

Interviewee: Susan Perschbacher
Interviewer: Xavier Wetterhan
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ABSTRACT: Susan Perschbacher was born in Appleton, Wisconsin in 1946. She spent her childhood living in Denver, before she eventually moved to Ohio, Illinois and Massachusetts. After graduating from Denison University she took many jobs before eventually landing at Assumption College. There she was a professor of sociology and also took on roles for many social programs, including the WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] program. Ms. Perschbacher has two daughters who are now in their 30s. Her life has taken her to many places and given her many fond memories.

XW: Ms. Susan Perschbacher, do I have your permission to interview you?

SP: Yes, you do.

XW: It is the 12th of March. I am with Susan Perschbacher, my name is Xavier Wetterhan. So we are first going to start off with your family life and just if you lived in Worcester since you were born or your childhood in general. So what is your full name and maiden name if applicable?

SP: I'm Susan G. Perschbacher and that is my maiden name.

XW: Alright, and where were you born?

SP: I was born in Appleton, Wisconsin.

XW: And what year was that?

SP: 1946

XW: What was that like, Appleton, Wisconsin?

SP: Well, I don't really know because I moved from there when I was three. So all I did was visit there in the summer with all my Wisconsin-German relatives.

XW: And where did you move to?

SP: I grew up in Denver, Colorado. That's where I went through high school.

XW: Have you ever married?

SP: Yes, I have been married twice.

XW: And what is the name of your current husband?

SP: I do not have a current husband, I have been divorced twice also.

XW: Do you have any children or grandchildren?

SP: Yes, I have two daughters. Jennifer who is 34 and Elizabeth who is 31.

XW: And what cultures or ethnicities do you identify with? Family background.

SP: White, German. You know, Wisconsin-German

XW: Were your parents from Germany?

SP: No, no, no. My family moved here in the 1850s, so my great-great grandparents were born in Germany.

XW: Tell me about your parents a little bit. What did they do for a living?

SP: My father was a dentist, he did restorative dentistry. When I was born he was in World War II restoring mouths of soldiers who had been wounded in the war, but he was stationed here in the United States. So actually he was in Framingham, Massachusetts when I was born in Appleton, Wisconsin. And then my mother was a stay-at-home mom which was very common for women at the time. But after she left college, for nine years she worked in Chicago, Illinois, as an administrative to the dean of discipline at a university.

XW: So you lived in Denver, Colorado for the most part of your life.

SP: Well just through high school, I was here most of my life. My life's been pretty long.

XW: Yes, so then what was high school like in Colorado?

SP: Denver was very cool to grow up in. It was very beautiful. When I was bored in math class I could look at the mountains. It was not as crowded as now, no pollution. And I was at an amazing high school, I don't know where they are but it was considered one of the top high schools in the country. Very Jewish, 67 percent Jewish. Very competitive, 90% went to college. It was good. I skied every weekend, hiked and climbed mountains as well.

XW: Do you continue to do activities like that?

SP: I cross country ski some, and I continue to hike constantly, yes.

XW: So, you were not born in Worcester, so when did you move here?

SP: I came to work in Worcester in 1988, so I have now worked here—this May it will be 31 years. I was living in the town of Southborough.

XW: That's nearby, right?

SP: Directly east about 20 miles away. I moved there when I was working in Boston and my former husband was working in Boston, but a part-time job when I just had my second daughter became available here in Worcester, so I started working. It was with the Colleges of Worcester Consortium, and they had a program in Gerontology Studies, so I came here. It was mainly at U Mass Medical, but I worked at Clark, Worcester State, Holy Cross and Assumption.

XW: So you really did the college circle.

SP: Yes, recruiting and working with students in Gerontology Studies with all four colleges. I started that in 1988 and in 1990 I got a position with tenure track at Assumption College.

XW: Then you have been here ever since.

SP: And I have been here ever since. I retired as a professor—let me think about this—six years ago. So 2012 is when I retired I think as a full time professor, then I became an adjunct. And then in 2016 I worked for the WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] program. So I have still been connected with Assumption all those years.

XW: So compared to now what was Worcester like 30 years ago?

SP: Well, I should say 30 years ago I worked here, now I live here. I moved here in 2006. I love living in Worcester, way more interesting than living in Southborough. I know the city better, I get around. I mean the city looks better, the result of the city planning. I really appreciate the coming of age, it's very impressive. It's a little more crowded when you try to drive around, I do notice that. I like the changes, I've always liked Worcester and I think the community spirit is growing. I'm excited about the Red Sox, you know, Hanover Theater, all these things have happened since I've been here. And the more I know about Worcester, the more I like, and the college scene is very quaint.

XW: So where do you live in the city now?

SP: I live about two miles away, it's off Chamberlain Parkway. Right near Pleasant Street and Richmond.

XW: Have you been there since 2006?

SP: Bought a condo and have been there ever since. And I'll be there for a few more years I think.

XW: Speaking on the restoration and improvements of Worcester, what challenges do you think the city still faces?

SP: Low-income housing, well all of the major cities, but I don't think Worcester wants to lose track of that. You know any city sustaining a tax base should all come from their residents. Continuing to work with diversity. Working on the public schools, I think education is really important. And Worcester is a very old city, that's one of the programs I work with. Worcester is a city where people seem to age in place. Making sure that older people still vote for money for education. And money for neighborhoods and as I said low income housing. I love that it's a refugee and immigrant city, but I think we need the services to help it transition. One of the things I love most about the city is the Citizens Academy, helping immigrant refugee students get back into schools. So I like that, I like some of the programs for African students, or Asian student population. It's pretty exciting. At the college here at Assumption, well as a professor, I started the service learning program. I really enjoyed being a part of the community and doing services as a part of the classroom.

XW: Could you speak on that a little bit more? What kind of services?

SP: Well, one of the classes I taught was Social Justice in a Global Community. So they all had to think global but find out local, so people went out and did service work as part of a course. Plus we had a day where we opened the campus to New Citizens Academy so the students would begin to think about what college is like. It fit sociology perfectly, but here at the college we have also fit history, education, psychology, communications, business.

XW: So it's a campus-wide thing?

SP: Yes, it's a pedagogy, and it helps Worcester become part of the learning experience.

XW: Clark is doing a very similar thing, like very similar.

SP: Clark is very good at that.

XW: I think Worcester is very good at that.

SP: How did you get here by the way? Do you have a car?

XW: I ubered. So what distinct characteristics make Worcester the place it is today?

SP: One of the courses we have here with my WISE program, the Worcester Institute for Senior Education, I got to do this course called "Find the Blackstone." And we got to go to the

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Blackstone Heritage Trail, and you appreciate that the only reason Worcester became the industrial city it is because of the Blackstone River. And turning that into a corridor that connected support, so it's a fascinating city just socio-politically to think about, a landlocked city that's not a capital, is the second largest city in New England. Makes no sense at all.

XW: When I first heard that I was blown away.

SP: Providence is a port city, it's a capital and it has Brown University. You know, New Haven has Yale, it's a port city. Hartford's a major insurance capital, has a river and is the capital. So Worcester is pretty fascinating. One of the people in my department wanted to study, so I'm always interested to learn. I think understanding that canal is really important to understanding Worcester and it's development and the key role that we played in the industrial revolution of making the parts through the Norton Company. You never stop to think that the industrial revolution couldn't happen without the equipment. So that's a crucial niche that was filled.

XW: Shoes were a big thing I think.

SP: Yes, shoes, but they were also big in Salem. Anyway, I love that and I love knowing all the different cities. And also the cultural scene. This winter they offered us a free program called Music Worcester, and had a visiting nationally renowned pianist because they were celebrating their 160th anniversary. So to understand Worcester, one should also understand the cultural scene. That's a long time. I don't know if you or many students get to Mechanics Hall, but Mechanics Hall is acoustically as great as Carnegie Hall, as Symphony Hall in Boston. I mean Yo-Yo Ma rents it for his recording space. And that whole area is coming alive with all those little stores down there in the Canal District. It's very exciting.

XW: And what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been now, or 30 years ago when you were working?

SP: I'm thinking historically too. Another reason to see Mechanics Hall is because the Worcester Women's History Project now has these four portraits of women [there]. Abby Kelly Foster and all the prominence we have had in the women's suffrage movement you read about and they met in Worcester, Massachusetts. It's kind of crazy. So that role. I don't know my experiences have been these small liberal arts colleges that make up the Worcester scene. Maybe more Assumption, I don't know about Clark or Holy Cross, but academia is one of those ways women climb to professional status. And here I would say pretty equal. If there is any pay disparity it's because they pay a sociologist less than a business person or an economist or a science person and that's just a fact of life. But I feel, I've taught periodically at Holy Cross and there's a lot of women in the department I've been in. I've been around Clark, at least in the Sociology Department there's a lot of women. I think academia has been a great route to advance for women. Certainly not financially because it doesn't pay that well, but in terms of the prestige thing. You know another aside, which I think is important and many women may not talk about it is the experience of being a single mom. I was a single mom pretty much the whole time my kids were growing up, because their father moved. The flexibility of being a

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single mom and trying to have a career, and when I think about Worcester I'm also thinking about academics. It's a pretty academic city.

XW: With eleven colleges it's hard not to be. OK since you are a professor you attended and graduated college. So what college did you go to?

SP: I went to Denison University. It's a small liberal arts college in Ohio which I thought was east because I came east from Colorado. I was ready to move. It was very conservative politics growing up, it's now at least a purple state. I did not grow up in a liberal family, very conservative politically. Went to Ohio and thought I was going east, and all the people that came there from New York, I don't know if you're familiar with Denison, but there's a lot of them from there, they started laughing at me. Shut up, I'm 1,400 miles away from the West, don't tell me I'm not east. So I went there and then my junior year I went to the University of Chicago, which was a program I set up with a faculty member and an organization in Chicago, and I enjoyed that and went back there for graduate school. So I was in Ohio and Illinois, the Midwest.

XW: How was the transition from a place like Denver to the Midwest? I feel that's drastic?

SP: I don't know I never thought about it. I enjoyed myself immensely and had a great time at college. Actually probably not that hard. This is a strange little factoid, my high school in the 60s had sororities and fraternities.

XW: In high school? That's bizarre.

SP: It was intense people got rushed and had parties. It was only three years of high school, and four years of junior high. I didn't get into one by 10th grade but I remember all my friends did. I don't remember being that traumatized. And junior year I was invited to a couple, and senior year I was invited to the big bru-ha-ha one. By then I just turned them all down, I didn't care. But when I went to college there were sororities and fraternities. This was before the student revolution. My mom was like, "Please try to join," because I didn't really fit in. So I did the rush, and I evidently got into quite a popular sorority and it was interesting until I realized this is just ridiculous. When I deactivated, it was a very social college I became more of an outsider. By then I was more concerned with my academics. I think it might have been shocking, the social scene, but it was no different.

XW: It seems like if you had these sororities and fraternities in high school...

SP: Yeah, we had these balls, and even being 67% Jewish, there were Jewish clubs and Protestant clubs. Actually my sorority in college we pledged a Jewish girl, which was such a big deal, this was 1961, but what I really reflect about was how the enrollment community worked with us. They wanted students of color. I spent some of my sophomore year of college in the inner cities going into schools to recruit. So our student population of African-American students grew at the time. But they weren't invited to the sorority or fraternity life and that really

bothered me because they had 90 percent of the opportunity closed to them. I am pleased to say the year after I left Denison, not the sorority I was in, but another sorority did pledge a black woman, and they were kicked out of their national sorority. So I think after my junior year when I was in Chicago coming back was really, really hard. I hung out with a friend group and we had an underground newspaper that was really important to anti-war.

XW: So you were an anti-war protestor? How intense were you in that?

SP: Well it was intense. I went to marches and wrote articles. My brother was there [Vietnam]. I would send him boxes of brownies and then run off to my anti-war protests. My mother was very upset at home.

XW: That's a very interesting conflict to have. My grandfather went off to war. He was in Vietnam, and my father hated the idea of Vietnam, but would always write letters to his father.

SP: That's your father's, that's your brother and you don't want anything to happen to them.

XW: Exactly.

SP: I don't know if you've watched the news but it was horrible when they came home, the way they were treated, it's still a painful memory. This Wisconsin group went off to Vietnam, and they've been shown on CBS. When they came back home there was a huge crowd of people greeting them and cheering them on. These men just all broke down, I break down just thinking about it. It was a very difficult time for America.

XW: Ya, a lot of struggles. So besides these social issues that have bothered you, like the lack of African-American social integration, what other challenges did you face in education? Like bad grades...

SP: Oh no, I was a nerd, I studied all the time. College professors are all nerds. I loved the stuff, it was an excellent education at a really great school. I got tired of the social scene, it seemed really small. I think a better school in some ways, although I can't disparage the education I had, might have been Oberlin or Carleton. My mother said I was already too much of an intellectual to go there. I more than survived, I went back to my 50th college reunion in June and it was phenomenal. They put me on a panel to talk about all the social change, and at the end—there were four of us—one talked about the Vietnam War and how it affected our class, one talked about change in the college, and I was supposed to talk about social change for ten minutes, and one of the things was to talk about personal change that happened to people. But at the end someone said, "Persch, what do you think is the solution?" I talked about poverty, race and gender briefly. And just gave them a time sheet and said I don't think there's any hope until there's re-distribution of resources. Greed and power are going to win out, it has to be redistributed with justice. Number one, I finally came out of the closet as the democratic socialist I am, and I can't tell you how many people came up afterwards and said we really agree

with you. You know, you're in college, and years later it's fascinating. I felt fine, very interesting.

XW: No challenges? Or any major ones that you saw?

SP: Well later I was in a program, and went on my own. Turns out when I got back they didn't give me any credit for work in the community, because those were the days you didn't do internships. It turned out that spring before graduation, I found out I was one credit short of graduation. So I begged the choir director to give me a credit, and he did. But it was like really? You're going to do all that extra work and still not meet the requirements?

XW: Yeah, it seems you did everything. So upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

SP: Well, that's interesting, because it was in my junior year, and I always wanted to be a teacher. Do you guys still have the club, Future Teachers of America?

XW: I think so, yes.

SP: I was the president or vice president of the club, and I always wanted to be a teacher. I loved sociology. So when I got to college, that's another challenge, sociology at Denison is really weak, it used to be considered the gut major. I'm sure there are other majors that have replaced it, and I know it's considered that here. That bothered me, so I took a lot of my sociology when I got to the University of Chicago. What was the point of that? Oh, so I didn't know what I wanted to teach. If you take sociology, in high school you have to be a history teacher, and I knew I didn't want to do that. I went to graduate school, and was largely very convinced that I should get married. It was a bad marriage, I was married very young. He convinced me that you're smart enough to get a PhD, and I think that's one thing about women...believing in yourself. When I went to college it was because my mom fought. My dad said, "You're a girl, you don't need an education. You can go to a local college and live at home." And this was a dentist. My mother had gone to a very prestigious college, and she said, "You're going to go, but you can't go to this school or that school." To even get out of the state is amazing. But I really believed I could finish, because that allowed me to teach college level. I would have liked teaching high school, to be honest I would have loved it.

XW: Just not social studies?

SP: No, I couldn't see myself, well now my son-in-law teaches high school social studies and he is amazing. I'm not a historian, though I do teach a lot of history in my sociology and economics.

XW: Well, they're integrated obviously.

SP: Yes, they should be. So it was believing in myself, and once I got to Chicago, and even then it took a long time. I did not finish my PhD quickly; it took a long time.

XW: Was believing in yourself your main support system throughout education?

SP: Well, I would say yes. I think my mom was proud of me. I got some surprising awards along the way that helped. My high school gave some senior girl award, in college I got what's called a Ward Award. So there were people who believed in me. My second grade teacher was one who believed the most.

XW: Stayed in contact?

SP: Yes, up until around my mid 30s. She's passed away now. I think when I went to write my dissertation, also having a support group, because I finished when I was living in Boston.

XW: So, after or even before college what was your first job?

SP: I used to mow lawns believe it or not, and babysit and shovel snow. My first job, in the summer I worked in an ice cream parlor.

XW: That's a good transition right there.

SP: The next summer I was a Greyhound telephone operation operator. And those were the days with no computers. You called a phone number and I plugged the thing and told people their schedules. And then my next job was as a case manager for the welfare department in Chicago.

XW: How was that one?

SP: Painful. I felt proud to help people, but it's pretty scary to watch. It was harsh conditions, welfare. I had worked as a case manager, and then I worked with a group called the welfare rights organization. It was a big movement in the '60s and '70s. Chicago was a great city; there were a lot of powerful women.

XW: How did working with welfare affect you? I know it changed your outlook, just seeing those people.

SP: Well, it gave me more information but not my outlook. I have always had a liberal inclination. My parents, they were Republicans, and where I was born, Appleton, Wisconsin is where Joe McCarthy was buried. And some of my family were in support of Joe McCarthy, or at least proud that he's there. My parents were pretty liberal in their own way. When I was a young girl they took me--well we had a woman who cleaned the house, Charlene, she was an African-American, and she invited our family to her wedding. I think she invited one other family she worked for. I know the moment I experienced race, because we were the only white people there. Maybe one other family came, but it was very scary at first. My dad used to do a

lot of dental work, pro bono work for minorities, and he was a pretty well-known dentist. He got a lot of business from people's mouths. So they were both pretty liberal that way.

XW: So, do you think you got your liberalism from your parents?

SP: Yes, but not my economics. I don't know because my brother can't spend a penny. I remember once when I was in Chicago I took my mother to a Eugene McCarthy rally, must've been '68-'69. And she just laughed the whole time and she said my father would be turning in his grave if he knew I was at this rally. She went.

XW: When do you think you started getting those ideas of democratic socialism?

SP: When I was 16. I used to look at those gorgeous mountains and think, I gotta get out of here. The politics in those days in Colorado, I compare them to Sarah Palin-esque. Even though she's a woman, they were pretty pathetic politics. That and I was raised in the Protestant Church, and the doctrine –are you Protestant?

XW: No.

SP: So the doctrine of the elect, it's a very important doctrine that says what if you're doing well in this world, it shows you're one of God's elect. And it just always bothered me, very self-righteous and self-sustaining. Very much a middle class enhancing belief system. I used to just sit in church and be furious. Not about church because I am a fairly spiritual person but this belief system. And one day at church there was this very cool, young minister who got up, and I was sitting in front of my parents. And this guy got up and said, "You are all hypocrites. You sit here Sunday after Sunday and make so much money, look at what's going on in the world around you." Civil rights, and poverty, and he had so much courage. I just loved him. He was gone in two weeks.

XW: All the ones with the good ideas.

SP: He was a little too radical for them. I don't know where it came from. I would love it at a family wedding when one of my cousins or something would come up to me and say, "Don't tell anyone but my wife votes Democratic too. And my one gay cousin, and his partner, called me when [President Barack] Obama was elected. They said, "I had to call you, I heard you are the only relative celebrating this." Yes I'm dancing in my living room right now. When Obama was elected, that was the most politically integrated day of my life. Massachusetts, Colorado, Wisconsin, Ohio and Illinois voted for Obama. So all the touchy places of my life. Now my daughter lives in Denver.

XW: Denver has gotten pretty liberal, right?

SP: Denver is very liberal, the city itself, the state is purple. It's really changed, I go back and visit my daughter all the time. And I still have relatives out there.

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XW: So what other jobs have you had, and what do you do now with the WISE program?

SP: I've had a lot. After graduate school I taught for a year. A little bit at Boston College, then I went to a college called Newton College near BC. And then I went to work in a group home for disturbed teenagers for a year, and worked with them as an educational liaison for a year. Then I went to work for a weaving store for a year, and then I got a job at an alternative high school for a residential program for delinquents. That was in Boston Kenmore Square. It was when there was a move to deinstitutionalize juvenile facilities. People were saying we shouldn't be treating them in prisons. There was a program called the DARE program, I had known the woman, we had met, and they had a residential program, and they had a school. When she needed a teacher she called me, and I was there for two and a half years as the social studies teacher, and then I was the assistant director of school. Then I got this interest in going back to finish my PhD. I found a topic. I took a year off borrowed money, finished my dissertation, which is pretty cool, because once you drop out, a lot of people don't finish. After I finished that I was a temporary secretary. Pretty fascinating though, because I got to be pretty good at law briefs, and I got to work for Max Sterns. They were defending some of the criminals in some civil rights cases. They were pretty liberal guys doing really cool law. They wanted me to stay, but once I got my dissertation I got probably the most powerful job I ever had. I was the chief planner for the developmental stability counter, every state has one, so I was down in Boston and was chief planner. So I would go around the state and did that for four years to develop plans and services for individuals with developmental disabilities. Then I had my first child, dropped out, and went to work providing housing for individuals with mental retardation and I volunteered for the program and raised some money for that. Then I dropped out again, had my second child, and then I got the job up here with the Consortium with the Gerontology Studies program, because I had a PhD and I worked with all these college kids. I worked with college kids from Brandeis, Boston College, Wellesley. Wherever I was I brought college interns. Did a lot with BC and their programs. So when I came up here they had this program, I knew nothing about aging, so I learned about aging. First of all, that's when I separated from my second husband. I had been on my own for years, and remarried. I needed more money. Holy Cross hired me to do some faculty work in sociology. And then I got the whole credentialing stuff to get the teaching career going again, which was pretty miraculous. It's one of the reasons I love this school because it was hard to get back in. I hadn't been doing research and other faculty have life experience.

XW: Well I'm sure especially with sociology you would have to keep up on the subject. That's honestly really remarkable.

SP: Yes, it's been good. Lots of interesting careers though.

XW: Very interesting, I could go in depth on those. So what do you do now with WISE?

SP: Right, so WISE has been at the college since 1993, this is the only college in the consortium that took on this program. It was a big movement in the '90s. And the head of the consortium at the time tapped into that, and the dean here was interested. Well I was doing the gerontology

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program, so I knew about it. I was not involved in starting it, but I was always involved with teaching in it. Older learners who come back to school have modified classes without tests or papers, usually five weeks on a subject matter. So I would do a segment of my Family in Society course, or my Problems in Society class. Plus I invited them to all of my classes, so I would have WISE members come to my family class, or to my aging class. And all my students did interviews like this, so I was always involved with it. I loved the program. After I retired I was adjuncting. I loved to teach, I was just so tired of politics. But this position came open about three years ago now. I started June 1st, and it was kind of my dream job. I'm in the job I most love of all of them. Actually this is the first year I haven't taught with WISE. That makes me a little sad. Oh after I finished teaching, I went back to school and got a writing degree. I got an MFA in creative writing just for the heck of it. So I get to teach some writing classes. It gets tiring teaching social issues, especially this day in age.

XW: Oh yeah, so polarizing. So what do you think are the pros and cons of the path you've chosen? Whether it be education, work...

SP: Well it's probably better, at least economically, to stay married. At least find someone you're really willing to spend the rest of your life with, because that has hurt me economically. You know, the kids—the dad does very well and he's involved in their lives. I'm friendly with him, but it still was a big burden on me. Having a little more money for retirement would be great. I love to travel and I'm doing that when I'm working. This job takes a lot of energy. I don't know what else would I have done? Not much different really.

XW: I mean coming from someone who went through a divorce, and my mother is now retired, so I've seen it firsthand it's really rough to recover from that.

SP: You know, my kids' father was there for them thank God, and has helped them with college, I don't know if that's the same with you.

XW: Yeah, my dad is always connected.

SP: And I did everything to facilitate that because it's not your child's fault this is all happening. It's ok, my kids will do something to help me. They won't let me starve.

XW: Speaking a little bit on politics and religion, what role has religion played in your life and has that impacted your politics?

SP: Well this gets very complicated. As I said to you, I am a religious, spiritual person, so I've tried to nourish this in different ways. Of course I left the church I grew up with. And after I was in Chicago that year where I was blown away with poverty and race, given that theology I solemnly became an atheist. There can be no God that allows these things to happen, and say other people deserve it and these people don't. Because there isn't a theology for it. That made me very angry, but somewhere in my late 20s I connected with Buddhism. And practiced Zen Buddhism for a while.

XW: Did you convert?

SP: No, no, I mean it didn't really last, but I respected it. But it did make me realize what was missing, and I did start getting involved with mystical Christian groups and led me to the Quakers for a little bit. And ultimately I devoted to Catholicism. So I would consider myself a Catholic, though I cannot go to the church right now. I will go if someone's getting married, or a funeral, or if I feel like it. But it's so male and this sex scandal has been terrible. So I'm not bothered by being at a Catholic college, and my dissertation was in sociology of religion.

XW: Did you study Durkheim at all?

SP: Oh ya, but more so George Zimmell. And also, I just had wonderful people in Chicago including a Dominican high school that helped me and a connection to the Black Panthers. Writing my dissertation turned out to be wonderful once I got on my own track. Then, I have reestablished a bit of a Buddhist meditation practice, and it's more so a meditation that includes Christianity.

XW: You said you're vaguely connected to the Black Panthers?

SP: No, they didn't want white people. Those were people I knew that helped me with community groups. And when I was in Chicago, when I worked as a welfare case manager, I was in the neighborhood of this famous group called the Blackstone Rangers. A very big gang, and turned out I helped one of their families, and this one family was a mess. I would advocate for them, and at one point they said to me, "You need to stay put in one apartment," because I kept moving. Then they said, "You white girl can't tell us what to do!" OK, sorry. I never knew why I was so safe in the neighborhood, turns out that one of their child-in-laws was a big officer of the Blackstone Rangers. I gained appreciation for the power of the movements in the community. And the welfare rights mothers, they knew some of the Black Panthers. They didn't want white people.

XW: That's why I was shocked when I thought you said that.

SP: I just appreciated it. And now my oldest daughter is so excited that they're coming back, resurfacing in cool ways.

XW: How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

SP: I've been really lucky to be so energetic, and I love walking. I've had one joint replacement, my shoulder, which was really problematic. Other than that my joints are doing fine. High blood pressure, I'm old. And my family if you don't get cancer you can live into your 90s. I was affected, I had one child who had cancer, my oldest daughter. So that and my mother died of cancer. So cancer hasn't been my favorite disease.

XW: I don't think it's anyone's favorite disease.

SP: It was pretty tough watching my child go through that, and she suffered a lot because of it.

XW: So with cancer, or any illness whatsoever, what are your experiences accessing quality affordable health care?

SP: Oh, I've had excellent luck. When my daughter was sick there was Harvard. I've gone through two surgeries on my shoulder, and the first one wasn't billed. I had to get plastic surgery because my eyelids grew. I have no complaints, I've been really lucky. I got a really great doctor now, a doctor for older people over 65. I've had pretty good luck, and if I haven't I changed doctors.

XW: Whose health are you responsible for besides your own, if you are anyone's?

SP: I worry about my older daughter. She has a lot of physical and mental problems from the trauma. She was very sick as a little girl. A mother's always worried about any child that's not doing well.

XW: Do you find it's easy to get mental care for your daughter?

SP: No, I get it for me. I used therapy to negotiate being a single mom and to not to bring my kids in all of it. You can do nothing for a grown child. It's the hardest thing in the world. Even suggestions aren't always welcome. So it's tricky. It was easier when she was a little child. When their dad left I got them therapy, but I can't do it now.

XW: You could try, but it's up to them.

SP: I do. You do a good dose of having fun with them and a little dose of making a suggestion.

XW: I like that outlook. So how do you get through tough times?

SP: Prayer. I have a deep faith, a strong faith. Gratitude, and gratitude leads to hope and hope leads to positive thinking. It's a little hard right now politically, and sometimes hard with my daughter, but envisioning things in a bad way for a person sends negativity. So I really try to remain positive. And I think prayer sums it up for me. And meditation too, there's a definite meditation practice called loving kindness. Inside meditation people have picked it up, and it's basically compassion.

XW: So how would you define success in your life and has this definition changed over time?

SP: I think success is doing your personal best and just really trying. When I did that gerontology program, I thought that was a success here, and I passed it on to a really good person when I left. Starting the service program, that took me ten years here, and turning that over to a

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good person. Now the WISE program for senior learners, when I started it was 300 now it's almost 500. There's a lot of older people in Worcester and it's a great program. Maybe getting something and making it a little bit better. But I'm proud, I've done my best, I'm proud of my academic achievement. I'm most proud of my daughters. But I'm not proud of them, I'm pleased I had them. They're not a success, they're just the greatest source of meaning. All my research when I finally got started in academia was on making meaning of late life for older people. And I do think that making meaning is something we should all be thinking about.

XW: That's a big internal conflict you have, when you're a senior. Whether you actually succeeded in your own life.

SP: I don't think too much about it. I just want more time.

XW: Last, but not least, based on your life experiences, what advice would you give to women of today, in future generations?

SP: Believe in yourself. I'm sad that my older daughter, cancer hit her right at a time of a developmental part of her life. She's doing amazing. I had to struggle, many parents don't believe in what women can do at least historically. I just had a young woman living with me, and now she is leaving to finish her dissertation. She was really struggling with believing in herself, she came from a working-class family. I'm really thrilled my youngest daughter believes in herself. My greatest joy of teaching at Assumption was, I think when you go to a regional college, your parents think you're going to be more sheltered, that's a difference between Clark or Holy Cross. Having taught at all those schools, they're all bright. Holy Cross they're really bright, Clark has really bright kids but it's mixed I think. Assumption's really bright kids don't know how to have confidence. I loved working with really smart young women and watching them grow to believe in themselves. And I'll watch now. Some are doing amazing things in Africa, senior editor for NPR, social workers, public health workers. And I do think it's a challenge for women, unless you have these utterly confident parents that believe women can do everything.

XW: Yeah, just historically with the limits that they've had in society, it's built in essentially.

SP: You're only a girl, you're only a this. I bet no one has said to you, you're only a boy.

XW: Exactly.

SP: That is what my dad said to me, "She's only a girl." He was a doctor Perschbacher, and now I'm the only doctor Perschbacher in the family. I don't know if he ever appreciated the irony of that. Are we done?

XW: Yes, we are done.