

Interviewee: Barbara Morton
Interviewers: Ciera Clivio and Andrew Wynne
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Transcribers: Ciera Clivio and Andrew Wynne



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Abstract: Born in 1959, Barbara Morton grew up in Worcester, Massachusetts in the Burncoat area. Barbara's education consists of St. Peter Marian Central Catholic High School and then for college Barbara went to UMass Amherst and then postgraduate school at Suffolk University. Barbara is the Regional Director for the State Department of Youth Services for the Worcester County which she discusses her passion for in this interview. She stresses in the interview that it is important to start talking about difficult conversations and helping people. Everyone has tragedy in their life and Barbara conveys an aptitude and genuine love for her craft of helping kids through it, and enjoying every second of her job. Most people try reach for a goal to work a job they love and live for, and Barbara is the epitome of this ideal.

CC: So I have to ask if we have-I have to ask permission to record your voice for the oral history using your name and date. So, wait do I say the name and date or do you say the name and date?

BM: I don't think it matters.

CC: Okay, well.

BM: My name is Barbara, maiden name Fleming, married name Morton, and today's I believe October 1st.

CC & AW: The second.

BM: Oh, it's the second. Okay. So you have permission to record me today.

CC: Wonderful. Well, you answered the first question already. What is your full name? Including both maiden and married name if applicable and then where were you born?

BM: I was born in Worcester.

CC: Worcester?

BM: Yes, Worcester, Massachusetts.

AW: What part of Worcester were you born in?

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BM: I was born in the original, St. Vincent's Hospital which used to be up on the top of Vernon hill. It's still partly there, but then it relocated to downtown Worcester when it was built new.

CC: Yeah, have you ever been married?

BM: I have.

CC: And what is the name of your husband?

BM: Robert Morton, but I've been divorced probably 18 years.

CC: Do you have any children or grandchildren?

BM: I do. Both. I have, two sons.

AW: Nice.

BM: And both born in Worcester and I have a granddaughter in Leicester.

AW: What do your son's do?

BM: Do?

AW: Yeah.

BM: One's a police officer and the other works in a residential program in Maine. He supervises the program for troubled young people.

CC: Oh wow.

AW: What part of Maine?

BM: He's in the programs in Litchfield. He's temporarily living in Augusta. But he wants to get closer to Portland.

AW: Oh okay, okay, because I...my family has a lot of relatives in northern Maine.

BM: Oh, okay.

AW: But they're in Stockholm. It's very north.

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BM: I was just up in Kokadjo. Kokadjo, way up here.

AW: I'm not recognizing the name, sorry.

BM: Yeah, after that the other the towns have numbers after that. So that's how far up down here. East Millinocket, you know where that is? Way up. A lot of Maine up there.

CC: It's like a foreign language to me. I don't know any of them.

CC: Okay, so what cultures or ethnicities do you identify with? Your family background?

BM: Irish.

CC: Full Irish?

BM: That's how I identify.

CC: Yeah.

BM: I probably have just a little bit of French Canadian on my mother's side, but mostly we've identified as Irish.

CC: Tell me about your parents.

BM: Okay, my father is Irish. His grandfather, born in Ireland, Waterford county, and came over to Worcester. So I believe that makes me 4th generation. Irish immigrant. Emigrant, I guess, and they settled on Shamrock Street, go figure, which is on Shrewsbury Street in Worcester, which is the Italians-now the Italian section of Worcester, so they first came here and then they moved his father lived in Webster Square area of Worcester. And then my father moved when he you know got married, he was up on Burncoat Street of Worcester where he raised our family. So we that makes me fourth. I know I'm fourth generation Worcester and then my mom was from Uxbridge and met my father when she was in college at Clark University in Worcester becoming a teacher and the rest is history on that. So a lot of Worcester.

CC: A lot of Worcester.

laughs

CC: Have you lived here your whole life? Or growing up?

BM: All growing up. Yep, born in Worcester raised in Worcester didn't leave Worcester until I went up to UMass Amherst and then came back to Worcester after graduation and where I have

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worked in Worcester County ever since. Various positions. So I don't know what the...I do know some of the questions this but I'll let you go.

CC: What was the neighborhood and what was it like, generally?

BM: It was Burncoat Street, which was generally, low, middle and upper middle-class. Predominantly white. And very, you know neighborhood oriented. Very community-oriented. A lot of professional people, a lot of, you know police officers, postal workers, Norton's and Heald were big corporations in Worcester, a lot of families that worked for both those companies went to the public schools in that neighborhood. So it was funny back then there's a little grammar school at the bottom of Burncoat Street where 290 picks up and I was actually young when they built 290, it wasn't even there. So it was a Park. It was Burncoat Park and then they put the highway through and they knocked down that bit of the neighborhood, but that grammar school, back then you went to school in the morning, you went home for lunch, and then you went back in the afternoon. They didn't serve lunches in school. So I went to the Worcester grammar school there and then went on to Junior High School in Worcester at Burncoat Junior High School and then went to Marian Central Catholic High School. Which became St. Peter Marian High School in Worcester. So my senior year it was an all-girls Catholic High School and that, and that was up in kind of like almost to Holden but still in Worcester, up in that neighborhood, and then Saint Peters was down the main south of Worcester and they merged the two. The church merged both schools, and so St. Peter's closed the high school down on Main Street and it came up to Marian, and we became co-ed which is where I met my husband, my senior year. When we went co-ed. So, we were the first graduating class of the combined school of St. Peter Marian, which very famous people graduated that class.

AW: Like who?

BM: Like Richie Gedman played for the Red Sox.

CC: Oh wow.

BM: Who's going to be now coming in to coach the Woo Sox that are coming Worcester and JP Ricciardi. Very famous in baseball, not for playing but for managing baseball like the Toronto-it's Maple Leafs right? No that's hockey or...

CC: No, Blue Jays! Blue Jays!

BM: Very good!

CC: I love baseball.

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BM: Yeah, there was one...one guy went and played for the Bruins for a year. So different athletes came out of the class.

CC: Nice do you still live in Worcester now?

BM: I don't, I live in Township of Leicester which is called Rochdale.

CC: Have you lived in multiple areas?

BM: No, Worcester and then just where I live now.

CC: Do you have other family members who live in the same area?

BM: I do. Well we were all raised-well there's five of us so four siblings, and so I have a brother in Paxton, another sister in Leicester, another sister down on Cape Cod and one in Florida.

CC: Nice.

AW: Florida?

BM: Yeah, West Palm Beach.

AW: Nice.

CC: What challenges do you think Worcester still faces? And what would you change about the city?

BM: A couple of things I want to share with you that you know in coming here made me think about a few things. One, I started my first job, which I think you ask later, is I worked for the Worcester Parks and Recreation Department, they would staff schools during the school year at night and on weekends and they'd open the gymnasiums or all-purpose rooms and called them back then, and they would be supervised and you'd have a lot of activities through the Parks and Recreation Department. And then in the summer the parks outdoor would be staffed Monday through Friday and there will be activities all day long. So that has gone away over time. I thought that was really important in terms of Youth Development and the funding of that, the training of that kind of community involvement that it inspired, was really helpful. So it made me think about that one. I think Worcester should continue to do that, well bring that back. Those were very I think influential people in my life that taught me. I've always been in public service and I think that some of the roots come from, originally attending the Parks and Recreation and then participating as an employee of Parks and Recreation how that just gets you involved it. Also, you know keeps kids off the street and busy occupied and learning skills and people to talk to so I think that's important. I've been a member, in my professional career, for numerous

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Mayor's Youth Violence Commissions in Worcester. So I've sat and I continue to sit on those Violence Prevention and Youth Development committees for the city and the current Mayor and the current City Manager. So I think that they are doing a lot. There's a Citywide Youth Violence Prevention initiative with Clark University assisting and then a multi-collaborative group, which includes the schools and the police and all the various agencies as well as local nonprofits and Grassroots organizations. I think it's really important what the city is doing. So what could they improve? They could continue to collaborate and I think doing that with people and then embracing the, you know, kind of the multicultural aspect of Worcester as we grow. I think they're doing a really good job. So, proud to be from Worcester.

CC: What changes have you seen in Worcester over time? So I know you talked a little bit about that. Maybe any other examples too.

BM: Well, I think economically as the second largest city in Massachusetts, it struggles economically and I think that can be seen in the investment in the public schools. Should be better. Both the infrastructure in the buildings as well as the academics. So the more they could build the economic base, I think the better they could invest into school systems.

CC: So what distinct characteristics do you think make Worcester the place that it is?

BM: I think location is one, being Central in Massachusetts, easily accessible. The biotech and medical and pharmaceutical is just probably the tops in the nation. The art museum I think is 12th in the country. So is the Historical Society, I mean just a lot, a lot, of history here. The women's history that, you know, is in Worcester. As well as the small town feel it still has and that people know one another, so I think you can still get a lot done.

CC: What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

BM: I think generally they don't differ from the national picture of what women's experience has been. Slow to embrace women in leadership. But I don't think that's any different anywhere else, you know, I think it's reflective and you know what's going on currently, so I don't think Worcester's ahead or behind. I think they're not an indicator, you know, they're not leading and they're not following but I think they have a ways to go in terms of embracing women in leadership.

CC: Okay, so I know you talked about schools earlier, but just in case there was one we didn't mention what were the names of all the schools you attended?

BM: Wawecus Road Grammar School, Burncoat Junior High School, Marian Central Catholic High School, and then St. Peter Marian Central Catholic High School. Those were Worcester, and then UMass Amherst and then postgraduate at Suffolk University.

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AW: What did you major in?

BM: Public administration, in Suffolk. But at UMass it was community services and how to...community planning and intervention. Minor in women's studies.

AW: So when you went to school, what did you what did you struggle with the most?

BM: Balancing academics and social life in the undergraduate.

CC: Yeah.

BM: That, uh, UMass was a lot of fun. But there was so much diversity there that Worcester didn't have at the time. And UMass had so many different like clubs organizations. Like, you know, you can walk through the student center and you know, they're asking you to sign up for the Communist party. I mean, you just didn't see that, you know in Worcester but so, you know, learning a lot.

AW: So how was that coming into an environment that was so drastically different?

BM: Oh, I loved it. Love, love, loved it. It gave me the opportunity, at UMass I was able to get a student job of running an all-male high rise of 500 men in a dorm, which was great because I get free tuition and free room and board, but it was also a challenge to control that many crazy people up at UMass. And that was during the Animal House kind of era.

CC: Zoo mass.

BM: Yeah! That's what they called it down there. Yeah. A lot has changed after that, and the drinking age was 18.

CC: Yeah.

BM: Not 21, so it's a little different.

CC: Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

BM: Work. Get to work. So I came back to Worcester and I thought I could take the summer off, but my mother was clear that I needed to get a job and get my own place. So I applied and received a job with the Grafton Job Corps program. So I was the lead head of residents and we built the Job Corps. We opened it. So renovated all the buildings, which was formerly a state hospital and then open it up for, for the young people. We had three hundred and fifty 16 to 25 year olds that came in from New York, Connecticut and all the New England states. And they were a varied background and were a challenge behaviorally, but it was all about getting a job,

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getting first your GED and then vocational skills. So we work with them and we had about 300 in residents. So that was the biggest challenge; getting a job, getting my own place, which I got an apartment in Worcester, moved a couple of times to different apartments in Worcester with friends, but...

AW: So what would you say was a good inspiration for you? Or what did you take away from your college? Like this question is kind of based in like a...it's support networks and mentoring. So like what gave you some inspiration?

BM: One thing I had at UMass was a sister who was two years older, at UMass. She was an inspiration for me, to follow her to UMass. It was a sense of security having, you know, a sister there and we didn't live in the same dorm or even the same area, its miles apart up there but knowing she was there I think was a real inspiration. Fellow women that I met and are friends with today, we get together all the time. I still get together with high school friends. They are all women, we get together twice a year. So there's a real support network of women and that we helped each other and have the past 40 years. So I think those were real kind of supports for me. My mother too, she was a college graduate. She was a teacher. She was the first lay teacher at OLA which is Our Lady Angels Church in Worcester. It was a Catholic school, and that was at the time unheard of to have a non-nun teacher. So, you know, I still run into people that will say I had your mother in school and she was an inspiration to me. So that was nice.

AW: You already talked about your first job, what other jobs have you had besides that?

BM: Oh boy. If you want to talk just jobs I mean I've worked retail, I've worked I think as every woman my age has had in their background, waitressing at some point in there. I've done that, you know worked, you know, go down in the summer on the cape and work selling scrimshaw or jewelry. Well just on the between semester breaks, freshman and sophomore year or whatever, just to be out at the cape, but then I worked at the Job Corps and after college, I went to the Job Corps and after Job Corps, I've worked at DYS where I've been for the last 34 years. So it's I found like my place and I absolutely love it and I serve Central Mass. So I'm the regional director for the State Youth Services for Worcester County. And so I get to serve Worcester. Which that's where my heart is. I want, you know, always it to be about kind of trying to keep Worcester on the map and people thinking about it and people funding it in moving things ahead here.

AW: So that basically leads into our next question. Your work seems to mean a lot to you.

BM: Oh, yes.

AW: So just how much does it mean to you?

BM: It's a passion. I mean, I love going to work every day. I work with wonderful people.

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AW: That's the dream, right?

BM: It is, so you know, which you know, I encourage people until you find it. It's not great on the money, especially as you start out, but I've worked my...I did direct service. I ran residential programming. I worked as a caseworker, going into homes and you know worked my way up in the system until I became the regional director, which is as high as you can go locally. The next step would be into Boston at a commissioner's level. So the work is really important to me. I love the young people. I love delinquent kids. I think they're just really artistic. They're real resilient. They're very challenging. Funny. I think they have a lot of strengths that they've overcome, most of them such trauma in their lives. And I've seen a lot of success with the kids that we can get them their high school diploma. We have a lot of kids going to college and investing the time they just don't have the support network that they need or you know people supporting them. It takes a lot. It took a lot to raise my two sons. And I know all the energy it took to get them to finish high school and to go on.

CC: Yeah.

BM: So all the energy it took for me. Most of these kids that we see do not have parents. Not that they aren't capable but usually there's multiple challenges, poverty being one of them and that's the significant issue, housing is a significant issue, finding housing that's affordable in Worcester is difficult, especially in the land of the historical three-decker, which was built, you know, and came about for, families, large families, so they could live and share expenses, especially as immigrants. We need to make sure we have affordable housing for people.

AW: So you just said, you were just talking about how you brought your kids up and then your experience of how much energy you need to put in. So what would you say your primary responsibilities were in terms of your housework and childcare as your kids are growing up?

BM: I had full responsibility. They were probably five and seven when I got divorced, and their father was not involved much in their life. So I had you know, the significant role there, with a lot of support from family and friends. I worked full time and I was a full-time parent so it took all, all my time which I loved but both of them played sports. Usually three sports. So, I know there was one season I did a hundred and twenty six games! So...

CC: That's insane.

BM: I never missed one. Which was one of the wonderful things about working for the Department of Youth Services is that we value family. So we value our employee's families too. So we you know, make sure we can adjust to people's schedules.

AW: How have you balance different priorities responsibilities roles and interest in your life?

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BM: You know, sometimes you just do it and you don't think about how you're doing it and then you reflect back and say "how the heck did I do that?" But, it was prioritizing. My family was first, and my job was second and I gave up a lot of kind of social activities or things that were expensive or going out to dinner as I was raising my kids and focused on spending time with them and making sure that their needs are met and that they were supported so it's been a matter of prioritizing and there's still plenty of time left. They've been gone a little while now and I have plenty of time to do the things I want.

BM: I don't know if that answers your question.

AW: It was an excellent answer but more specifically what would you say the pros and cons of your decisions were? That's a little bit of a loaded question as well...yeah.

BM: I am very happy with my choices. It has not been a perfect or easy life, you're right, it hasn't. It's been very challenging and you haven't asked about, and I don't think you do ask about, in terms of a person my age, especially a woman in the workplace, I went into a job that was predominantly male. I was the first female that took this position. I was on a staff with all men and so it was very difficult to break that glass ceiling. But it wasn't until 2005 that my agency had its first female commissioner, it just hadn't happened. You still see today, in 2018, the first female commissioner of police, so there are still many challenges women face today but that is how I see it, not as struggles but as challenges. I am very happy with the choices I made regarding my work and my family no matter the obstacles I faced, I don't think there were any cons, and would I have liked to stay married for the long term? Yeah. But it was not the right person. Or right circumstances and it was not in the best interests of my family so...I do not have any regrets for the choices that I have made. I am actually very happy.

AW: I hope I can answer that question similarly someday.

BM: You gotta recognize the calling when it knocks the door, when it is in front of you.

AW: Now, let's take a turn shall we? Would you consider yourself active in the political spectrum?

BM: As a state employee, I cannot be affiliated with fundraising for campaigns and things of the sort but I can personally donate to anyone I want. At the same time I cannot bring up politics at work or talk to my co-workers about it. As a state employee, you're bound by the ethics commission rules that dictate how you act when contracts and regulations are involved. I do have my own political thoughts and beliefs and I still have my opinions on specific people within the parameters my work gives me. You'll see me at every St. Patrick's day parade marching with a politician for the last thirty years and I am allowed to do that and I also do phone calls and other things like that, along with putting signs up on my lawn at my house, it just cannot be at the

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workplace. I do vote, I taught my sons to vote as children. To be able to look at all sides and make decisions objectively was my goal. We do not agree, one of my sons and I, but we have very engaging debates which makes me wonder, wow, who raised you, but I love the difference in thought and opinion. But that's really about as political as I get.

AW: Do you ever get involved in community or volunteer work?

BM: To tell you the truth, not as much as I will do when I retire. My job and my kids take a lot of time and my job has night events which is almost like volunteer work, so it's usually a lot of speaking like I'd go to the community health link and the community partners and I'll go to meetings at city hall for committees I am on, so I guess that is volunteering as I am not getting paid for it. But I would say I am more interested and involved in social issues. It is not a specific volunteering kind of thing.

AW: What role would you say religion has played in your life?

BM: In my childhood, it played a primary role. My parents raised my catholic, brought me to a catholic church, we went to Catechism, aka Sunday school. That was a teen kind of thing where we would go to the youth center. Of course we were all sent to catholic school for high school, my brother went to Assumption. There was a prep school in Worcester called Assumption, where Quinsigamond College is, before it was there it was Assumption prep school, which probably closed around 1970-71. He went up to Worcester academy for his senior year and came back here to Assumption for College. I was a little rebellious and did not want to be sent off to Catholic college. So religion was a main part of my life then, but now I focus more on being Christian and helping others. There are a number of issues I have with the Catholic Church and with the role of women and the Catholic Church.

AW: How have health issues affected you and those in your family?

BM: You know it's funny, well it's not funny but it's funny, but when I think about it, I have had a number of surgeries, I was "cured" of cancer but it never slowed me down tremendously. I was in the hospital, then home for two months but still, with the progress we have made in medicine and technology so many more people are saved. There is such early intervention that doctors can finally say cured. Back in my day if the doctor told you that you had cancer it was, Uh oh, she's dying. Today there are some great treatments and excellent health care especially in the state of Massachusetts. We are among the top in the world, this is where you want to be if you get a disease. Both my parents are dead, one from cancer many many years ago and the other just recently from old age. All my grandparents died when I was young, I never had one past the age of five. On the paternal side it was mostly due to world war two and the lasting effects the gas had on them that caused cancer and eventually death. Because I was a late child in terms of my other siblings, my grandparents were already old by the time I was born.

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AW: You were just talking about health care in Massachusetts, have you personally been able to get access to it easily?

BM: Here's an interesting piece of information for you women studies majors, I was the main source of income for my house and the insurance papers were in my husband's name and they would not let me have my own name on it and that's just how the healthcare system was. I made more money than him but it did not matter, he was the male head of house. That's how the banks worked then too. I even called once to get it changed and they just said no, it is hard to argue with a computer. We have just come such a long way because gender was so binary then and it is so fluid now. We did not even have those words. I can remember when I was in college at UMASS, one of my first jobs, besides the RA (Residential Assistant), was human awareness coordinator which was just the name for LGBT for back then. We did not have the language at that time and it was during this time that people were getting very very hurt for being gay. They were being beat up on a regular basis and we were just trying to educate people about that.

AW: So do you only feel responsible for your own health?

BM: I guess legally I am only responsible for my own health but I will always feel responsible for my children until the day I die. Let's just say I recently had to screenshot the name of a pediatrician for my twenty-six year old son and ask him if he was going or not because he needed a physical.

AW: How do you get through tough times, what kinds of thoughts keep you going?

BM: Well first of all I have great friends and family that I love, especially the girls because my brother is a different story. I love him but there was just a different relationship. The boys and girls were raised differently in my household, the girls were expected to clean and cook while the sons went outside to play sports and be boys. My brother was the golden child. It was just different roles...what was the original question?

AW: How do you get through tough times, what thoughts keep you going?

BM: Oh I would say it is through my support network of family and friends. I have a job and saved money to a point where I can comfortably support my own family and self. I am not rich in any monetary sense but my family can live comfortably with most of the things they need and we can also have fun occasionally with no stress. I think that is really important for women, that by themselves, they can be financially independent and stable. I see a lot of women suffer, tremendously, because they do not believe they can support themselves so they stay in terrible relationships as a means to an end.

AW: Expanding on that idea there as it relates to the next question I am asking, what advice do you have for young women with the knowledge you have from your own life?

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BM: Young women need to put education as a priority, education in finances and math and science is pivotal for the continued path women need to follow. In my day it was frowned upon for a young girl to be learning math and science and that is why there needs to be more emphasis put on it for them in schools. Empower themselves financially. That does not mean you have to be rich but so you do not go into debt either. There were too many people I knew who did not know how to keep track of credit card purchases or mortgages and this lack of knowledge was so detrimental to women because it made them grow a dependence for anyone who knew better. The government is not going to take care of you in your retirement. Comfort in finances and having a voice. Women, when I was coming up, were not supposed to speak their voice or you were called a number of things and to a certain extent today that's true. Women are seen as bitchy or whiney or emotional about something but a man would just be seen as passionate. Women can be the best, or just as mean to their fellow women. There's a word for it we teach our young ladies who take our programs. Relational aggression. An example we use is one on playgrounds as children, in observing boys in the sandbox, one boy throws sand at another boy so the second boy hits the first boy. That is the male behavior. The female side is different, they will hate her and make her an outcast, saying let's not play with her and let's be mean to her and that's relational aggression. We need to teach young girls to help one another rather than hurt.

CC: Solidarity.

BM: Absolutely.

AW: So when you think about success, how would you define it?

BM: Primarily through the success of my children, that they are happy and found a career they love are financially stable and are in relationships they love every moment of. Also for me that I am satisfied in my profession, that I travel, I've been all across the country with the Casey foundation. Have you heard of that? So I have a network of professionals in juvenile justice working all around the states and in Europe so I really have a lot of fulfillment in doing that .I get to see a lot of countries and over the past summer I visited Dublin to see the centers there.

CC: Oh awesome.

BM: Yes it was a comparative public policy so really... I am fulfilled that I get to continue to do this work. The Casey Foundation is great they are all about child welfare and juvenile justice and have been around for many many decades. I did bring a copy of my resume in case there were things you wanted to know that we haven't discussed.

AW: Now that we are working to tell a fuller story on the history of women, what should we be sure to include in this recording?

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BM: About me or the history of women?

CC: I would say both.

BM: I really enjoy reading the book that was put out by this project. I think it is important to capture the history, to not let it repeat itself. If we are not a student of history we are destined to have it repeat itself. We need to talk about the difficult subjects. We did not talk today about sexual harassment at all but it was prevalent during the seventies, eighties, nineties, not that it isn't now but now people are more careful and responsive with it. Was I a victim of it? Yes. Although it may not be as common today, there still needs to be steps taken in order for sexual harassment to be a thing of the past, especially in the workplace. Professionally, you should not have to deal with that and I was denied many an opportunity because I was a woman. They would have cases in which they would label as too important for a woman to do, so they would get a man on it. Or that a case is dangerous and they only want men on a case that may have had some physical implications or violence. Now I just think we need to look at workplaces through an equity and justice lens and see if there's bias there. And if it is there, I need to do a better job.

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