. The same accomplishments were achieved with the summer youth employment program. The United Way does a great job convening partnerships so there really is that it takes a village attitude here in Worcester. And that's why I stay, that's why I love it.

LS: Cool. Now we're going to move on to a little bit about your education. So where did you attend school? Like in elementary school and high school?

DH: Elementary school, I attended Middlesex Elementary School which is now a condominium. It is up Hamilton St. That tells you how old I am. And then when I was in junior high, my mother married an educator and I was going to end up in the same school system. So I was then put in parochial school and I attended at that time it was called St. John's. It is now Worcester Central Catholic. And I went to Holy Name for high school.

LS: Okay. And then after high school did you attend college?

DH: I did. I did.

LS: And where did you go?

DH: I started at the University of Massachusetts, was not able to work out the double major I wanted, so I transferred to the University of Connecticut, and that's where I graduated from.

LS: And did you go to graduate college?

DH: I haven't. I have taken classes. Nope I don't have a Master's.

LS: What did you major in, in college?

DH: I did a double major in Theater Administration and Psychology.

LS: Okay. And upon finishing your education what did you see as your options?

DH: Because of the theater degree and because my husband at the time was a professional actor, I went right into theater and spent a couple of years at Foothills Theater working there, but really was just feeling this urge to get into the nonprofit community and figure out how I can make a difference there.

LS: And well that kind of takes us to work, the work section. And first I'll ask, do you work outside the home?

DH: Yeah. Although I remote access a lot on my computer, so my family will say that I work a lot in the home too. (laughing)

LS: And what age did you begin working?

DH: Wow. 15? 14 maybe.

LS: And what were you doing?

DH: Typical, I did a lot of the babysitting, that sort of stuff. Waitressing. Waitressed at Howard Johnson's at that time, the one by Holy Cross. Got held up at gun-point while I was there. Decided I didn't like waitressing so much.

LS: Fair enough. And so after you got your college education and you worked at the theater, did you, where did you work after that?

DH: I-my first entry into the nonprofit world, and really I've worked with three agencies, was at Worcester Comprehensive Child Care. I worked in the Great Brook Valley Daycare Center and loved it, absolutely loved it. I was there at the time it was Worcester Comprehensive that made a very bold move that they were going to open a teen-parenting program in one of our local high schools. So I had the experience of being a part of that inaugural step, working at the teen care center at Burncoat High School.

LS: Oh wow. And then how many years, I guess I can say when did you start working at Junior Achievement?

DH: Okay, I was there for eight years and then I went to CASA [serves Worcester Juvenile Court] coordinating special advocates. I was there for almost ten years, then did a brief stint at the United Way and then joined Junior Achievement in 2001.

LS: And so you currently work for Junior Achievement?

DH: Yes.

LS: And what has this work meant for you?

DH: Paying it forward, making a difference for young people, creating opportunity. It's just the best experience I have had in terms of helping people. Like you guys who want to make a difference in young people's lives and connecting volunteers with kids who really need them.

LS: And what has been your greatest success or accomplishment at JA [Junior Achievement]?

DH: JA Academy. What you folks are doing on the college campuses with kids who otherwise might not have a chance to see themselves in a postsecondary environment.

LS: Now can you just describe a little bit what JA Academy is?

DH: I can. What it is, is the pairing of each public high school with a corporate partner and a college partner. We ask the high school to identify 15 high potential juniors who could succeed in a college environment but whose challenging life's circumstances might not make it easy for an automatic transition from high school to college. The students tend to be almost exclusively first generation college applicants. The majority of them have overcome challenging life circumstances. Many of them are recent immigrants. We have students who have been in and out of foster care systems, lots of tough stuff going on in their lives. We pair them with a business and a college. Two afternoons a week they are transported to the college campus where corporate volunteers spend an hour doing some work course readiness, financial literacy instruction and then we have these absolutely fabulous service learning students from the college who coordinate peer led college access and familiarization activities with them.

LS: Okay great. And actually how do you define success? Or how would you define success?

DH: Having no regrets.

LS: And do you think that this definition has changed over the years?

DH: Yes. Yes.

LS: How so?

DH: Probably when I was younger, success was defined more externally by allowing other people's opinions to determine whether or not I was successful. The older I get, the more internal the definition has become and it's really, do I feel good about what I did today or what I did this week.

LS: Great. What are your hopes for the program, Junior Achievement or JA Academy?

DH: That it continues to grow. That it is not impacted by the current economy. I worry, it's a new program and this is a hard time to be the new guys on the block during a crisis. My hope is that the students who are graduating and benefiting from it will have a ripple effect. That these students are going to campuses all over the country, and that they are going to show up, and they are going to be the ones challenging, well why can't we start something here? Well what can I do to give back to the community? So my hope is that ripple effect.

LS: Great and I guess I should probably also ask when did the JA Academy program start?

DH: It started in 2007. Early 2007.

LS: And is this the first place it has been?

DH: This is the only place where the model is defined here currently exists. Boston had a similar program in that they were delivering Junior Achievement courses on campuses, but weren't linking in with some of the student resources on the college access piece. It was more getting a donation of space on a campus and when they told me about that program, it mushroomed into well wait a minute, this is a partnership this can be something exciting in the community. Several other Junior Achievements across the country are in the early stages of implementing programs. I think Springfield will be ready to relatively soon, as will Fall River. I have received a lot of inquiries request for information. I'm now hearing from the people, we couldn't get the funding for a new start up unfortunately.

LS: That is so unfortunate.

DH: I know. I know. Yeah (____???) The city even had letters of intent from a company and a college all excited to go, but weren't able to secure the funds.

LS: Uh that is a so frustrating. So what would you say have been some of the biggest challenges that you have faced at Junior Achievement?

DH: Collaborations are immensely rewarding, they are also very, very hard work and they are challenging. Every program we run involves the intersection of at least two, usually three or more major stakeholders, and my job is always to balance the dynamics of that relationship and make sure that everybody is gaining what they need to. The Academy, as an example, wouldn't be successful if the college students weren't getting a leadership experience and a learning experience out of it. So I'm doing a lot of managing dynamics where you go on a college campus and the administration is used to, okay this is an Assumption College program and this is how we are going to do it. The Worcester public schools likewise will have a Worcester Public School Program. So I have to always maintain the balance of this is a partnership with equal stakeholders and equal say. And I have been pleased with the results. It's hard. It is hard.

LS: Now is there anything else that you want to add about your work experience?

DH: I think one of the observations I have made is just how interconnected all youth work is in the city. I mean, the three youth populations that I have worked with were the teen parents and their infants; (and it has been almost a decade with each agency); the subjects of child abuse and neglect investigations at CASA; and now the Junior Achievement students. And because I have been in the community so many years, I'm starting to see, wow these are the same kids. You know this junior who is in the program at Assumption College was actually the child of 18 mother. Or this person who was in foster care might have been a young person that I advocated for when I worked at CASA. So that really has reinforced a lot for me, the importance of all the agencies to be working together, cause it is the same kids.

LS: Exactly, it is great to see people so dedicated to the city of Worcester for long periods of time. Okay and this goes back more, I guess it can be now or growing up. What were or are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework?

DH: (Laughing) Getting it all done. I mean now I am really fortunate in that I am married to somebody who's wonderful and doesn't view it as there are prescribed roles, who should be doing the housework, whatever. So it's, get it done. My house is clean. But I have to admit I don't spend a whole lot of time worrying about how it is decorated or the curtains have been up for two years. I need to buy new ones.

LS: Okay, so you guys obviously share the housework. How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles and interests in your life?

DH: By not sleeping? (Laughing)

LS: Fair enough. And how do you, or how do you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path?

DH: I chose to work in the nonprofit, never going to be rich. That is a given. I think particularly when I was working somewhere like CASA, with really extreme child abuse cases, having to achieve a balance that I am not bringing that home, that I'm not letting that make me an unhappy person because I'm dealing with so much tragedy. But the pro-side to that is that I think it has made me a more empathetic person, like now, as I watch my daughters who are young adults. I'm finding their friends are still calling me, they e-mail me, they ask me to start a Facebook page. And you heard that whole embarrassing story.

LS: I did. Now what kind of work does your husband do?

DH: He's total opposite from me. He's what's called Account Developer. Yeah yeah, it's like a cross between a computer programmer and an actuary. And he does something with tables and numbers and making it all work on the computers at Fidelity.

LS: Very different.

DH: Very different.

LS: Now we're moving into politics and community involvement. Do you consider yourself active politically?

DH: I don't think anybody is as active as they want to be or could be, but yes I do.

LS: And have you been involved in volunteer or community work.

DH: Yes I have

LS: If so, what groups did you work with?

DH: I volunteered with the United Way. I've done a lot of volunteering in the arts community, cause that was really my outlet. As I've mentioned, I have a daughter who's a choreographer. So a lot of my volunteer time, my board time would be for organizations like Foothills Theater, Wachusett Theater. I also volunteer with the United Way as an allocation volunteer and helped out with their campaign.

LS: And what led you to work with the United Way?

DH: A very persuasive friend asked me to. And I believe in the work. I believe in the work.

LS: Were there any other organizations that you've been involved in over the years?

DH: Did I mention I was a Red Crisis volunteer? Can't remember if I mentioned that.

LS: And when was that?

DH: That was right after I graduated from college until I adopted my oldest daughter. So it was like from 1981 to '86 to '87.

LS: Great. And has religion played a role in your life?

DH: Yeah, as I said I went to Catholic school. Wasn't baptized Catholic, but had that exposure and grew up in a very religious neighborhood. I think some of those early experiences as the view that the Catholic Church had at that time toward single parenting, divorce, any of those issues did bias me a little bit towards the church. I'm now realizing, no, you know prejudice or biases are things that people own, not necessarily an organization or an institution. So I had that Catholic school experience, Catholic neighborhood experience. When I adopted my daughters, we joined an African American Baptist church which was another whole learning experience for me.

LS: Are you still active in that church?

DH: Um, no I'm not, but that's part of the how do you balance everything? Enough hours in a day.

LS: You do have to sleep at some point. Well great. So now moving onto health. How have health issues impacted your life?

DH: Fortunately, I am blessed, nothing really serious, although some bizarre things. As my mother says now, 'So you were the kid I didn't get inoculated.' (Laughter) I got the measles when

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I was in college. I got the chicken pox when I worked with Worcester Comprehensive in Great Brook Valley, along with all the kids. I thought it was a really bad case of acne. Nope. I was the only staff member that the nurse had to send home. So I had the chicken pox then and then, which was really bizarre. I didn't realize it was a major thing, I caught spinal meningitis when I worked at teen care. So yeah, I've had weird health issues like that, but otherwise, very healthy.

LS: Great. And what are your experiences in accessing quality, affordable healthcare?

DH: Um, again, that's another, that's his job, not mine. My husband's company has great benefits program so...

LS: Excellent. And whose health are you responsible for?

DH: Well, directly my own, indirectly my husband, my two daughters.

LS: Alright, and this is kind of a conclusion. Now that we're working to tell a fuller story of the past of women than has been recorded in the past what should we be sure to include? Is there anything you want us to include in your history?

DH: I think, one of the things that I say a lot to the teenagers and the adolescents that I work with, don't judge a book by its cover. Don't assume the outward package that people see tells the whole story. You know, most of us are so multi-faceted. And I know for myself personally, when I work with young people, they look at me and they see somebody with a title of president who dresses a certain way, speaks a certain way. And I want to make sure my voice is heard that I came from the same place as many of them did. And don't want, you know, assumptions made that we can all be put in convenient little boxes. Boy that was a rambling answer. (Laughter)

LS: Well, thank you very much.