

Interviewee: Dr. Melinda J. Boone

Interviewers: Andrew Lampi and Alina Schmidt

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Location: Worcester Superintendents Office, 20 Irving Street, Worcester, MA

Transcribers: Andrew Lampi and Alina Schmidt

Overseen by: Dr. Carl Robert Keyes, Assumption College

Abstract: Dr. Melinda J. Boone is an African American woman born in 1959, from Norfolk, Virginia who became Worcester's Superintendent of Schools in 2009. Much of her identity originates from her perseverance through struggles over the course of her life. These struggles include racial prejudice throughout her education, as well as her being a woman in a job many of her colleagues assumed was male-oriented. Though she certainly had difficulties and troubling times with her family, including the loss of her husband, both her family and faith provide sources of inspiration and comfort for Melinda. Her past experiences and morals are what led to her current position as leader of all public schools in the city of Worcester. In this position, although she did not feel welcomed upon entering, her strong dedication both to self and community led her to aspire to great things and allowed her to institute policies to help Worcester Public Schools do the same. Commenting on her entrance into Worcester, her words sum up her entire experience in one phrase: "Some people said I came with three strikes...I said no, I came with bases loaded, the only place to go was a home run."

MB: Multitask so...

AL and AS: [laugh]

AL: Alright so, [formal interview begins] We are completing a city wide oral history of the lives of Worcester (MA) women, aiming to collect stories from a wide range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics and community involvement. And today we want to focus on your experiences with the creation of your identity. And we want to thank you for your help with this very important project.

MB: Sure.

AL: And do we have your permission, Dr. Boone, to record your oral history today February 28th, 2013?

MB: Yes.

AL: Thank you. [to Alina] Do you want to go first?

AS: Alright, the first question that we have for you is what is your full maiden name and if applicable, your married name.

MB: Melinda Dolores Jones Boone.

AL: When were you born?

MB: On [], 1959.

AS: Have you ever married?

MB: Yes, I'm a widow.

AS: Okay. Do you have any children?

MB: I have two daughters, one who is—teaches middle school in Virginia—in Norfolk Virginia, and a graduate of Hampton University. And my younger daughter is a senior at Hampton University, scheduled to graduate this May, and her major is communication disorder, speech pathology—following in her mom's footsteps.

AL: What cultures and ethni-ethnicities do you identify with?

MB: African American.

AL: Okay.

AS: And then, could you tell us a little about your parents?

MB: Sure, I am the only child of my late parents, Locksley and Barbara Jones, and I was fortunate enough to also have been raised—primarily have been raised by my grandparents. My mother and father married and my father was in the Air Force, my mother was in nursing school and so she set out the semester that I was born, and went back to nursing school and around this time my father got out of the Air Force and so it was a natural thing for my grandmother—my grandparents to provide child care for me. My father was working shift working when my

mother finished nursing school. She too, you know, early on being a nurse she had work. So it was just a natural place to be, and even as my parents established their own household, they again—for child care is spent most of my time with my grandparents. So I lived with my parents really together for about one month and we moved to New Jersey when I was four years old: didn't like it, I had always been with my grandparents, I had never been to a babysitter and all of those things and so I wanted to come back home and I did come home. And lived with them you know all the way, my grandfather died when I was a junior—when I was a sophomore in college, my grandmother passed right after I had graduated from high school—I meant from college excuse me, from my undergraduate program and I was finishing my first year of graduate school, and, and she passed and my parents actually divorced when I was in first grade and people have often asked me 'well you know that divorce impacted you' and I say 'not really, cause I was with my grandparents so.'

AS: Mhm.

MB: But I, because of the way in which my grandparents raised me and the closeness of our family, I was always close to my mother and father, and so never, never missed out on a relationship with them at all. And even as my grandparents passed, and I became an adult and married and established my family, they had a strong relationship with my daughters and my mother passed away in 2003 and my father in 2007 and so it-it-it was a great opportunity because Christmas mornings after I was married and, and had children, included my mother, my stepfather, and my father, always for, for breakfast on Christmas morning there with the grandkids and it-it all worked out okay.

AS: That sounds great.

AL: Yeah. [laughs] Where have you lived during your life?

MB: I have let me think, I have lived all of my life in Virginia and in Suffolk, Virginia, actually were I was born and raised even though I worked at other places around there and that was, had been my residence until I moved to Worcester in 2009, the summer of 2009 to assume this position as superintendent. I did spend almost two years in Champagne, Illinois when I was in graduate school for my masters, but Virginia has been my home all my life.

AL: Mhm.

AS: What was the neighborhood like generally, in Virginia, that you grew up in?

MB: It was interesting; living in the South, we, we of course had a lot of segregated neighborhoods. You know, they, they were segregated by race. Not necessarily ethnicity but primarily by race, and, but they were, they were strong middle class neighborhoods of working professionals and-and working people in general, with a mix of education, and experiences and they were close-knit communities, we still today know people from the neighborhood that I grew up in and I lived in one neighborhood until I was in third grade, and then we moved into the city, time was accounted but it was all Suffolk.

AL: Mhm.

MB: And again, moved around the corner from some cousins and created new relationships with other children and, and adults in the neighborhood. So always a-a close-knit community and-and just, just a loving and a nurturing community and that was during the times when neighbors looked out for the kids and if you did something great they'd tell your parents and if you did something wrong they'd tell you and tell your parents.

AL and AS: [laugh]

AL: So you came to live in Worcester by being offered the Superintendent's Office, could you tell us about that?

MB: Sure, it was interesting, my husband passed away, it'll be 8 years next month—in March—and I had done, I had some great experiences and actually by the time he had passed away we were thinking about applying for a couple of different superintendencies, but when he passed, my younger daughter was in eighth grade, and the one thing she asked when she said 'Mom, I know one day you gonna do that superintendent thing'—you know how you young people, how you all talk.

AS: Mhm. [laughs] How we all talk.

MB:'and do that superintendent thing.' and she said 'I just ask that wherever I start high school, I can finish.' And so that was not a challenge for me at all. That certainly we have an opportunity in our lifetime to change careers and jobs but you only get one time to do high school. So I did not pursue any superintendencies during her high school. I did do a couple that were nearby that would not have created disruption in her life, but wasn't successful with those. But at the—so it became a really great opportunity for us her senior year when, when I was approached by the search committee—search firm, that was conducting a search for the superintendent in Worcester. So they apparently had, had heard my name and, and sought me out

to have conversations with them and eventually I agreed to apply for the position and, and emerged through that. But I was fortunate in that when I—even when I told the search firm that if the—if this district was looking for a superintendent to start before the end of the 2008-9 school year, then I would not pursue it at all because it wasn't negotiable for daughter.

AL: Mhm.

MB: And I wasn't going to interrupt her senior year and miss out on those key activities and everything. And so fortunately, the, the school committee felt very comfortable with the interim superintendent, and when I was offered the job, they said it was fine for me to start at the beginning of the next school year, which was July 1st, of 2009. And so that gave me a chance to do-to do some transition visits. I spent a week a month in Worcester, from February through May, and then I moved here in May of 2009.

AL: Okay.

MB: Let me also say that what made it a natural transition was that my older daughter had just bought her first place and she was teaching school...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ...so she was ready to move out, and my younger daughter was preparing to go to college. It was just that natural transition time that, so it was right for all of us.

AL: Mhm, yeah.

AS: What challenges do you think this city faces?

MB: The key-the key challenges in Worcester, related to its transition from an industrial city with lots of factory driven manufacturing and everything that-that it had been known for, and not unlike many Northeastern cities that are making that transition. So I think that's part of the greatest need of how do we as a community celebrate and build upon our legacy, our history of having been an industrial city. But how do we position ourselves to really be a thriving city in the 21st century, when we know that we are living in an information age and advanced manufacturing is what's happening it's not just simply about going to the job and being present and doing lots of physical labor but it really is about the literacy, numeracy and analytical skills that people bring to those jobs and so how do we really build a bridge between our heritage as an industrial city, and what the 21st century demands for its employees, and what people want in a

community that they live in? I mean we look at the revitalization that's happening here in Worcester and we see what's happened to downtown and- and the Main Street areas and some of those things. And we are at the right place and the right time to be thriving like that, but the community has to fully embrace our intellectual hub with all of our colleges and universities in the city. It also has to embrace the strong medical research and training as well as the service delivery of medicine, and healthcare in the city and embrace what's new in advanced manufacturing, and-and where the jobs of today and tomorrow versus how do we hold on to what had been.

AL: What...Can you elaborate on some of the changes that you've seen over your time in Worcester?

MB: Oh sure, I mean just in the four short years that I've been here, I've seen so much change particularly in the city working on its appearance. For example, lots of the sidewalk and street repairs. I remember the first time I drove into the city—well this end of the city, I had been here for my initial interview but it wasn't—I didn't have to come through the downtown area, and-and-and I remember driving down Belmont Street and it was full of potholes...

AL: [laughs]

MB: ...and it was just raggedy. I was trying to get down to Plantation [Street] to get over to the Beechwood [Hotel] and I was like 'Oh my gracious, this is a raggedy place!'

AL and AS: [laughs]

MB: And I remember thinking about that. And so now when you travel down Belmont Street, within the last year, that project has finally has been completed; where you see new sidewalks you see a street that's been repaved. And not just with blacktop on it but fully dug up and refurbished and then you begin to see as you approach Plantation [Street] and continue into, right up the line with Shrewsbury [Street], across Lake Ave and all of that. You see new streetscape, you see new streetlights, you see the median is, is done differently, and it's beginning to look like a vibrant city. The gateways, the entrances into the city as well (???), along Route 9 up through Belmont [Street]...

AL and AS: Mhm.

MB: ...or 146 or them, you're beginning to see not that landscape of empty factory buildings, or just that look, that, that industrial cities would tend to have after they are no longer thriving.

We're really seeing welcoming gateways into the city and, and so you see that across what's happened. So it's the physical piece, we see, you know, revitalization of, of libraries, and making sure that that's thriving, the-the whole, the-the-the piece of the oval, the ice skating rink...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ...that was opened on the common behind city hall this year, was-was a great opportunity for drawing people downtown. The whole theater district, with what's happening with the Hannover Theatre, and restaurants and things around that and celebrating—it's-it's so much of what we're seeing. You go down Shrewsbury Street and you see the same thing where the medians and the street and the-and the lighting has all changed and what's happened with the canal district. And we see, neighborhood by neighborhood and sector around the city we see it changing. I remember the first time I came to Worcester, I was standing in the Marriott [Hotel] Courtyard for that transition visit, and the Gateway Park was under construction, with WPI [Worcester Polytechnic Institute], and now that's fully operational and we-we just see those changes. What happened at Institute Park, and the revitalization of that park and-and the new performance shell. So you see the evidence of the city transforming itself as a place where people would want to be...

AS: Mhm.

MB: ...various activities. So I think we on that right path of-of what's happening and for me, that's part of what I'm focusing on with the schools. How do we raise the schools up to a level to match what's happening in the streetscapes.

AL: Okay. [To Alina]: Can I just get a follow-up real quick?

AS: Mhm.

AL: Can you tell us a little bit more about how—what you're thinking of doing to bring up the schools along with the city?

MB: Sure, when I came, I initiated a State of the Schools annual message to the community, where I talk about what our focus is, what we're successful in accomplishing and where our greatest needs are going forward, and we know that we have to prepare all of our students for today and tomorrow's jobs—today's jobs—tomorrow's jobs. And so what does the workforce look like? We know also that a higher performing school system is certainly an enhancement to economic development within the city. So we want to be able to showcase our best and brightest

schools and students as part of the economic development, but my overarching goal is to ensure that every child is college and career ready, and I say both because when you look at entrance requirement for jobs, and the entrance requirements for colleges, they are very much the same now. So gone are the days of being able to separate the two...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ...We have to have that same level of infrastructure. But additionally, you know, I respect the parent's right to choose, whether, you know, public, private, parochial, or charter. I want to position the Worcester Public Schools at a place where they will want to choose us...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ...That we aren't the place where we could do something else. And so we've done everything such as trying to—well not trying to, we've actually changed our graduation requirements with the entering ninth grade class of the fall of 2013, to align with the MASS Corp graduation requirements, that are among the more rigorous set of courses and expectations for graduation. And we think that's important because if our students will leave this city at some point, potentially, for college and for employment, and we want them to be successful. And so when they are competing with others that have had different experiences, then they are at a disadvantage. And so we need to be able to address that...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ...and I think it gets to the whole piece of what's changed in this city—to is the-is the demographics of the city. It is a—it has always been a diverse city, and look at this desk [gestures to her desk behind her] it was built in the WPA era, I always call that the original stimulus one...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ...but it's hand carved, and it's a strong part of our heritage here. The immigrants of 2013, don't look like the immigrants of 1913, but again it adds so much value to our—to the city, and so making sure that every student, our best and brightest and high end learners are challenged and have opportunities as well as our students who are English-language-learners, who are coming to this city for the first time, and this country often for the first time. And introducing them to our language, our culture, while respecting and embracing the culture that they've grown up in and still live in, and addressing the whole language issue and-and their ability to be college

and career ready. So everything that we are doing is about aligning the resources, raising the level of expectations and the rigor, and having it so that there are not a few schools that are stellar schools in Worcester being the exception but where all of our schools are exceptionally strong. And people would want to, to have their children educated in the Worcester Public Schools and employers then would be able to locate here because they know that their employees would be willing to live and work, and-and educate their children in this community.

AS: Okay, thank you. What do you think women's experiences in Worcester, or in Virginia have gen-have been generally?

MB: Gender issues are something that we've dealt with in this country for a very long time.

AS: Mhm.

MB: You know, even-even right here in the Northeast, the whole women's suffrage movement and-and the ability to-to have voice through a vote; the ability to serve as chairmen of boards in corporations, to be CEO's of those organizations, and superintendents, and college presidents. And so the role of women over time has really emerged, and-and it has strengthened and I think the-therein creates a challenge of what had been status quo, primarily a white male dominated culture in these United States. And so the idea of-of women holding a strong place in the workplace, beyond being nurses and teachers primarily, and moving into the corporate rooms and into the military leadership and everything else has-has really moved this country in a-in a positive direction. And so with that movement have come a number of challenges: equal access, comparable pay for comparable work, taking away or moving away from stereotypes or-or things around women who choose to work and also have families and you know, how do you appropriately support and-and accommodate women in that role. And so, you know I look at even in the superintendence in the four years that I've been here, the room has changed. I'm part of the Urban Superintendence Network and in the larger State Superintendence Network, and I have seen over these four years, a number of women who are serving as superintendents. We-we are now almost outnumbering the men in the room.

AL: Mhm.

MB: And there are, there are a number of schools of thought as to why we've gotten to that piece but a big piece of it is women tended to be more of the instructional leaders, through the classroom, through assistant principalships, principalships, and the work that they did in central offices around curriculum and instruction; and superintendents now have to be strong instructional leaders, not just—you know you have to be great fiscal managers and operational

managers, but we have to know instruction and bring that to the table, and I think that is one of the things that has cracked that ceiling for women across the country in superintendence.

AL: Did you have any difficult transitions in moving from childhood to adulthood?

AS: [coughs]

MB: No, I can't really say I had difficulties in moving from childhood to adulthood. I think that was the beauty of being raised by-by grandparents, because, they were-they were even more mature than my parents.

AL: Mhm.

MB: And so different life experiences, but my grandfather was a high school principal, my grandmother was a stay at home wife and mom. And it was interesting, they-they were always so progressive. So even though my friend's parents were the ages of my parents, they looked to my grandparents almost as the mentors in-in raising me and what-what happened. And so you know, a lot of times, people will ask "well, what are the Field's doing?" that, my grandparent's last name was Field. And said "well-well if-if Mr. and Mrs. Field are doing it then we, it's probably okay."

AS: [coughs]

MB: And my grandparents weren't stuck in that place of, you know, the grandparents sometimes would-would, during that time, would-would keep a child home...

AS: [coughs]

MB: ... "no you can't go out, you can't go to this school dance, you can't whatever" but I think because my grandfather...

AS: [coughs]

MB: ... was the principal...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ...he, he was at a different place and-and they were just progressive, and so I didn't miss out on anything...

AS: [coughs]

MB: ...growing up that trans—helped me transition into, into adulthood and I think just...

AS: [coughs]

MB: ...my life experiences with him positioned me well to do that.

AL: Mhm.

AS: I'm sorry. [referring to coughing]

AL: [laughs]

MB: No its okay! Drink, drink. [motions to water bottle]

AS: [laughs] Did you find that your grandfather was a driving force in your becoming involved in education?

MB: [chuckles] You know, that's the irony of it. I declared, when I-I knew I wanted to be a speech language pathologist, from about fourth, fifth grade I knew that. And that's what I pursued. As I got into my degree program, I- I've always loved science, my grandfather was a science major, my-my grandmother of course cooked and sewed and so there was that-that other (____???) piece you know, with us. And she was an astute business woman, she owned some property, so I learned a lot of that through her too. And it was interesting, in that, because their-their, daughter who I-I count as a sister, she's 11 years older but, we-we grew up together, was an elementary school librarian, my great aunt and my grandparents—grandfather's sister, was a-a history teacher and guidance counselor, my grandfather of course being a principal. And with the exception of my mother, and father, my mother being a nurse, again that science and medical background, and my father, you know, having been through the Air Force and-and-and...

AS: [coughs]

MB: ...technical background, I vowed that I wasn't going to do anything in education because my godmother, was a-was a teacher. You know, every—a lot of people around me were educators and I was going to do something different.

AS: Mhm.

MB: And so, when I pursued my major, I fell in love with audiology: the science of hearing, and, and, servicing and supporting people with hearing disorders, and-and rehab with that. And it really linked to my—and I took my major with a pre-med emphasis...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ...because I was not gonna do anything in education. And you know, I had a decision to make as-as I was graduating from college: would I apply for medical school? And then the time that that would take me to complete that process, and I wanted to marry my high school sweetheart, and I kept thinking, "Well if I do medical school, that's gonna extend the time before I think I'm ready to get married, or able to get married" and so I opted for the graduate school in audiology. And so that I, you know after I finished that program I did come home and marry my high school sweetheart. And it was interesting because I was thinking I was going right into clinical audiology. In the early 80's, when I finished that program the number of clinical audiology positions were limited. And so I was really competing for just a few, and-and folks who were in those positions weren't leaving, and they weren't growing at that rate in the area. And so that's how I found myself...

AS: [coughs]

MB: ...in schools as a speech therapist. For me that stop gap, until I got into audiology; and I, you-you know as soon as I started in that work, people asked me if I had ever thought about administration in education and I said "Oh absolutely not, I'm just here until I get into an audiology position." Needless to say, almost 30 years later, I realized that education was where I was destined to be and that's my niche. And the interesting piece is: what my grandparents taught me that prepared me for education that I didn't understand at the time was that the difference between success and failure for most people is opportunity. And I used to watch graduates of my grandfather's high school come back and visit him and talk with such pride of the relationships they had with him, and the difference that he had made in their lives, and everything such as buying a winter coat for someone going to school for the—college for the first time. Or books for people (____???)...

AS: [coughs]

MB: ...who was my boyfriend at the time, my husband—and became my husband. They bought him his initial drafting equipment when he went to college, because his undergraduate degree was in electronics. And so when, when you start thinking about all that, I realized that, that's what educators do. We fill—we help close that gap between success and failure by creating opportunities. And so even though my goal was not to do anything in education, I was well prepared with that mindset from my grandparents, to do education. I think that's why I've stayed and love it.

AL: Okay, so we're gonna switch—shift focus a little bit...

MB: Okay

AL: ...we're gonna talk about some health stuff. How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

MB: You know, just last week, I presented a, a message for black history at UMASS Memorial Hospital here in the city and the title of my speech that day was "Health and Wellness, the Essential Key to Success for African Americans in the 21st Century." Like all other folks, I've, I have family members with a strong history of diabetes—type two diabetes, hypertension—high blood pressure, cancer, strokes, you know, the full—heart disease—the full gambit.

AS: [coughs]

MB: And one of the things that I've learned, you know, in especially having an interest in medical issues and as I've taken courses and continued to work even in education and understand those clear connections, that we have to make some lifestyle choices, so that we can take the best possible care of ourselves. And that includes healthy eating, active lifestyles, not smoking, social drinking: not binge drinking or drinking to the point of alcoholism. And so when you think about all of those things, is the, you have to make those choices and—it was interesting, just a couple of weeks prior to my husband passing, I had decided that I would start Weight Watchers because you know, you-you get your family going, you're married, your—you-you build your home...

AS: Mhm.

MB: ...you got your kids, your career is going well, and you get comfortable. And so then you get lax on things like exercise, and-and you know, you-you eat according to your ability, you

know, you're able to feed your family and you know you got out and so you enjoy those things. And sometimes you don't pay close enough attention to the signs and signals of-of perhaps moving into a less than healthy lifestyle. My husband's family—late husband's family had a-a significant history of hypertension—high blood pressure, and type two diabetes. So much so that his grandmother was a double amputee before she passed, his uncle died one day before his 50th birthday, having been an amputee, on dialysis, and complications from diabetes. Just recently when I was visiting Virginia, at Thanksgiving, just buried one of his cousins, just slightly younger than he would have been if he was still living—my husband was 47 when passed—and you know, who again died from complications of diabetes, amputations, strokes, heart attacks, dialysis, you know the full gambit, young people. And so I watched my husband and self, both of us, putting on weight, and even though he didn't have diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, he was fine—he died from a blood clot—but he had a condition, Sarcoidosis, which is an auto-immune deficiency, and impacts his upper respiratory—impacted his upper respiratory condition. And so I said you know—and I watched my younger daughter, who was beginning to put on weight—she had a hip condition and had to have surgery when she was in fifth grade, twice in that year, and so she was 18 months totally non-weight bearing on that leg other than walking on crutches, which she went through a growth spurt, couldn't work out, still-has still had limited impact. And so she put on weight, and I realized, “you know our family is not beginning to look healthy, and I don't want to be a diabetic like my parents, I know my children are getting ready to be at risk for diabetes, because of family history.” And you know, and I looked at my husband putting on weight and I said, “Okay, let me be a model for the family,” so I had started Weight Watchers. The first time in my life I had really done any weight control. And two weeks later, he passed away, and then I had-I had a decision to make: “Was I doing this for my health, or was I just doing it for what I thought was gonna help him and everything else?” And so I continued, and so here I am now, eight years later, I have—you can look at that picture [motions to picture on mantle in office] that family picture on that- on the fireplace- the mantle there was taken eight months before my husband passed. And so you can see me now, I'm probably closer to 60 pounds lighter than I was in that picture. And I never put any of that weight back on, and understanding—you know I eat what I want to eat but I can do that because I work out, I watch portion size-control, I certainly absta-eliminate drinking regular drinks and sodas and those things, and from the foul sweet-teeth..

AS: Mhm.

MB: ...full of sugar. And so I don't do those things but I do desserts and things in moderation, I limit fried foods and one of the most important things is to have an active lifestyle with it and so you know, health and-and awareness of health in these lifestyle changes are critical for me.
[pause]

AS: Alright...

MB: ...I wanna be around to watch my granddaughter get beyond her third birthday which is next month, so you know all these things.

AL: [laughs]

AS: Okay, so now we're gonna switch to politics and community involvement.

MB: Mhm.

AS: Do you consider yourself politically active?

MB: Yes, I vote...

AS: Alright.

MB: ...and yes I pay attention to campaigns, whose elected, because those are the people that will set policy for the community...

AS: Mhm.

MB: ...for the nation, for the state. And so from that perspective, I am politically active, but I have also made a conscious decision, since I moved to Massachusetts—you know one of the things people ask me is they say, "Did anybody tell you that politics in Massachusetts is an Olympic sport?"

AS: Mhm. [laughs]

MB: And that is so true. But I intentionally have not declared a party affiliation on my voting roll-registration...

AS: Mhm.

MB: ...simply because as a public servant, too often, the community feels that they own you in the positions when you are a public servant. And I have certainly my own personal philosophies, and-and-and interests but I also tend to vote with the person that I think is-would deliver best on

the policy agenda that-that we need at that time. And so I also do not sign papers for people seeking to become candidates for elected office, nor do I contribute to local or state campaigns. And I have to do that because I'm the superintendent of almost 25,000 students and I have diverse races, ethnic groups, religious affiliations, political beliefs. And so I have to vote my conscience in the booth but I also need not to have my personal choices become the headline for the work and-and imply the headline for the work I do. So I've made some of those conscious decisions which in this community have caused some to raise their eyebrows because they'll talk about my predecessors who did these things and I work very effectively with local officials and at the state and—local, state, and national levels—but I intentionally draw that line around what my public support will be.

AS: Mhm. And then, have you ever been involved in volunteer/community work? And do you implement that in your schools?

MB: Oh yeah. I've-I've been involved in volunteer work since I was a youngster.

AS: Mhm.

MB: Again part of what I'd-I'd learned from my grandparents, and volunteering is something that I always did, something that I'm very proud of. I'm a member of a-a number of boards and things but—United Way being one, I've been this a-a—for a long time I—particularly when I was working at the classroom and central office level in some of my jobs I was a-had been a volunteer for Special Olympics. I volunteer a great deal through church and faith based work, which is very important to me. And so yeah, volunteerism is-is important, and we-we support what happens with volunteer activities. And so you'll look at events that our students are involved in and we have a very active focus on volunteering. I have a superintendent-student advisory, and I listen to the voice of those 35 high school students on a monthly basis as we think about the work that we are doing. And I realized that we're in-we are in an era now where we have another generation of youth who are emerging, who are very civic-minded and they seek out and want the opportunities to volunteer, and to support their communities. And so it's exciting to be able to nurture that.

AL: Okay, You said that faith is important to you...

MB: Mhm.

AL: ...can you tell us what religion you affiliate with?

MB: Yes. I'm- I'm almost a lifelong Baptist. My parents were Episcopalian, my grandfather was Baptist, my grandmother was Methodist. And so I had a chance to do all three.

AS and AL: [laugh]

MB: But I, through-through self-choice, and partly because my friends were at the Baptist church at the time. Settled on Baptist affiliation, and-and that's what I've done since about the age of eight.

AL: Okay, and can you just tell us the role that religion has played in your life?

MB: There are three things that are so key for me—and it is interesting, I was listening to Robin Roberts the other day when she's returned [to Good Morning America] after her most recent medical intervention and care. And she talked about family, faith, and friends, and I laughed because I said as I came to this community three things that aren't negotiable for me in my life are my faith, my family, and my friends. And I am grounded by my faith, that's my anchor. And I also know that while that's my anchor for how I live my life, it's also my anchor to get through storms, if you will, and the challenges. And you talk about the difficulty of moving into Worcester, you know, Worcester's a city that doesn't readily welcome folks who are not from here. And so, being the first woman, the first person of color, and-and outs—and the first person in 45 years hired for the superintendency from outside of the school system; I- some people said I came with bases loaded- with three strikes and I said "No, I came with bases loaded, the only place to go was a home run."

AS: [laughs]

MB: And so, it was about my faith. And I truly believe that God was the one who led me to Worcester 'cause it was nowhere on my radar screen. You know, I had decided it was time to move on from where I was, but I didn't have a destination, you know? I decided a year at the-at the end of my daughter's junior year that would be- that next year would be my last year with the Norfolk public schools, but didn't have a destination.

AS: [coughs]

MB: And so I-I firmly believe that God is the one who led me here, and He continues to provide me the wisdom to do what it is He would have me to do for the children and for the school community at large. And so you know, I'm on my second contract, I've gotten a contract renewal: I had an initial three year contract, and I'm on the first year of my next three year

contract. And, it was-it was a tough, it was- the first- the first two and a half to three years were very difficult. Partly because of me being an outsider, and those who just wanted to push on that agenda of-of me not being committed or connected to this community. But I didn't let it deter me. And so it was my faith that has sustained me and it-it, we- my faith they, has gotten me—it was my faith that has gotten me through the sudden loss of my high-school sweetheart. We had just celebrated our 22nd wedding anniversary, and he passed two weeks later. You know, it's my faith that allowed me to understand that I had the best of both worlds when I had my parents, though I didn't spend a lot of- most of my childhood with them directly, living under their roof (___???) being able to have a relationship with them that was nurtured by my grandparents who got me to where I am as an adult and yet to be able to, after my grandparents passed, to still have that strong and loving relationship with my parents. All of that is-is-is about my faith so those things haven't shaken me. And so, you know, life is about changes and challenges, those are things that are guaranteed in life. Your faith is what helps you figure out how do you respond to those so that you don't crash and burn or crumble and-and-and whatever else. And so, you know, as difficult some of the journey has been, its-its been a good journey, and so, but my faith is what's-what's guided me to that point.

AL: Okay. [to Alina]: Can I just get one more?

AS: Mhm.

AL: You talked about feeling like you were an outsider when you first came into Worcester,

MB: No, it wasn't feeling, it was living...

AS and AL: [laugh]

MB: You can look at the articles where they talk about, but you can go ahead.

AS and AL: [continue to laugh]

AL: But could you just talk about how you felt from being an outsider to feeling like you were more welcomed and an insider in the community?

MB: Yeah, for some people, I never will be. 'Cause they—even—and-and I generally don't read the blogs on the articles that impact the schools because it's just not a healthy thing to do, you know? People who resp- who really write on those types of blogs are people who would never stand up in the public forum and say what they say on blogs.

AL: Mhm.

MB: So I generally don't, I have other people who read those and tell me what I need to pay attention to; particularly my older daughter, and she'll say, "Mom, the rest of it was junk, but there was this one comment, this may be something you wanna think about." And so, but I did read a blog [laughs] just, you know when we start-when we had the blizzard [earlier that year] and it was the funniest thing because someone commented on the blog and I was thinking "Okay so you must be the last of about 10 people who's still in this place."

AS: [laughs]

MB: But said, they were asking if we made the right question about closing schools so I mean—if you were around in the blizzard, even the government said, you know...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ...So I closed schools that Friday- no need to try to get kids in here and then can't get them home, staff not safe, whatever.

AS: Mhm.

MB: So someone actually had the audacity to write a blog and said "90 percent of the time she makes the wrong call." And I'm thinking, "Okay, so were you not here for the blizzard we just had?" [the blog continues] "And that's what we get for hiring a person from Virginia." So I'm like "Okay, so..."

AS and AL: [laugh]

MB: ...there's an outlier there." But, at the end of the day, you-you know, I—what you see today, who you see today is who I am. I'm the same sitting here with you all, meeting you all for the first time, as I am with other people. I respect people in positions, I respect when we agree to disagree, and we can have philosophical or political debates that are different...

AL: Mhm.

MB: ... but I believe—I get along with just about all people. And because of that, people have seen me as being genuine, that when I- when I talk with passion about the schools, you know,

people understand and believe that. And they see me trying to walk the talk, that, when I've talked about trying to create improvements in schools, the things that I fought for. You know people will often tell me "Your passion really comes through." And I don't even realize it because it's so much inside of me, and who I am. And so, you know, I just spend a lot of time, I've go-I spend time—though I-I have a church that I worship with regular, I've settled on that. I still visit lots of churches when invited, or programs or just—you know programs are going on. And-and meet with people and you know I go, I'm on various community boards and everything and I—because I like being involved, and because I haven't taken my position as superintendent as being "I work here, I work in these 44 schools and then I go to my home at night, and then I don't interface with the community." People see me out in the community, they see me in the grocery store in my jeans and-and-and sweatshirt. They see me, you know, at social events and things in the community and then they realize: "Okay well you are real people." You know, I'll be sitting in this salon-nail salon getting my pedicure, you know and someone will come up "Are you the superintendent?" "Yes." So we are having a conversation, and because people see me living in the community. You know, I wouldn't have come here and done anything other than my best. When I agreed to move here, I agreed to-to adopt this as a community in my life. I don't give up on my-my Virginia roots and heritage, my family is still there. I-you know- that's where I go to visit, just like anybody who has children-adult children who live somewhere else. And so, you know, I still have my family and friends there, but I've also created a strong network of personal family- personal friends here, some of whom are-are like my extended family away from my family, and a strong network of professional colleagues. And I think because people see me, people said they see me as being genuine, that you-you know, I'm out and about and I believe in the work and I support a lot of different things around the community that they see me as really, not being the outsider who just comes to work but really being part of the community. So I think that's what's bridged that gap for me.

AL: Mhm.

AS: Alright, now we're going to shift to education...

MB: Mhm.

AS: ...So where did you attend school, and if you could name the names and the years that you attended them?

MB: Sure, my undergraduate work was done at Hampton Institute, now Hampton University, in Hampton Virginia, one of the nation's oldest historically black colleges and universities, founded in 1868. And, it has done quite well over time: strong financially, academically, programs. Some

women called it-it-it—someone recently introduced me and reminded me that Hampton is—if you had an ivy league within historically black colleges, Hampton would be one of those. So I graduated from Hampton, I attended April 1977 through 1981, and graduated there in 1981. I immediately continued to the University of Illinois, in Urbana-Champagne, or Champagne-Urbana, it just depends on which way you, [laughs] which side of the street you were on, because the two cities are right there...

AL and **AS**: [laugh]

MB: ...the college spans both. For my masters in audiology, and I graduated from there in January of 1983. As I found myself, working as a speech therapist in-in I think beginning in the fall of '84. No, yeah, fall of '84. I started then taking additional courses, one for my teacher licensure, because I was a pre-med major, not an education major in speech pathology. And then people started asking me had I ever thought about administration and leadership. And so I continued and completed a certificate of-of advance studies or advanced graduate studies from Old Dominion University. And I think I completed that probably in, oh I have to look at that, I'll have to look [gets up to go look at certificate on wall] 1989.

AS and **AL**: [laugh]

MB: I can never remember, [walks over to wall] yup! '89. So I was right...

AS: Alright.

MB: ...I always think about when my younger daughter was born, a year later in '90. In 1989, and then I continued my work at the college of—oh so that was Old Dominion University...

AS: Mhm.

MB: ...in Norfolk, Virginia. And then I continued my doctorate work at the second oldest college in the country, the College of William and Mary, which was founded in the 1600's, and that's in Williamsburg, Virginia. And in-I completed my-all of my dissertation, I had completed my course work years before, took me a few years to finish my dissertation cause I kept changing jobs, I mean there were great opportunities.

AS: Mhm.

MB: And so that delayed me a couple of times. But I, actually, my degree is dated December of 2001.

AS: What were some of the hardest challenges in your education?

MB: Some of my hardest challenges dealt with the issues of race. I was at a time where I knew—I grew up and through third grade, I attended segregated schools, all black schools. In fourth grade in-in-in Suffolk Virginia where I was raised, there was an opportunity for voluntary integration, because by fifth grade, it was gonna be mandatory integration-to integrate schools across the city. And so, my grandfather being progressive as he was, you know, suggested that I do the voluntary year of integration, where I went to school that primarily a white school—one of a handful of black students in that school. And so there were challenges there, and then there were challenges at the year of the mandatory integration. I'll never forget, I got suspended three times in the same week in fifth grade, simply because the-the white teacher that I had—it was the first time working with black kids, and it was obvious that she wasn't comfortable in the setting. And you know, my grandparents had taught me to be an advocate for what I believed in and for myself. And so we had a few challenges that week that resulted in me being sent home, three times in the same week in fifth grade, because I was an advocate for myself. Needless to say, that teacher didn't teach after that year so I think I was the victor in that one.

AL: [laughs]

MB: And so the-the whole issue of integration, and it worked well for us. But I remember, there used to be an episode on Saturday Night Live called “Not Quite Ready for Prime Time Players.” And I remember my-our high school's senior class skit was “Not Quite Ready for Class.” And that was because we were the class that emerged through this integration and-and we had a great relationship, our class members black and white got along fine, but we talked about all of the things that we weren't quite ready for in education. We were the first class to be part of that experiment in the open classroom setting. And a couple of years after, we were the first class to put walls up and said “Okay, that's enough of that open classroom setting, back to class there.” You know, taught us something different. But I found myself all through high school still being an advocate, you know, then an honors student and doing well. I was one of a few students who was tapped when they wanted a black student face or voice around the work and I used to say “There are other talented students.”

AS: Mhm.

MB: So I was always pushing them to pull, to select other students to be involved and give them an opportunity. I chose a historically black college because of those experiences. Because I wanted to get to know who I was as an individual, and to have that nurturing, and that was the best thing that I ever did for me. And so, when I went off to the University of Illinois, where here we are at 1981, this is how the dean of the school met us: he grabbed -- put, you know, we were told that there was this meeting. And so, my best friend and I who were both going out there together for the program, and several others we knew and people we met, we all go into the department meeting thinking this was gonna be of all new graduate students, and we looked around the room, everyone in the room was black. So then it dawned on us: "Okay, this is a different type of meeting." The dean came in, head of the department and welcomed us to the University of Illinois, he said, "But I need to let you know, not all the faculty share this sentiment: This is the first time that we (____???) this is the first time that we've had this number of blacks in our graduate program at the same time, and there are some faculty members who are afraid they may have to alter the program to accommodate you." And so, my girlfriend and I, as we left that meeting and stood on the corner and our families now were gone, headed back to Virginia, they had dropped us off, unpacked us the night before, and now they were headed back, and we looked at each other and said "Oh gracious, what have we done here?" But, you-you know, once again, we found ourselves in the place of having to prove ourselves. And at that time, Illinois had, when we first started, a 5.0 system. At the end of, for those of us in the audiology program, at the end of that first semester, three of us made 5.0's and two 4.8's.

AS: Wow.

MB: And so that began to help people understand we didn't come unprepared, or underprepared. Our classmates used to say, "You all are taking patient history and doing this information, how'd you get there?" We had lots of clinical experiences as part of our undergraduate program that some students from other universities had not had that opportunity. And so, we were very well prepared, and so we graduated and we've done well since then. But those were the challenges that were really around race and-and cracking that code of-of understanding and knowing that we're here because we have the ability, not because the color of our skin.

AS: Do you think that being a black woman made this more difficult too?

MB: Oh yes.

AS: Mhm.

MB: Gender matters, and so being a female, being black. I remember in high school, one of my dear friends, a white guy, both of us had applied to the same college, University of Virginia. I was accepted, he wasn't. He was devastated. But I realized I was getting in under affirmative action, and I was gonna be a number, and I didn't want to be a number, I wanted to be there because I showed talent.

AL: Mhm.

MB: And so when I got ready to go to graduate school, I applied at three different schools, and I was accepted at all three: Purdue, University of Illinois, and McGill in Canada. And University of Illinois gave me Benjamins [money] so that's where I went to school you know? [laughs] It was an economic decision. But at the end of the day, my acceptance to all those schools let me know that I had the talent so I have done well, you know? I have been able to be accepted at, you know, The College of William and Mary is one of the nation's prestigious institutions, and I was accepted because of my background, because of my ability and I'm glad for that. But I needed to have had all those experiences I had in education to be able to lead a diverse school district. Because absent those, I would have had too narrow a frame of reference.

AS: Mhm.

MB: And I would have thought that, you know, all of the world is-is-is looking great through rose-colored glasses.

AL: Could you just tell us about some of the support networks and mentoring that you've gotten, that have been important to you?

MB: Oh yeah, well my grandparents were huge.

AS: Mhm.

MB: They've always encouraged my-my education, my-my passion for learning. And to-always told me you know, keep going, you can do whatever it is you wanna do. So, they-they were important- an important mentoring system and my-my husband- late husband and my family, I mean because you know, when you're married with children and you have a husband who supports your continuing in graduate studies through a doctorate and you know, it's time away from home. His sister, my sister, picking up the kids from-from daycare and school, and-and watching them while I'm in class until ten o' clock at night, not getting home 'till eleven, and those types of things, so my family mentored me. But I've been very fortunate with my

childhood pastor, who just passed away at the age of about 87- about 88, back in December. And those folks have-always encouraged me and nurtured me and I've been so fortunate to work with some really great educational leaders that have been mentors for me. My first principal, I remember, when he asked me had I ever thought about administration was the assistant principal when I was in high school, and he was principal at the school that I started working at. And then my first administrative job when I was the director of special education that, I learned so much from that superintendent; he nurtured me and-and folks that I worked with there. And then I had the opportunity to go back and serve under a superintendent who I had worked with when I was the special ed. director in another district. But it had been my high school honors social studies teacher for ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade, and that was superintendent. And what a great mentor for me in terms of being an educational leader. And I can't say enough for another superintendent who hired me as assistant superintendent of (_____???) and being able to learn from her experiences as I was beginning to think about the superintendency then and she told me, she said, "Look, I had 13 interviews, applied 13 times" she didn't have 13 interviews, "I applied 13 times before I got my first superintendency so don't ever be deterred." And helping me to grow as-as an-as an individual to. And then the person who remains my mentor also is the superintendent- former superintendent of Norfolk, Virginia, who really gave me the opportunity in a-in a large urban district, 36,000 students at the time, to really have leadership opportunities, to really not say to me what it was I wanted to hear, but to really push me to grow. And he served as my executive coach since I've been superintendent here. I'm-I'm a graduate of the Brouge Urban Superintendent's Academy, in 2004, and that prepared me to lead large urban districts. And so John Simpson has been my men-executive coach and mentor ever since I've been here. And so those are the folks that have really made a difference in my life.

AL: Okay. Do you wanna do...

AS: Alright, and now we just have a quick few social questions to ask you.

MB: Okay.

AS: How old were you when you were allowed to date, and where did you go on dates?

MB: That's interesting, because my grandparents described it this way: in the South, it's called taking company, when you're having company means the guy could come to your house. So that started when I was in high school, occasionally one could come and sit on the front porch when I was in eighth grade. You know, in ninth grade, they could come and sit on the front porch.

AS: Mhm.

MB: In the end, I actually started dating who-who became my husband in tenth grade. He was a senior in high school, so that was the real dating scene. But it was interesting because my parents said, “Okay, you can date. He can come to the house.” You know there were times, Sunday afternoons or maybe Fridays, whatever. And I was in the band, he was a football player so I would see him at events and things like that. But I couldn’t ride in the car with him...

AL and AS: [laugh]

MB: ...so we could do walking dates, you know, we could walk to the movie theater, which is about three blocks from my house. Or you know, we could do those types of things, we could do group things walking. If there was to be any travel involved, there had to be a parent, who was you-you know, even my best friend--childhood best friend, growing up, we ended up dating two best friends and marrying two best friends. And so we could do things together if one of the parents were transporting us. So I was probably in 11th grade before riding in the car as a dating could-could really happen.

AS: [laughs]

MB: But I'm proud, I never had a curfew. And it was something that I used with my daughters, and it has been very successful. My grandparents said, you know, we're not gonna tell you you have a curfew, we're gonna tell you that you need to govern yourself according to where you are going and what the activity is. So we'd go on to a football game and to McDonalds is what we did at the time after the game: you don't step in here at one a.m. because that's not where you are. And so, we would talk about where I was headed, and so I-I had a window of understanding, but knew- I also knew that if I ever abused that privilege they would set limits. And so that never happened.

AS: Mhm. Alright, and what was your favorite musical group or song?

MB: Growing up?

AS: Yup.

MB: Hmm.

AS: [laughs]

MB: Lots of ‘em, grew up when they were making real music.

AS: [laughs]

MB: Not just beat-bopping to the-the, it’s okay, rap has its place. Rap is to today as Rock n’ Roll was to yesterday so I understand that transition. I was a huge Earth, Wind and Fire person...

AS: Mhm.

MB: ...Love some Earth, Wind, and Fire, so I would probably say that.

AL: Mhm.

AS: What was considered fashionable when you were a young woman?

MB: When I was in high school, it was when we got into the platform shoes, which is back again...

AS: Yup.

MB: ...the wide-leg, we used to call them palazzo pants...

AS: Mhm.

MB: ...the wide leg pants, you know, in the 70’s you know, it was that disco style. You know, the tight fitting shirts, the wide leg pants, the wide belts, the big hoop earrings, the afros- I never could get one, my hair was too soft.

AS: [laughs]

MB: And so it would always flop, I could maybe do an afro puff, but it would still look like more like a ponytail than a puff. And like I said, the platform shoes, so that was huge.

AL: [laughs]

MB: And it’s back.

AL and AS: [laugh]

MB: I still don't like it, but anyways...

AL and AS: [continue to laugh]

AL: Do you have any hobbies or any things you do just for leisure that you really like?

MB: You'll see in here, I-I'm an avid collector of lighthouses. I-I love lighthouses, see I even have some prints, and inlaid work there, my uncle actually painted that one above the Cape Hatteras lighthouse. [indicates to painting on wall].

AL: Oh wow.

MB: He's from Trinidad.

AS: Oh.

MB: And so I love-I love- I love the ocean, I love sand and sun and water and I just have this passion for lighthouses. So that's what I- there's a peace and tranquility that comes over me with water. So I collect those, and all types of lighthouse things. I love reading, I don't have enough time to read for leisure, I love reading, and travel, and shopping, you know those things you expect a girl to want to do.

AS: [laughs]

MB: And I really just enjoy just sitting around with family and friends, you know. I'm not high maintenance, it can be whatever's on T.V., I can find something to watch, or we can turn on music, or we can play cards, we can, you know, cook a meal and do potluck, but I really do enjoy you-you know playing games. We used to have family game night, and-and we would do things all types of games, so I like doing that with family and friends, card games, board games, those things.

AL: Okay, [to Alina] do you have any?

AS: Nope, but we have those two questions we have to ask at the end.

AL: Okay, so now that we're 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?

MB: I-I think it's important to-to address, well obviously this was a focus on women, so the gender piece would be there. But the- but the journey of the women of color. I think that's important; race does matter. And it also frames and shapes experiences. I think the role of faith in my pathway as a woman is important. And I think the-the role of family and friends are the things that it—because the story of women throughout history has been that regardless of race, women have been in a position to carry families, to keep them together when men are out working or at war in the military, same as it is now, you know we have more women, you know and men now assuming that role, too. But it-it's just so important that we look at the strength of women over time and history. And that-that strength has-is still going through in families, even for working women. And now where we're, you know, raising that glass ceiling and getting us into the CEO's and corporate board rooms, and leading organizations, and-and leading families and communities in a way that—there's-there's a huge story to tell about the evolution and-and about how we've continued to use our strength to support communities in a way that can't be (____??).

AS: [coughs] What advice would you give a woman of today?

MB: Be grounded in your faith, recognize that the playing field is still not level in-for genders, but don't ever feel that you have to be the man-try to be the man who's doing his job, but rather recognize you can bring all of your feminine characteristics and talents to that job and do it. You know, one of the reasons—I-I do have on some black today, but you will very seldom see me in a-in a solid black, brown, gray, or navy suit, because while I'm in the board room with other men, other superintendents, I don't have to look like them.

AS: Mhm.

MB: So I wear colors, I wear these things, and I think it's okay for women to be women, doing the job in a field perhaps that has been traditionally male dominated. And so be comfortable in who you are as an individual. You have to know yourself before you can be successful at anything. Because otherwise, everybody's push and pull on you, will take you in a direction and at the end of the day, you'll look in the mirror and you don't know who you are and what you represent. So know yourself so clearly that-that you can advocate for what you believe in but don't be so inflexible that you can't continue to learn and grow.

AS: Is there anybody else that you suggest that we talk to?

MB: Hmm, not knowing who you've spoken with, there is a-a woman that I've met, I don't know if she's ever been interviewed: Dr. Deborah Harmon-Hynes. She's the vice-provost at the University -- of student affairs- I think student life, at University of Massachusetts Medical School, here in the city. And I found her a very interesting person. Similar to me- she's a little bit older than I am- but similar to me, has grown up in the South, and moved to Worcester 20 plus years ago, and has stayed in the community. And she just has an interesting history. I certainly would-would recommend her. I'm just looking at landscape, I've worked with so many neat women now across the city...

AS: Mhm.

MB: ... you've probably -- they've probably done Linda Cavaioli, the director of the YWCA. I think she's a neat person. Probably also done Gail Carver, the President of Quinsigamond Community College, that has a strong story to tell. I'll tell you a person too, Jen Davis-Carrie, Dr. Jen Davis-Carrie. She is the executive director for the Worcester Education Collaborative, and she's had the chance to lead that organization. There used to be an organization called the Alliance for Education that had folded many years ago, and as I was transitioning into the Superintendency, the former president of Clark [University] John Basset had convened a group to think about getting something again, similar to this Alliance for Education...

AS:[coughs]

MB: ... and Jen leads that, so I think she'd be another great person.

AL: Okay.

AS: Alright, thank you.

MB: Thank you.

AL: Is there anything else important to your life you feel we should discuss?

MB: No, I think we've-I think we've covered it.

AL: Okay.

MB: I think we've covered it.

AL: Thank you very much.

MB: Thank you, thank you, I wish you all the best.