

Interviewee: Ann “Cookie” Nelson  
Interviewers: Roxann Wint and Talia Rossi  
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Overseen by Prof. Carl Robert Keyes and Prof. Lucia Knoles, Assumption College

### **Abstract**

Ann “Cookie” Nelson was born in 1937 and grew up in Marblehead, Massachusetts. Ann was married in 1959 and later had two children, and now has three grandchildren. Through this period of her life, she balanced family life with a career in writing. She wrote many travel articles, was a food critic, and ultimately was the author two children’s books. As an active member in the Worcester W.I.S.E. community, she organizes fundraisers. At a young age, Ann developed a passion for the arts which eventually led her to act in two television commercials. In addition, she was involved on center-stage and behind the scenes for the set design of various theater productions at the College of the Holy Cross. She incorporated her love for design in a successful career as an interior designer for many homes. Her passions for design and stage production further allowed her to eventually co-found the Worcester Children’s Theater. Ann discusses her involvement in theater arts as a positive experience. She comments that, unlike women in other fields of endeavor, she never felt that she was treated differently because of her gender. As a woman who worked through the transition of the College of the Holy Cross from all- male college to co-ed institution, she describes the experience as a natural one as it “always felt co-ed” with so many females already involved on campus. She also believes that the importance of female involvement in the program contributed to the college becoming co-ed. Ann’s “why-not” personality led her to a variety of achievements and professions.

**RW:** Hello.

**TR:** So, do you know about the project?

**AN:** I've heard about it over the years, so when they--- when Charlene Martin and the other lady came out with a book, they had some sort of a little program. I for--- I think it might have even been at Assumption. Oh okay. Then they read a few sections, and then I guess it's gone on and on and on, and you're just recording them.

**TR:** Yeah.

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**TR:** So, for our project, we're taking a women's studies course. And our professors worked it out with the W.I.S.E. [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] program so that we can be a part of the Worcester Women's [Oral History] Project. So, where we get the opportunity to interview you and, basically so like our questions... They'll be pretty general, but they'll be more centered around...

**RW:** Your life.

**TR:** And like as a woman in the time that you grew up in and worked in.

**AN:** Okay. So there--- I am at age probably about one year sitting in that house, which is where I grew up, and my parents had just bought it there and my little rocking chair with my stockings. So, it must have been on Christmas Eve.

**TR:** Where was it?

**AN:** In Marblehead.

**TR:** In Marblehead.

**AN:** So, where do you want me to begin, in Marblehead?

**RW:** In Marblehead.

**AN:** Okay. Well, I grew up in Marblehead. And growing up in Marblehead... It's an extraordinary place because it's a beautiful seacoast town. It has a lot of history. And my sister and I have always talked about the fact that at the time that we grew up, she's 76, I'm 82, that it was just a charmed life, you know. There was certainly some drinking, but there were no drugs at the high school that I went to. Probably 98 percent of the kids there went to college. It was very outdoorsy. Everybody learned to sail and play tennis and go to the beach. And everybody had a sense of history. And I always used to say that even the dumbest kids in our class knew American history because we went to Elbridge Gerry Elementary School and he was the fifth vice president of the United States. And the Constitution was sometimes moored outside Marblehead Harbor. And we had brick sidewalks and there was one house that was lived in by Tories supposedly. And when kids got mad at you, they'd say to you, "You're a Tory."

**AN:** I remember my sister running and saying, "Mother, Ann called me a Tory! Boo hoo." So, it was really a great place to grow up. And I feel extraordinarily lucky that I did grow up in a town like that. Where there was so much history and very, very good schools. And it's probably a relatively small crime rate. I remember when I was a teenager, Tallulah Bankhead, who was a

famous actress... We had a wonderful summer theater and big stars came, and she got really drunk and she started smashing around this house that she was renting. And so my father, who was a lawyer,---- they took her and they put her in jail. The jail was this little wooden building was like maybe two cells. So the next morning, they called my father, who was a lawyer, and they said, "We held Tallulah Bankhead in jail overnight and you need to come down and help bail her out and bring a character witness." Well, you need to come now, that your father needs to come now. Yeah, my father. So, my father goes down and as a character witness, he takes our dog, Mr. Peel. And so, you know, it was, it was that kind of tattle. It's really funny. We have a wonderful summer theater. When I was in my later teens, I started working there as an apprentice. And by the time I was in college, I had worked there three years. And so, I had to join Actors Equity, which is the acting union in the United States. And you have had to go professional because you were being paid.

**TR:** So, you were an actress?

**AN:** I went to Skidmore College and I was a theater major. And I realized from boarding school, where I went the last two years of high school, and college that I was a good actress, but I wasn't a great actress. And I was never, in all honesty, going to make it into the big time. But my real interest was set design and set decoration. So, that's really what I majored in. And I met someone at Hamilton College. So, I dropped out of college after a few years. My parents said, "You're much too young, you know, to be engaged and getting married. So, you have to go to school for another year." So, I went to Chamberlain School of Design in Boston and that really sort of turned my career from set design to interior design. And anyway, I didn't marry that guy.

**TR:** How old were when you were going to get married?

**AN:** Well, 17, I guess, when I met him.

**TR:** When you wanted to get married?

**AN:** Well, 19 when I wanted to get married. Fast forward. We get rid of him. So, I worked in Boston for a couple of years. And I lived on Beacon Street and had great roommates and did all the usual crazy things that kids still working there, living in an apartment in Boston. But again, it was a different era. There was a--- I mean, there was certainly a lot of drinking in those ---a lot of drinking in Marblehead. I mean, our parents had cocktail parties. There was a yacht club, but it was a very social club. But it was fun. You know, I don't ever remember anybody binge drinking that much. I mean, a few guys at fraternity parties would drink a ton of beer, but it wasn't as prevalent. And there certainly weren't any drugs. A lot of people smoked, me included, but very minimally and sort of did it to be cool, rather. I don't have an addictive personality. So I wasn't

addicted to nicotine, but I did smoke. I have a picture about five women, very prominent women in Worcester. And we're all standing like this, cigarettes in our hands. Anyway, while I was in Boston, I met someone who was at Harvard Business School and I did get engaged. And I married him in 1959 and we lived here. He went to work for the Norton Company, which at the time was the biggest employer in the city of Worcester. It still exists, but was bought by a French company called Saint Gobain. But it was huge. It was worldwide. And he came to Worcester to go through the training program. So, we lived here for a few months. And it was really hard for me to get a job because places that I interviewed knew I was only going to be here for six months. So, I worked in a personnel office at Heald Machine, which was exceedingly boring. And then we were transferred to Chicago. And I just loved Chicago. We lived there for three years in an old carriage house on Lake Michigan. And it was just a really great place. We were a block, we were in Evanston, a block away from Northwestern University. And we had a beach at the end of the driveway at Lake Michigan. And I got a job at National Merit Scholarship Corporation. And I worked there for about a year, a year and a half. And then I had my first child, who was a girl.

But meanwhile, I had joined a big repertory theater company out there. And I was doing some acting. And there was a man who directed some of our commercials, but he worked for Fred Nile Studio. And Fred Nile Studio was the biggest maker of television commercials in the Midwest. There were a couple of studios in Los Angeles and a couple in New York. And then one in Chicago. And I auditioned for a commercial for Quaker Oats. And it really... There's a legend, they say, in the theater never work with children or cats. Well, there were about 10 kids in this commercial. And the theme was... Some people who still sort of remember it, not in your age group, certainly, but said no matter how many mouths to feed, there's always Quaker Oats.

Well, try doing a commercial with 10 children. They didn't like the cereal. They were constantly pulling and tweaking each other. We had to do take after take after take. Now, a commercial lasts a minute and a half to two minutes. This went on for a day and a half. I remember at one point there's a little girl with braids and the boy next to her took her braid and put it in the cereal. I was playing the role of the mother. Obviously, I couldn't have had this number of children. I was like 23 when I was doing the commercial (laughs). But anyway, it went on and on. But it was a huge success. And when I was finished, they said, "Well, if you want your... You're paid by the hour. But if you want to get residuals, which means that you get money every time the commercial is run, you have to join SAG, the Screen Actors Guild. And it was 200 dollars, which was an enormous amount of money, you know, in the early '60s and I said, "You know, I can't afford that." Well, I rue that to this day because that commercial ran for well over a year. And I would have made a lot of money if I had joined SAG. But I didn't. And then I did one other commercial, which was a company called Alberto Culver that made men's hair products and

stuff. And I don't know, it was some dumb scene where we're in an airport and the guy selling a ticket has this wonderful hair. Of course, it was sort of the era of Elvis Presley hair. So a lot of people used, you know, hair oils and stuff. Anyway, that one ran for a while, but that was my life. As of.

**TR:** What was your role in that commercial?

**AN:** I was the person buying the ticket at the airport. I can't even remember whether I said anything or not. I don't think I did. I think just he talked. I ca--- I really can't remember that one as well. And that they did about three takes and it was done. So, I didn't make much money.

But in the meantime, while I was still at National Merit Scholarship Corporation, I became friends with a woman that had an interior decorating business and she was independent. You know, she just worked alone. And someone said to me, "You know, you have great taste. I'd love it if you'd help me with my house." So, I said to her, "I don't know how I would get into the Wholesale Merchandise Mart in Chicago." It just was that time and still is huge, huge, huge. Every furniture line and fabric show are there. And she said, "Well, I'll take you down." So, I went to a couple of showrooms, and I said to them, "I'm just starting out. I wonder if I could open an account." And they said, "Well, yes, but, you know, you have to register in this book." I can't remember the name of it. "And you'll have to pay cash up front if you order fabric because you're not really established yet." But several of them were really great. And I did business with them for years and years and years. So, I did the house and I got a little bit of business, and was fun to do because I was now a stay- at -home- mom. I enjoyed, you know, doing that.

And after three years, we were transferred to Detroit and we lived in Birmingham, Michigan, which is a suburb outside of Detroit. And my aunt and uncle lived there. My mother was from Detroit. So, my aunt immediately said, "Oh, I want you to decorate my house." Well, what a gold mine. All her friends. And so and they, of course, were much older than me. And so they had big budgets. And so, people saw Fran and Fred's house and said, "Oh, we'd love to use your niece to do our house." But also, Birmingham was very transient because of all the automotive companies. People came through and lived there for a few years and then moved on to other areas of the United States. And so, I had a lot of people my age who wanted an interior decorator.

So, it really took off in a way that I hadn't expected. And I had a lot of fun doing it. But after just over a year, we were transferred again back to Worcester. And my late husband was a very, very successful business man. He ultimately went on to become the president of the Norton Company. And we traveled all over the world because they had factories in South America and Australia

and Europe. You know, it was a huge, huge company. So when we came back to Worcester, we bought our first house on Wheeler Avenue and it was a wonderful neighborhood to live in.

And again, I joined a couple of theater companies and at that time, regional theater here was just booming. There were the Holden Players, the Shrewsbury Players, the Grafton Players, the big hot shot group was something called the Worcester Players Club, which had been founded by some sort of social people. And the other thing was a group called Entr'Actors, one of competition and was picked as the best community theater in America and sent to Europe. That was the year before I came to Worcester, but they were really, really good. And I was asked to join Entr'Actors. I did a number of plays for them, and I was still doing the interior decorating. And then someone at Holy Cross asked me if I would do the set design, the set decoration for a play. And I said, "I'd love to." And ultimately, I was hired by Holy Cross Theater Department, and I worked there for 10 years as director of public relations and designer in residence. So, I didn't design the sets because they had a really big time set designer. And it was offered as a, you know, a class. I mean, people took classes there. But I did a lot of the sets and I acted in a lot of the plays, which was really fun because people in the community, particularly Entr'Actors, acted with the Holy Cross students. At that time, Clark [University] didn't have a (???). So, they had this big cross- registration. So (??) the year that I went to work at Holy Cross, it still was an all boys' school. So, a lot of women cross- registered through the Consortium [College of Worcester Consortium] and took theater courses, particularly students from Clark. The second year that I was at Holy Cross, it went co-ed, and so we had women in the theater department. But it was the absolute heyday to be working at a college. I mean, one of the things that happened was that the students would go streaking and they always did this when there was a big alumni weekend. And on the campus, there is a big statue of the blessed mother. And they would go out and put a blindfold over her eyes and then they'd all streak by. So not a... And of course, at that time, drugs had mainly--- just pot had come into popularity. And I remember there were some kids that were caught selling pot and they had flags flying outside the dorms saying free the Lehigh Five, they were five students from Lehigh Dorm. And I mean, that was, you know, a big thing. But the cult--- being on a college campus was the place to work at that. And, of course, the Vietnam War was going on. And the Berrigan brothers [Daniel and Phillip] had been affiliated with Holy Cross. One of them had graduated from there. And they wrote a play called *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* about the men and women who went into the draft office in Catonsville and burned the draft files. And I was cast in that. And it was decided that it would tour college campuses in the Northeast. So, there were three or four [of us]. There were two faculty members and two other adults. Then the rest were students.

And we would tour once or twice a week in New England. And it was really phenomenal. And though some death threats [were] put out in our lives. So, we had an F.B.I. [Federal Bureau of

Investigation] person that was always with us when we performed. But, of course, we put out you know, huge amounts of publicity with that show. It was and again, it was like where the action was. It was really just a great experience. I have many fond memories. I won't... Many funny things happened. Most of the time we didn't stay overnight. We drove back the same night. But sometimes we stayed in dorms, some areas that they gave us. We were in Vermont, places like that. And so that was really a great experience. And I loved working at Holy Cross. But then after 10 years, they decided on some budget cuts.

Meanwhile, while I was at Holy Cross, I had gotten involved with the Junior League [of Worcester]. They used to have something called trouping, but where they took a little play and they went around to elementary schools. I put on this little play, and it was sort of losing its charm. I was not involved in that. It was almost before my time. There was a woman named Sylvia Carswell and she said, "You know, it's really too bad that there's no children's theater in Worcester. So, she and I founded Worcester Children's Theater and it was just a huge success. We did two plays a year, one during February, public school vacation, one during April. They ran for a week. Every afternoon there was a matinee on Friday or Saturday. I can't remember which, before the opening. We had a night performance. We had a lot of funding, a lot of support from philanthropic people in the city. We had a lot of students that were in the plays and it was just a huge success. So, then we decided, in addition to that, to start street theater and that was going to be in the summer and we were going to go to playgrounds at six o'clock at night and put on a play. And the person that ran the Volkswagen dealership actually gave us a van for the summer. Again, we had huge funding and we became the second largest street theater company in New England. There was only one that was bigger, and I believe it was in Portland.

**TR:** Did you, did you have any struggles in the process of trying to fund those three theaters?

**AN:** Well, there's always struggles. You know, raising money and everything. But I found that I was really good at raising money. And, you know, because there was no children's theater in Worcester, it was sort of a natural for some of the foundations and philanthropic people, you know, to fund us, because, how could you say, you don't like children's theater? I mean, it was, it was just really a huge success. It actually ran for 25 years. I stopped after about 12 years and unfortunately was something like that. They began... We used to just pay the director and the set designer, and then they decided, well, they'd pay the costume person and then this one. And eventually, you know, they consume themselves. They were spending so much money that--- and the tickets were like two dollars or three dollars for the kids to go. So you couldn't, you couldn't make a profit and sustain it. And eventually more and more people were going back to work. Many of the people that sewed costumes and painted sets were women who then went back to work. You know, it was getting more fashionable to go back to work, the kids were getting older, and they went back to teaching, or they decided to get a job. And it was just harder and harder

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for them to get volunteers. So, unfortunately after 25 years, it did die, but it was really wonderful, while it was going on. So, after I left Holy Cross, I moved down to Sever Street and that's where Becker is located.

And there are lots of old houses down there. And I bought an old house and there was some very...It was very bad neighbor relations between Becker and the people that lived in the houses there. So I trotted next door to the president's office, which was in a house next to mine. And I said, "I think you need a public relations director to work with the neighbors to try to have a better relationship." So, they hired me part- time and I did that.

And then I realized that there was no director of development and no one doing fundraising. And the president...It's kind of an odd character and he didn't really believe in fundraising. And I said, "Look, all these colleges are getting huge amounts of money, too." And, and Becker at that time was still really pretty much a business secretarial school. Simple. You know, all the legal secretaries, all the medical secretaries are all provided by Becker, all the early childhood education. You know, Quinsig [Quinsigamond Community College] was still really small. Becker was really a provider of a huge work force. And I said, "You know, it's really your turn." And like that, they had a Leicester campus, which they still have. And they had a wonderful program for animal assistants because the laws had changed. And you could no longer just have a housewife that liked pets, go to work for a vet and start giving animal shots and helping. You have to have a two -year degree in animal care, veterinary assistants, and they had a barn so they could have some animals. But they needed a building, they needed a real little veterinary hospital where the kids could learn to give shots. But they could also take cats and dogs and spay and neuter them and treat, you know, minor things. So, I said, "Well, you know, I think I can raise the money for that." And I went to the local foundations and I basically said, "You know, Becker's never asked you for anything. And it's now your turn to step up to the plate." And one thing about foundations, and Worcester is blessed at having some very big ones with a lot of money, is that they have to give the money away. They can't keep that. They have to give it away. So what you need is the hook. You need the thing that says, look, here we are with this program. There's no other program like this at any of the colleges in the city. We need this building. You've never given to Becker before. And asking for 50 thousand dollars was not a big deal for them. So, I raised all the money to build that building. And after that, continued doing fundraising for them for about 10 or 12 years.

And then I just decided to stop that, kind of went back to doing some decorating. And I was also getting very interested in writing and. At that time, the Telegram and Gazette had a travel editor, but they didn't have a budget to send her anywhere. And I usually went to Europe every summer, so they would have me write travel articles when I travelled, and they would buy them. That was fun. And I would. Then they approached me, and they said, "You know, when you

travel, you mentioned a lot of restaurants and we're looking for a restaurant, a restaurant critic for the paper. And I thought, "Oh, goody. This sounds great. You get to go out to restaurants, take your friends. I like that idea." So, for eight years, I was the restaurant critic. And it's really hard to write a column every week. Believe me, you're always writing at--- thinking of the next restaurant field. And I'll say--- but it was really fun. I really enjoyed doing that. And that--- I was still writing travel articles. But I decided that, you know, they don't pay much for a stringer, they pay 25, 35 dollars back then. So, I went to Harvard and I took a course on how to market travel articles nationally.

Now bear in mind, there were critics of computers who said... So you know, I would write a travel article and I had the secretary that would type it up and then we'd print it off. You know, they had copiers and I'd send it out. And I had this book with a list of all the papers in the country. Well, someone like The Boston Globe has a huge budget. They can send someone somewhere. You know, the Chicago Tribune, they can send someone, but the smaller papers can't. So, I would mail to like the Sacramento Bee, the Hartford Courier, and everything. All of a sudden, I was making a fortune. I wrote a travel article. I sent it out to the New Hampshire Sunday paper for the main Sunday paper. I sell 20 articles all across the country. I said, "This is a little gold mine, I love this." So, every couple of months I would write an article and send it out. And I did that for a while. But, you know, it's a lot of work. I would add the manila envelopes and getting the right postage, sending them off, sending the cover letter. I mean, you weren't making a fortune. But I, I had a lot of success. So that kind of burned itself out. I got tired of that.

And then I was still doing fundraising from time to time. And I loved doing annual funds and I was doing an annual fund for the EcoTarium [Museum]. And now you can hand me those two books.

**RW:** This one?

**AN:** Yeah. And they had--- I was try- trying to get a theme for it. And I said, "You know, whatever happened to that dinosaur? Because when the EcoTarium started, it was in an old building downtown. They had this big dinosaur on the front lawn named Siegfried. And my daughter had gone to nursery school at the EcoTarium when it was downtown. They said, "Oh well, we put it when we moved to the big EcoTarium, which I don't know if either of you have been, but it's a huge science museum in Worcester on Plantation Street. And so, what happened to Siegfried? "Oh," they said, "We'd put him down in the woods."

And I said, "Well, why did you do that? You know, kids can't see it." I said, "Well, I know we're going to move them up to the plaza." So, I started thinking, you know, there are really no books for little children that have been written about Worcester. What if I wrote a story about

Siegfried? So I said to this guy that was having me do the annual fund, I said, “What if we wrote a little story about Siegfried and how he was in down--- in downtown Worcester, and then he got moved into the woods and then he came up here and we're thinking we could have a little pamphlet that we hand out to the kids?” Well, they were so crazy about it that they decided to have me write a book. And this is the story of Siegfried. There he is. And what we did, there he is, downtown Worcester on Cedar Street, sitting on the lawn and the kids all waving at him and then they put him on a flatbed truck. And they take him and they put him in the woods. So, he was really--- he missed the children and everything.

So, he ran away, and he went downtown to Shrewsbury Street. And he had a hundred salads because he's a vegetarian. And then he went to the train station. But they have a big sign saying no pets allowed. So, he couldn't get on the train. And then he went to Mechanics Hall and he listened to Yo-Yo Ma practice the cello. And then he went to the Worcester Museum and went running up the stairs looking for pictures of dinosaurs. And then he went to the Higgins Armory, which is no more, but he went there to see the men in armor and then he got really tired, so he went up to Greenhill Park behind the Voke School [Worcester Vocational High School] to visit the vernal pools and had a drink of water and everything. But he knew it was time to go home. So he went home.

And the gatekeeper said, “Siegfried, where have you been?” And Siegfried did not answer him, he just started marching to the woods. And then the gatekeeper took him up to the front, where there was a big crowd of children, and they said, Hooray, hooray.” And they put him on the front plaza with the director. And this has actually Steve Pitcher [Executive Director of EcoTarium] saying (laughs), “This is a new spot where everybody will see you, but you have to promise never to run away again.” And then everyone went home, and the director locked the gate. Siegfried looked happily over the seven hills of Worcester. The moon came up, the stars came out. Siegfried closed his eyes and went to sleep. Good night.

And this book has been read. I go to schools and read it all the time. And this was a huge, huge success and the children...It's really a read-to book for first and second grade. But then older kids can take it and read it to their siblings. So, then I got a call from UMass Medical School [University of Massachusetts Medical School]and they said, “You know, Curious George is really out of date and, uses words like fear and pain and hurt. And he has an operation. We'd like to have you write Siegfried goes to the hospital.” So, I thought to myself, “Well, what could we have get wrong with him that he would have to go to the hospital?” So there he is, still up on the plaza full of children. And then they come in one morning and he's fallen over on his side and his eyes are closed. So, they send an ambulance and they send the medic flight and they can't... It is too big. So, they have to put him on the flat-bed truck. And then what it does is take the children through, you--- they look at his eyes and look at his teeth and they put a little bracelet on him

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and they listen to his heart and they are very puzzled. They can't imagine what's wrong with him. They take his blood pressure, all the things that kids would go through if they were going in. And then they poke a stomach and a tear rolls down his cheek. They know he has a stomachache. So they put him on a gurney. And all the children in the pediatric ward are waving to him as he goes by. And they put him in the scanner. Now, the scanner is the thing that the kids would be most fearful of. So they have a child life worker there, which they really do with a puppet. And what do you think they saw? Siegfried had eaten four hot dogs, two bags of potato chips, seven candy bars, six popsicles, two and a half peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a cupcake. And, of course, the kids are so trained now to be against junk food, they go, "Oh." So now they've put him in bed and they give him a dish with brussel sprouts and wax beans. And then the next day they let him go home and he marches by the cars and he goes home and he sees all the junk food waiting for him. But they're told that he's never eaten junk food again. And so, it ends the same way. The moon comes up and the stars come out and he goes to sleep. So, Siegfried is well, kind of at the end of what I thought I would do.

But I was named secretary commissioner. I was very interested in the Hope Cemetery because it's Victorian and it was getting terrible publicity. The grass was overgrown and that's our huge, huge city cemetery. So, I got together with Bill Wallace, who's the director of the Worcester Historical Museum. And I said, "You know, Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge has a wonderful group called The Friends of Mount Auburn. What if we started a group called Friends of Hope Cemetery?" So we did. And it's 25 years old now.

It again, has raised lots of money. It has restored mausoleums. It has had planning. We don't because it's a city cemetery... We don't set any rates or rules. It is strictly restoration, preservation, and beautification. And we just recently have opened up a whole section for the Muslims to do green burials, which there was a lot of publicity in the paper about that. And it's just been a huge success. We have a board of directors. And right now, we're working on some very special signs. So I sort of think of Worcester Children's Theater and Friends of Hope Cemetery and I said, "Well, maybe I've made it a better place to live at, a better place to die, that's the end, and thank you for sharing this story."

**AN:** So, do you have any questions for me?

**RW:** Yeah, I do. How many kids do you have?

**AN:** I have two. I have Murray, who works for Chanticleer, which is the largest (cough) and most famous acapella group in the United States. They're actually coming to Worcester in February. She lives in San Francisco.

**RW:** Okay.

**AN:** And which is where they're based. And I have Christopher, who got his master's degree at Assumption and is a psychiatric therapist. He works for Pernet Family Service, which is affiliated... It was started by the Little Sisters of Assumption. And he's not a social worker. He's a counselor. But he's head of all the outreach programs there, and then at 4:30, he leaves there and goes to an office on Elm Street where he sees private patients. He has three children. Walter, who is six foot six, graduated from (cough) the University of Toronto at the age of 20 last year in the pre-med program and is now working as a research scientist in Canada and getting ready to start his master's degree. He'll ultimately have to get his doctorate. Oliver, who is six foot four, just started college three weeks ago at Westfield State and came home last weekend. I was so thrilled because he said, "You know, Meme Ann, I just love college.

**AN:** And I thought, that is so great to have that attitude. And then you have Annabel, who's 16, and she's a runner. She's five, 11. So they're all really tall kids. And I don't get to see them. I don't get to see Walter at all. But we e-mail back and forth and, I'm really pleased, with both of them. I've had very good, successful careers. I hope they continue. I have one sister, Ellen, who lives in Atlanta. And both my parents are deceased, but my mother lived to be 101.

**RW:** Wow.

**TR:** Wow.

**RW:** How is your relationship with your mother and your father?

**AN:** How was it?

**RW:** Yeah, growing up?

**AN:** Well, my mother was... When I say easy going, I don't mean permissive. But she was much easier. My father was a lawyer and he--- and then eventually went into the State Department. But he was very demanding and very strict. Not in an unkind way, but very demanding about academics. In hindsight, it's pride. Good thing. I mean, neither one of them were mean or anything like that. But Daddy was, was really, really demanding, and I remember one time I wrote this essay. And I won a little prize for it and I gave it to him to read. And I remember him saying, "Ann, come up here." He was up in his study and I went to him and he said, "This is terrible. This is the worst piece of junk I've ever read." And I've never been so devastated that--- here I'd won the award and everything. And he was so critical. And that was sort of typical of him. When I remember--- when I got the job at Holy Cross, he said, "Well, how can they hire you to write on behalf of a college?" He said, "How do you know how to write?" And I said,

“Well, I just do.” And he said, “Well, you know, I am a superior writer.” But he was, he was a very good writer. But he never wrote any books or anything.

But he belonged to this group where they'd write these very literary papers. And he was very, very brilliant. It's an interesting story. He grew up on a farm in Maine and his parents were Swedish immigrants. But his mother decided that this oldest boy, my father, was really brilliant. So, she'd literally take the egg money that she had, and she got on a bus and she went to Bowdoin College and she said, which was a few towns away. And she said, “I have this really brilliant son. And I--- I want you to take him as a student.” Well, I'm sure you must have had to take some sort of test. I mean, this is back in the '20s. But anyway, he went there on a full scholarship. And when you have the highest grades, you get to live on Longfellow Road, and he lived on Longfellow Road. And then he went on to law school and ultimately got a degree as Doctor of Jurisprudence. And when he retired, he went to Salem State, which is the (?), the next town over from Marblehead. And he got a degree in poetry and he was writing and publishing some poetry. And it took a couple of other courses to arrange. He loved learning, you know. And he was very smart. But he was a difficult father and son, somewhat critical in some aspects. Yes.

**TR:** I wanted to ask, how did you get your nickname?

**AN:** Because my maiden name was Cook?

**TR:** Oh.

**AN:** Ann was a tremendously popular name then. And so when I went away to boarding school, there were like five. And so, in our class they said, “You have to get nicknames.” When I started writing, the newspaper said, “We don't use nicknames, you have to write with a byline and call yourself Ann Nelson. And people would say to me, “Do you know this Ann Nelson that's writing?” So, I went to the editor and I said, “You know, no one knows it's me because everybody in Wall Street knows me as Cookie. Please let me write under the name Cookie.” So he said, “All right.” So I did this very, very few. Once in a while, someone like Bill was so-called kidding aside. Ann it's me, you know, because he heard my mother call me Ann. So, people do it to kid me. But most people don't know me as Ann. I say.

**RW:** Why did you not, why did you decide not to get married to the gentleman before you met your husband?

**AN:** Oh, I don't know. I was just much too young. He you know, we'd just sort of drifted apart. He enjoyed it. He had graduated from college. You will see the Coast Guard. You know, I just, I just thought, you know, I don't think I want to be married yet. Oh. So there wasn't any big deal except I remember at one point I was--- we were having some sort of fight over the phone and I

was really mad and overnight took my engagement ring and I threw it out the window at Marblehead, out my bedroom window. And my mother and sister were down on the lawn looking all over for the ring.

**RW:** (Roxann laughs).

**AN:** You know, I said, "I hate him, I hate him. And I don't want the stupid ring." And I threw it out the window. Ellen always reminds me of that. "I remember mother and I looking through the grass," which, of course, they found.

**TR:** Do you think it was... Was marriage always something that you knew you were going to do? Do you think... Did you ever have a doubt that you would get married?

**AN:** Not, really. (cough) I think that, you know, with my age group of people who were married, getting married, younger, I think everybody just thought they would get married. You know, it was--- it wasn't like if, it was more like when.

**TR:** Okay.

**AN:** So, I don't think I was really obsessed with it. But, you know, a lot of my friends got married around the same time I did.

**RW:** Did you share? Like, how was your husband when you decided to do all this work? How was he with sharing?

**AN:** Well, parts of it. He didn't like the theater things (cough) because I was out late at night. But I always got up in the morning and fixed everybody's breakfast. And actually, we divorced in the, in the '80's. And I think it was really--- he was a complete workaholic, so devoted to his work that I really felt just sort of left out. But he was a very good father to the kids and, of course, in his work had made a tremendous amount of money. So, there was never a situation where--- they didn't I mean, they would tell me sometimes kids would go without their college bill being paid or the tuition money hadn't been settled or something like that. That never really occurred. You know, we divided up the holidays. So, I don't think it really had as bad an impact on them as some other situations that they knew about. You know that they would tell me about it. And I mean, obviously, he and I had words, but he, he never tried to bribe them with gifts, or stuff like that, which sometimes kind of happened. So... You know, it all worked out quite well.

The other thing I didn't mention, but it was a really big part of our life, every summer we rented a house on Martha's Vineyard and we went there. And I think that had a big influence on my kids because of the stability. It was a very old community, called West Chop, of the same family

sort of back there for years. The group that was there were our age. (Roxann coughs) Their parents were there. They were there. And I think that was a really good thing for both of them. And then as I got older, Murray actually worked there a couple of summers with a bunch of kids from Wellesley and they rented a house. Now, where are you both from?

**RW:** I'm from Boston.

**TR:** I'm from Rhode Island.

**AN:** So, you're familiar with my New England, good tales?

**RW:** What were your parents' reactions to you getting a divorce?

**AN:** I think my father was the most upset because he had enormous respect for John, who by that time was vice president of Norton Company. And, you know, my mother was much more pragmatic. I mean, she sort of rolled along with whatever was going to happen when it happened. But he he was upset. (Brief pause) But I can tell you, my mother eloped with my father during the Depression, and I still have a letter that she wrote to her brother, Fred. She said, "Freddy, I want you to take mother and daddy out to lunch. And then when you do, tell them I'm married." (Roxann laughs)

**TR:** So, you said that you divorced in the '80s. So, we're learning in our women's studies class at that time, there was like the Women's Movement was very, very popular. Did you have any involvement?

**AN:** You know, I never really had directly. And I think it was because being in the theater, both in the summer theater, you know, professional theater and everything. There were two things and then decorating. There were women and we were all treated the same. I mean, when you went into a showroom, you weren't discriminated against. And the other thing is you met a lot of people that were gay. And so it just never occurred to me. I mean, I might say to someone, "Oh, you know, he's gay or he's, you know, I think he's gay or something," but it was never a big deal because in the theater and in the decorating business, women, women were always treated equally. I mean, some of the women that I met in the Boston showrooms were big, big time. I mean, they... There were some men, too, like William Hodgins and everything, but there were probably more women in the trade than men at that time. And you know, we were all treated with great respect because we were their bread and butter. So, I never felt, I never felt that sort of glass ceiling. I never felt as a fundraiser discriminated against because I was very good at it. And although there were men in development, jobs like that had to develop, manage. Holy Cross was always a man. The man, at Clark... We had a big organization in Worcester called Women in Development because so many women were the big fundraisers of the nonprofits. I mean, I'm

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talking about, you know, small schools and things like a United Fund and Red Cross and everything. They were, they were all women. So, I haven't, I haven't ever felt in any way discriminated against or a situation where someone said, "Well, she can't do that because she is a woman." And I think I've been really fortunate in that respect.

**TR:** Especially since during that time there were a lot of women...

**AN:** And, you know, had I been in the corporate world like banking or investing where, two people would be up for a job and a woman would say, "I wasn't a picked because I was a woman." I never had that situation. I never had someone say, "Well, you know, she didn't do this or she couldn't do this because she was a woman." So I, I feel I've been really lucky in that respect.

**RW:** Did you face any struggles, like being a divorcee and raising two kids, did you see any struggles?

**AN:** No. I mean, it was hard. Murray was at Andover at the time and Christopher was at home for one year. And, you know, raising a son, 15. You know, but he was very, very good at sports. And he was a ranked tennis player and he had his own coach. So at an age where they can sometimes get into mischief, especially with a single parent, he was... So he'd go from school to Greendale [YMCA] four days a week and then he'd usually be playing in a tournament on a weekend. So, that really kept him out of mischief. And I kept him very occupied. I mean, obviously, there were... I remember one time he was studying for a test. I quizzed him and he didn't have the answers. And I remember the two of us sitting on the stairs of Stringer Street. I said, we're going to sit here and go over this. I don't care if we have to stay up all night. And I still laugh about that. You know, I mean, I think that was--- I think I was a fairly strict parent. But I think I was a reasonable parent. You know, I think he feels that way, too. I don't think he feels that, you know, he was neglected in any way.

**RW:** I know that you were at Holy Cross a year before it became coed. How is it seeing Holy Cross become coed? How was your experience?

**AN:** Well, what was really funny was--- so it's a big rumor that I was actually there and that I was going to, that I was the dean, going to be the dean of women. But they had put me in this job to sort of see Holy Cross from the, from the inside, you know, and of course, I was, I was hired. I didn't have anything to do with being the dean. (Phone rings).

And, you know, I---(phone rings) there were so many women in the theater department and we were so isolated (phone rings) up in that little Fenwick tower that it really felt coed, even the first year. I was there (phone rings). And I just felt that. I mean, there were girls in the place, (phone

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rings) girls helping in the shop. And I taught a couple of courses at children's theater. (phone rings). And there were women in those classes. (phone rings) So, it didn't really feel any different. I think other people would have noticed much more. You know, their classes were all men and then suddenly there were girls in the class. But for me, it didn't seem any different. And it was a really good thing. I mean, Holy Cross, I think, was really strengthened by admitting women at the time that they did it. It was very timely.

**TR:** What, what are major differences that you see in women of your time and women of our generation?

I don't really. No, I think you're probably much more (cough) liberal overall, but I don't interact with your age group at all. I see (cough) my grandchildren, obviously are your age. I mean, Walter is 21 and Oliver is 19. So, I don't, I don't see a huge difference. I mean, you, you all have much more independence. You have cars, which a lot of kids didn't have cars, you know. I think you've been exposed to much more and are much more involved in things like climate control or politics or whatever. We were probably not as, I don't know, socially curious and socially responsible, I guess I'd say. What is your major?

**TR:** I'm a psychology major. I want to work with children with autism.

**RW:** And I'm a history major, so I'll be special education teacher.

**AN:** So. You know, as I say, being in the W.I.S.E. program, I see the students, but I don't interact with them at all. And I always say that I know you're told during your orientation, or they say you are, that you'll see a lot of adults on campus. You'll see a lot of seniors. I would say most of the time when the kids walk by, I'm walking to class. They'll say hi or good morning. They'll always hold a door, if they see a couple of us coming or going. We go mostly to Kennedy [Building]. But I also think that a huge number of the kids at Assumption have gone to Catholic school. And I think that the Catholic schools are stricter. And I think that they teach more manners. And I think that shows and the general behavior of what I see with them. But when I go this way, when I am at a board of directors meeting, because I'm on the board and we go and eat in the dining hall, they're just like kids at any other college, you know? They're not coming over and saying hello when a group of us is sitting at a table. But I've always felt that the students are very polite. But, you know, I barely see them. Most of my classes are in Kennedy. And, you know, like scurry down the path and into my classroom, a that's that and then I--- and you see a few kids walking by. But I don't I don't know. Do you find it odd to see someone, older people on campus or..."

**RW:** I mean, educating never stops, just keep learning.

**AN:** Yeah. But I know the W.I.S.E. Program is fabulous. When I joined about six or seven years ago, there were about 320 people. Now we have 500 people. It's really--- it's almost getting too big. And I handle all those special events, priorities, and brought back speakers and everything. So, I have a lot of work. But yes.

**RW:** Do you have... oh go ahead.

**AN:** It is. It's really good to be a volunteer and be involved in an organization. And I feel, you know, some of my friends just go to the car club and watch TV and everything and they become so bored. The people I've met through W.I.S.E. are all interested in some sort of learning. And there's such a diverse number of subjects that people take. And you really meet interesting people that, you know, want to keep on learning and don't feel that you have to stop because you're 75 or 80 years old, you know? Right. I think that makes a big difference in my attitude. And I know my kids love the fact that I'm involved in W.I.S.E.

**TR:** Yeah. That's awesome.

**RW:** Do you have any regrets, like on...

**AN:** Any regrets?

**RW :** As maybe throwing the ring out the window?

**AN:** (All laugh) Oh, it's not ---I was just a vague, a willful, spoiled person. Well, I suppose in some ways I regret that I didn't get a four- year college degree, but it hasn't hindered me. So, I can't say, I can't say, "Oh, I'm a big advocate for being a college dropout," because that would be wrong. But I suppose that's one regret. I don't know. I haven't... I don't I don't tend to dwell on negative things. I'm not a particularly negative person. So, I don't say, "Oh, poor me, I regret this or I regret that," sort of not in my nature.

**TR:** Well, we're just about out of time.

**AN:** Well, if you think of anything, you can always call me.

**TR:** Absolutely.

**AN:** Thank you so much for your time.

**TR:** Your story is awesome.

**AN:** Well, I hope it was interesting.

**RW:** It was.

**TR:** It's really nice to hear how successful you are in --- when we're learning about women of your generation involved in the women's movement and how most of them were really angry during that time.

**AN:** And I think that's very sad. Anger is never, ever productive, ever. And you know that as a psychology major, they're you know, obviously they're small things that I regret. I mean, I just had a knee replacement and I put it off and put it off. And I was in constant pain. And I don't know what I thought was going to happen. It certainly wasn't going to get any better. And so, do I regret that I didn't do it two years ago? (Roxann laughs) Yes. But, you know, I'm not going to chew on that like a dog with a bone. I just said I was really dumb. I should have done two years ago, but now I've done it. It's over. My physical therapy ended yesterday.

**RW:** Congratulations.

**AN:** I got that slap. You put it behind you. I think I'm dwelling on negative things, particularly as you get older. If it's like, oh, I'm so sad. I, I have a couple of people that say, "I don't want to discuss age. I don't want, you know." They're very negative about the whole thing. Well, you know, everybody's going to get older. I would like to be younger in some sense. And I would like to go back and be, you know, a 15 year old girl working with summer theater at Marblehead. But that's not going to happen. You know, it just doesn't. And you can't. I don't know. I don't think you can dwell on those kinds of things, because I think a lot of negativity affects your health. And it really just wears you down.

**TR:** Yeah absolutely. I'm taking positive psychology right now.

**AN:** Oh good.

**TR:** So, everything you just said was valid.

**RW:** I do have one last question.

**RW:** Yeah, I know that in women's studies we learned that like a lot of women tend to have teaching jobs. And when you said that your mom's friends went back to teaching after their kids got older...

**AN:** No, I said my friends.

**RW:** Oh, your friends, sorry. How did you navigate, not wanting to be a teacher?

**AN:** I'm a terrible teacher. (Roxann laughs) I taught. I did teach children. Sarah at Holy Cross, a couple of pass- fail courses. But people have said, "Oh, you should teach a course at W.I.S.E." That was I taught one thing, a senior at a senior citizens thing. So, I hate teaching. I just don't like it. I don't think I was a good teacher. I mean, I'd much rather write. Or do something creative like--- I just finished doing the annual fund for W.I.S.E.. Now I'm, I am not a graphic artist, but I'm a conceptual artist. And I thought all summer long about what I would do for the annual fest, it's---is the fourth one I've done for Assumption and I think, I think it's all right. We've had trouble with the printer.

**AN:** No, not the printer that's actually going to print it, but coming through on the computer, it's okay. (Gets up from the chair to walk over to table) It's just when I get up, I'm still hobbling.

**TR:** Yeah.

**AN:** So, I got this idea and now I'm really thrilled with it. And this will bring in a lot of money.

**RW:** Oh, its ice cream.

**TR:** Aww.

**AN:** And it says (opening up card). W.I.S.E., so many choices. Make the W.I.S.E. choice, give to the annual fund.

**RW:** (laughs oh) That's nice.

**AN:** I love that.

**TR:** That is nice. I love it, too.

**AN:** And then it says, "Provides a wide variety of classes, programs, activities. W.I.S.E. this increased offer. Support W.I.S.E. continues to add more advanced technology. W.I.S.E. continues to grow and expand enriching its members." That's all it has to say. People that write these long, dreary letters for fundraising. Nobody wants to hear all that. (Roxann laughs ) What was this about? They've already joined, or they wouldn't be getting them.

**AN:** So stuff like that. I love to do.

**RW:** That's good.

**TR:** Good.

**RW:** So thank you.

**AN:** Go forth to your classes and do well. Have fun.

**RW:** Thank you.