

Interviewee: Rachael Shea
Interviewer: Matthew Clauss
Date of Interview: April 14, 2019



Overseen by: Prof. Melinda Marchand, Clark University

Abstract: Rachael Shea was raised in Worcester, MA, and attended Burncoat High School, University of New Hampshire, and earned her master's degree at Columbia University. She is a librarian and has worked at College of the Holy Cross, Worcester State University, Clark University, and the American Antiquarian Society. In this interview she discusses growing up in the Burncoat area and the changes she has seen in Worcester. She also describes her spiritual life and her roles as Sacred Fire Firekeeper and as an instructor of plant medicine as well as her experience starting a women's soccer team in 1979.

MC: Okay, I'm here with Rachael Shea and we are completing a city wide oral history of the lives 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/community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences at Clark and other Worcester schools. Thank you for your help with this important project! Do I have your permission to record this oral history?

RS: Yes

MC: Fantastic! Okay, well let's just kind jump right into it so first what is your full name?

RS: Rachel Mary Shea.

MC: When were you born?

RS: In 1955.

MC: Have you ever been married?

RS: Yes. Well I'm not married anymore. So it's my ex-partner,

MC: Do you have any children?

RS: Two.

MC:Any grandchildren?

RS:No.

MC:What culture /ethnicities do you identify with?

RS:Irish and English.

MC:Tell me about your parents.

RS: Well, my dad was a pharmacist and his brothers are pharmacists and my grandfather was a pharmacist and at my father's drugstore they worked in different physical departments and my dad, grandfather, and uncle all owned different drugstores. My uncle did work with my grandfather.

MC: Awesome, that's a lot of history right there.

RS: And my mom, she was born in Melrose, she then moved to Arlington [MA]. She and dad met at Hampton Beach. And when they married they first lived on Walnut Street which my mother adored, because she could just go to stores and meet people and have lunch with my grandmother and all that and then they bought a house on Burncoat Street [Worcester, MA] and that's where they raised all of us.

MC:That kind of answered the second question of where you lived during your life just in Worcester or in other places as well.

RS:My husband and I left for a while while I was married and then after I was divorced I moved back to the city and was elsewhere in the city for a while but then when mom and dad became older I moved back home with them so I've been at Burncoat Street for many many years.

MC:These questions are a little impersonal so your history says obviously that you're pretty much in Worcester almost entire life what has been your experience with Worcester overall?

RS: There's a broad question. Well, I will add that in spite of the fact that I have lived here my whole life I have traveled and gone away to school so it's not like I've never left the city. When I was growing up there was some curious things about the city when I look back. So the city is organized in such a way that their industries were sprinkled throughout. So in those days it was the men would go to work and then they came home for lunch and then they go back to work. I

don't know if this is true in all grammar schools, but we would walk home for lunch and then walk back to school and there's some places where that would never happen, but it happened here. My father was born here and my grandfather was born here. My father loved the city of Worcester, he just loved it, and because he had to do deliveries for prescriptions he knew every single street in the city and he knew a lot of the people. He grew up on Vernon Hill and there are a lot of three deckers there and if you put a whole bunch of Irish Catholic people in 40 three deckers all in close proximity you grow up with a hundred and something next door neighbors. So for me the city is a place of roots. I have strong roots here and if I think about what it's like as a place, I am accustomed to people not liking it. I'm accustomed to people who grew up here especially not liking it. I'm accustomed to people saying, "Oh yeah, I drove through it on 290," and that's their only experience of it. I'm accustomed to it being considered a gritty industrial place that isn't especially beautiful. My experience of it is there's a genuine quality to it. There is no facade so what you see is what you get and there many jewels here you just have to be willing to look for them. You can go to all kinds of activities and things at any one of the colleges. There's music and the art museum and the antiquarian society so there's really many jewels. The Hanover Theater. I see it as a mixture of sort of an authentic, solid former industrial place as well as as having aesthetic beauty if you go to the right places. I'll also add that one of the things that I find really interesting is the many Clark students fell in love with it. There are some who never like it, but then there are others who stay for a little while they decide that the people here are so real that they like it and, you know, it's it's a dream to me. I'll add one more thing. I was having a conversation with some people a week or two ago and there was some from Auburn and some from away and I never expected this conversation to happen in my lifetime where the people from Worcester were saying, "Well, you know, Worcester is on the up-and-up and we're doing really well. I was talking to my husband and we were going to buy this place to invest because we know that it's going to be a really important place for people to live and we'll hold on for a while and then sell it. Maybe our kids will live there for a little bit." It's great because Worcester is just really finally coming into its own.

MC: That's fantastic. That's a lot of information thank you. So you commented on people having different experiences with Worcester. Some of them living here their whole life not liking it, thinking it's dirty, grimy. What do you think in your opinion why people would come away with such an experience and why yours is so different?

RS: I think this is true, the story I heard ages ago about when Starbucks was kind of new and the in thing they did a marketing study here and they decided that Worcester people were not willing to pay \$4 for a cup of coffee when they could get one for \$2 at a Dunkin Donuts because how can a cup of coffee be twice as good at some other place. So what I mean by what I was saying is that the trappings are less important to people than the actual function. So is Dunkin Donuts coffee good? Yes, for \$2 that's fine with me and why would I pay \$4 for something where I have to learn a new language and it's trendy, but not necessarily better. That's the kind of logic that I

think a lot of Worcester people have which I find suitable, but other people who like things that are new or trendy might not be able to say that if there aren't these trendy things here I guess they're not aware of what could be rather than most people maybe choosing not to do that.

MC: Interesting, so I know you've worked at several other Worcester schools as well other than Clark what were they and could you talk about what you did there as well?

RS: Well, I've been a librarian. I worked at the Worcester Public Library for a little while. I worked at the American Antiquarian Society and their library. I worked at the Holy Cross Library, I worked at the Worcester State library, and then I've been here at Clark for many years. And for a little while I was on a project where I also did some work at Norton Company for a little bit and WPI for just a little bit with library work.

MC: Okay, and you said—I'm talking about Worcester—you said that Clark students some of them fall like really in love with Worcester. Has that been your experience at the other schools as well or is Clark special in that way.

RS: Holy Cross students because they're off a little bit away from the downtown area and they're very involved in the city and they do a lot of volunteer work. They are very community-oriented, mission oriented, and making wherever they live a better place. My sense of them was that they would do it and then go back to Holy Cross whereas the Clark students tend to move off campus. Now maybe this has changed because it was many years ago it was almost thirty years ago, but the Clark students end up moving into the neighborhoods and become a little more integrated more quickly. And again this is 30 year old information but I know people who were at Holy Cross who chose to come and live near Clark because they're not that far apart and they would get that that integration through that experience. It seems like moving just a little off campus and into the apartments nearby and then finding your way to the different kinds of grocery stores and the restaurants and whatnot that helps the Clark students feel more a piece of things and they also do volunteer work with—I don't remember what the name of it is, the casa or whatever, the Main South organizations that work with that this neighborhood and a lot of the students work with the Regional Environmental Council that do gardening kinds of things.

MC: So Worcester, you talk about how when you were growing up it was very industrial at least in parts or segmented. Has Worcester changed since then have you noticed that...

RS: I actually live here and Worcester people, those are who are my age, think it's odd to go all the way across the city to do anything So I find all the things that I need to do in my little area of the city, but sadly I don't pay attention to the politics very much anymore so I can't speak to that. There was a time I paid more attention, but I think from the little I'm seeing and hearing now is

that the Boston-area people are beginning to buy the city of Worcester and say, “Hey, that's not such a bad place, and it's not that far away, and it's really expensive living in Boston, and it is really inexpensive living in Worcester, and that's a nice place.” So my sense is that it's inviting and that the politics are balanced enough that people who are from outside of it don't mind coming in and choosing to live here, but I don't even remember, I don't know the politics anymore. Well, actually one more thing, so when my father had his drug store was on Main Street, Worcester—300 Main—in the late 70s, the city council had to decide what they were doing in the world. The idea of malls, that was the new age, new way of doing things to have malls rather than at Main Street, Worcester. It was back and forth with some groups that knew we needed to keep our Main Street vibrant and that it'll work, it's always worked, it will continue to work. But the other group with the Worcester Redevelopment Authority or something like that, they wanted said to keep a place vibrant you need to shift the foot traffic and parking so people can walk from a parking garage right to the store they want rather than parking on the Main Street or walking a distance or taking a bus. So they rearranged things and that meant my father no longer had foot traffic. So he had to move where his drug store was to another place because the traffic pattern and everything had changed and what I feel is happening is they're kind of getting back to that old way. There's the Crompton Collective kind of thing and how do we get to things using public transportation and having people live in the city and walking to what they want. So it feels like it's migrating back to what I remember and what I thought of as beautiful.

MC: So you are a librarian where did you go to school to get your education or major?

RS: I went Burncoat Junior and Senior High School. Then I went to University of New Hampshire and I have my master's degree from Columbia University in New York.

MC: And what has been your career path to lead you here to Clark?

RS: Well when I was getting my degree I was dating somebody who was at the American Antiquarian Society so when we married I knew I was going to stay in the city. I worked for a little while at the Worcester Public Library just trying to get any kind of professional position. So that was pre-professional and the way the city worked in those days is so delightful. I worked for a wonderful man whose name was Mr. Mahoney at Holy Cross, one of the finest people to ever walk the earth, just a fine wonderful man. He called a friend of his at the Worcester Public Library and said, “Hey, do you know anyone working down there who's trying to get a job as a librarian we need somebody,” and very nice man whose name was Mr. Lovely who worked at the public library said, “Sure, this person is looking for a job.” So he came down to pick me up and brought me for an interview and then I got hired. That's how I got my first

professional position and in those days I was a cataloger which is in the technical services area and there tend to be more jobs available there because most people who become librarians like the public side of things and a smaller segments do the technical end. I had studied both and so I was able to do whichever. I started as a cataloger and did that work at home. That's what I did at Holy Cross and then I did a different kind of technical job at Worcester State. I'd left Holy Cross when my son was born so that I could stay home. Then I went back part time to Worcester State and then left Worcester State and came here. So for me, my career has been somewhat organized around my children which is fine with me. What kind of work can I get that I can still take care of them.

MC: True true, so this is for the Worcester Women's Oral History Project so what has been your experience as a woman in Worcester?

RS: I'm going to take you to a place that you don't know to ask me. I'm going to use this as an excuse to go there. There's some pictures of me in the Worcester Magazine because with a small group of other women we started something called the Worcester Miss Kicks. We played soccer in 1979 and for you at your age that doesn't sound that remarkable, but very few people played soccer right. I used to see people not from this country playing soccer a lot, but most people didn't know the game at all. When I watched them play I didn't understand the game very much then. When I was first married and had more time because I was only working and didn't have kids and all these other things, I was looking for something to do and I found one friend to play tennis with, but kind of hard to find a good match for tennis. You can only play certain sort of way and it's a short season here unless you belong to an indoor club or something. So when that didn't work out I found this group of people who are just starting this thing called a soccer team and then they didn't end up staying so those of us who remained put together a soccer team and we played for many years. We went on and came in number two in the country for over 30 years. The beautiful thing about Worcester is we needed a place to practice and one of the women on the team worked at Bancroft School so the athletic director there said, "Sure, you guys can practice on our field." So we practiced and had our games at Bancroft School field. They didn't charge us anything they just let us be there. It was incredible and we had lots of people from the city playing. It was wonderful, that's really cool. And one of the women on the team is an artist and she did a really cute logo and somebody's still using that logo. Our team eventually became other things, but somebody is still using our logo. In those days you couldn't buy—there were no cleats for women so you had to go and buy men's cleats. There was no athletic gear like that for women. We had the whole thing, that's exciting really cool. So Worcester, as a woman, when this Worcester Women's History Project began, I may not have it right but I think they were behind some of the work to fix over Mechanics Hall and things like that. I always saw the women in the city as pretty powerful. Not necessarily more so than women elsewhere, but there are certainly a lot of strong women. Again, in my day, when I was young women did a lot of social service volunteer work and that's where I saw women. My mother was part of that group

so she did a lot of volunteer work in the city to make things better and that's my sense of women with using their power. They volunteered to make something better, but compared to other places and other times I don't know. I just know that I met a lot of really strong women.

MC: So I do have a question what major historical events in Worcester have occurred during your life and did they impact you personally?

RS: A little while before I was born was the tornado and that was in 1953 and I was born in 1955 so I was there but it happened on upper Burncoat and we lived on Burncoat. My mother had gone to the doctor in Boston with my brother so there was a babysitter and the babysitter's family was in upper Burncoat. She was here taking care of us not knowing what was happening with her own children. I don't know the details of what happened but the woman managed to get my father and he came home from the drugstore and then she was able to go take care of her kids. It was a huge moment in the city. That tornado really made a huge change and if you look up there you can tell the houses where all the houses are the same age because everything else was destroyed before. That's one major thing. I remember when 290 was built. I remember before it was here and I remember watching them do the construction of it. I remember things like the Harrington & Richardson I think it was called where they made guns for Vietnam when that was on Chandler Street, but those aren't major political things. I know a guy whose name is Ray Raphael did his research at the Antiquarian Society and in his opinion the American Revolution started in Worcester and he has some good evidence for that. Farmers revolting against taxes and who are the women who I should remember? Some of the women who were writers, John Adams' wife and some other people here. I also heard that the Underground Railroad was here but I don't really know any details of that so I don't know Worcester history all that well. There's a man who works in the library here who did work on all the different things invented in Worcester and it's a lengthy book. There are many many inventions but I don't know what they are.

MC: So you talked about the Worcester Miss Kicks, what were some of your other extracurricular activities and involvement that you've done throughout your life here in Worcester?

RS: I love to take classes at Night Life. My buddies and I have taken some cooking classes, stained glass, handwriting analysis, and things like that. Powder Puff mechanics it was called for fixing my car. Soccer took up a lot so that was the main thing.

MC: So you talk about Burncoat and you talk about that little neighborhood how you've pretty much found everything you need there. Are there any other particular areas of the city where you spend or have spent a lot of your time?

RS: Well, it isn't all that far from Burncoat, but when I was first married I lived kind of near the Antiquarian Society so around Highland Street in that area. I used to walk a lot and when I was first divorced I lived in what's called Columbus Park which isn't very far from Clark so I did a lot of walking and exploring the city. I'm laughing at myself because Grafton Street's a bit of a mystery to me. It isn't that far away but the Grafton Street, Massasoit, all of that, route 20 those are all mysterious places. I know Burncoat and in West Side. My grandparents lived on the West Side so we can go out Salisbury Street way so that area is very cool.

MC: Here's kind of a broad question, based on your life experiences what advice would you give to women of today and the future generations.

RS: My poor daughter. There are times when things seem to be shifting politically and places where rights have changed. I have seen them come to places with more freedom and then the pendulum seems to be going the other way and I find that very disturbing. So I'm going to speak about some less significant things right now, but when I was young they didn't think women could run very much so when women played basketball you could only play half-court because nobody, no woman, was capable of running full court. Interesting and I don't like that. It changed as I was getting old enough to play, but the fact that women would have been seen as too weak to run full court and that shift is really important. I know physically we may not be able to lift weights and run this far and lift as much as a man and some women are not equal to all men, that kind of thing. I'm not going to go over all the details of that but it's important to recognize when you have freedoms to hold onto them because you don't want things shifting back to a place where you're restricted. You know, some people will choose to run and some will choose not to, but it's a choice. I would say violence wise I can distinctly remember if a woman were attacked, raped, or that sort of thing, it was the woman's fault for being in the wrong place at the wrong time when I was young. They almost didn't care what the facts were, that was my sense from reading the newspaper in that kind of thing, whereas now that isn't the case. So it's important for women to hold onto the fact that you have a right to be safe and you must demand that and expect that in terms of having your voice with other parts of your body in terms of abortion and that kind of thing. That you pay attention to the shifts that are happening. Do what you believe and then think about not just your own choice but the choice of other women so that you vote your choice and you don't let other people decide that kind of thing for you. That's very personal and I'm not saying that what's right or wrong, but don't let things slip away without you making a decision about it. I'm not particularly interested or fond of politics, but if you are I think it's great if you participate and then really get your voice out. I would say what I see now among young women like the 20-ish age range is they tend to be too apologetic and a little too kind. It's okay to not always be nice if somebody needs to hear a truth and it isn't sweet and pretty that's okay. Don't always apologize, don't always try to take care of everyone else before you take care of yourself and maybe for all ages. We did it in a certain way because we were

raised to and people like me tried to raise our children not to do that, but I still see it so much that they either didn't get the message across or other people of my generation didn't or we gave the same message in a different way. But it's very important for women to get in touch with their power and hold on to it and not lose it for any reason.

MC: Very nice so how do you get through tough times? Just shifting more towards you instead of just you and Worcester how do you get through tough times like kinds of thoughts keep you going forward.

RS: I have a very strong spiritual practice. I remember meeting somebody who said when women get divorced they either do X—and I don't remember what x was—or they find a spiritual practice and that was the one that I did. I don't know if you know this but I'm the one who holds the sacred fires out here once a month. What I know is that no efforts for sustainability will work without a sacred component and I am very devoted to lots of work with sustainability. I teach a course in the sacred, I pray by a fire, or I go to a healer, that kind of thing and that's how I get through tough things.

MC: Could you expand upon your spiritual beliefs if you're comfortable.

RS: Well, I have followed two principal ancestral traditions. I have done a pilgrimage in the Huichol tradition. Huichol Indians live in Mexico and I did a proper pilgrimage where you fast and you go someplace and then you walk a long way without food or water and you make prayers to a sacred site. So, I did a pilgrimage but it took me 12 years to do a 6-year pilgrimage in Mexico and that has informed me in one way. And then before that and then after that, I have found teachers in the Lakota tradition and so I study and work with them. So sweat lodges in Temescal and prayer, that sort of connecting to the Earth, looking for how all of us beings on this planet are connected. I'm no greater than the tree, no more important than that rock, and we all need each other to survive and how do we do this together. But this kind of ties in with me being a librarian because I know that what our species needs to do is to learn how to be together and to share and to be respectful of things even that are other from us. What librarians do is they teach people how to share things like books and lights and chairs and computers and rooms and that sort of thing. And we have stories of the ancestors from many different cultures so we've become more aware of different ways of seeing the world. That's what our species needs or we won't make it. So that's my spiritual tradition and it's my work here.

MC: So this is a question for the Worcester Women's Oral History Project, 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.

RS: Say that again.

MC: Now that they are working to tell a fuller story of the history than has been recorded in the past what should we be sure to include in your opinion. There are many women in this city who do a lot of work that's unsung you know.

RS: My mother and Mrs. Anderson started what is now called Seven Hills and in those days they called it the Worcester Area Association for Retarded Citizens. They started a program for respite care for mothers who had children with special needs and you can't just hire anybody or ask anybody to watch your child under those circumstances so sometimes those women couldn't get to the doctor or the dentist or the grocery store or whatever because of the child. So that's only one example that I know of. There are amazing women all over the city doing small acts of generosity and kindness for other people and for people who are not as well off as they in some fashion and it's wonderful to remember the women. They're not afraid to look at the community and say, "How can I help?" Even if they can't help with everything in a big way they can do the small things with something at church, something for a child next door, helping with Earth Day, or people who collected water samples of the water at Coes Pond to monitor to make sure that the water was in a good in good shape. There are many, many ways that women very quietly support the community and we won't be able to shine the light on all of them, but it's nice to recognize that that is one of the women's ways to participate where and when they can for the good of the community.

MC: This has been Matthew Clauss interviewing Rachael Shea for the Worcester Women's Oral History Project. Thank you very much for allowing me and my partner to interview you today.