

Interviewee: Sarai Rivera
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Abstract: Sarai Rivera was born and raised in the Worcester area and currently serves on the Worcester City Council. In addition to her work in local government, Sarai is a minister at local churches and works for global partnerships at churches abroad in Burundi, Rwanda, Haiti. She earned her master's degree in clinical social work and her doctorate in urban ministries and is a visiting professor at Assumption College. Her three roles often overlap in her pursuit of equity in society, be it racial, social, sexual, educational, or economic. As a self-professed workaholic, Sarai balances her busy professional life with self care through family time with her husband and nine sons.

SN: Okay, great. So let's see, I was wondering if you could first talk about your childhood and growing up in Worcester and what that was like?

SR: I grew up with both of my parents. I was the youngest of five. My parents were also ordained ministers. I'm actually third generation pastor. So I was what was called a PK [preacher's kid]. I grew up, this was interesting, my parents moved to Aster Street because they were pastors of the house and then we ended up living in Arenage [sp?] in the pastoral home because they needed to kind of supervise the property. But that was really a blessing because I ended up going to the [?] Very all white neighborhood to moving to a more eclectic, very diverse community which I probably wouldn't have experienced had I not gone to the neighborhood with people from all different backgrounds. It was kind of cool, I love the neighborhood. I grew up where people knew each other, the neighbors, the kind of thing were if your kid got in trouble your neighbors knew it and told your mama. And we hung out at the stoop, and to this day, I'm friends with people from the neighborhood. Neighbors actually knew each other and we were there for each other's birthdays and christenings and funerals and so on and so forth. And we played outside and very kind of traditional which was really nice. I think about sometimes I see neighbors now and they don't really have that. And it was nice to have experienced that. I mean to me that was normal. We'd sit on each other's stoops and long summer hours. From biking to rollerskating, to skateboarding.

I had a really strong church community. In the Latino culture that was really prevalent. We were all Latino-based Christian church so a lot of like, maintaining my language and culture, not just my faith, was maintained through that. And that became kind of your second family, your other family, what you call your spiritual family. So, I had a lot of great advantages growing up being surrounded by really great people.

SN: Right okay, great. So what was school like?

SR: It's interesting, again its funny because you don't really realize until you're educated and you're grown like some of the challenges you actually encountered in school. So I was a relatively good student all through elementary. It was interesting how they would have us, even though I was born here in the United States and actually I dominate English, I didn't realize how they would make all of us do mandatory ESL [English Second Language] classes. And how some of us would hide, we wouldn't want to go to the ESL tutor. But it was like this mandatory—it was weird. I didn't know what that was so I didn't even understand until now. And even what we did, I don't remember doing anything different than reading and writing. And then when I went to middle school we got bused. So we went from this neighborhood to a completely other neighborhood on the west side and we were bused into middle school to what was junior high at the time because they weren't called middle schools. It was seven, eight, and nine. And that was really, a big shift because now you had kids from two sides of the city together that had predominantly grown up together on one side of the city and another, and also very different demographics and so I remember being placed in honors classes. Which now the whole scaling of—the categorizing of classes, but I was the only one and I had no friends in there. Everybody that was there was from—none of my friends were there. I remember I had a really tough time in seventh grade and almost kind of like subconsciously began to do very poorly to be taken out, and again not understanding that ,and my parents were great but didn't understand the advo—you know it was complicated for communities of color especially parents who dominated a different language to be able to kind of... Usually you know, in most cultures people don't challenge the education system we have confidence that we deliver the children and they know best kind of thing. So that was kind of a little bit challenging and definitely saw those challenges from middle to high school. Definitely a difference of—because it was the same kind of demographic going to high school and so really just saw kind of the difference of that level of treatment between middle and high school.

SN: Right. What about college and grad school?

SR: Yeah, college was great. I mean college was always a really great time to kind of find yourself where you kind of self discover and you meet people from all over. It was interesting because a lot of my friends didn't go on to college. So here was, you know, I had grown up with these people all my life, I had gone to school, and now you're in college and you're used to kind of having friends and being a group and all of a sudden you're all on your own [laughs]. You're like, “Oh my god I want some friends.”

SN: Yeah.

SR: But it was great. I made some friends which I still have great relationships with and college was again just a really great opportunity to kind of self discover and kind of put into fruition and learn about what I really love. Which at the time I majored in psychology and did clinical social work for my

master's. Went to work right away right after my undergraduate and then quickly applied to graduate school.

SN: Okay, so you were a social worker.

SR: Yeah.

SN: In between college and grad school? Okay.

SR: Yes, and then that's when I went to do clinical social work. My goal was to be a clinical therapist and do clinical social work.

SN: Oh, wow.

SR: And that's what I've done for a chunk of my life. So I've done a lot of work in inpatient, outpatient program development. I specialized in trauma focused therapy crisis intervention. And I actually that's what I teach now. I don't practice as a much but I teach.

SN: Oh, okay got it. So what was, what did you encounter as a social worker, were you in Worcester doing that?

SR: Yes, I love this city, always came back to stay here and work in the city and work in my community. I mean as a clinical social worker I worked with a lot of things and like I said I worked in the ER [Emergency Room], I worked in the inpatient, I worked in the longer term in patient, so there's not much I haven't seen let's just put it that way [laughs].

SN: And then your doctorate, what did you get that in?

SR: So I became ordained and I did what's called urban ministries which is kind of a combination of urban setting, of urban studies and theology. It's really looking at ministry in urban complex settings and how you kind of maneuver that community. And so my focus as a minister, kind of really my social work that church is not just about four walls. But it's not a Sunday service, church happens Monday through Saturday.

SN: Mhmm, got it. And then let's see, how long have you been a councilwoman?

SR: I got elected in 2011 and got sworn in 2012 so I'm serving my fourth term so I'm going on my eighth year.

SN: Okay, wow.

SR: I know [laughs] hard to believe.

SN: Is it difficult to balance being a councilwoman and a minister and doing teaching at Assumption?

SR: I mean, yeah. I mean I think for a lot of us I mean because council isn't paid on full time here which is kind of bizarre because especially district council is such an ongoing—you're on call all the time. All of us pretty much, unless you're retired have established careers. Plus I do love to teach and I would not give up my ministerial work obviously for anything. Is it difficult? Yes, I mean there's some things I've had to let go of like I couldn't practice counseling in a clinic as much as I used to before when I took office. Because it was just too much time. I do love to teach now and I do some counselling still through my pastoral work. So I have a good balance, but I mean it is because also being a minister is also very demanding. And you're on 24/7 you don't get a break from that. So you have two kind of polarizing aspects to my life. So it always is a challenge, but I think I'm probably a self-professed workaholic [laughs], but also I work hard, but I play hard, too. I know when I have to step back and take a break. I think because of my kind of whole work I also know that I can't give what I don't have. And so just even growing up as a PK and seeing it through my parents I think I had a really good example. I mean I never felt second to ministry like all the things that people call PK kids, you know, preacher's kids.

SN: Oh preachers kids I was going to ask.

SR: Preacher's kids. They call them PKs. I didn't feel second to ministry. I wanted to make sure my kids didn't either. So my most important is being a mom and making sure that my kids were well and taken care of. And part of that was being who I was and not giving up a part of who I was whether that was ministerial or what I was doing in the city.

SN: Okay, got it. Do you find similarities between the different roles?

SR: Oh, yeah.

SN: Or like overlaps sort of?

SR: Oh yeah definitely I mean I think honestly, probably the only reason I do what I do for the city is because I've felt it as a calling, too. I mean think about it its very you give up a lot. And my life was kind of headed I think in a little bit of a different direction and then it took a turn to this. And you give up a lot of your privacy, a lot of your time, a lot of what you want to do that you can't because you have a commitment here. But to me it was really important to have that representation. I was the first Latina elected [to the Worcester City Council] and I was the only person of color for a period of time in our whole governmental delegation. I mean for a while there wasn't anyone elected. I wasn't the first but we hadn't had anyone else elected. Even though we had had other candidates in the past that were of color,

we just lost our way somewhere. Really amazing people actually, not just because they were people of color. They were just pretty amazing. So definitely I feel like I do this because I live by what's called the two greats, the great commission and the great commandment. The greatest commandment is that in order to love God I must love neighbor. I can't profess to love the God I serve without really loving neighbor. That doesn't mean I love you with conditions, I'm not there to ask you what you practice for religion, I'm not there to ask you who you live with, I can't. I'm not asked to love you with any condition I'm just asked to love you. And so understanding the importance of being on that Jericho Road even though that Jericho Road was obviously very difficult, right? Because the guy on the Jericho Road is the story of the good Samaritan who was on the Jericho Road and gets beaten and obviously that's a really tasking road. And so definitely my service in council is like a calling for me.

It's the same and I think I couldn't do it without faith. I couldn't, because at night you get caught up. You know, I don't have to worry, I don't govern with fear of losing my seat. I feel like it's a calling and when it's my time to be I will be. As a person of faith, when it's my time to be out, my time will be out. But I also feel that, I was—it was really important to me to make sure that I really believe that the people have voices, they just weren't being heard. And they also were not part of what I call the decision-making table. And I feel like I've brought people that normally wouldn't be at the decision making table, to the decision-making table. Like I share public health and so have really have brought a lot of my work in public health throughout my life, my career and ministerially I've done it, too, to make sure we are caring for those most vulnerable, right? And the needy but also understanding, if I have a place to eat, if I have something to eat, you should have something to eat. If I have a place to sleep at night, you should have a place to sleep at night. If I'm sick and I get medical care, you should get medical care, right? It's just like what I would want for me, I would want for you. And how do I make sure that we are really living equitable to the best of our ability and challenging that? Because you know, we don't live in an equitable society. We live in a very self-serving society. So part of the greatest commandment is about, its actually that love that surpasses that and how you fight for that so I think if it wasn't because of who I am and my faith and my spiritual walk, I would not do this work [laughs].

SN: Right.

SR: I'd be sipping on some little tropical drink in South Beach Miami with a nice little private practice with some affluent people. That was my plan, a nice little private practice with people that would just kind of, just discontent with their life nothing major. Instead, I got to give them my life, I started my career in clinical working during the time of deinstitutionalization and they were closing down hospitals. So I worked with major mental illness and really began to understand the stigma in people with major mental illness and have always worked with a population that's always considered the least of least, right? But to me I felt like that was really important. So an example, in council one of the things I am very passionate about apart from big thing is equity like I said, so how that translates is for example when we were looking at the issue of prostitution and people were just looking at these women on the streets, these women were prostitutes, and who cares?—and the community impact? Who wants a prostitute in their

neighborhood, but we weren't looking at that. People were coming into our neighborhood to buy and sell and these were women, these were human beings like somebody loves. This is somebody's daughter, somebody's sister, somebody's, somebody's someone. Right? And I saw that. I saw that. Like what got them there, right? What got them to that space? And I had an encounter with someone that I knew who ended up on the streets, and that really opened my eyes even more. And I've done a lot of victims' work throughout my career. I specialize in trauma so I've done a lot of work with people who have been sexually exploited. And that became a priority. We're only looking at the issue of prostitution through a public safety standpoint and not a public health. And so what we were finding is that the women here in Worcester that were on the streets predominantly had a history of sexual trauma, number one, and also had a problem with substance abuse disorder. So those were health reasons, right? Those weren't just so, how do we deal with that and how do we kind of adapt? So really looking at bringing folks together, specifically survivors. When I had conversations with women who were still on the streets, or had been on the streets that was very humbling for me. And I felt like I remember coming out of that meeting feeling like my three worlds were completely intertwined. So my role as a minister because I've always been fascinated with the story of Rahab in the bible and the fact that in the lineage of Christ. There were three women that are mentioned, which usually women are never mentioned in genealogy. And yet these three women were mentioned. Mary obviously, his mother, and then Ruth who was a Moabite which was sacrilege to be a Moabite they were considered really idolotrists and they like sacrificed children and like the Moabites were the lowest of the low kind of population. And she was a Moabite initially that married into the descendancy. And then Rahab who was a prostitute and the spies hidden in the house and I'm like, "Wow, really amazing," when you think of lineage. Like I come from this lineage and we also, especially in royalty, we believe that in my faith that Jesus is the king of kings and lord of lords. And he chose to name these women in his lineage. Like what does that say about your—and so I've always had kind of this feeling these women for who they were. Amazed at who have they created, how they were created and not how society, unfortunately, had led them to... So coming at that meaning using my power and privilege as city council to say we need to do something about this. And then clinically—obviously through sexual trauma—that was what I had worked with. And obviously as minister, so like my three worlds completely intertwined right there. Right there.

I'm doing a lot of work now for example on economic equity And that's another thing I mean I just firmly believe that everything that I do is intertwined. Who I am is not fragmented into pieces. These pieces make up my whole. And that whole actually drives me completely. So really really looking at economic equity, looking at if we're thriving in the city of Worcester is everybody thriving? Are all neighborhoods thriving? Is everyone having an opportunity for economic growth and mobility? And if that isn't happening, then how do I use my position of power and privilege to move that to a different scope? And again, it comes down to following "loving your neighbor." So I think these are always intertwined completely. It really is those pieces are what make me whole. It's just like the way that we have different parts of who we are because we like certain things. And you make like rock and roll, but you may really enjoy a good disco song, right? You grew up in the '70s [laughs], but you like a good rock and roll band too. But it's like we have all these different aspects of our life, but that's what makes us whole.

SN: Right, okay. Wow, awesome. What social issues are most important to you?

SR: For me, its equity. I mean, again, are you as a woman being treated as fairly as a man. When I got a phone call before coming here, I was late because I had a phone call with a mom that I knew who lived here for many years who moved, has her child, her son here. Not her child, he's a son, a grown man. He's living on the streets. He's been living on the streets for months and his wife and in very difficult situations, health situations. And so, how do I, how do I help with that? How do I kind of make the connectability? But in general it isn't just the individual, but how do we change systems, right? How do we look at, is everyone having access to fair education? We do know that we have schools that are one school or kids that are treated—we have some of the highest suspensions among Latino population. Right now when you look at when you have a hurricane in Texas, and you have a hurricane in Puerto Rico which one gets treated differently? And so, the issue of immigration and so there's something. This power that comes, and privilege with that blue passport. So even though Puerto Ricans are the only Latino community that has that blue passport. How do I use that? So I'm constantly looking at any position I have of power and privilege to be able to combat inequities, right? And so right now doing a lot of work regarding Puerto Rico, doing a lot of issues regarding economic development because if we're looking at a lot of the thrive that Worcester really doing a lot of great things. Were definitely on this renaissance but is it for everyone? And we want to make sure. So for example downtown there's this growth, but we have to be cautious not to have gentrification, right?

SN: Right.

SR: So businesses that were there before, when downtown wasn't downtown, will they be able to afford the rent now? You know what I mean. And so most of those are minority businesses. So how do we make sure that that happens? How do we make sure that jobs that are coming in? So construction, if construction is happening with a new school or new hotels or whatever, how do we make sure that our people are getting jobs? That it is our local community and that it's also livable wage jobs. Because honestly it's so expensive to rent an apartment now. [Laughs] It's like you can't even—you gotta make—it's really difficult. So right now big issues for me is really looking at the issue of inequities and also racism. I feel like it's really important for us to talk about racism and discrimination and talk about gender inequality and not be afraid to call it what it is, health inequities. The closing of Plumley Village, the closing of half of the psych beds at UMass. I mean these have been detrimental. The Plumley Village had like 98% communities of color, over 75% Latino population half of that were monolingual. I mean it's crazy almost 3,000 patients, where are they going to go? Where are they going to go? We couldn't even get half of our clinics, you can't even get a primary care physician. People are on wait lists and now we had hundreds of people come from Puerto Rico that couldn't even get a doctor. So thank you for kicking us when we were down kind of thing. So I mean those are the things, those things are constantly being challenged. You know, so part of me, you know the best way to sum it up is really looking at issues of inequity. And then also really talking about issues of racism because no one really wants to have that

conversation. But racism and poverty go hand in hand, and racism and inequity go hand in hand. And if you really look—I'm not pro marijuana, but I'm not pro liquor, either. So you know I don't drink so [laughs]...

SN: [Laughs].

SR: But, but it bothers me that, you know, I sit on economics and all of it and you see the people that are, “No problems, its legal and you have the right to retail, let the law—people voted, that’s what fair, just like we have the liquor stores.” But you know for how many years did our black and brown kids get locked up? And then who sits before me for these applications? More affluent, white males.

SN: Yeah, absolutely.

SR: I'm not even seeing women hardly come up in here in front of me.

SN: Right.

SR: So it's like you just locked up all our black and brown kids, brothers, and now who's going to rack up crazy money? Crazy, this is some crazy money coming in with this. Who's making that money? And what's some of that foundation? Some of that foundation comes back to racism, that and issues of inequities and health, issues of inequity and education. Like, you know impoverished, it's class and race and we have to start feeling so afraid of talking about that because its binary, right? But we see it so binary that of course racists are bad, they're all bad people, and they're running around burning crosses with little white capes and that's not—racism isn't binary. I think we're so afraid to talk about it and so here you have—like I was just saying how Canada is implementing curriculum talking about white privilege and people are upset because it's like people being shamed into it. Well guess what? There's some things like I'm embarrassed how like I'm a proud Christian evangelical. I'm not ashamed in saying we have a nondenominational church but an evangelical background and I believe—I'm what they call believe in the manifestation of the holy spirit so I'm part of the evangelical—I'm ashamed at the way we've treated transgenders. Or you know the fact that we know transgenders should be—you could go to the doctors, I don't care if you're transgender. Who's asking for that? You have to go to the bathroom, for the love of god, who's asking on what you are? I mean how could really tell who's who. Come on, really? I mean, you're going tell me, you're really going to come up and bring an issue of bathroom but yet we have the poor dying because they can't even get access to—I call it out because as a heterosexual Christian woman, as a woman of color, I have certain issues that are marginalized and don't have privilege. But as a heterosexual Christian woman, I have certain privilege.

SN: Right.

SR: So how do I utilize some of that, right? And so I think that we have to acknowledge where fault comes from some of the groups we belong to. I didn't ask for the privilege, I have it. I'm an able bodied individual. I move without the assistance of a wheelchair, walker. I don't need to feel guilty about that but I have to understand that because of that I don't notice things like—I do now because I'm conscious of them. But I didn't think about if I go to a concert, "Hey, do they have a way in and a way out if I travel. Does this place that I'm going to have handicap accessible?" And there's all these things that come around with that privilege. I have to acknowledge that. And how we live in this society where I can only see through an able bodied eye unless I purposely put myself in that position, which I have, right? I've been purposeful as like, whether it's during White Canes Day, or interacting in deaf communities. You're interacting with communities so I understand even just watching my language understanding that who creates, who says like who's disabled, the level of disability. And so if you use the wheelchair you're disabled, but if you use glasses you're not, even though they're [laughs] still an exterior form of assistance. So just it's really, I think, challenging us to understand these things and so part of my position I try to bring that up. That's very difficult because people have a hard time in this country doing that.

I was in Rwanda I do a lot of work out of the country. I do a lot of local partnership work. I oversee 24 churches in Burundi and a church in Haiti. And I went to meet with some leaders in Rwanda and you're looking at a complete genocide. I was so humbled at how they remember. They have a thing called Remember, Reunite, Renew. They constantly are remembering what happened, but not because you're going back to that, but so that it doesn't get repeated. And they unite in reconciliation and forgiveness and then renew, and honestly its booming. Rwanda is booming. Like, I was in Kigali, it was crazy like the development. Cleanest—one of the cleanest, it is the cleanest city in Africa. One of the cleanest in the world. They have like this whole eco kind of project, they banned plastic. I mean crazy some of the movements are very progressive so when I think about that and they went through that just over 25 years ago, holy cow. We need to have the conversation about slavery, Jim Crow, the genocide of our Native Americans, the colonization. We just refuse to acknowledge that and the reason we keep repeating it just in a different way because were in a different time, I mean. We went through slavery, we went through Jim Crow, we went through the Civil Rights, were now going through what we're going through now. We still haven't learned, so people are like, "Oh my god," whenever people bring up the issue of what we're facing now. We say, "Wait a minute, holy cow, this isn't new for any of us."

SN: No.

SR: None of this is new, none of it is shocking. It's just people are noticing because it's been more, like there's permission to be outwardly and unapologetic where people were very hypocritical about it. So I think the challenge for me is really bringing up challenging that. And as a woman of color, because your race baiting, or you're just this angry woman and they don't understand like, listen. If I was so angry I wouldn't be almost 50 years old and been progressive as to where and I and raise my children and, you know, no. But, I'm going to call it out for what it is. That's very challenging.

SN: Mhmm yeah. Wow. Let's see so Worcester, what changes have you seen in the city, good or bad, and what changes would you like to see?

SR: I mean, I think I'm really excited since I've been in office—if I'm talking about since I've been in office. I really feel like we have a better understanding of public health. And how public health really is so connected to so many things. From economic, like the fact of how people in foreclosure when you look at the foreclosure crisis or just access to health care or even putting in one of domains the issue of racism and how racism affects health. So, I'm really excited at how we are understand public health and that were acknowledging it from different factors. And I think I've seen that definitely grow. I am excited to see the changes and the pro—we're safe, we're relatively a very safe city. And it's a great place to raise your children. But the irony—and a great a place where you can kind of progress as you can see, but the irony is that Massachusetts is one of the places where Latinos are least successful. It's one of the worst cities to come as a Latina woman. Worcester is also one of the highest in Latino suspension rates. So still there are many populations that are being left behind. So the challenge before us is that, how do we make sure that as Worcester is on the move, that everyone is moving forward? So that's going to take us looking at how we're looking at how we're doing economic development. So for example, we're looking at economic development, are we looking at the issue of racism and discrimination? So for example, how redlined—there's a history of how people—so the fact of social segregation, how many people live in what part of the city? Who is allowed to purchase and where? Are we looking at that? So we're looking at getting people to purchase in Worcester and home buyers—are we looking at that aspect? We're looking at business development—are we looking at how to coordinate through statewide effort here on banking? How banking practices happen and how communities of color were less likely to get loans? And mortgages and things like that. And so when we're looking at business development plans, are we looking at those aspects? Are we looking at the aspects of how women are paid less and what is our—so part of what is called Worcester Works that I've joined in with the labor coalition, it's looking at different steps and were we can do, tactically challenge economic disparities among race and gender. And so part of that is we're challenging the affirmative action numbers with in the city. We're also really looking at increasing what's called the jobs fund which gives opportunity for training people to actually then get into like livable wage jobs. Also doing a disparity study to really looking at how public construction jobs are being filled and it takes a look at what our numbers so that we know what our goals are and so there's definitely some steps in doing that. We can say it all we want, but we have to take steps to be able to, you know, that margin of like in equities to shorten it and so those are some of the steps that I'm taking. The challenge before us is still education that we, that our numbers of staff, administration, and educators do not reflect our children. That's problematic. I'd love to see that and so even though you see a progression in education and that Massachusetts ranks one of the best in the nation, we still have a lot of kids left behind. And academically and that usually generally black and brown kids. Especially the Latino population. So challenging that is going to be great. I mean I think I was—I came out of the school system and there's so many things I feel like I wish it would have been different for me. And I think I was successful number one because I thank god every day for his mercy and grace and I had great parents and I had certain advantages coming from a two parent home and having that support. Also, being the

youngest so I didn't have siblings to have to compete with. I was significantly younger, so my siblings were out of the house so I didn't have to compete economically with my other siblings. So I came from a certain economic privilege from that so that was helpful but and in turn, you know, my husband and I, my children, thank the lord, are all very successful. Academically very successful. So I mean, I think—but that doesn't stop what happens to everyone else. I'm the exception and not the rule. And there's definitely different factors as to why my children as men of color are successful. In turn, privileges they have that others don't have so I mean I'd love some of the challenges before us on that, are our educational systems and I'd like to see some of that really shift.

SN: Yeah, yeah absolutely. I was wondering if you could speak about your family a little bit. However comfortable- whatever you'd like to say.

SR: So I've been with my husband, were going to be going on to 30 years in August.

SN: Oh, wow. Congratulations!

SR: [Laughs] thank you. We met when we were in college and we've been together ever since. So we kind of became adults together. And he's a great guy. He's actually the chair of Worcester in Faith, he's also third generation pastor, too.

SN: Oh, wow.

SR: So we minister together. And he's also a veteran, he served in the Gulf. He was a Navy Corpsman and served with the Marines. He's very private about that. We have nine boys, some birthed from my womb and other birthed from my heart as I'd like to say. They're great, they give complete purpose to my life. I love being a mom even though we are officially now empty nesters. [Laughs] So I say, "Thank god we like each other!" [Laughs] Because now I get it why, I used to always say, "How do people divorce once the kids leave?" I could never understand after being together like 18, 20 years and divorcing but you definitely get it once kids leave because—but thank god I like my husband and I have always been really good friends so we always joke around we're like, "Thank god we like each other [laughs] because now I get it." But I'm very fortunate to have a great partner. He's the one that's at my corner. All the time in the city he's just, he's not a king looking for a princess to rescue. He's looking for a queen to battle side by side. He's very egalitarian, not intimidated by who I am, and celebrates that and so that's very great as a Latino male. And you know it's great to really try to raise my sons to understand, too, the importance of respecting women. Raising males I think is so important because if you want to combat some of these gender inequities and mistreatment that you need to teach that with the males even when they all went to college the conversations were not just about like oh and don't drink or drugs- don't party too much. But it was about let me have a conversation with you about how women are sexually exploited in college, right? And reading of some of those numbers... Like you are never to take part of that.

SN: Mhmm.

SR: Right, like when you are around your friends and they're having a conversation and I was very blunt I said and they're talking about, "booty, gucci, ho" you need to go. Because that could be your mom, your sister, your future daughter, right? Like women are not to be treated as objects, right? And so understanding that kind of conversation It was nice I got a phone call from one of my sons one time and he says, "You know, I went to a frat party, oh god that was wack," and I say, "Why?" And he goes, "It was so sexiess they just want you to go there and bring girls." To him that was just like so appalling, you know? And so it's great to be able to see my son with his wife and raising his daughter and his son. And it's funny because even now since the daughter is the oldest they don't believe that the son was [??] They believe that you're the daughter, whoever is the oldest, male or female, female you will take responsibility for this family. Like really raising that you know, which is great to see. You know, my son just recently got married and he says, "Mom, I always say she's just like you. They always say you marry your mama." [laughs]. I said, "That's a good thing." But seeing them, how they respect their wives, their partners is a great thing.

SN: Right.

SR: I think that's so important and I love- and its bitter sweet because you see them as they're going off to college and as they're making their life, you're excited because you can almost take a breather. Because when they're little you're just holding your breath just wanting so much for your children like you just want—and then raising men of color, so many odds are against them and you just holding your breath just saying, "God, I just want them to have a good life."

SN: Yes.

SR: Where they're happy and fulfilled. And they're good people, and that they love others, and that they treat people with decency. And so you see them living out their dreams and you're just like it's bitter sweet you're letting them go but at the same time you're so excited to see what they're doing, what lives are. We're really fortunate that my children are really doing very well. Academically I have three that have graduated college, one from community college already. So four, and one who's going on, he's going on to a four-year college. Two married, two grandkids. I have one he's 19 and he's doing neuroscience. He's actually at Princeton University over the summer.

SN: Oh my god!

SR: At 19 and working at a potential publication. And this is his second science [??] program. He did one at 18 at Penn, UPenn. He got selected to this very prestigious program at Princeton this year. So that's great to see. I have one who's 21 and he has a master's and has traveled almost 40 countries. And will do his second master's now in the fall at Harvard University. So, I have sons that didn't know how to

...speak any English at all, that have educational gaps and came here and in their mid-teen years and are at Boston College at the Lynch School of Business and the other, I mean the Lynch School of Education, one at the Carroll School of Business. It's just like, I can't even like—they should be kids that are like bitter with the world for losses that they've had. My son who's now as we speak in his country. He hadn't been there in a decade and half. He left there a boy, he's seeing his mother for the first time. Since he was a boy. To be able to hug your mom. She hadn't even been able to see a video of him till like a couple months ago. They've been able to speak on the phone, but she had not been able to see him. Like that's just amazing, you know. They've always taken care of their family. They've, there's never a need there that their family has in their country that they're not taken care of. I mean I'm just so proud of that. They work really hard. So, really fortunate

SN: Yeah that's-

SR: So we're all different you know? You know what TED Talks are?

SN: Yes.

SR: So I did a TED Talk, it's called "Birthed From my Heart." And it tells the story of my family, a little bit of my family. So I have three sons from Burma and four from Guatemala.

SN: I'll have to give that a watch. It sounds interesting. Let's see, so clearly you're so successful and you work so hard. I was wondering how you self care and just take a break...

SR: Self care is really, really important. Because I teach this, you know I teach in the human services field and especially the kind of work that I've done throughout my career with crisis intervention and trauma. Both my husband and I will one afternoon, "What are you doing? Let's blow that off and go to the movies." I work hard but I play hard. I always take a vacation, I always take family time. Family time is very important to me; I do things that I enjoy. I start off my morning with some level of meditation. And I try to, I'm a big believer of the word of God in that, that's like the living word and that give me life so there's always something encouraging that I learn, even a story that I've heard 20 times all of a sudden I'm hearing it in a whole different light and so that feeds my soul. So I feel like I can't give what I don't have. So I have to make sure to take care of that. You know, are there moments that you want to just kind of like run away somewhere? [Laughs] Yeah. I mean, I was reading a book, I forgot the name, I think it's called... Oh my god, I forgot the name of it, but it talked about in ministerial work all pastors often fail, ministers and the fallen how many of them are—such a large statistic, 70% divorce. It's just crazy. Some of the statistics how many of them like resign or fall or—and you can't take anything for granted. I don't, our marriage, that marriage, is one of the best decisions I've ever made in my life. Which is funny because I'm this career woman or whatever so it almost seems like it's contrary to who I am, but I think it's because we have this concept of marriage of like belonging to whatever and it's not. It's just like you have a partnership and he's like my forever friend. He's the one if push comes to shove I want to do something

he's going to be there [laughs]. He's always there, like always got someone there to do something with. We are different people but we have our morals and our values the same and but we have to nurture to that like I have to make sure I nurture that relationship. So I think it's so important for all of us to nurture a lot of who we are. We tend to be—people tend to be very neglectful. I think just very early on I learned that just because if I had to do that because in my career, the career that I chose, and if I didn't do that self care I can't give what I don't have right? If I don't have food, if I'm not well nourished, how can I present a meal? I mean to me I can't. And so I think it was part of me, for me if I really I want to do for you, if I'm really motivated to doing for you and doing something for someone else, outside of me, I have to make sure that I'm equipped to do that or else I'm not going to do you any good.

SN: Right.

SR: And so sometimes it's really looking and stepping back. If I'm overwhelmed, then I have to figure out that something doesn't belong. What am I taking on that I shouldn't and what I need to get on. And being realistic as hard as it is sometimes like you have to be realistic. You know, some of the work that I do abroad can be very challenging but it has taught me so much so. Initially people do this mission work, I like to call it global partnership instead of missions because of the connotation of that, you're doing for them and you're like the hero coming in to save the day. And I'm not anybody's hero. And they give us so much that what we can ever give. And really learning that that initially you know this whole charity perspective you bring like the clothes and the food and the toothbrushes and all that and then it only provides for so much. And then what happens to like, there's still a line of people and you just ran out of food. Holy cow. That was a rude awakening for me. And really began to look at sustainability and then looking at self-sustaining resources. But the one thing that they taught me that was really hard was—and when I teach people when I take teams, I take teams abroad, we have to cross this boarder one time. And I said, “You are going to have children come up and ask you for food when we're crossing that border, you are not to take anything out you are to—I'm going to ask you to do the hardest thing, which is you are going to have to look away. Turn your back on that child.” And they looked at me like I was crazy. And I said, “Listen, where we're going there's hundreds of children. You cannot do it for everyone. It's just humanly impossible.” So it's hard to do. Have I cried? Yeah, I think about it now. I just came from Burundi and I was just like heartbroken. Heartbroken. Crying in the car but thinking about what I'm doing at a longer term right, I had to leave. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't leave food or clothing which would make me feel better but in the long run, what is that doing? But looking at the sustainable work of changing but I was meeting with the minister of education of that country. And we're looking at bringing a team for training for education and partnering. I was meeting the minister of public health, right? So this is at a larger scale, at a larger scale so I couldn't—it's tough to do. It's tough to look away from a child that's asking you for food. It's the hardest thing you'll ever have to do. I would tell them, “Think, where you're going there's hundreds of children. You will feed other children. You will do, you will play.” So, I've had to grapple with my limitations. I want to do so much, but I can only do so much. So that's always challenging. And part of self care is acknowledging that. And just being okay and then understanding that part of what I'm feeling is because I'm combatting an unjust world.

SN: Yeah.

SJ: Again back to inequities. There's haves and have nots. How did I get the privilege of being born where I'm born? I've never forgot the very first time I met a mother whose child died because of hunger. And my kids were little at the time and I remember walking back to the village where I was staying and just crying. I still think about and I get emotional. Because I can never as a mother fathom my child asking me for food and that I didn't have anything to give them. I can't even, I don't know what that world is. I can't even imagine that. And so when you see all this stuff about refugee and immigrant, I've been to refugee camps. I've held the hand of moms who've had to release their children. Don't talk to me about—and so it's a challenge all the time. So I'm encountering these things all the time. They break your heart.

SN: Yeah.

SR: So you have to kind of go back and work on healing. It's really very important. Know your limitations, know what you can do and just do all you can with what you have. Right? And to me, it goes back to my faith. Like that little boy, the story of the boy with the fish and bread and Jesus fed the thousands. All he had was a little poor lunch. In fact, you know, if you look at history barley was considered like it was a poor lunch. But he rendered what he had. I mean you could have been able to—look, you've ever been somewhere and you're like, “Holy cow, I'm not taking this out and I got to share and it's like one little bar. I ain't got enough for everybody. “

SN: Yeah [laughs].

SR: Right? I don't got enough for everybody, kinda, wanna eat it on the down low [laughs] because you feel bad. He could have potentially been like, this guy got a couple of fish and a little bread and this is a lot of people here. This is not even—this barely feeds me. But he surrendered what he had. And to me, my faith just believes that God will do with what I have as long as I give from my heart, he will do amazing things with that. So I mean I think just understanding where I'm limited, that I belong to a higher authority. You know, that's where my faith, honestly my faith and spirituality is what drags me every day, what keeps me sane, keeps me whole, and keeps me pressing forward, even those days when you want to just give up.

SN: So given like the political climate, social issues, everything that we encounter today. What gives you hope to push forward?

SR: I don't have the luxury of not having hope. I don't have—I can't be hopeless. And I can't give up. You know, I want a better world for other people. For my own kids, even for selfish reasons. I remember that I was with a [?] she was five, both her parents are Burmese. So her mother dominates one of the Chin (ph) dialects so when she went to school she obviously dominated one language more than the other

but she does speak English. Anyways, I notice when I took her out she didn't play much with other kids and so I asked her mom how is she getting along. You know she started kindergarten and she went to a little private school, predominantly white. And she says, "Well, so where she goes to school maybe other kids are white so she, she doesn't have a lot of friends because she doesn't speak very good English and so kids didn't really want to play with her." And man, just terrible. We live in a society where we celebrate monolingualism so much. I want something different for her, I want something different for her. So I can't be—when you want to give up you think about you just I don't have the luxury of being hopeless. And so just you do what you can and you keep pressing forward.

SR: Right, absolutely.

SN: And none of this is new. If you're from communities of color, none of this is new. We've survived genocide. We've survived slavery, we've survived Jim Crow. We've survived, Civil Rights, we've survived sexual exploitation, the commercialism of women, the sexualization of women and I mean we have a restaurant that people go it's called Hooters. That's problematic for me. Like how to do you not think—how is that okay? And yet we are upset and we have a Me Too movement. Hello, we have a restaurant called Hooters. So, you know, I find something better. I'm going to keep fighting till my last breath.

SN: Okay great, let's see. Is there anything else you'd like to mention?

SR: No, I guess that's it we covered quite a bit.

SN: Yeah we did. Thank you again so much.

SR: You're welcome I got to go run off to another meeting ...

SN: Oh I so appreciate you squeezing this in.

SR: Oh you're welcome.