Interviewee: Domenica Perrone
Interviewer: Ailyn Rodriquez
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Abstract:
Domenica Perrone shares her story and discusses her journey as advocate of community engagement and social justice. Born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, she shares her experience as an immigrant in the United States and her perspectives on issues surrounding the community. She recounts social, political, and economic factors that shape her passion for social justice. Perrone discusses issues like education equity, public health, and the housing crisis going on in Worcester. Being on the board of many community organizations, Perrone shares her experience of the ways she has helped the local community. While emphasizing the hardships people in her community endure, despite these challenges, Perrone pushes for change in her many communities and remains positive that change will happen. She currently works at UMass Chan Medical School and their Collaborative for Health Equity as their Director for Community Engagement and Outreach.

AR: OK. First of all, Good morning. We're really happy that you're here.
And we are so excited that we have this opportunity to talk to you and find out more about you. So we're Molly Willson (she's Molly), and I'm Ailyn. We are currently at Clark University Goddard Library, room 402. It's October 15th of 2024, and the time is 9:10 in the morning. So what is your full name, including both maiden name and married name, if applicable.

DP: My name is Domenica Perone.

AR: Could you spell that out, please?

DP: Yep. D-O-M-E-N-I-C-A. And then last name is P-E-R-R-O-N-E.

AR: Where were you born?

DP: I was born in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

AR: Okay. Um. Have you ever married?

DP: I am married.

AR: Oh, okay. What is the name of your spouse?

DP: His name is Noah Meister.

AR: Could you spell that out?

DP: Yep. Uh, N-O-A-H. And then last name is M-E-I-S-T-E-R.

AR: Okay. Do you have children?

DP: I do not.

AR: What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with?

DP: I am Ecuadorian. I'm Ecuadorian (laughs). Yeah. Um, also, I am a white-passing Latina, so that counts.

AR: Tell me about your parents. Where were they born?

DP: My mom was also born in Guayaquil, Ecuador. My dad? I assume so, but I'm not certain.

AR: How do you, could you spell out the…

DP: The city?

AR: Yes.

DP: Um, G-U-A-Y-A-Q-U-I-L.

AR: Thank you.

AR: What did your parents do?

DP: My mother, most of my life has worked at a hospital or a doctor's office. So she's like an office manager within, within the hospital.

AR: Okay. What did her education consist of?

DP: My mother has an associate's degree. She went to high school in Hackensack, New Jersey and then she got an associate's. I'm not sure from where. But then she returned to Guayaquil Ecuador after that.

AR: Okay. What, where have you been - sorry. Where have you lived during your life?

DP: I have lived, so I was born in Guayaquil Ecuador.

AR: Mhm.

DP: And then I immigrated to northern New Jersey. Clifton, New Jersey. I think, well, actually, when I first moved to New Jersey, it was Passaic, New Jersey where we lived with my mother, sister and my aunt. When we first immigrated, I was two. So I guess that was like 1993. And then we moved to Clifton, New Jersey, where I spent most of my childhood and high school. And then when I graduated high school, I moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where I studied my undergraduate degree at Emerson College. After Emerson College, I got into an AmeriCorps program called Teach for America. And then I moved to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, and there I lived in three different cities over the course of three years. So that was from 2014 to 2017. And I lived in Edinburg, Texas, and then McAllen, Texas, and then San Juan, Texas. And then after that, I got into Clark University for my masters, and I, for when we first moved back in 2017, we moved to Brighton, Massachusetts, because my husband was still working in Chelsea in Boston, and I was commuting here for my first year. And then we moved to Worcester 2017 into 2018. And I moved to Woodland Street for, it was the second year of my master's program. I did a three-year program because it was two degrees. And I lived on Woodland Street until probably, so that was like maybe into 2022, I think.
And now I live over on Lincoln Street.

AR: Cool.

DP: Yeah.

AR: Could you tell me more about the neighborhoods where you grew up in.

DP: The ones not here, doesn't matter?

AR: Everywhere.

DP: Okay. Yeah. So in New Jersey, I grew up like my first childhood home. I lived in like a two-family house in Clifton, New Jersey, and I lived at first I think we lived on like the second floor

and then different landlords so we moved on the other floor. But I grew up with I had two older sisters, have two older sisters, that are like eight and nine years older than me and my mom and my grandmother. So we lived in that it was like a two bedroom house. So I like basically slept in my mom's bedroom until my sisters went away to college, because she kind of turned like the dining room into a bedroom. So, we did share that type of space for some time. It was kind of a more immigrant side of Clifton. It was like next to Patterson, which is, I think, well known to be predominantly immigrants and minorities. So, grew up there. And then when I was 16, I actually had a house fire. And so we at that time, my sisters were living in Bergenfield, another town in New Jersey. So, I stayed with them for some time until, you know, my mom was able to find us another apartment to live in. And so then I lived in – we, probably I was like 17, I guess at that point. We moved into another apartment in New Jersey, also kind of in a predominantly immigrant-ish area, also like a two-family house. And then, yeah, so that was kind of Clifton. Clifton is very diverse. It's huge. I went to high school with like 4000 people. My graduating class was like a thousand, and I had a really nice childhood, I think all things considered in for sure. And then obviously, I think growing up and going to my undergrad at Emerson and Emerson College is like, right on the Common. And I lived on campus all four years. I did study abroad one semester, which was really fun in the Netherlands. But Emerson is obviously right in the heart of Boston. So it was very urban. And then when I lived in Texas, that was like my first experience with like rural poverty. And there was it was the most rural place I've lived in. You couldn't get anywhere without a car. It was almost 100% Mexican American. I'm Ecuadorian. So I was like, these are my people. But actually it's really predominantly Mexican, and they have a very rich culture and complicated history, especially living on the border. But I really enjoyed my time there as well. Just like a really powerful community. Delicious food. And now that I live in Worcester, I would say it's back to being kind of urban ish. I think when I lived on Woodland Street, which is in Main South, maybe a little bit more. So now I live on Lincoln Street. It's still kind of urban ish, but I'm also next to like the Burncoat area, which is a little bit more residential. When I lived on Woodland Street, I lived in a triple decker that was split into six units, and now I live in a two-family house.

AR: Okay. That’s really interesting.

DP: Mhm,

AR: Um, what was your experience in new Jersey?

DP: Just in general?

AR: Yes. Just whatever you want to say.

DP: Yeah. It was pretty great, honestly. Like, I think being, (is it okay if I drink water?).

AR: Yeah. Of course.

DP: I just got back from visiting my mom this weekend. She lives in Montclair now. But growing up in Clifton, I really loved it. I think when I first immigrated to the United States, my mom, coming from Ecuador, was in Ecuador. Most of the students or young people go to like, private schools because I guess the public schools are really bad. So when I first moved to New Jersey, my mom was looking for a school system for my sister, so I was pretty little still, but they were like eight and nine and obviously were, well, not obviously, but they would need like ESL support but she didn't want to send them to the public schools. So she found a church which was a Catholic church, and, you know, befriended the community there. And they gave her the opportunity to, like, be the lunch lady in exchange for, like, tuition. So my sisters went to Saint Clair. Now it's like, doesn't even have a K through 12 or K through eight school. It's just a preschool now. But at the time, it was like a really small Catholic school. Like the classes, each class size was like 20 students. So my sisters went there. And then when Paola, my middle sister, was like an eighth grade, I entered kindergarten and I went there as well. So I went there from K through eighth grade. I think it was kind of complicated because it was obviously a really it was a Catholic school, so it was pretty religious. I wouldn't say there was there was diversity. Clifton, where I lived, was a very diverse town, like tons of immigrants, like very, very diverse. So I feel like I kind of always took that for granted. Like most of my friends are like, Latinx, people of color? And some of them I did make friends from, like, my childhood then. And so after eighth grade, though, my sisters went to a public high school, Clifton High. I was going to do the same. I did do the same, but then I was like a huge school. But coming out of eighth grade, I was like tracked into like honors and AP classes because I was coming from like a private school, essentially. So I did most of my classes at Clifton High where like honors and AP, but I had a very, really nice, like, high school experience. I was like on student council. I was Key Club President. So I really got into service during that time, I filled my time with extracurricular activities because it was pretty much a non-negotiable that I was going to go to college. Both my sisters went to college. One of them went to school in Philly. The other one went to school in California. That was kind of a big deal. I remember at the time because she obviously moved across the country. My mom obviously had a lot of feelings about that. But I do think that was really, like when I came along and got older because my sisters are so much older than me. My mom is just very open-minded and, you know, just wants us to, like, follow our dreams, essentially. And I think, like, she kind of had already gone through all those emotions and healing process by the time I was already ready to go away to college. I definitely had a lot of friends, and I just had a really nice childhood. I feel like I think there was a lot of different times I had insecurities about, like where I lived and where I grew up, because I also in high school had a lot of friends whose parents had like, houses and like, you know, they had a basement to

hang out in and a bedroom upstairs. And for quite a bit of time, at least in my childhood, I didn't want to have friends over my house and stuff because I had a really crowded house and it was, you know, around, it was like a one floor situation because it was a two-family house. But by the time I got into high school, I feel like I really maybe it was like doing service and, like, Key Club and things like that, but I definitely, like, reframed my mind and I, like, kind of got rid of, like, any shame I had associated with like my upbringing or income. You know, I'm like really proud of my mom being a single mother. And my father passed away when I was a baby, which is like what instigated us to emigrate. So I feel like in the end, in high school, like my friends did come over and I was like, no longer, like, embarrassed of where I lived or anything like that. But I did struggle with that when I was really younger. My grandma would have to, like, pick me up from Saint Clair, and I never understood. Like, why? Like, the white girls always had, like, their moms who didn't work and like, would, you know, bring kids over and they would, like, play in their pool and whatnot. So I didn't have a good understanding of, like, income inequality until a little bit later. But once I did understand that I no longer had, like, shame or anything like that I was really always very proud of where I grew up. So. Yeah. And then I but I knew I wanted to go away to college. I feel like I've always been a little bit more, I guess you could say eccentric, opinionated, like I knew I wanted to, like, I was, like, wanting to get, like, tattoos and go to art school, and, like, I was, like, really into creative writing in my young years. And, so I definitely cast a wide net. I looked at colleges in California. My sister had gone to school in California. I did like I think I did like, a college board search and knew I wanted to study creative writing. And so, Emerson College came up and I did my junior year, and I was like, this is where I want to be. And I wish I had more knowledge about, like, student loans and things like that, because now I'll be paying my loans back till I die. But, but it was a really beautiful time without thinking about those things.

AR: Yeah. I totally get that. Yeah. I know you talked about it, but I just want to go into specifics so when did you arrive to Worcester?

DP: So I arrived to Worcester, I want to say it's either 2017 or 2018. I think it was the summer of 2018. So I had already graduated from college. I did Teach for America for three years. I graduated from college in 2014. I moved to Texas and I did three years there, so 2014 to 2017, and then I moved first to Brighton and then either 2017, or like the fall of 2017, turning into 2018, I believe I that's when I moved to Worcester.

AR: And what age was this?

DP: I was probably, like simple math. So 2017 was seven years ago. So I was 25, I think I was 25.

AR: Mhm. And you currently live in Worcester?

DP: Yes.

AR: Where do you live? In the city now.

DP: I live on Lincoln Street. So yeah. Like right off of Lincoln Street and the two-family house.

AR: Have you ever lived anywhere else in Worcester?

DP: I lived on Woodland Street when I first moved here. Yeah.

AR: What is your Worcester connection? Well, you already. You work here, right?

DP: Yes.

AR: Okay. Do you have hobbies or do any regular leisure activities that take you outside of your home?

DP: Yes, I would say so. I mean, I have a lot of friends in Worcester. When I first moved to Worcester and I went to Clark, I felt pretty isolated in some ways, I think for the masters programs at Clark, it's really catered toward, like fifth year students, especially like the CDP, MBA, which is what I did. But I started working at the Latino Education Institute, which I got through a connection from a Clark professor, Dodie Swope. And then I made, like, all my friends. So my friends have like an organization called El Salon, which puts on like, creative artist markets and experiences. So sometimes I go to that. I am in a book club with some friends. I do feel like I'm like really active in the community. I'm on like several different boards for non-profits. I ran for city council last year. That took up a lot of time. I wouldn't say that was like, for fun or like a hobby necessarily, but I definitely still maintain, like a civic engagement one. So, like this morning I was like on the radio to talk about an order that's going to be at City Council this evening. I'm going to go to a rally later today. So I am pretty in tune with like different types of events that go in the city that I want to show up to and support. And then also, a sense of responsibility in terms of civic engagement that includes like participating on boards and nonprofits, but also like civic engagement in terms of like city council and things like that.

AR: What is the name of the book club?

DP: Oh, it doesn't have like a real name. It's just mostly like me and three friends who, you know, pick a book a month to like, get together and read, which is important to me because I do

my job right now in community engagement. So it is important for me to, yes, show up in community, but it's also really important for me to like, surround myself with people where I don't have to like, perform or like, you know, have this sort of transactional agenda with even if it is like rooted in social justice and my values, it's important for me to just like, hang out with my friends and do my job. So that's kind of, I'm trying to fill in my sense of community in more ways of like going to yoga as well as another one like BIPOC. Yoga is really fun, and that's something that goes on in Worcester and I go with friends sometimes as well. Yeah.

AR: How often do you meet?

DP: The book club?

AR: Yes.

DP: Once a month-ish.

AR: Ok, That's good. Yeah.

DP: Yeah, I know, I mean, we're all really busy ladies, so it's actually kind of hard to become, like, older. It's, like, really hard to see your friends sometimes because of everyone has a lot of commitments and things like that. So. Yeah.

AR: What about the boards you belong in, and can you talk a little bit more about these?

DP: Absolutely. So I first joined I was working at my job at the Department of Health and Human Services, during like 2020, and that was the pandemic. So I managed all the mobile, mobile vaccine clinics, and I made a lot of connections with different community partners during that time. So I was asked to represent the Department of Health and Human Services at the Maine South CDC. So that was one of the first boards I joined. I'm no longer on that board because I also eventually got a job at Clark, and so it was just kind of a conflict at the time. I wasn't really there to represent Clark. So I do have a really strong connection with the Maine South CDC, but I'm no longer on their board. That board was very spicy. There's a lot of drama that goes on with that because it's housing. And at the end of the day, housing, a lot of people have different opinions about housing. But they do amazing work. So I was proud of that. And then I am on the boards - I'm currently on and have joined even since that time - I'm on Edward Street Child Services. [?]. And so they do advocacy for universal early education and care. And then also have some childcare funding that they kind of move throughout the city. I love that board. I'm on the League of Women Voters board, which is a nonpartisan voter, civic engagement board, not just for women. I'm on the board for the Worcester Public Library

Foundation. And so that's not like the Library Commission, which is run through the city, but the Foundation, which kind of raises money to supplement things at the library. So it's kind of fun. It's mostly like planning big fundraisers and things like that. And I feel like I am missing something, Oh, the Women's Initiative, which is their fiscal sponsors, United Way, but they're a philanthropic organization that raises money for middle school girls programing. And so when I worked at the Latino Education Institute, which does youth work, they had a program called Lassos, which was like for fifth grade girls and their caretakers. So they received their funding from like the Women's Initiative. And that's kind of how I met them there. And now I am like the Chair of the diversity Committee on the Women's Initiative and like on the Leadership Council. So those take up a lot of time. They all meet like once a month, um, plus like events and things like that. Most recently I'm like not sworn in yet, but I think I'm going to be sworn in, like next week for the Worcester Community Action Council board. And so like there I would be representing like Senator Robin Kennedy on that board. And so we'll see. That's going to be another one.

AR: Very active indeed.

DP: It's a little bit too much. I'm looking forward to rolling off like two of these this year because I've already done like 3 to 4 years on a lot of these. And I'm like ready to just, like I can still be a part of the organization. Just I don't necessarily need to be like on the board. Yeah. Some of those decisions necessarily. Plus we need to like put new people in those spaces. And many of these boards, I am like the youngest person in the room and the most diverse person in the room. And as you can, you all look at me like I said, I'm like a white passing Latinx person. But I do think it's really important to be in these spaces because people don't realize that, like, yes, like I went to the Boys and Girls Club going up, I went to, you know, all these programs and non-profits provide to the community, have boards and like the boards, dictate what the executive director does right. And so oftentimes these meetings are like boring, but sometimes they're really important. And so I do encourage more people to like join those things. But it's volunteer work and not everyone has the capacity to be able to do that.

AR: Yeah, I feel like being on all those you can talk to us about the next question.

DP: Mhm.

AR: Which is, what challenges do you think the city still faces?

DP: Ugh. Oh so many. But there are so many great things. I love it here. I think the biggest issue that our city is facing is a housing crisis. So I kind of have a, I have a public health background in terms of the work I've done in Worcester, like I mentioned, when I worked at Health and

Human Services, and I just think that, like, you know, Worcester is one, has one, like the highest rent prices like in the country right. So if you look at the income to rent ratio, people can't pay rent. So we, and we, also Massachusetts is one of the worst states for tenants. So we have no tenant rights. Right. And that's a Massachusetts issue like that is like, you know, like Maura Healey over here is like, I don't know, I have a lot of thoughts about that. But so, you know, like, I do think that's something that's going to be coming up to like a is like, do we look at rent control? Do we look at no fault evictions like we have no fault evictions? You can get evicted for absolutely anything and there's no rhyme or reason behind it. You could, I mean, unless it's like discrimination, which you would have to prove. So we have a housing crisis, and then also tied in with that, we're in New England, and we have, like, a substance use disorder crisis, right? We have an opiate crisis going on right now. So I think a lot of students where we're located now at Clark, like they don't realize that the only wet drop-in shelter in Worcester is about ten minutes that way. Right. So that shelter was built for 50 people on average, 200 people stay there a night and they're sleeping on the floors or sleeping in the bathrooms or sex trafficking going in and out of there. I mean, it's just crazy. And so but it is really hard to like, put up shelters, put up family shelters, put up a low threshold housing with like hotels. So. And I think the reason it's hard to create more sheltering is because when it goes up to city council, people don't want it in their backyard. And so that's an acronym that's called like 'Not in My backyard', which is a NIMBY approach. And there's a lot of NIMBYism in Worcester. Worcester is very segregated. If you look at the West Side, it's predominantly one racial demographic and one age group. If you look at Main South, it's another one. There's a ten-year lifespan difference between people who live in Main South and people who live on the West Side. So redlining is something that, you know, is very real historically, and you can literally see it in Worcester. You can see it the way the highways cut through cities. You could see it when you look at how many garage shops and liquor stores are located in Worcester and where they're located. So Worcester is a segregated city with a housing crisis and a mental health crisis, and we don't have enough detox beds. And so all of those things, for me, the social determinants of health are really important to me. And I think that we can like, talk about it and people can make individual change. But at the end of the day, these are like policies that need to go through like the municipality and the state.

AR: What would you change about the city?

DP: I mean, I think like the rent housing crisis is probably one of the biggest, definitely rent control when it comes up, um, creating guardrails around evictions. My husband's a housing attorney, so he has, like, 100 clients at a time of people he's representing in court who are getting evicted. So I think that is a big one. And creating enough shelters to house the people who are without housing in the city. I think the latest data shows we're up to almost 700 people who are unhoused in Worcester, and we have one drop in shelter that fits 50. People literally freeze to death and die in tents in the summer and in the winter. And people just don't want shelters in

their backyard. So, you know, it leaves very few options. We have encampments. People don't want the encampments. So you could arrest them and then they can go to like, the House of Corrections, which is also one of the worst [scales?] in the state. And then they can come back out eight months later and go to that shelter over there. So it's not really a solution. So, I think housing, all types of housing, whether it be for people like me, first time homeowners, college students and people who are unhoused, we need all types of housing.

AR: What changes have you seen in Worcester over time?

DP: So I'm not someone who's been here like my whole life, but since I got here, I will say there's been a lot of development. I think one of the first things I learned when I came to Clark is about like the Worcester quote unquote, "Renaissance," which I think depending who you talk to, can be seen as a really good thing. Worcester Renaissance being like wow, look at all these like luxury apartments, restaurants, breweries, all of those things. But at the end of the day, we often see, like, people who live and commute to Boston living in those spaces. So it's like development at the cost of who, right? We have a really big issue with gentrification because we, like I already mentioned, we don't really have housing rights and policies around that. And so in terms of seeing Worcester change over the years, there's a lot of things that I've seen that I enjoy. Like I love going, like I like going out to eat. I like going to like cool restaurants. I like going to like, see concerts and different types of bars, like, I enjoy those aspects of my social life. And also, I know that they're at a cost of people being gentrified and like, moving out of their spaces. And so I do think, like, there's a lot of good but a lot of bad at the same time. When I moved to Worcester, I think the homeless account for people who are without housing was like maybe in the hundreds. And as I previously mentioned, the latest data is like 600 to 700 people. So yes, we have maybe three new breweries, but we also have a huge housing crisis. And I think something's got to give at some point because like sometimes when we create like the public market and like the development of the Canal District, it's like Saint John's is literally right behind there, which is like one of the soup kitchens. So you can go from one street and look at a luxury apartment and the public market, which is pretty expensive. And you can go one street over and you see the soup kitchen, which is where you see people who are in different types of crisis. And like that juxtaposition is really stark.

AR: Yeah. What distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

DP: So much. I mean, I think it's a really diverse community. I always say I like my cities interesting. I think being an immigrant and having grown up with a lot of diversity, I think Worcester is super diverse. It's home to different groups of refugees over time. I think that there is a lot of people from the community who have been doing social justice work for a really long time. So, you know, I take my learning, like when I moved to Worcester and the way I approach

my work now is like listening and learning and showing up for a community. People who've been here longer, people who know what's going on, and being, you know, able to contribute my own superpowers into that space, whether that be through like, advocacy or holding institutions accountable because I find myself working in them. So the things I love most about Worcester is really like the community and like the people who've been mobilizing for a long time, whether that be for racial justice or housing justice or harm reduction.

AR: And what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

DP: I think it varies. I think it varies a lot, who you – depending who you talk to. As I mentioned, there's definitely again, just like from a public health perspective, there's definitely like human trafficking that takes place in Worcester, right? Like we've had different nonprofits come and go that have been survivor led. And like, you know, Main South historically has been a place where there was a lot of like, prostitution. I did a project when I was a Clark student for my masters, where we interviewed the police department because women were saying they were being sexually assaulted by police while they were working on the street. So I think, like, depending on who you talk to, like women without houses or women struggling with substance use disorder, really struggling. I think if we think about, like the immigrant community and people who are paying their rent month-to-month, childcare. Childcare in Worcester costs about $26,000 a year for one child. So from a child care perspective, we have a lot of work to do, right? There have been cities like Boston and like New York City who have moved to like universal preschool. That's a step. It's not really childcare necessarily, but we do have a child care crisis in Worcester as well, especially after the pandemic. People who work in childcare are not paid enough, so we can't expect them to stay in those jobs necessarily. And so we do have childcare centers close, because there's not like a workforce that can keep them open. And those are, you know, so it's a workforce issue. It's expensive to send your kids to childcare. So what ends up happening is like communities find ways to take care of themselves, which we always have. But it also means that when a child goes into kindergarten, they're all - they all have different levels of preparation, and that is where the educational equality gap starts, right? Like a child who's entering kindergarten and can't spell their name versus another child who can, like we see those disparities, like moving up. So there is a lot of work around early childhood, I think, in Worcester right now too, which is good, like Edward Street Together for Kids Coalition has been a lot, a big part of that. And we'll see. One of the goals from the city right now is to create a child care plan, right. Like we had ARPA funding that came from the pandemic, that could have helped address some of those gaps, and we hope that they do. So I think for women, depending who you are, depending where you live, the experiences can definitely vary.

AR: Okay. I know you talked about your education, but I want to go a little bit more in depth about it.

DP: Sure.

AR: So I'm gonna ask like questions that you've probably already answered, but I want to get more specifics.

DP: Absolutely.

AR: So where did you attend school, more specifically high school.

DP: High school. I went to Clifton High School and yeah, it was fun for the most part.

AR: When did you graduate high school, if you can remember?

DP: Yeah. Class of 2010. That one's easy because we were the perfect ten. That was like our all our t shirts said that, (laughs).

AR: What about the name of your college?

DP: College, Emerson College.

AR: Okay, which is in the Boston Commons.

DP: Yeah. Right.

AR: Where did you graduate from college?

DP: There. Yep. Yeah.

AR: And what programs and degrees or degrees, you know, did you.

DP: Study?

AR: Yeah.

DP: So I studied at Emerson. It was called Writing, Literature and Publishing because I thought I wanted to be a creative writer, which writing is a very strong skill that will take you very far in many spaces. Grant writing is basically creative writing. So, so I studied creative writing, and I think my minor was in like political communications, which was like a PoliSci degree, basically.

AR: From what were the years that you went to school?

DP: Yeah. Emerson was 2006 to, oh that's a lie, not 2006 that was high school 2010 to 2014.

AR: Did you face any challenges in education?

DP: Definitely. I mean, I already said I'll be paying my loans back till I die. So, I think I definitely think, like, Emerson did not do a good enough job, like talking to my mom about, like, student loans and things like that, because Emerson gave me a lot of money, but definitely not enough money to, like, cover full tuition. So I think financial is huge - financial literacy and things like that. Also, I just feel like my generation, I guess you could say, like I was like a part of a millennial generation that really got exploited through student loans. So I'll talk all day about that. But, other challenges, obviously, like imposter syndrome was very much I don't think I had the language to explain that at the time, but definitely like my first year, I remember sitting in class studying creative writing and like the professor was like, who here has like been published before and like everyone like raised their hand and I was like confused because I was in classes with, like, students who did pre-college programs, right? Like students who did different forms of early college experiences that I've never had any exposure or access to, didn't even know existed. Emerson is a private liberal arts school with a film major that's really big. So had a lot of people from L.A. that went there, a lot of people from Miami and that were really rich, like they went to Coachella, they went to whatever, all the music festivals and would travel to it and talk about it a lot. So I definitely found myself like my first semester of freshman year wondering if I was like in the right place or if I belonged there. I had to go to the writing center to receive tutoring for writing, which is something I had always been good at in high school. But like, you know, I was getting like A, B or C in class with some of my early papers and having to understand that. So I think that was a big part.

AR: How would you say this affected you either, if you can remember back then and now?

DP: I mean, I'm pretty much like an outspoken Socialist. (Laughs) So I think that, like, definitely informed, like my political views and my values. You know, I had I eventually at Emerson made really good friends who had similar lived experiences to myself. I got involved in Jumpstart, which was an AmeriCorps program for college students to go work with, like preschools in different parts of the city, that were like low income or what have you. So when I even the, the language I'm telling you now and like the things I'm involved in like early education and care and like educational equity, right. Like I was a college student working at, like, a South Boston preschool that was predominantly black, where, you know, teachers were probably making very little money. And like, they were just sending a bunch of, like, white college students in there to,

like, go work with these kids. That was like some of my first exposure to educational inequity and also like, not even understanding what that looked or felt like to like the teachers there, the students there, things like that. So I definitely think it informed my values and a lot of the things I care about. I think it just made me realize there's a lot of inequity in our world, and I deserve to be in these spaces. And pretty much like these types of experiences should not only be for rich people.

AR: Once you've finished formal education, what did you see as your options?

DP: I definitely knew I wanted to do Teach for America. My sister had done Teach for America. Paola, who was like my middle sister, and I'm very close with her, so I was always very ambitious. I was passionate about educational inequity, things like that. So I definitely knew I wanted to Teach for America. I think I applied to it probably my junior year, maybe senior year. I remember interviewing in Boston University. And also at that point I had done several alternative spring break trips. So I had done service in El Paso, which is on the border on the other side of the border, the western side of the border of Texas and Mexico. That was a huge eye opening experience for me. I learned about like immigration law and like the border and xenophobia and all sorts of things. And so I was particularly passionate about like DACA at the time and things like that. So that being said, I applied for TFA, I cast a wide net, and my first ranked choice was the Rio Grande Valley, which is on the border on the right side of Texas. And I got in and I was like, great. I got my next two years planned. I stayed a third.

AR: Could you talk a little bit more about Teach for America just to know what it is?

DP: Yeah. Teach for America. So complicated, but, well, you know, it's an AmeriCorps program that was started, I think, by Wendy Knapp. The fact that even though that shows you that TFA really instills those things in you, but Teach for America as an AmeriCorps program, I don't know how long it's been around maybe 30 years, maybe more. And it really was started to send college graduates, particularly from Ivy League schools, to teach in low income, low resourced schools around the country. There is a lot of criticism associated with Teach for America because, as I previously mentioned, it's, there's a lot of, uh, disconnect between the people who are teaching and the students that are learning in those schools. And also, a two-year commitment. So many people just use it as a stepping stone in their career to like medical school, to law school, different things like that. So I do think just like service in general, in the way we see service has maybe changed. I think in my eyes, I don't think we have language like, oh, understanding like a white savior complex, for instance. Right. Like I think Teach for America really was like founded upon that framework. I'm really lucky because where I did Teach for America, I was placed at a large public school, like really big, a huge public school. So I like, made friends with teachers and built community in that way. And also Teach for America has

ties to charter schools. And so I would say maybe 60 to 70% of people in my core, my group of people who got in ended up at charter schools that were literally started by Teach for America alumni, so that I was already having conflicting - my values were already in conflict. Once I started understanding how charter schools were funded and the role Teach for America plays within that work. That being said, I don't really regret it because I made a lot of really beautiful relationships with students. So I still keep in touch with some teachers. And I think I hopefully put that into practice in the way I taught. But I know for a fact that's not how everybody approaches their service or time in Teach for America.

AR: What support networks and mentoring were important to you throughout all of this?

DP: Mhm. Mentors for sure. Very important. Finding people that I had similarities with in my undergrad, like I said, when I started doing some service and identifying people who were like me, people who were, you know, immigrants or people who maybe came from more low income family situations, like creating a support system that had the people who had similar lived experiences to myself, similar values, and then finding mentors that, like, pretty much always believed in me and like I cared what they think. So that, you know, at Emerson was like various types of professors that I really cared about. And even now, in my work now, throughout my career, I've had mentorship that to me, I'm like, I know I'm going to take this mentorship. And I know that's not the type of boss or leader I want to be, but I'm also going to take the value that they're giving me. So I think all mentors are like also humans. And I think the work that I do in community engagement, like it's not black and white, it's like a gray area. And so I do try to just find like value in the relationships I build and like take the advice for what it is, but also understanding, like with a critical lens, like how I want to be different or how the type of leader that I want to be.

AR: Yeah. So was Teach for America your first job?

DP: Yeah. Technically.

AR: Okay. And what other jobs have you had?

DP: Yeah. So Teach for America. I taught high school English for three years at a public school at Coachella. So, and then I came here to Clark. I was like a nanny during my first year. Like, just like taking care of children, basically to make money. My first graduate year. Once I moved to Worcester, I got a job at the Latino Education Institute at Worcester State, which does youth programing and family engagement programing for the Latinx community in Worcester. So I did that. I was a program evaluator for them and also like a coordinator, I did summer programs, college readiness programs. I still do work for them sometimes as like a contractor to do

professional development. I'm going to be there next week doing a training. So they were huge for me and like family, honestly. Like, I love them so much. After the LEI, I got a job at the Department of Health and Human Services in Worcester, and I worked for the commissioner there as her program manager. So I like that varied from doing like all of her PowerPoints with like, data that she needed to like ghostwriting her speeches to like, you know, managing the vaccine clinics. The pandemic hit like three months after I started that job. So that was crazy, and a very traumatic time, I feel like. And so after HHS, I got a job here at Clark as director for community engagement. So I did that for two years and most recently now since the end of May. I work at UMass Chan Medical School and their Collaborative for Health Equity as their Director for Community Engagement and Outreach.

AR: So how would you say these jobs were?

DP: Varies for sure, depending on the one. Like, as I said, I think like the LEI, I love them so much. So like they really do create like, uh, almost like an affinity space and like safe space. It's like, you know, it's like feels for me, very familial, like, my boss was someone who to me feels like an aunt, you know, like. So that was a beautiful time for sure. Um, I think HHS was very difficult. And I started working in December of - Pandemic hit March of 2020. The commissioner, Doctor Matilde Castiel, is brilliant, and she herself is a Cuban refugee. She's very progressive. She taught me everything I know about harm reduction. And she's a community physician or she's a community physician. She started the Hector Reyes House and also Cafe Reyes to support Latino men in recovery and people who've been previously incarcerated. So I really learned a ton under her guidance. Like I said, I made a lot of relationships. I mean, I've toured the Worcester House of Corrections probably like seven times because of that job and like looking at the House of Corrections and being like, you know, this is problematic or, you know, and so I'm very grateful to have had the access that I have through that job, her guidance, her knowledge around harm reduction. And also, as I mentioned, like I learned the things that I don't want to be when I grow, like when I become a leader. Like she works like crazy, like she is intrinsically motivated. She works like many, many hours a week. Right. So I also worked many, many hours a week. And I think like work-life balance and burnout are things that I, those were some of the lessons I learned during that time, during my time here at Clark. Easier in some ways, but maybe for me, conflicted with, like, my intrinsic motivation. Clark is also a private, higher ed liberal arts college, and so I think that, like, I also learned and developed like during my time here professionally, I was like, oh, I'm not all healed up from like my own private liberal arts experience, right? Like, I see y'all and I see different students I had relationships with here and like, understanding the type of like student loan debt that they're going to be going into for this experience. And like, that makes me mad. Like, I shouldn't like, you know, shouldn't be a company or a business or any of those things while at the same time being like, I love liberal arts education. Like, I love talking about theory. I love arguing with people and like, you know, so I

love that this is a predominantly, like, queer institution. So it has like so many beautiful things about it that create like safe community. But yeah, institutionally, it was interesting to be on that side of things. So now I've worked in like government. I've worked in like nonprofit, government, private higher ed, and now I'm at a medical school. I will say, like, the role I'm in at the medical school is not student engagement. There's a lot more resources there. So student engagement is not really my priority. There's a lot of research that goes on at the medical school. So I'm more involved with like institutional level change, which is what interests me and my current boss. And my current team is brilliant. And we all have the same framework when it comes to health equity. And so a lot of that work is done. Nobody is doing our job to like, make UMass Chan look good necessarily. We're there to like push and drive the needle towards equity and ask hard questions. And we're all in agreement with that. It's hard to be the only person doing that.

AR: What is the name of the middle school - medical school you work for now?

DP: Yeah, UMass Chan Medical School.

AR: And how did you come to work here?

DP: Basically, well, I just saw them post the job (laughs) and like, my, you know, someone sent it to me, and a couple people sent it to me through community. I asked around and learned a little bit more about it, and then I applied and did my many interviews for it, and it worked out.

AR: And what has this work meant to you?

DP: Oh, it means a lot to me. I, like I said, I'm like, I have a hard time doing anything that doesn't mean things to me. Like I just. Yeah. So the fact that its a collaborative in health equity, and we're looking to advance health equity locally and globally. And like what that means. It's all very new. The collaborative is only a year old, so my boss is only a year in. And, you know, we're all very new as a team, but we have the same values and we're mission driven. And so for me, it's exciting to see how we create our initiatives, our programs, how we center community voices. My job is community engagement and outreach. Like a huge part of health equity. And health and equity is the disconnect between our health care system and our communities. Right? Like we live in a country where there is broken trust. And so our main goal is to rebuild trust between communities who've experienced health inequities at the hands of health care institutions, specifically UMass, in this case. And how do we, we are literally looking at ways that we can facilitate trust building between community and this institution. And I think that's really interesting.

AR: Um, you have a lot going on in terms of work.

DP: Yea, (laughs).

AR: And we kind of want to understand, what your primary responsibilities in terms of housework is.

DP: Okay.

AR: And how these go hand in hand?

DP: My home?

AR: Yes.

DP: Okay. Yes. That makes sense. I will say I don't have kids. I wish I did. Like, I, I if I go back, I'm like, okay. Like, the fact that I have student loans is preventing me from, like, buying a house and starting a family. And I'm like 32, so I have, like, a biological clock, right? Like, I have, like, friends who are getting pregnant, like, predominantly my friends from New Jersey have like, you know, like they didn't go away to college, like they're like buying houses and having kids. My friends in Massachusetts - definitely not. I think like we have a different financial, we're in like a different financial place. Like I'm really not financially stable enough to be able to like put down a have a down payment and like have a child. Right. So now I'm like, all right, well, maybe we're sacrificing saving money for a house in order to like start saving money for a child. Because quite frankly, I got to do that in the next couple of years or it's going to cost me more money. My friends, I just visited my friends from New Jersey this weekend like she's pregnant right now, and she had to pay thousands of dollars to get like, you know, different types of support to be able to get pregnant. I have other friends who've gone through IVF, other friends who are, like, freezing their eggs. All of these things cost money. So that's something that I think about a lot lately. But in terms of my actual home, in my day to day, I have a very supportive boyfriend, boyfriend, husband. He's been my husband for two years. But he has, like, he's like my - I met him when I was 19 at Emerson. We both went to Emerson, so we've been together for a really long time, and he is like, like his love language is like acts of service. So he'll, like, cook, clean, like, you know, he has no problem, like supporting me in that sense. We share a car so we don't have two cars. So we do spend a lot of time together and have to coordinate carpool and things like that.

AR: Could you talk about the ways this has changed over time?

DP: Yeah. I mean, he is an attorney, so he went to law school and I was getting my master's while he was in law school. So when we lived on, like, Woodlands Street, I would say that's like the [?] we've ever been. And, you know, the home itself probably reflected that, like, we were really busy. And then the pandemic, etc. but over time, I will say, like now with the career, the job I have now, which is like my highest paid job. He has been an attorney for like two years, and now we have, like I would say, the apartment we live in now is like, really nice. Feel safe. It's clean. We like our landlords. I live on the first floor. I don't even mind paying them rent because they're Latino and they're gay. Like, we have community within our house, which is nice, versus when I lived on Woodland Street, it was like pure chaos. Like it was like we had a slumlord. The house was disgusting. There was like roaches. The tenants were in and out because there was like, no yearly lease. There was a lot of tension between tenants, always because of parking and things like that. And it's like, interesting to me because I reflect on my life and I've, I've never been a homeowner. I've never come from a family that's owned property like I've only ever grown up in, like, different types of rental properties. And I will say, like the first place I lived in Worcester on Woodland Street, which was like, even past, like the Clark students. Right? Like it wasn't even like Woodland Street. It was like past Main Street. So it was like more community like. And I still love the, like my neighbor at the time was like an older Salvadoran guy who unfortunately, like, was an alcoholic. And I would like see him out a lot while I walked my dog. But now when I see him in community, he's like in recovery and works at Cafe Reyes and like gives me a kiss on the cheek when I see him, right? So it's like, I don't regret it because I feel like I learned a lot about what, what many people in Worcester have to experience when they're living in some of these slumlord type apartments. And I'm also like, really grateful for where we live now.

AR: How have you balanced these different priorities, responsibilities, roles and interests in your life?

DP: Uh, that's, uh, that's a struggle, my friends. That's, that's the lifelong journey is finding balance. Therapy helps a lot. I will say, I think that being like an immigrant and somebody who has, like, the values that I have, it's really easy to burn out. And it's really easy to just, like, try to be everywhere, like, like I mentioned, like, it's like, oh, I do, I go to this rally. Do I go to, like this event at The Village or I go to this event here? It's like you want to show up for community because like the work I do is community engagement. Like I want to support the people who are doing good work in the city, but at what cost? Right? At the cost of my relationship, at the cost of my mental health. And, and so I think boundaries is really important. And also like I said, you know, my family, my immediate family right now is Noah, my husband. But, you know, we don't want that to be forever. And so it it's like, how do we work together to get our lives in order so that we can be in a place where we can, like, start a family or something like that, and like, what do we need? Like, does it mean, like my mom who's retiring now, is she going to come live

with us to take care of a baby? Right. I mentioned $26,000 for childcare. Like, we don't have that. I pay my loans every month, right? So there's no, I guess, law school loans. So, Yeah.

AR: Yeah.

DP: Oh, balance, I guess. Yes. Therapy, boundaries, asking for help and also, like, not saying yes to everything. After I joined one board, I became like the token, you know, young Latina who's, like, outspoken and articulate. So, like, all of a sudden, like, will you join my board? Will you join my board will join this board. It's like at first I said yes, everything. No, I can't. Right. Like, I know my time is valuable and I need to pick and choose how to use it, not just for my, I'm not going to join a board just because it's going to look good on my resume. Like, what is this board doing? Like, are they doing good work? Are we going to come across something hard as a board like, you know, so asking hard questions like that has been helpful to have to create boundaries. Yeah.

AR: Um…

MW: Before we go into that I'm going to break for a few seconds

DP: Perfect.

AR: I'm going to

DP: Pause it?

AR: Yes.

AR: Okay. We paused and now we're back fast. And now we're back. So clearly you have been very active within the community. So we're going to talk a little bit more about that. How politically active do you consider yourself?

DP: Very I would say, as politically active as running for City Council could make you. I've never missed an election. I vote in every election. And I'm pretty opinionated when it comes to, like, my politics. That being said, like, I engage in discord and dialog with, like, anybody about it. That's why, like, every so often I go on the radio show in Worcester. It's called like Talk of the Commonwealth, and it's on like it's literally the target audience is pretty conservative. And they don't think so. They probably think they're like centrist or nonpartisan or more on the liberal side even. But [third?] the people who listen are generally older, white. And like, I was on there this morning, I go for like the Talk of the Commonwealth, like Worcester Roundtable. And, you

know, I got that opportunity after I ran and I pretty much just like sometimes we're all in agreement, but oftentimes we are usually like arguing something. And I find value in that. You know, at the end of the day, like I do believe in like restorative practice and restorative justice. And that to me means like it doesn't benefit the collective goal to have people that I refuse to talk to. Right? Like for me, it benefits the collective goal. If we're like, we engage in hard discussions and like someone can see my point of view or something like that. So yeah.

AR: I know you've mentioned several organizations you've worked with, but how have you worked with them in terms of like being politically active?

DP: Sure. Yeah. Well, the one that comes to mind for sure is the League of Women Voters. I met them during vaccine clinics and they came and did, like, voter registration. And I was impressed by them because they were predominantly older white women, but they were always down to show up at a vaccine clinic, no matter where it was at. They were always down to have good conversations with folks and meet people where they were. So I was happy to join their work. And, you know, we do sometimes. Like I sat on a panel at the library recently, which was about running for office. We'll do voter registration. And we're kind of doing some outreach now to understand, like why people who are registered don't vote and like what the barriers are around for, like voter turnout. So I am very interested in those elements of like who votes, who doesn't. Why? Why not? Why do municipal elections only have 20% voter turnout, while federal elections have 60% voter turnout? So I think that's one of the ones that I get really involved with. But I will say that when I ran for City Council, people from all the boards I've been a part of showed up to support me in different ways, not as a part of like, the board work, but because they've been exposed to me and have built relationships with me and like, believed in, you know, our campaign.

AR: Yeah. So you've been involved in volunteer and community work. What groups have you worked with? If you could go a little bit more in depth about this?

DP: Yeah. so aside from my boards, those are like the biggies, but I do feel like, I don't know, a community organization I really love is like The Village, which is on, I think it's on, is it on King Street? And so they're an Afrocentric community center. Like, I like to go to their events they put on Kwanzaa. So I like to go there. A lot of that stuff is really just like showing up to support, you know, do community meetings when, like, the Worcester Police equity audit came out and, like, going to stuff like that. They also do like healing circles. So like even during my campaign, they like, hosted a bunch of us who were running that had similar values. And we kind of did like some sage and like, you know, some intentional spiritual work, which I find really valuable. So that's one of the ones I really love. I'm trying to think if there's others that I'm, like, really involved. I mean, other campaigns essentially, like, I really I will probably support campaigns

forever like. And that that means like door knocking, that means, like fundraising, that means like, you know, talking to one another. So I do have like people I support in that respect as well.

AR: Mhm. And what led you to join these organizations?

DP: Sometimes it's like people have invited me and I care about the people who've invited me. So I show up. Every board that I've been a part of, for the most part, that's kind of how it's worked. Like the Women's Initiative, I had a friend who was like, I'm leaving. You take my spot on this board. You know, when I joined the Men's Health CDC, it was through my job at HHS. So different connections have kind of opened up a lot of these opportunities. And depending who's made that connection and how I find that relationship, is kind of how I've approached whether to agree or disagree. Is this a strategic thing to do? Is this going to advance the collective goal or not.

AR: Yeah. okay. So clearly, you've been in a lot of organizations. So what would you say are the main goals. Like could you [collide?] them?

DP: Yeah, yeah. I think for me, the main goals of the things that I'm a part of all fall under, like health equity, like health equity is like the big umbrella, right? Like if we look at early education and care, that is like health equity because it means, like, moms can go to work after they get childcare and like, you know, children are going to kindergarten and prepared. If I look at like the Women's Initiative, it's like fundraising for middle school girl programing. Why? Because middle school girls experience sometimes the most violence or like, you know, sexual education's a big part of that as well. So for me, health equity is like the collective goal that I have for social justice. And like the thing, the work that I do. And I'm lucky to be able to, you know, in my free time through volunteering on boards, my missions aligned with that. And then my work obviously is very aligned with that at this point in my life. And then really pretty much most of my friends and like my social life, we kind of hold some of those collective values, right? Like racial justice, health equity, economic justice, harm reduction.

AR: Yeah. And what were some of the main programs or initiative initiatives that you worked at?

DP: I mean, I've kind of talked about most of them. I think, like during my time at HHS, like I said, I managed like the vaccine clinics, and I made some lifelong friends through that work. That was hard because it was really like as the vaccine rolled out, um, we knew there was going to be disparities between like, Latinos and black folks in terms of access. And so we worked with like, different faith based organizations. We work with the Boys and Girls Club. We really tried to find, you know, shelters, like we brought the vaccine to the shelter over there,

domestic violence shelters, stuff like that. So I think that initiative has been something that I learned a lot about because it was really important. There was a lot of pressure, a lot of public scrutiny when the vaccine rolled out and who had access to it. And also to me, I was like, this is like life or death, right? Like some people like, we know that like Latinos and the black community are dying at greater rates like they just are. And the reasons that they're dying at greater rates is because of like, health disparities that come from racial injustice historically and present day. Right. Like we know that they're dying because they have higher asthma rates. They have higher asthma rates because they live in parts of the city that are redlined, and there's more garages and highways. So all of those things to me were interconnected and I think have informed my work and relationships today.

AR: What has the work consisted of?

DP: Yeah. I think it could look differently. Sometimes community engagement type work could look like very superficial programing. You know, it could also, you know, I'm trying to think of an example. So, like, it could be like putting on an event that highlights a local speaker. Right? Like a different type of speaker series, like, let's pay this pay or invite this community member with expertise and like, have an event and they talk and like people show up to it. Some might say that's like low impact because like what? You got like [?] people in the room, maybe a little bit more, but really then what [race] is going to actually make an impact, I don't know. I think so because I think it's like storytelling and relationship building. So that's some of the work there, other elements of the work, like now in my job now you know, like my boss applies to national grants that are like millions of dollars. For hospitals, and she knows she just received a grant, for instance, that is around like education and outreach for female genital mutilation. So like, I'm going to work with her to see what type of outreach we do into the Worcester community that honors survivors and make sure people feel safe. But we create like community for people who are survivors of female genital mutilation. Or how do we create educational opportunities where there are immigrant cultures that are like, this is a part of our culture, and it's like it might be, but like, let's unpack that. And, you know, it can't be a part of your culture here. It's illegal in the United States, the human rights violation. So, you know, and if you bring your child to your homeland to do it and then come back, it's also a human rights violation. So, you know, and then all of a sudden, like, DCF is involved and now the child's removed from the house. So there's a lot of, that to me feels like more impactful and like thinking about how we create programing or outreach around like that target versus, you know, some other events may feel a little bit more lighthearted, I guess you could say.

AR: What would you consider your major accomplishments within all of this work?

DP: Uh, I don't even know. I don't really like to say good things about myself, but, accomplishments. Honestly, if I have any level of like, respect or trust that I've built with this community, I'm proud of that. Like, and I do think that, whether, like the campaign we ran, for instance, was like, aligned with my values. And I'm proud of that because there is like a lot of external factors of people that are trying to shift that or change that. Right. Like, it's easy for me to explain this to you right now in a room of two, but, you know, put me in the middle of a neighborhood meeting that's run by police with people who love police, and I'm still saying the same thing, or am I catering to the audience there so that they don't yell at me in front of everyone? I'm going to get yelled at, right? Like I've chosen to do like that pathway. And by choosing to do that pathway, I think I've earned respect from people who share those values. And honestly, those are the community members that I care about. I'm also - I forgot to - I'm Ecuadorian, so I have built relationships with some of the undocumented folks in this community who are Ecuadorian. And this past August, we put on the first, like Ecuadorian festival at City Hall. And so I was a part of, like, you know, me and three other people who were able to organize that. And that was really hard. It was like really hard to figure out the permit, really hard to raise money for the permit, really hard to like, organize all of that and also like, honor the wishes of, like the people who brought me into that space from the community. So that was something that I was proud of, that we had a huge event. It was great. There was probably like 200 people there. Ecuadorians came out hard and I was impressed.

AR: Yeah. So along with all of that, what role has religion played in your life?

DP: Not much honestly. I did go to Catholic school, as I mentioned, from kindergarten to eighth grade, but I have never been more religious. Some might argue that my values are religious values. Right? Like, I think Catholicism teaches you to love your neighbor as yourself and you know, all the things that go with that. So maybe that's where my values come from in terms of like, social justice. But I will say from an institutional perspective, I feel like pretty early on, I like read a book about people who are without houses and the way the church [?], honestly, now you see some churches, treat people without houses great. And some people treat them terribly. So I think it varies a lot. But the short answer is I'm not very religious (laughs).

AR: Was your mom religious growing up?

DP: Yeah. And my grandma, for sure, like, my grandma was always like, are you praying? And I'm like, no. She's like, wow. She's like, don't tell me that. So, you know, I would say I'm spiritual, right? And I think that, like, I believe in like, like I said, like I believe in my ancestors. I believe in, like, collective liberation. Right. And so like, it's kind of like a religion in a way. And I do think, like when I talk to my mother or my grandmother, like we all actually share that. It's just like they believe that's for an institutional perspective. And for me, I'm like, I can't really

look at this institution without also seeing, like, the complexities and like the harm around that too.

AR: So how has this if it has affected your relationship with your mom?

DP: I think like maybe it was harder when I was younger. But now that I'm older, I don't live with her right now. And so, like, I think she, like values any time we have together. But she herself has also been challenged. You know, her faith has been challenged. I think she still has it. I think during, I don't know, however many years ago it was. But like all the stuff, that's anything that has come out of like the Catholic Church in terms of like, you know, like child abuse and anything and everything that's gone with that. Like, me and my mom have had hard conversations about that. And, you know, and I think it like breaks her heart like she is also an immigrant and she sees like, the way institutional religion has been like weaponized right to like, cause harm. And I think that makes her sad. So and I'm like, I get that. That makes me sad, too. I'm a little bit more cynical. Like, I feel like I didn't have that. I don't really have much faith in that type of institution, but I think she, at this point in her life is more on like, the disappointed side, but has found like different types of churches that also shares her values. There are churches that do that are progressive or universal and things like that. So yeah.

AR: Um, so we want to talk a little bit more about the health side of stuff. So how have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

DP: Yeah. For the most part, I'm pretty healthy. So I'm like very grateful for that. I don't have diabetes. I don't have any disabilities or anything like that. My oldest sister, Stephanie, has M.S, and she was diagnosed when I was in high school. So that was probably one of my earlier experiences with, like, health care, like the hospital system in that sense. And she still has M.S. And, you know, it shows up in different ways. And I think about that often. My mom also is very healthy for the most part. She did get Covid before the vaccine because she works in a hospital. And so she has like long Covid. And so I do think about that sometimes, but for the most part, aside from like dental stuff, which I have pretty bad, like I've had the negative experiences with like dental care, and it makes me really mad that it's separate from health care in this country, but because it's literally tied to your brain and your spine. But aside from that, I'm pretty healthy.

AR: Just to clarify, what does M.S. stand for?

DP: Multiple sclerosis. Multiple sclerosis. Okay, so it's an auto immune illness. Yeah. Similar to like lupus or Crohn's or something.

AR: Do you know how this has affected her relationship with the health system?

DP: Yeah. I mean, she basically has, she has to make sure she has good health care. She is lucky to have a husband that also supports her because sometimes she has to walk with a cane. Sometimes she needs a wheelchair. She basically has gone through different types of treatments, where she has to put, like, an injection in every day that her husband helps her with. Lately, the treatment she's been doing is similar to chemo. So she goes for, like, chemo for a basically like a month to month and a half of the year. And it's like really bad. And then her immune system's really down immediately after that. But then she has minimal symptoms throughout the rest of the year. But the thing with M.S. is that, like your body kind of can sometimes become immune to the type of treatment that you're doing. I think so many people have I think - several illnesses - have stuff like that. So she, yeah, it's a, it's a journey.

AR: Has she been able to find health insurance that is affordable? Has it been accessible for her?

DP: I mean, she's just always had a job that, you know, health insurance has helped with that. And I think it just is something she thinks about, like when she switches jobs and how much she reveals to people at work, too. You actually don't really have to reveal any of this. Anybody. So she's cognizant of some of those things,

AR: Has her experiences with health insurance and the health system have had any influence with your perspective on it

DP: Probably. I mean, it would make me really upset to think about how - it does make me upset to think about people who don't have health insurance and have M.S. and have different types of illnesses. I think, like health care is like a human right. So I feel like, again, it kind of just reaffirms some of my values around what I think about our health care system in the United States. And also, it just makes me think about people with less visible disabilities. Right. Like, I think we truly don't know what people experience. And so as I do the work that I do, trying to be cognizant of less visible disabilities or like neurodivergence, seeing the way that I work, you know, it's kind of informed my practice a little bit in that sense.

AR: Yeah. I know you mentioned your mom got Covid, but I want to know how the Covid pandemic affected you, your family or your family.

DP: Oh. Terrible times. As I said, I, I've pretty much worked on the front lines, like, I literally, like, wore a hazmat suit and, like, went through, like, every shelter and every, like, sober home and, like, went door to door to people being like, do you want a vaccine? We have it here downstairs. And they're like, no, like we don't trust the government. And then it's like, okay, can we have a conversation about that? Like, I understand that. I also don't trust the government. I

still think you should get the vaccine because I don't want you to die. So I just worked on the front lines. I was probably working like 60 hours a week. I would, like, wake up. We also started before the vaccine even rolled out. We started like, emergency homeless shelters. So all the high schools turned into shelters. And so we took people 25 at a time from Queen Street, which is, um, the shelter I was describing earlier. Hundreds of people stay there. We literally got a bus and would take like 25 people. We'll bring you to North High, 25 people. We'll bring you to South High, we'll bring you here. And so those people, some of them have substance use disorder and have like methadone. Right. So like coordinating Spectrum who does like mobile methadone to those places that means but also like people are transient right. And not everyone wants - wanted to quarantine. So like there might be you know, Sally who's staying at North High who requires methadone, but she might have gotten in a fight with someone who was working the shelter last night because they told her she can't go out for a smoke break, and she left. Right. So now that means in the morning, I would have to communicate with the people who are running the shelter. I would wake up 6 am. I would text Carlos. I'd be like, how many do you have for methadone? Like, who's there this morning? And then I would communicate with Spectrum and they would show up to North High that day at like 11 a.m. and give methadone to like the five people who needed it. So doing that for like 4 or 5 different shelters. So I was working from like 6 am to like 7 at night sometimes. So that was really hard. And then my mom got Covid and that made it like even worse because she got super sick. And also just made me be really resentful of where she works because they basically, like, I knew she was going to get Covid because, like, a coworker had Covid, but they had to still show up to work until they tested positive. So it's like she had that. I honestly was like, you should file like an OSHA complaint and we should like, sue them. But she was like embarrassed and traumatized and was like, also like lost faith and like, you know, I think her generation boomers, as I say, like have a different relationship with work than any of our other generations. And as an immigrant, as someone who, like, came here, worked X, Y, and Z, now her employer has essentially been like, I don't care if you die. She was like embarrassed and sad, essentially. So she didn't want to do anything legally necessarily. But I was, you know, like working at shelters and then vaccine clinics, while also like knowing that my mom in New Jersey was like super sick and like, I'm very grateful my sisters took care of her. But it wasn't good for sure.

AR: Yeah. What have your experiences been in terms of accessing quality and affordable health care?

DP: It's varied throughout my life. Dental is one I'll always talk about because I never had dental insurance as a child, so never had many good experiences with dentists. I have one now. Just had to go to the dentist yesterday. It was terrible, but it's fine. And other than that, I do think, like, I'm trying to think like gynecologists. When you start thinking about, like, women's health, I guess you could say, it's varied. You know, I've never had, like, super consistent health care. I've never

really, like, went out of my way to, like, find one PCP. I had, like, a relationship with X, Y, and Z until, like my adulthood again, I'm lucky my mother like, works in health care. So anytime I get confused, I like call her and I'm like, help me figure this out. Like, why isn't the insurance covering this? Why is it covering this? I also have like a lot of allergies and so I've gone into, like, anaphylaxis, like twice or three times in my life where I've had to go like an emergency room and get, like, Benadryl and stuff. So. I think like having access to an allergist actually changed my life because it affects like my breathing, my sleep, all of those things. But I would have not known that if I hadn't, like, gone to the emergency room and like been like, okay, I need to like actually address this because I almost died, like on more than one occasion at this point. So it's varied.

AR: And are you responsible for anybody else's health besides your own?

DP: Actually, no. Not really. Aside from when - I guess my husband, technically I would like him to be healthier, and we're dealing with that more now that we do go to, like, doctors and have, like, consistent health care and like, have, have the ability to go to like the same doctor more than once and, and stuff like that. So I am growing more concerned about his health at this time in my life than I happened before.

AR: Yeah. And now we're just finishing the interview with a couple more questions. How do you get through tough times?

DP: Again, Therapy. Mental health care, I would say, is very important. I think that that's not also something not everyone has access to. And if you do have access to, especially if you're looking for a certain type of therapist, it can be very challenging. I'm grateful to have health insurance that covers therapy. And I'm able to take care of my mental health with a therapist that I like for the most part. I do think most people don't have access to that. And if they do have access to that, there's a lot of stigma around it, and things like that. So I do that. That's been helpful to get through hard times. I enjoy like cooking and eating with my husband. I read a lot of books. I've read like 32 books this year, so I just like have been reading a lot, which has been really fun. Nothing serious. My life is too serious. I'm not reading, I'm not reading anything nonfiction or anything like that. And honestly, like spending time with my friends and, like, [watering?] my friendship plans. As I like to say it, it could be very easy. We're all very busy, so it could be really easy to just, like, fall into routines. And all of a sudden it's like, I haven't seen someone in two months, even though we live in the same city. So showing up for, for them, just as much as I would value showing up for community is something that I try to try to do, and I take care of my house plants. I have a lot of house plants and I have a dog, which is cute.

AR: What kinds of thoughts keep you going?

DP: Oh, honestly, some days are harder than others. When you see, like, what's going on in the world and, like, waking up and seeing, like, my feed and like having hope during some of those darker days is hard. But I do think like hope. Like I find hope in in small victories. I find hope in like the people I build relationships with. I find hope in, like the bravery of, you know, some of my friends who are also doing brave things and visibly being advocates. So the thing that keeps me going is hope. And also, like, I really want to like, love my life and so like enjoying my home, enjoying time with my husband, visiting my mom because she's not going to be here forever. So like, you know, being like, wow, it has been four months since I saw my mom. I need to go to New Jersey. Like I need to plan a trip immediately.

AR: Yeah. How would you define success in your life?

DP: Success? Honestly, I guess success is like happiness, right? Fulfillment? I would say there are other ways people look at success. Like, yes, I've gotten many awards, like I've gotten recognition for various things and I've gotten like, you know, 40 under 40 or I've gotten, you know, Pulse People to Watch or what have you. And, like, all those things make me kind of uncomfortable. So I don't actually find a lot of joy when I'm, like, accepting an award or recognition necessarily. Excited, really. Like just, it just, I don't believe in, like, leaders unnecessarily. And I don't have my mom who lives here to like, come and celebrate me. Right. But I find joy and like, you know, like I said, like going out to eat, hanging out with my friends, preserving my peace has been really important.

AR: How has the definition of success changed over time?

DP: I think when I was younger, I did care about like getting awards or like, oh my God, I got invited to be on a board. Oh my God, [have I been in another world?] Oh my God, I'm invited to be on like the radio or like to be on like the news and like advocate about X, Y and Z. And it's like I now know, like with great power comes great responsibility. Right? So it's like I don't take those things lightly anymore. I try not to take them as a point of like, oh my gosh, you know, like they want me on the radio to be X, Y and Z. And now it's like, I know they asked me to be on the radio to be like their token Latinx young person, to be like pushing a leftist ideology. But how can I use this to my advantage for our collective goal? Right. So I think I'm more strategic. But I really I just want to, like, live my life in solidarity and also like, preserve, preserve my peace in the process because it doesn't help anybody to burn out. So that's kind of where I'm at in my career, in life right now.

AR: Based on all of your experiences, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

DP: Mhm. I think my advice would be. How do I say this? There's a lot of external pressure when it comes to being a woman. Right. And I think it looks differently throughout a woman's life. Like when I was in high school, it was like my mom and sisters being like, you're not going to be another statistic, so don't get pregnant, you know, like stuff like that. And now the pressure I face is like, it's ironic because now it is like people are getting pregnant, having kids. So there's just so many external things. But I think really just like focusing on what I want and what people want and like leaning into what you want to do and honestly, just like make leaving this world a better place than it was for you and what that looks like for you. So like what it looks like for me and say from what it looks like for you, what it look like for my mom. Right. And so how are we a part of like ensuring that, like, the next generation has better access to healthcare, better access to education? You know, there's a lot of disparities when it comes to identifying as a woman. And those disparities get greater if you have even other intersectional identities. Right. So ensuring that I'm not just doing this for myself and for people who look like me, but I'm doing it for like the people who don't look like me, that struggle even harder. I don't know if that's advice. That's kind of just how, that's those are - that's just how I think I feel happier. I sleep well at night knowing those things.

AR: Anything is helpful. So. Yeah. What do you think are the pros and cons of the path you've chosen?

DP: Uh, ignorance is bliss, they say. Right, sometimes I am. I wish I was more ignorant so that I wasn't so cynical and, like, intense all the time. But, so, yeah, I think, like, the negatives is that, like, I don't know, I live my life thinking a lot about society and communities and other people, and I think I could have lived my life just being like, focusing on building a family or focusing on, like improving my generational wealth or something like that. But I really have like, kind of put a lot of that energy into, like external things and external systems and communities. And I don't regret that because it's beautiful, like I said, like, I love the relationships I've built, and I know the way I see the world is, you know, centered and rooted in like, justice. Right. And I feel that way because of the way I've lived my life, and the way I've experienced life, the way my mom has, my grandma has. So but the negative side is, is that it's also like, I don't know, we have like a little bit of, as women, sometimes it does feel like you need to end up making hard decisions. And it's unfortunate because I don't know if that applies to men in the exact same way necessarily.

AR: How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life, and do you have any regrets about these?

DP: I would say no regrets because I try not to live my life with regret. As my therapist would say, guilt is a useless emotion that is usually unwarranted. So no point in feeling too guilty or regretful, honestly. But, I'm proud of the life I've lived. Like, I feel honored to even be considered for a part of, like, oral history for a city that I've come to later in my life. Right? A city I've grown to love, and also, like life is a journey, and the way I've lived my life today doesn't mean I have to live my life the exact same way here on out. Right? And so at the point of my life, I'm 32, I've got two master's degrees. I have my dream job X, Y, and Z. It's like finding balance and boundaries between like feeding those external things and also being like, I am not going to go to this event tonight because I'm just going to watch TV with my husband and it's going to be great. You know, where I'm going to go see a friend and get a drink with her instead. So finding that balance is really important.

AR: As we work to tell a fuller story of women, of the history of women that has been recorded in the past. What should we be sure to include?

DP: Obviously diverse voices and diverse perspectives. I think Worcester has a, actually a really has rich history when it comes to like the women's suffragette movement. So there's, there's a lot of interesting things about that movement because it was obviously it was led by white women, predominantly for white women. That being said, it's also like it's an important part of history. I don't think we should not talk about it as just like how you frame those conversations. And so I do think this project should maintain a critical lens when it even comes to like the things that we tout that are like, oh, this is amazing. Like, look at this, like rich history. It's like, yes, okay. Birth control started in, in in Worcester. But do we know that the founder of Planned Parenthood was a eugenicist? You know, like, let's tell the full history, and not shy away from the hard discussions that we need to have around that.

AR: Good. That's basically it. Those are all of our questions. Thank you for, you know, being open to all of these and allowing us to interview you. So yeah, we learned a lot.

DP: Of course, thank you all.