

Interviewee: Melanie Bonsu
Interviewers: Shannon Porter and Roslyn Flaherty
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Abstract: Melanie Bonsu is a thirty-four-year-old bi-racial woman who has spent the majority of her life in the Worcester area. She loves Worcester and states it is a big city with a small town feel. Her father is from Ghana and her mother is from Philadelphia, PA. Melanie has a close relationship with her parents to this day and relies on them for a lot of support. She had her first child when she was a senior in college and moved back to Worcester for the support of her parents. She is a single mother of a four-year-old and a twelve-year-old and delights in all of the things that her two boys do. Melanie graduated from Worcester State University with a degree in language and literature arts. She has worked at a digital publishing company as a project manager, at UMASS Memorial in the marketing and communications department, and at Girl Scouts of America as the Fund Development Manager. Melanie enjoys her job with the Girl Scouts and working for a non-profit. She believes the Girl Scouts have a good mission and she likes that she can represent that in her work. Melanie's pride and joy are her children and she speaks very highly of them, and always wanting to be the best role model for them. Melanie is passionate about her job and her children, and is a great role model for women in general.

WW: What is your full name including maiden name and married name if applicable?

MB: It's Melanie Ann Bonsu

WW: When were you born?

MB: 1981

WW: Have you ever been married?

MB: I was married once. Do we have to discuss that?

WW: No we don't

WW: Do you have any children?

MB: I do, I have two boys. One is four and the other is twelve.

WW: What are their names?

MB: Jack is the four year old and Quinton is the twelve year old.

WW: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

MB: Well, when I was younger I had to mark other because they never had multiracial, I never wanted to leave my mother out. My mother is French Canadian from Philly [Philadelphia], and my dad is from Ghana.

WW: Tell us a little bit about your parents

MB: My parents are still together, they both still live in Worcester. My dad worked for the Department of Children and Families for 32 years. He actually got the job the day I was born. He retired two years ago in January so now he's at home. My mother works for a mortgage company, she works at home as well so they kind of want to kill each other. He refuses to work now that he's retired; he's earned his retirement and is enjoying himself.

WW: Where have you lived during your lifetime?

MB: I grew up in Worcester. I graduated from Doherty Memorial High School. I spent my freshman year at Bridgewater State University. I hated it. I ended up transferring to UMASS Boston, and I lived in Boston I loved UMASS Boston. It was like work. Nobody lived there; you handled your business and left. I lived in the South End in Brighton. Then half way through my senior year I moved back to Worcester, I had my first son Quinton, and then I finished up at Worcester State and I've been in Worcester ever since.

WW: What neighborhood did you grow up in?

MB: I originally grew up at the corner of May and June in the west side area I went to May Street School, until I was entering the fourth grade, and we moved to the Worcester/Holden line, which is the northwest side of Worcester, and I went to Nelson Place from there. Forest Grove and then Doherty.

WW: What was your neighborhood like?

MB: Well at the time it was a dead end street so you only drove down it if you lived there. So we used to sled in the middle of the street, lots of kids, it was really fun. When I lived on June Street, obviously a busier street and intersection, so we had a huge backyard and my backyard connected to my best friend's backyard and we used to meet halfway in between, my best friend, Shaun. So there was always lots of kids around, not like these days when you really can't let your kids outside.

WW: How did you come to live in Worcester? How did you family end up here?

MB: My dad came here when he came to the United States in his 20s, because he decided he wanted to be a dentist, and then he realized that he does not—after I think two semesters it was not his forte. I don't think he realized how gross people's mouths really are. He had a business degree when he was in college, he worked in business positions until he got the job at DCF. My mother moved here right after she turned 18, right after she graduated high school. She didn't have the easiest childhood, so she came up here for school as well. They met at a party, six months later they got married, love at first sight, and they have been together ever since.

WW: Have you travelled to Ghana?

MB: I have not. My dad used to go often because he did have a lot of family there. Unfortunately they have passed so I think he just has one brother left. He hasn't been for a few years.

WW: Where in the city do you live now?

MB: I live in the Burncoat area actually. It's very funny because my little ones don't go to the Burncoat schools. Well my little one doesn't go to school yet he goes to preschool, but I don't have my middle school son at Burncoat I have him at Forrest Grove. I like that side. The Burncoat area is still very nice

WW: So you know Worcester pretty well?

MB: Yes, I think one of my colleagues was like, "You're so Worcester it hurts."

WW: Do you have family members that live in the Worcester area?

MB: My brother used to, he now lives in Boston, and then my uncle who is the closest to my dad's age they are like best friends for life, he still lives in Worcester, but other than that no, we don't have any other family.

WW: What challenges do you think the city still faces? Or what would you change about the city?

MB: I would change, I know they are working very hard on changing it. Our downtown needs a very big hug. There is really not much nightlife downtown. There's the Hanover Theatre, which I love, but other than that, there really is no reason to go downtown at night. We do have other vibrant areas like Shrewsbury Street, which I love, the Canal District. I just wish that downtown had more to offer, especially for younger people. It doesn't really affect me now, because I have two kids I'm not going to many places, but I think that that's one thing that they could work on. I also think tying non-profits with for-profits and within the school system is really important.

WW: Have you seen many changes in Worcester over time?

MB: When I was a kid there was this place called The Galleria where I loved going to because they had the best Filenes, and it was Jordan Marsh which then turned into Macy's, then they changed it over to the Fashion Outlets, and now you can drive through where it used to be.

WW: What characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

MB: I think that it's a big city, but also has a small town feel. Like you can run into people that you know. Obviously I go to a lot of places for my job, my colleagues are like, "You know everyone" and I'm like, "No, I met this person here...." So I like that. I think that the colleges have a huge influence on the characteristics of Worcester. Always a huge influx of college kids come fall. The hills obviously are huge.

WW: What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

MB: I have no idea....you know, birth control was invented in Worcester....women's experience...

WW: Where did you go to elementary school?

MB: I went to May Street school from kindergarten through third grade, and then Nelson Place from fourth through sixth.

WW: What was your major in college?

MB: Because I transferred, I ended up having to switch to language and literature arts, which is essentially English except they force you to take a foreign language.

WW: If you could have majored in anything would it have been that?

MB: Well if you ask me when I was 10, I always wanted to go to Temple University. I had my life planned. I was going to go to Temple University and I was going to be a sports broadcaster for basketball. I'm 5'1, I don't know where I go that from. I love professional basketball. I didn't get into Temple. I cried. So I ended up at Bridgewater State [University]. They did have a communications major which was great, but I hated the school so when I switched to UMASS Boston they had English with a focus in PR [public relations], still kind of the same thing—as you can tell I talk a lot. And then I was pretty much done with my English degree when I switched on to Worcester State [University] and they kind of split like the communications was under business aspect and I was not taking any more math classes, business classes. I'm fine in math I just didn't want spend—if I'm paying for it I wanted it to be something I wanted to do. That's how I ended up sticking with the language and literature arts, which was still good. People said, "Do you want to be a teacher?" And I'm like, "No." I have no patience for other people's children, but English I loved it everyone said it's easy, it's English but it's more writing than speaking.

WW: So once you graduated what did you...?

MB: I actually got a job before I graduated because I switched and they didn't take all of my credits from UMASS because it's more schools and I needed fulfill their requirements at Worcester State and of course the Spanish class that I hadn't taken in five years. So I graduated with 146 credits I think, something ridiculous like that. When I was taking my last Spanish class that summer, I took a job at a digital publishing company as a project manager for their largest account for the Worcester location, because I needed a job. I had a two year old and I had student loans coming so... I hated it. It was great experience. It was great it was just not what I wanted to be doing. I think I realized when I had to lay someone off three weeks before Christmas, she was crying—that was just not—I couldn't do it anymore. For-profit was not for me. I had to lay her off. There was no reason to keep her she was dead weight, there was no need to have a second shift, but I realized that was not what I wanted to be doing. So I simply looked for a position in a communications role where I could do a lot of writing, event planning that kind of stuff. I did get a job I worked at UMASS Memorial in the

marketing/communications department. I worked there for about two and a half years until my position was eliminated during—you guys probably wouldn't know this but every couple of years UMASS had a wave of lay-offs with health care reform and costs of health care and paying back and getting reimbursed from the state. Obviously I would rather be cut than some nurse in the ICU because that is just not fair. I was pregnant too, three months pregnant. So I sat back and said what do I like and what am I doing now, or what I was doing, and where I want to go from there, and I realized I still liked working for non-profits, I still like to write, it's not all I want to do. I do like more of the events side, more of the people, meeting people and stuff. So I decided that I wanted to go into fund development and that's where I am now. I love it. I couldn't be more happy that I changed over to that.

WW: What is your official title here?

MB: I am the Fund Development Manager

WW: What year did you graduate from college?

MB: 2005

WW: What was your first job?

MB: My very first job I ever got was at—and it didn't last long—was at Levi's in the downtown fashion outlet. My first day of work, I had the worst stomach bug. I was physically sick and this lady was telling me what to do and I'm looking at the wall of jeans, and I projectile vomited all over the wall of jeans. I never went back, ever, to the point where I wouldn't even go to that end of the mall, if I went to that mall. It was a wall of like perfectly folded jeans. So that was technically my first job, I worked one day. After that I ended up at TJ MAXX, it opened up at the Greendale mall and I worked at TJ MAXX and then my jobs were throughout that mall there. My favorite one at that mall was there used to be an arcade on the first floor, and it was the Dream Machine and my best friend was the assistant manager so it was the easiest job ever. I loved it because I remember going in there when I was a kid, and I would have like five tickets and I worked so hard for those tickets and like yeah you'd get a tootsie roll, so these kids would come up with like nothing and be like, "I really want that" and I'd be like, "Have it I'm not saying no to you, I don't care." And then they went out of business.

WW: So your current job, what does this work mean to you?

MB: I love this job, I love obviously our mission. We're the Girl Scouts. Our mission is to build girls with courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place. I support that through fund development. I handle grants, corporate and foundation relations, the annual fund, the alumni association, all special events, board development committee.

WW: So you have two kids. How do you balance your time and what is your responsibility in terms of housework and childcare?

MB: These children will be the death of me. So I am a single mom which gets tough. But you know, my parents are here. And both of their dads. And they both come from great families. So, obviously a lot of the stuff does fall on me. The four year old is a handful. He's very sweet, but he is a handful. So it's a balance of coming to work—well my day starts I get up first, then the little one gets up, he's not hard to get up it's the twelve year old. "I need five more minutes" No, you don't need five more minutes, if you needed five more minutes you could have gone to bed five minutes earlier last night. So getting them together. Dropping the first one off at preschool, then dropping Q off at Forest Grove which is nice because we live right up the street so I'm always on time to work. And then picking them all up after school, going home, making dinner, doing homework, getting them bathed, and then in bed. And then sometimes at nine I get to actually watch my own tv shows. They're good kids and they're relatively, somewhat easy. As long as they're getting along, you'd think eight years difference they would have nothing to fight about but they somehow find things to fight about.

WW: I bet.

MB: Like every morning when I'm just like I just got to the car why are you fighting now?

WW: Have you found a technique that helps you balance everything? Any strategies?

MB: That nothing is permanent. You can't, you gotta laugh. It may seem like a disaster but so many other people have it so much harder than me. Like I said I'm fortunate that I have my family here. Their families are here. I look back and think that my mom and dad, their families weren't here. I didn't have grandparents growing up so they couldn't be like, "Hey, I need a night off. Can you take my kids?" And I can say that, like my four year old is going to my mother's tonight. I am very, very blessed to have them. So many people have it so much worse that you have to always remember that. I got up this morning, got myself out of bed, how many people can't get themselves out of bed in the morning.

WW: What do you think are some of the pros and cons of the path that you've chosen?

MB: Well somebody called me a professional beggar once [laughs]. I am funding a mission, I am a salesperson but I'm not selling a product, I'm selling a mission. The pros would be obviously, that I like doing good work. The cons would be the pay. You know it's non-profit, we have to deliver on our mission more than we have to ensure that our employees are living large. So my life journey, everyone is like, "Wow, wasn't it difficult having a kid at 22?" and it was. will say that, but I'm a lot more tired at 34, than I was at 22. I could function on a couple of hours of sleep then when, now, it's like I need my seven hours. Not very pretty.

WW: Do you have any regrets with anything?

MB: No, you can't live with regrets.

WW: Do you consider yourself active politically?

MB: I vote. I do make a huge effort to always vote in any kind of election. I try to keep up in any current politics, the city and on a national level. I can tell you my first—I will never forget this, my first presidential election was the year [George W.] Bush won the first time. And I had to get an absentee ballot from Worcester. My roommate got his and I didn't get mine and I was so upset. I was like, "Where is my absentee ballot?!" I remember this. This was the year they had to do the recount.

WW: Oh, yes

MB: I also remember because they had the presidential debate at UMass Boston and they had to lock down the school, we got out of school for two days, it was great. I was so, so upset that I couldn't vote. And it came like three months later because they sent it to—I lived on Waltham Street and they ended up sending it to Waltham, instead of Boston. I was so devastated, I was like you ruined it for me! But of course I continued to vote. So yes, I do think I'm involved. I voted on Tuesday.

WW: So you work for a nonprofit now, are you involved in any other volunteer or community work?

MB: Yup! My baby left from junior high so I just had to step down my vice president's post last spring at Nelson Place, and he tells me there's no PTO at Forest Grove, I don't think I believe him. I am the communications chair for the Worcester Area Women and Development, I am an

advisory member for the Rainbow Child Development Center which is where I used to work as their development person.

WW: I volunteered there.

MB: Oh! For Kim?

WW: It was a couple of years ago.

MB: With the preschool program? My office was right above the preschool, whenever I had a bad day I would go down and play with the little kids and they were so funny, I could hear them on the playground. And I am on the planning committee for the Worcester Women's Leadership Conference with the chamber, I think that's all I do. Yes, I haven't volunteered to do anything else.

WW: Yes, that's a lot. Do you have a religious affiliation? Has it played a role in your life?

MB: I have zero religious affiliation. When my parents got together they like church shopping, my dad was raised Catholic, and they ended up picking the Wellesley Methodist Church on Main Street, which is actually gorgeous. If you ever look for a place for a wedding that hall is stunning, I actually had my Brownie troop there when I was a kid. So we used to go there when I was little. One, my mom told me not to sing because I have a horrible singing voice, I'm extremely tone deaf, and two, there used to be a Friendly's on Highland Street that we would go to every Sunday after church, and she would not let me get chocolate ice cream because she was afraid I would get it on my dress and she would only put me in pink or purple, so I could only have ice cream that color coordinated with what I was wearing. So if I was wearing purple I could have black raspberry or vanilla, or if I was wearing pink I could have strawberry or vanilla but she never let me have chocolate ice cream. I'll never let her live that down. So yeah, and then we just stopped going. Like their lives got really busy and we started playing sports and I just, I'm not a religious person at all.

WW: Were you involved in Girls Scouts when you were little?

MB: I was a Brownie.

WW: Me too.

MB: I think that's like everyone's answer. My mother, she was like you're going to be a Girl Scout and she went nuts, I had the Beanie, I had the jumper, the little sock ties, and when they

actually did the ribbon cutting for this building I was the Girl Scout greeter. Strangest thing. I did it for two years and then I was like nah, I don't want to do it again. Because they made us do this thing, we met in the church, it was so scary. It was scary to a child at nighttime, an empty church building. It just wasn't for me.

WW: So we're going to move on to health. How have health issues impacted your life, or those in your family?

MB: In my immediate family I have been very blessed. We have had pretty good health. My dad is, oh god, sixty six, he'll be sixty six, and my mother is very healthy. My brother and I haven't really had any health issues, I have never broken anything. Oh, I did have a broken cheek bone once.

WW: Oh?

MB: It's a long story. My kids are very healthy, we have been lucky with health issues.

WW: What is your experience in accessing good quality, affordable healthcare?

MB: Well I think because I worked at the hospital I know what you have to advocate for yourself. I think the biggest challenge is finding a primary care [physician] that you like and actually go to. You know, it makes sense. They aren't the highest paid ones. I can see why they don't want to go into primary care as opposed to a specialty. I think if you stay up on things, if you advocate for yourself. If you do preventative maintenance you should be in good shape. You can't just not go to the doctors.

WW: Are you responsible for anyone's health but your own? Your kids?

MB: Yes, my kids.

WW: How do you get through tough times? What kinds of thoughts keep you going?

MB: Thoughts or

WW: What do you do?

MB: I think I usually, well, I swear a lot. I'm a very high strung person, [laughs], like bad. My mom's like you have such a large vocabulary and those are the words you choose? Yup. They're good words. I think, well I said I was high strung, so I try to stay focused on the long run and

what's going to happen. Again, nothing is permanent and you are responsible for your own happiness. So I have to focus on that and I can't wallow in misery when I have two other people that I am responsible for, and I don't want to be a poor role model for them. I don't want them to see work is stressing my mom out, "Oh my god, I don't want to get a job when I'm older." Because I don't want them to think that life is tough. I don't want them to think I'm weak either. So that's my biggest—it's not the best thing in the world, but I try not to be emotionally upset around them, and they're always around.

WW: How do you define success in your life?

MB: In my life or in general?

WW: Either one.

MB: I think as long as you're happy with what you're doing and you feel good about yourself, and you can go to bed at night and not feel guilty that you're harming anyone then you're a successful person. You don't need to have everything you want, there are things you want and things you need. As long as your needs are met, you're successful.

WW: What advice would you give to women today and of future generations?

MB: See this is where I didn't prepare, I would normally give you some Girl Scout quote, [phone rings] I did not prepare for this. Give me a minute to think about that and let me get the phone.

WW: That's okay.

MB: It's a difficult thing when your admin is in Ohio. Okay, we have to come back to that one because I don't know.

WW: Okay. We can do that. So we're working to tell a fuller story of the history of women rather than what has been recorded in the past. Is there anything we should be sure to include?

MB: I don't have anything. You're not posting this whole audio thing online are you?

WW: We are transcribing it.

MB: Perfect. Make me look good. There are cookies with your name on it. [laughs]

WW: Is there anything you want us to know about you? What's your favorite musical group or song? Dance?

MB: [laughs] No, I'm actually pretty boring. I don't really do much. These kids suck the life out of me.

WW: Do you have any hobbies?

MB: Yeah, no. I think my life is so for the kids. I remember when I had my older one and I was like I need to get something going in my life, like he doesn't need me anymore. Well, my four year old, he still needs me, but yeah, no, I don't have any hobbies. I just hang out with my kids.

WW: Do you do any events?

MB: Okay sure. Development events or Girl Scout events?

WW: Both.

MB: Okay both. So for me, my two fundraising events, I do one in Worcester and one in Holyoke, and we along with the cookies, in the Worcester one it's Girl Scout cookie season it's called Fork it Over. It's our cookie culinary competition. We invite area chefs in to make either an appetizer or dessert with Girl Scout cookies as an ingredient. They don't have to be the main ingredient, they just have to be in there somewhere and then we invite celebrity judges to come in and judge, best in sweet and best in savory and then the attendees vote on best in sweet and best in savory. And you would be absolutely amazed—[looks at recipe booklet] I think this is last year's winners not the year before—absolutely amazed, with what people make. I can tell you Pepper's won for both of theirs. They did a Samoa candy bacon and raspberry cheesecake domes, this guy out from Athol did a peanut butter chicken and waffles with a peanut butter and he used maple syrup.

WW: Wow!

MB: Seminoma did a sweet spicy truffle slider, I'm trying to think of one I loved, oh Cafe Reyes which hasn't even been open for a year did a Samoa roast bacon on Cuban toast. So that's what I usually do for events, those are our two fundraising events. Fundraising events aren't the best way to raise money but they're good advertisement. That event I raised probably about \$40,000 between the two of them and it cost me two grand. So the overhead is so cheap, so that is always a plus. People have those huge sit down dinners, but you're going to charge \$100 a ticket, but it

costs you \$65 to put it on. For the Girls Scouts, we have few signature events that I, my favorite one just happened a few weeks ago it's called Geek is Glam. We host it at WPI. It's an all-day STEM event for girls in grades four through eight. So they come in, they pick four workshops throughout the day and then there's a hands on expo they can also go to. They can fly drones, toss something with their animals. We had 482 girls this year, we love it. That's a huge one we do it's a huge undertaking. WPI is a great supporter for us, helping us find space and centers. We do a couple smaller ones, our focus right now is K-5. There's historically a trend that you hit junior high, high school and it's not cool to be a girl scout anymore. So they drop off, our number of enrolled girls drops off tremendously. So we focus a lot on K-5 right now. We have some grant-funded programs, we have two in Worcester Public Schools one of them is a level four prep, the other one is level two, very low income. They're after school programs, 22 girls in each program. We have a staff member that goes out once a week and does, helps with personal wellness and seems fit for that.

WW: Mhmm.

MB: We do a lot of that and we get grant money to carry that because a lot of the times these girls wouldn't generally join Girl Scouts. There's naturally a general shortage in adult volunteers, so we end up with girls on waiting lists who want to be in a troop, but we don't have any adults to take the troop. And their parents can't run the troop so these offerings make it so that girls have the experience without actually having to be in a troop and it might work better because they're already at the after school program.

WW: Okay! Awesome, that's all we have. Anything else you want to add?

MB: No, thank you so much.

WW: Thank you!

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