

Interviewee: Brenda Safford
Interviewer: Hannah Brencher
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Transcriber: Hannah Brencher and Julie Perry



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Abstract: Brenda Safford was born on August 5, 1956 in Lubbock, Texas. Moving to Worcester with her second husband, Brenda worked within the community and became an adult learner at the age of 38, receiving both her Bachelor's Degree and Master's Degree in Human Services. Brenda is currently the director of Multicultural Affairs at Assumption College. In this interview, Brenda speaks about her days growing up in Lubbock, Texas, and her experiences with both racial segregation and integration in her school system. She speaks of the personal challenges she faced becoming an adult learner, and going to college at a time when she felt her opportunity to do so had been missed. Brenda also reflects life lessons that she has collected along the way from influential women in her life and from times of celebration, grief, revelation, and defining moments of spirituality. Brenda offers advice to future generations of women and emphasizes the true importance of knowing and believing in one's self.

HB: I am first going to start off by asking you for your permission to record your oral history today.

BS: Sure, you have my permission.

HB: The Worcester's Women Oral History Project is completing a city-wide oral history of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with education and working in Worcester. And we would just like to thank you for your help with this important project.

BS: You are welcome!

HB: So, I will start off by asking you your full married name and maiden name.

BS: Brenda K. Rhone Safford.

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HB: And when were you born?

BS: 1956. August 5, 1956.

HB: And do you have children?

BS: Yes, I have two children. Two boys, males.

HB: Okay, and their ages?

BS: 29 and 34.

HB: And do you have grandchildren?

BS: Yes, I do. I have six grandchildren.

HB: What cultures or ethnicity do you identify with?

BS: Black.

HB: Obviously you have married, so what is the name of your current husband?

BS: His name is Craig Steven Safford.

HB: And have you had previous husbands?

BS: Yes, I was married once before. His name was Kenneth Yates.

HB: Can you tell me a little about your parents?

BS: Well, they were hardworking people that gave to their community. My mother was a part of a group called the Secret Six and the Secret Six would give teenagers a dance every week, sock-hop and so forth. Their highest [level of] education was the 12th grade. But they became very prominent in the community that I was from. In those days, in the early late '60's and '70's, you didn't necessarily have to have a degree. You could have work experience and that was the equivalent to a degree at that time. And you could get promoted. And my mom was promoted to director of the hospital, the major hospital in Lubbock, Texas. [She began as a nurse's aide and after 20 years of service was promoted to director of her department]. And my [step] father worked at the bank. And as well, worked himself up to the position of loan-officer. [He was promoted to supervisor] And they did that until the day they retired.

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HB: And you said that was in Texas?

BS: Yes, yes, in Lubbock, Texas.

HB: So is that where you grew up?

BS: Yes, yes.

HB: So when would you say you came to Worcester?

BS: 1987.

HB: And what neighborhood in Texas?

BS: Well, it's the northeastern part of [pause]—well, in Texas you have to think, it's a large state so it is in the northern part and it is called the panhandle. Lubbock is known for its college and its Texas Tech University. So it is major football and it is major basketball [country]. So it generates a lot of commerce in the city as well. It is pretty known in the western, southwestern region of the United States.

HB: Okay, and what was your neighborhood like generally?

BS: I was a community baby. In my elementary school, in my education, I had family that was in there.[working as the music teacher, nurse, etc.] I had people that were extended family, like the principal. My teachers were part of this. And, my grandmother raised me. My grandfather had cancer when I was born, and I was about six months when he died. And my grandmother held me at the funeral, and this was, this was the story that was told to me. So they said that she wouldn't let me go. So I was kind of like a comfort to her. But then I was close to her. So I would stay with her every year per se—but in the community on the same street, we all -- family lived in different houses on the same street. So it was like a community thing. So my oldest cousin -- since I am the baby of my family --and my older brothers and sisters, they would teach me. I had many cousins that were going into English. So they would do my writings and stuff like that and another cousin would do my math, and another cousin—so you know, it was a family atmosphere. You know Hillary Clinton when she wrote about a village; I had that for myself growing up. So, it was a happy childhood. But we were also exposed to the racial unrest that was happening as well, and I was always chosen to be the one to speak [to go through the racial lines]. I would go into unrest situations, and the ministers and everyone

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would support me. But I was the one who was chosen to go in through the lines, through racial lines. Yes, so I learned at a very early age how to do that and how to communicate. So that's the reason I became a communicator. I love to get people to communicate when it's a mess. Healthy communication. You know, just put everything on the table and then discuss it. But you have to be honest about it first. But I was taught that at a very early age.

HB: And now when you said that you were the one that went through the lines, do you have any specific examples of this?

BS: Well, one example is when I was a cheerleader. They called our cheerleaders the all-American team, because it was two whites, two Mexicans, two blacks and a guy. And at the time I did not know that he was gay [laughs] I just loved him for who he was, right. But they said we were all-American. And we had to go to a camp, a cheerleading camp. [Cheerleaders from all over the state had to attend.] And we were very good. To go to this camp, it was all white and we were coming from a predominantly black school and they did not want us there. So I had to go through the lines as being the captain to make peace and make the way for the others. And you know they spat on us and called us "N" words and stuff... but we made it and we did. Actually, at the end of the camp we made friends with the girls. But they were very vicious to not let that happen. [Another example was] running for Miss Lubbock. And having to go to the mayor's office for the competition and things like that, and being told, 'you know, you are not going to win.' You know things like that. I remember when, when I was a cheerleader and we had to go to each other's houses to practice in the summer. And what happened was, we went to one of our white cheerleader's homes and the parent got real upset because we were sitting on the bed. And she told her daughter, 'I told you about having niggers, I told you they would dirty up everything.' And we felt so awful, that when we got home we were telling the story and the parents got real upset. [So by the time of our first] football game the parents and the community were upset. It was really bad. We were sitting there hugging each other because you know, we loved each other. And we didn't know it was going to escalate to that. So we were used as an example. We stayed together and completed the year but it was a lot of turmoil around then.

HB: Yes. And you said you came to Worcester around 1987, do you know what age you were?

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BS: Oh! That's a good question. I think I was 34, around 34. And my husband was in the military at the time. Whenever he traveled [relocation took three months for the process of transition], I would go home to my parents in Texas and wait until it was time for me to join him on his next duty. And this time it was a hardship [duty] one, it was in Korea. [We decided that the children and I would stay with his mother in Worcester. So for me to go and learn [about] his family and everything [was difficult as I had to acquaint myself with his family and learn a different environment] I came up here because he is originally from here. So that was a shock. But I have been here ever since. I love New England.

HB: So that is how you originally came to Worcester?

BS: Yes.

HB: And where do you live in the city now?

BS: I still live at Fay Street. Because I have never lived in three deckers --because usually, I am so accustomed to everyone having a home --people didn't live in apartments -- and that was the environment that I grew up in. So when I saw three deckers and how they were stacked up on each other, it was just fascinating to me. And the architecture inside those buildings is beautiful. You know the woodwork. Anyway, I love it. Love where I live.

HB: And have you lived in multiple areas, or?

BS: Well we lived in—we were stationed in [El Paso, Texas,]Kentucky, Tennessee. We lived in Panama for five years, and then the last duty station was my husband in Korea and we resided here from there on. So...

HB: And was this your first husband?

BS: Second.

HB: Second.

BS: Yes.

HB: And do you have other family members who live in the area?

BS: No, most of my family is from Texas and California.

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HB: And what challenges do you feel this city still faces?

BS: Nepotism. I think they need to really correct that. Because it is really access to others who went to school and got a degree to get it [their jobs]. Nepotism is very high in the city of Worcester. I can remember when I first moved here and I worked at a place called Guaranty Bank, which it is now famously known as Bank of America. But I can remember a young man coming in and he was dressed [impeccably], and he was telling me, 'I'm not going to be here for long and I just need to know what you do real quickly.' And all the older women were really upset. So then I went to the bathroom—and you've got to remember, smoking was allowed -- so they were smoking up a storm. And I said, 'What's going on?' and they said, 'How dare he! I can do his job better than he can.' But he was one of those people who was going to be in power and he wanted to learn the bottom up. So he was learning from us and the job we do, but he was going to be paid a tremendous amount of money [he was the nephew of the CEO]. And the women were sitting there had been working there 20 years and they had never gotten a chance. And the men were going to come in and make more money than I ever could and you know, and I started learning the realness of the workplace in that way. And it hasn't changed that much really, you know?

HB: So going along the same lines, what do you think you would change about the city?

BS: The job opportunity, those jobs that will put you in power and those jobs with the six figures. You don't see those kinds of jobs in the paper and you don't see those kinds of jobs really being advertised. You see the lower jobs advertised but these jobs that (pause) that are already spoken for, you don't see them and I would change that a lot.

HB: What changes do you feel have occurred in Worcester over time?

BS: I think its getting better. You know, they call Worcester the melting pot because you have different neighborhoods. Now all the neighborhoods are integrated. When I first came here, you had the Polish neighborhood, the Italian neighborhood -- I mean Shrewsbury was *known* that if you were a minority you wouldn't go there after dark or have any business over there. Burncoat was highly the wealthy. Don't even speak about Salisbury -- it was the gated community. It was rumored that when police sirens go off in the city, they cut them off here so they didn't disturb the wealthy.

HB: Wow.

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BS: Yeah! So, and I think that students today ask, 'Why don't we have more diversity in Worcester?' But I think it still has that stigma of being the gated community. So it's the most wealthiest part of the city. Now I am beginning to see it more integrated for myself and how much work we do and the community service and what we really do. Yeah, I think it is getting better.

HB: And what distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

BS: [pause] I think its people. I think they love the city. And when they come to the community, it really comes together. If it's threatened, I think they really fight for the justice. Like if there is a real clear overt [pause] discrimination or prejudice happening, they come together. An example of that, there was an incident November 18, 2008, at Honey Farms. There was a minority couple and these [white] guys proceeded to come in and make sexual undertones that were insulting to this young woman. It turned into a fight. They were just beating the car windows of this guy [boyfriend of the woman who was in a car]. And what happened was the clerk, when they exited the building, the clerk locked the door and made sure the woman was safe. The guy drove off. But when the police came, they handled it like they *should have*. There was a great appreciation like, 'Thank you!' because everything you worked for, towards discussing and having dialogue about what is wrong with the city, they acted accordingly. You know, you have to give credit where it is due. They are learning. So it takes a while but I think it's increasingly becoming more diverse and culturally aware in the city.

HB: And what do you think is women's experience in Worcester? How do you think that has been generally?

BS: You know that's -- we have women in key positions. If you look at most of the colleges, most of the women are presidents. So that's, I love that you know. In my area, in the area of multicultural affairs, almost all the positions are held by women. Key positions [like] the mayor [are held by women]. So you know, men will kind of argue that women are taking over, and I say, it's about time [laughs]. So yeah, I think change is coming. I think that they are going to see that women are just as equally intelligent, and they can do the job, and raise the family, and do it well. So I like that part about Worcester.

HB: Great. So we are going to get into education.

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BS: Sure.

HB: Where did you attend school?

BS: Well I attended high school in Lubbock of course. And I was very good, I had a skill. I could type. And you have to remember, this was before the computer world. We had the manual typewriter and I could type 90 words per minute with three errors. So I was like a human machine. So that allowed me to get into a position of being well paid for the work I could do. So when I married my husband and went into the military work world, they loved that about me. What happened, I was afforded to work for the generals and things like that. What happened to me though, when I came here to Worcester, I developed rheumatoid arthritis in my hands. So I became completely disabled. They told me, 'You should go to college,' and at that point I was like 38. So I was thought, 'It is over for me, I can't, are you crazy? I can't go to school now.' And they said, 'Why not?' And that is how I began my educational journey as a late learner, an adult learner. And I went on to Quinsig, and then I came here. I afforded—they gave me a scholarship. I came to Assumption and got my Master's Degree.

HB: Can you name the schools you attended when you were younger?

BS: My elementary school was Ella Iles Elementary School, [E.C. Struggs Junior High School and], Estacado High School. A matador was its mascot, [laughs] I remember it well. I had good times, it was troubling times, yes, but really we were the first high school to be integrated. So I had a good time and made good friends.

HB: So you said you attended college when you were 38, did you attend for four years?

BS: No, I only did two then came to Assumption and finished out my Bachelor's in two years. My fear was, I was older, so I had no time to play. My only regret, I did it so fast that I wish I had slowed it down just a little bit. Because it was so accelerated. But what I did when I graduated, in 2000, I went to work. My first job was director of the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association], of the parents' program. And I started in 2001, I do believe, with my Master's and finished in 2003. It went [makes sound of fast movement], you know along with the full-time job and everything it was really fast. But I thought, personally, I guess I didn't deserve to really enjoy the college life because I failed to do it at an earlier age. And since I was older, I had to really finish it fast. And that was the wrong way of thing. But you know, that's how it is engrained in us and it's

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how we think sometimes. So every person that I speak to, who is older, I say, 'enjoy, take your time, you know, really absorb it, because we are in college life as well.'

HB: And what did you major in?

BS: Human Services

HB: And what did you get a Master's in?

BS: Human Services.

HB: What were your challenges in education? I know you talked about this a little bit but...

BS: As a college student?

HB: Just in education in general.

BS: I was able to figure out that when I was going to my high school as far as integration, they took all of our prominent teachers and sent them over to the white schools. And the white schools sent over student-teachers. Not teachers, but student-teachers. There was remorse like, 'I cannot teach these kids anything.' So I think in my education, I was failed. Because I didn't get a 100 percent from the teachers. And this is what happens to people. You know we have a federal law protecting us and civil rights. It is going to happen, and integration is going to happen, but you can't change the people's hearts. You can change the laws, but you can't change hearts. And I think that was a really unfortunate thing, not only for me, but for that high school that year and all the kids. But I am finding out in Worcester, there are so many problems in the public schools' education and we can see it in the higher ed. If they don't have a good system in the public schools, when they graduate and come to, say Assumption College, it is able to come into my lap. You know like, social skills, not up to par in the math, and things like that like—we want diversity. But how much do we want diversity? Do we want diversity so we can set them up to fail or what is happening with our education system? So I think there are a lot of problems that I think need to be corrected. But as much as we reduce educators, we really need to invest in more, get it populated with better educators in Worcester. Or how to keep graduates here in Worcester? That is one thing we can't do. You know as students graduate from here, they go to Boston, they go out of state, you know. They are not here

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in Worcester. But I don't think that it attracts them to the point of -- they need to raise the money, the pay, and everything. Benefits. Everything.

HB: And when you finished your formal education, what did you see as your options?

BS: Nothing. [Laughs]. I am telling you, I was looking in the paper and I had completed my internship at the YW Parent's Program and loved it. Never thought about, you know, applying. Because I knew how non-profit is and it is hard to hire people for the salary they want or requested. And what happened was, a young lady that supervised me when I did my internship at the YW was leaving her job. So I was actually calling her to congratulate her and ask her where she was going. And she said, 'Brenda, I know you probably already have one, but have you started working yet?' and I said, 'No, I am actually looking for work,' and she said, 'Can you come down?' 'Sure!' So I came down and they were all there [including] the executive director, and they were scared to ask me because they thought they could not afford me, and would I like to work there, and I was like 'Are you kidding! Yes!'

HB: That's great.

BS: So from then, I had to stop. My mentality is that I had to start from the bottom up. And I said no one would ever hire an older person. And I was wrong. Because I had two things going for me, experience and now a degree. So, a very powerful combination for me.

HB: Now how did you come to be at Assumption College?

BS: Now a person that had seen me -- his name is Mark Bilotta, he was the executive assistant to President Plough -- Mark had seen me in the community working and he also saw me going to class. And he said, 'When I see you I know I am on time. Because you are on time every single day.' So he was with me, he knew of me, but when I was working at Quinsigamond Community College he called me up and said, 'I need you.' So I thought, for what? And he told me they had this opportunity for someone to come and develop the office of multicultural affairs and he said I would be a great person to have. But I thought about it and said that I had to think about it because that is a lot of hard work. Right. But here I am.

HB: So was there no multicultural affairs office before you came here?

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BS: Well there was one, but it was run -- the director then was Mario Silva. He was part-time director of this and Admissions. So then he got full time there in Admissions and they had to open this as fulltime. Because there was a need, they proved there was a need for a director of multicultural affairs. And I think they went through the hiring process and so they were finding someone so Mark said come on over. And I guess they liked me [laughs].

HB: Yes, and through all this, what support networks and mentoring have been important to you throughout this process of education?

BS: Older women. Older women who have their Ph.Ds. I can think of Ogretta McNeil is a great supporter of mine. Senator Harriette Chandler is a great support. Dr. Barbara Spent is a great supporter. And they have a wealth of experience. They're my biggest cheerleaders. They just knew, you could do it. I mean they never had any less than for me; they always had more than for me. I just had to really believe in myself. But I always check in with them about my approach, you know, is this the right thing to do? And they have always given me just what I needed to keep my steady. So if I called them 'crying, ' I am working so hard and I am so tired.' They would say, 'Well you are not the first. Do you like your job?' 'Well yea.' 'Well then quit complaining then.' You see what I am saying?

HB: Yes.

BS: And it was not to the point of not hearing that they have been through it too, it's you got to keep on going. That's what they were telling me. Straighten up, dry those tears, and keep on going. But I also know that whenever I had a loss in the family or I was getting an award, they were always there for me. And they still are always there. It is a great support system that I have.

HB: That's great. So making a segue into work. Obviously you work outside the home.

BS: Yes.

HB: And I have already basically covered when you began working, were there jobs before coming to work at the YWCA?

BS: Oh yeah! That is one thing I never had a problem with, was getting a job.

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HB: Um hum, so before you pursued the college education, what did you do?

BS: Well I went from, clerical typist to the name being changed to administrative assistant. It's really weird. I worked for one of—I lived in—I am from Lubbock but El Paso, Texas. And in El Paso, Texas, there was this huge corporation called the El Paso Natural Gas Company. And because of my typing skills I was able to get in. And when you get in, that was supposed to be *the* job and a great job for women. And I loved it. It was (pause) an eye-opening experience and I learned a lot from it. And I was really proud because my reputation was that I was really good. And every time someone was looking for a new person to set up, I was always there. Every time we relocated I always could find a job, always, always. I worked as an EKG tech, I worked always as a secretary. And when I first came here too, I worked at Guaranty Bank. I just don't like bank work; I know that is not my cup of tea. But I went to this place, this corporation that, it is called the Melville Corporation that is incorporated with CVS, Tech Team, all those stores. I was in the human resource department. So they gave me 600 stores nationally. And I had to do hiring, termination, vacation, union dues, everything. And I was very good until the company went bankrupt. And then, that's when I went to the Worcester Public Schools and I worked for the School Committee. And actually when I first started working there was the time that Senator Harriette Chandler, she was on the school committee with me. And she just sort of found a connection with me and she always told me, 'You should go to school.' And also, the time that Dr. Caradonio, who was the Superintendent of Worcester Public Schools, and I remember when he first came in and no, I mean no one, wanted to help him. Because you have to remember in Worcester, when they hired employees it was nepotism and it was who you knew. And it was Thomas Fran, and he was well beloved. He retired and they didn't want anyone to take his place. And Dr. Caradonio came in and he was impressive. And I went into his office and said, 'Do you want me to set you up? I can, I can come over and...' and I completely developed his office. And we got to talking and he was the one, the first kind of planted the seed of education by saying, 'You should really go to college and get your degree, Brenda.' And I kept saying that was too old and he would say 'Hogwash! Go!' And he started giving me all these points and I looked at him like... and ironically maybe three or four months down the road that's when I really started school, but he was there for graduation. And when I graduated from here Channel 5 came, the consortium [through Ed Central] had done a movie on me.

HB: Really?

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BS: Yes! It was big! But I was saying, 'you should not use me, go use the younger people.' But they laughed and told me I ought to think about what I had done. And that I could show other women that you can do this at any age. And I never did look at my stuff like that, personally, until that day.

HB: And so what was the basis for that movie that the consortium did on you?

BS: Well, when, Ed Central in the consortium is known to do financial aid and every college student knows that financial aid, FAFSA forms, is the hardest thing to do. (Laughs) Scary. So from my counselor at Mass Rehab, because I was getting rehab for my rheumatoid arthritis, he referred me to Ed Central. When I went there, filled out all the forms for me, and the only thing you needed to do was make a copy of it. And I loved it! And they said, 'We are going to track you, is it ok?' And I said, sure. And they asked, 'Do you think you are going to finish Quinsig or are you just going to take a run of classes?' And I said, 'No, I am going to finish.' And they asked when, and I said in two years, and they laughed. Cause it usually takes you in the community college to take two and a half to three years. But I did. So they really started tracking me and they said they could not believe the success I had so when I graduated they wanted to make a movie for throughout Massachusetts and for people to see. I have never seen the movie. I have it at home but I am too scared to look at it.

HB: Aw, you should look at it.

BS: I know! But that's just me. And one day I will.

HB: Ok, well through being director of multicultural affairs at Assumption, do you feel you have contributed a lot to the development of this program?

BS: One of the major requirements was to develop an office that was welcoming to students of color. And as you can see, we put on great programming. And I want to program enough to educate at the same time, not just for entertainment. Really good speakers that want to teach and raise cultural awareness. So yeah, I think, I feel really good about it.

HB: And what has this work meant to you?

BS: Everything (pause) because since I have so many different kinds of jobs and I know both sides of it, being educated and not being educated. And I know how it feels so I can

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identify in different ways. So the kids look at me and they say how do you know so much about so many? Well I say for one, I am older but I had a life beyond this that I wasn't always working, I didn't have a degree so I have always had to survive in a different way. I like to share that with you. And I think God put me in different situations so that I could do this job. And that's how I look at it. So everything I know I learned from the past, I use it in this job.

HB: Ok, so what were or are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework?

BS: You talking about now?

HB: Yes.

BS: Reservations? [Laughs] You know, it is just the husband and myself because the kids are grown. I sometimes cook for my grandchildren but that is mostly take out because that is what they love. I rarely cook. So, yeah, I mean, when the kids were home it was always clean your room and blahblahblah. But my husband and I, it is just the two of us so.

HB: So you share the extent of the housework?

BS: Well yeah because there is not that much to be done. So it feels really good. Yeah it feels good that when the house is messy it's usually only when the grandkids come over. And they come over every Friday. And every Friday is just for the grandkids. See what they're doing, see how they're doing in their lives, see who is walking and who is not. So that's very exciting.

HB: Yes and how do you feel you have balanced different responsibilities, roles, and interests in your life?

BS: You know, the difference is, when I did not have a degree and I worked in nonexempt jobs, it was eight to five. I could schedule my life accordingly. You know the kids knew I was off at five, they knew what they had to do; I could cook dinner in time. I could cook dinner in the slow cooker. You know with all of those things I was able to manage that. And clearly now, with my degrees, and the demands of my time it would be really hard with family. Because exempt, you get paid salary but you could work 60 hours a week or 40 hours a week. And I think it's really hard. Because sometimes we are required to be here on the weekend, and I am required to be here for the programming at

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night so, it was meant to be how my life is. I think that that is the reason why... I don't think I could have managed a family, especially a young family, doing all this kind of work. So, He knows what he is doing [laughs].

HB: And how would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen paths?

BS: I think that with my husband, my spouse, he knows my passion. I have always been a community person and I have always been invested in my community. But I think he loses a lot of time with me. And I am beginning to realize that, this is supposed to be our time to go and travel and do fun things together, and I don't think that (pause) I am really going to try and put that back into my life, make that a priority. I don't want to be 70 and realize that -- I am 53 and I want to realize that now before it is too late. I think that is the only thing. When you are invested in your job, it's not your world. Family is important, friends are important. I thought I would never be a person to say, oh I can't do lunch, let's see three months from now with my friends. And I --oh my goodness, I am one of those people. So I really want to correct that this year and get in touch with people. Like on Sundays, I used to call my family in Texas every Sunday. And I could hear my oldest aunt call and say, 'Brenda; you didn't call are you ok?' And they have never had to question before. And they even have my cell phone number and these are like, they're 80 years old. So I said why am I doing this? I have to put my priorities back in place. That's it.

HB: Ok, well what about benefits that you have?

BS: I triple my salary [from when I was a clerk typist]. I told my husband, 'I don't need you but I want you.' And he couldn't understand it at first, and he said, 'I think I understand what you are saying, that's good.' And I said, 'well I wanted you to figure it out, because it is important for you to figure it out. Like I don't want a divorce, I am just saying that I don't have to depend on you anymore; I can do it by myself.' I bought my first car, by myself, without his signature or him being a co-signer. It felt really good. So the benefit of independence, being independently wealthy is what I like. But I tripled my pay. And when I was working as the secretary, I could do the manager's job, and when the manager was out I was in charge. But I was being paid less. And I have always reached my maximum in my job position, like they couldn't pay me anymore. And I thought that was top pay. And now I can't believe it. Like last week I had to do this, they have this youth workers institute where they have workshops during the spring of every

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year. And they have different facilitators and I am one. And I have one on building family relationships. And I was sitting at the Boy [and Girls] Club and out of the window was where I used to work, and that was like a full time circle to me. I thought, 'Here I am, a facilitator, and right over there I was an hourly worker.' I was like, wow, this is crazy. But yeah it felt good, when I had one of those “aha” moments.

HB: Yes.

BS: Yes.

HB: And what type of work does your husband do?

BS: He was in the military, now he is a disabled veteran. And a lot of people are amazed because he is now back in school and he wants to be a schoolteacher. So I am not taking credit that that is the reason that he decided. In fact, he always wanted to go to school. In fact he is completing his degree in education this fall. It will be exciting. Yeah.

HB: Yes, definitely. Well we are just going to talk a little bit about politics.

BS: Sure.

HB: So do you consider yourself politically active?

BS: Yes. I am more of a behind the scenes person. I can generate a response quickly. If we need to have a town meeting, if we need to push a candidate you know like Deval Patrick when he was running. Especially Tim Murray, I love Tim Murray. We worked really behind the scenes to get him in there. Senator Chandler, anytime she calls I am there. But it is good to stay connected politically because opportunities come to students with internships and things like that.

HB: Yes.

BS: I worked closely with Gladys Rodriguez-Parker, who is the assistant to Jim McGovern, Congressman Jim McGovern. So those connections work well with me. Like we have worked so hard together over the years that they know me. And that’s real key and they also know that I don’t use their name to get ahead or tell their business, that I am really loyal to my friends. When I call, they really listen and I am appreciative of that. My students get a kick out of it. When they go to dinner with me and stuff and I think it was the Youth Breakfast and I said, 'I got someone for you to meet!' And I said, 'Mayor

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can you come over here?' And they went 'MAYOR?!' (Laughs) you know. And they got to meet him, you know like Tim Murray, Deval Patrick, and they felt really—and it is not because I think I am all that, I want them to remember your name so that if something comes up, and that's what I am thinking. And they know that as well. That I am not doing it to make me look good.

HB: Yeah, and have you been involved with volunteer and community work?

BS: Yeah.... Well, I was on the Board of Trustees for Quinsigamond, Board of Directors for the YW, A committee at the YMCA for the minority achievers, and I am on the Greater Worcester Scholarship Committee. I am on the Community Build Committee, the directors and all the other little things. But this year I stepped down from Board of Trustees only because they had me— I had to go to retreats and dinners, and it became overwhelming because I still had my job and priorities. And so I said I couldn't do it anymore. They understood, but I was spread thin. You know I am on the committee for the Worcester Martin Luther King Youth Breakfast Program, and I like that because it keeps me connected. But also, women need to know when to say no. And I didn't because I wanted to balance out my community and my job. I didn't want to be [disconnected] with Worcester, but I had to do my job. And my job comes before anything so.

HB: I see, and what did the work consist of for most of this community involvement?

BS: Meetings, you know, one time, they had this director at the Youth Center and she went into the regulation room. She made a big mistake and she was frustrated and she said, 'You niggers turn down this music.' So it became this big thing, and they asked all the community leaders, which I was included, because I felt that they wanted to hear my opinion and I told them, 'Well, I think she should be terminated, but not terminated because [of] emotional [reasons]. I say terminate her because professionally she was wrong. You know her personally, I don't want to hear that. Professionally she was wrong. She should be released from her position.' And we all talked about it, and eventually she was released. I am glad that they put me in that list as community leaders but it is a lot of work when you are on a committee. You have to go to meetings, and discuss whatever is at hand. These are weekly meetings. And some directors, I have learned, they put you on sub-committees [laughs] and then on the sub-committee you have to report to bigger committees. It gets really confusing, but it's the other things going on that they want you to have. If it is not donations, it is time, and yeah. So I have to be careful with who I am

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going to work within the community now. Like the YWCA, they have terms of four to five years unless you resign. So in four to five years I could really decide maybe one committee or maybe two, that would be all.

HB: Okay, and what role has religion played in your life?

BS: Oh, very strong. God comes first. You know, He just comes first. A lot of people would ask me when I first came here, 'You are always in a good mood, why are you always smiling?' I said, 'I woke up.' I mean look at me, like, that's deep. I did, I am so thankful that I woke up. And my prayer at night is, let your will be done through me. Like whatever you want me to say, whatever you want me to do, let your will be done through me. I would sit there and say the Lord's Prayer every single night; I mean it was just routine. And one time I had a conversation with Him and I said, 'You must be pretty bored with me.' And I just had this kind of deep conversation with him and I said, 'How about I just say, let your will be done through me, whatever you want, I am yours? If I am wrong I will tell you.' But He has been really good, so no complaints, no complaints.

HB: Great. And now we just have a few questions on health. How have health issues impacted your life?

BS: You know what, believe it or not, I am managing very well. The only thing that I could say is that I have not learned how to heal, meaning that I have a lot of losses in my family. I just lost my sister two years ago, and both my parents. I have lost uncles and so. But my mother was the biggest impact on me as far as my weight. Like I have always been down to maybe a size nine, size seven and I knew that I kept going but I kept gaining. And what I was trying to do was eat away the pain. And what happened was when I lost my sister two years ago, I knew that I gained more. So I had to identify what it was in side of me that was causing this. I am beginning to heal, and let it go. You know, it's like I talk about it and I think I am able to. My doctor just gave me permission to exercise, so now I know I have no other excuse now. I now have all the tools, so now I have to get back to Brenda. I miss her. And the only reason that I say I miss her is because I miss feeling pretty. Meaning, when you put on that favorite dress and it fits right. Not for others, but for me. And you look in the mirror and you go, 'Ah.' You know, like to the point of my husband's expression when he sees me and I am ready to go out to dinner, you know, those surprises when I have hidden a dress that I have bought and then he sees it. Those little things. But it matters to me. Just to get Brenda back. I know if my mother was still living she would have said, 'What is wrong with you? What is wrong?'

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and that would be... now they just stay on my shoulders like snap out of it. And I am okay. And that is one of those areas in my life, that when you see me, and I am beginning to lose weight you can say she is healing, she is really healing. And this is a beautiful thing. Yeah....

HB: Yes it is...

BS: Yesssss.

HB: And on health, what are your experiences with accessing quality health care?

BS: Hmm (pause) When I worked at Young Parent, that was 16 to 20, and the family members that were dying because they didn't have healthcare, and babies were getting sick because they didn't have health care, or when people got laid off and could no longer afford health care and going to these old folk remedies, and now I see that they can have access to affordable health care. I think it's needed. I think one of the reasons that it's so high is because of prescription medications and the profession of medical professions. They need to be shot, because they are making a lot of money where we can have universal health care and everybody can be treated and live longer. And why is that a question? You know, why? In a country or nation that is very powerful and image is very powerful, why is that not number one? Because it is almost like having health care is a privilege. And why should it be that, especially in this day and time? And I think it is eventually going to change because in Massachusetts making sure that everybody has health care, free health care is available for those who don't have it. I think it has made a difference in lives. So yeah, I am ready to fight that battle.

HB: Okay. And this is just a few final questions.

BS: Yes, yes. Sure!

HB: How do you feel that you define success in your life?

BS: (pause) I find that it's self-knowledge. It is the most powerful thing that you could have. You will not be happy unless you have self-knowledge of yourself and knowing who you are. Because I truly believe if you don't know who you are, then you can't help anybody else. And in this part of my life in helping others, it's really important that I maintain that knowledge and update it. Meaning I always check myself, in the good and bad. Able to make change where it is needed, always able to educate myself and have a

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free will to learn from others. Not saying that I am the absolute and I know everything I think that is the biggest enemy a person could have. That, that ability to do that, that I am able to listen and learn and love life, I think it comes from self-knowledge. I don't think I would have been able to do an analysis of myself 15 years ago of saying what was really bothering me, recognizing that I needed healing. I think self-knowledge also comes with I know who I am; I know where I come from. When people look at you for being who you are or overweight, it doesn't bother me because I know where it is coming from. I know what I have to do. You see what I am saying? I think if I allowed that to happen I think my self-esteem would go down. But it hasn't. I don't know. I guess truly walking in the light of God, I just feel like I am very— He is with me. Like I have not chosen anything that He didn't like and I haven't been afraid to open that door of opportunity that He has made for me. Even if I am there to help someone, and it's there for a reason, and it's kind of revealed to me very quickly. So yeah, I think its self-knowledge that is the most powerful thing a person can do, to think about themselves.

HB: Okay, and based on your life experiences what advice would you give to women today and in future generations?

BS: Wow. Always know yourself, be strong, and be independently wealthy. Meaning that, go and get a degree in education, always get an education. I mean the piece of paper, defines you and who you are in one sense, of getting at that so you can have the power to earn money, to make you independently wealthy, that it makes you strong and independent. Be an advocator, support other women, you know don't look down, be ready for the fight. Just know yourself as well. But yeah, you don't have to marry young. Go live life, go travel. Go see life! Your future husband might be in Paris! Your future husband may be in Mexico! You will never know! But if you stay right here rooted, in your hometown and your home state, you will never know. You know because sometimes when you come to college, I know there are young women they find their person and they are not from here and they are from somewhere else. So I would tell women to travel and see the world. You know, do what you want to do. You know, I don't approve of being strippers but if that's what you really want to, then be good at it! I would much rather tell you to get an education, to own the business [laughs]. But yeah I kind of learned that. I don't look at anyone and disrespect what they decide to do. Because this is my concept, we have to have waiters, we have to have waitresses, and we have to have janitors. I mean some people have generations of janitors in their family and they take pride in that. And I used to always say, when I see a janitor or a waitress, 'You

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need to go to school!' I mean I was really, you know, high energy on that. But when I looked at life I see that we need that lighthouse person, we need those construction workers. We could tell when they come up and want to do something better with their lives or they don't want to do this anymore, and so when I look at people who have been doing something their whole life and they are happy, I think we need people that do that. So I admire people in any profession that they are in. If they are happy, I am like, I am happy for you. I think when I began to look at the world like that, that I could not change everybody, but respecting for who they are and what they are doing and if they are happy.

HB: Well was there a certain experience that made you view life like this?

BS: Um... I can't say. I think it's just really talking to people. You know when I give a tip or I tell a person, you know you are really good at what you do! I thought your customer service skills were great, or even when you go to a hotel and they clean. That is a big job! But we take it for granted. And we want this and we want this, and we are complaining because we are entitled. So yeah. So, I think that through my education it taught me a lot to, about reading of different eras, and places in history, like the Renaissance like, 'God, they have the same problems that I had.' So it's like they made it, I can make it too. Or they did this (???). You know we need (???) and we need educators and that's what school is, we need to go into the concentration and the major that you want to study. And this is your profession choice. So why not? Respect them for what they do.

HB: So do you feel that you yourself have a legacy?

BS: I do. And I think when I talk to people and they remember me, not just as a good person, but if they take one word from me then that is my legacy. A legacy of hope, I think I give people. I could never figure out what I do or what I say, or why people would have me as a keynote speaker. They ask me to come speak to young kids in the school and I say, 'Why me?' And they say, 'You have hope,'... (Tape is flipped) It's not because - - they wanted my presence, yes, but they say when I do it, I am very genuine. So I say be very genuine. But I hope my legacy is of hope. I want to give them so much too, if they read about me, some girl may stop and say that too, 'Wow she did that, I could do that too.' I hope it is.

HB: Okay, great! And now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women than has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

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BS: In my past?

HB: Yes.

BS: I think, I would want to two things. One, the path I took to get a degree, that I worked real hard and raised my family. The key thing in my story is that I stepped up to the challenge of going to school as an adult learner. I could have said, 'No, no, no, no. I give up and this is it. I will just be on disability and I can get retrained to do another job.' But the ability that I had to accept that challenge I think that is where the learning and the teaching come from, of doing that. I didn't know the future, couldn't tell you the future but yeah. And the second thing, I don't know. I really can't think of it right now. But I do want people to know of accepting the challenge in life. Sometimes we have to do that, even if we have fears, step to the challenge and say yes I can. I can do this, or I can try. Beause we don't know if we are going to succeed when we step to the challenge, but we will try.

HB: Okay and is there anyone else that you suggest that we talk to?

BS: Yea, I have another woman you may want to talk to. She is a guidance counselor in high school. I would suggest talking to her. She is also from Assumption, I think she went to Clark, got her master's here. But she is a person who was born and raised here and she is very good. She has done exceptionally well and she is very good at what she does. She's good. Strong woman but her name is Linelle Reed and she is at North High School. And you can contact her and you can tell her that I referred her. I think she would be interesting. Let me see if I have her cell phone number in here because I was going to email Linda and I forgot all about it... its [taken out]

HB: Okay great. Well thank you for your cooperation.

BS: You are welcome! I hope it was worth your while.

HB: Definitely, do you have any other questions for me?

BS: No. Actually when I was working at the YW we had a big conference here that was for the Women's History Project that was real huge, so kind of being on this part of it, it's nice to see it grow.

HB: Yes, they have done a lot of oral histories.

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BS: Yeah! And I like that! You are a good interviewer!

HB: Thank you!

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