

Interviewee: Geri Dinardo
Interviewers: Emily Champagne, Keith Plummer
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Transcriber: Emily Champagne



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Abstract: Geri Dinardo was born in Hopedale, Massachusetts. She attended Our Lady of the Elms College where she studied sociology. She earned her graduate degree in education from Worcester State University. She has lived in Worcester, Massachusetts for over 50 years. Geri spent many years teaching and has been involved with the Catholic Worker and the founding of The Mustard Seed in Worcester, Massachusetts. Within the interview, Geri discusses her experiences as a woman and the influential individuals who inspired her when founding The Mustard Seed.

KP: Today is April 3, 2017 and we are interviewing Geri, is it Dinardo?

GD: Yes.

KP: Dinardo. Worcester's women activist

[Laughter]

EC: So right now, Keith and I are both in a class called Women and Non-Violence, so we paired with the Worcester Women's Oral History Project because they're opening an archive at the Harvard library, I believe?

KP: Yeah.

EC: Yeah so we're trying to get stories from women activists in Worcester...

GD: Oh.

EC: ...for the archive because there's nothing written down.

GD: Sure. Let's just see.

[phone call]

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KP: So our first question for you Geri is, could you tell us a bit about your childhood? Where you were born and raised?

EC: What your family was like?

KP: Yeah or were you raised in Worcester? Did you come here? What's your story in that regard?

GD: Okay. I was born in Hopedale, Massachusetts, which is the founding community of Adin Ballou who was a pacifist and I lived in Hopedale for about eight years, the first eight years of my life. Then the rest of my growing up years was spent in Mendon which is about the next town over. And my sister—I have a sister five years my senior. That's all we have. It was just the two of us. And I went to Saint (?) in Mendon, until I was college age. I went to Our Lady of the Elms College in Chicopee [MA] and it was a women's college at the time. And then I came back for a little while to Mendon and then I moved to Worcester. I've been in Worcester for over 50 years. And that's my story of where I came from.

KP: What did you study in college?

GD: I was a sociology major.

EC & KP: Oh!

KP: We're both sociology majors. What a small world.

EC: Can you tell us a little more about your upbringing? What were your parents like? You mentioned you have a sister.

GD: My parents were working class people. My father was a molder for the most part and then later on in his older years he became a custodian. My mother was home most of the time and then she worked in a laundry facility and what were they like? Well they were good, loving parents. My father was a drinker though and my mother was a teetotaler. And my father had to quit school when he was a young boy in the 9th grade and so he always wanted to go to college and he made sure we both of us went to private schools—Lady of the Elms—and we both graduated college. And my mother and father, even though they were working class, sought to it that we got to school and to graduate and all that. What else do you want to know about them?

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KP: Could you tell us a bit about your neighborhood? What school was like? Your community you grew up in? I guess your communities over time too?

GD: I lived in a small town on a lake. Lake Nipmuc. So we spent a lot of time swimming in the summer. Swimming and doing what you do on a lake. [Laughs] Listening to the frogs. I didn't have any children my age, really only one but she was younger than I in the neighborhood. The others were younger so I didn't really have any children my age which I kind of regret but what are you going to do. The neighborhood was rural, but on a lake so you got people over part time or in the summer or something like that as well. I don't know what else to tell you about my family.

KP: That's fine! Whatever you remember.

GD: It's a long time ago, you know? [Laughs]

KP: Yeah no, it definitely is. That is a good picture I like the lake!

EC: Yeah! So because this is a women and nonviolence project, when did you first become aware to social issues? High school...college? Like what issues were you most involved with?

GD: Believe it or not, not until after college.

EC: Okay!

GD: Pretty much when I met Michael and Frank. Frank is your...

KP: Frank Kartheiser...yes! He's infamous.

[Laughs]

GD: And Michael Boover. So it was really after college that I began to know anything about activism and it was because of Frank and Michael. Well I had gone to a community in Canada for a while and I came back wanting to found a community and the woman who I was teaching...the woman that I was teaching with my assistant said, I have just the people you want to talk to and she introduced me to Frank and Michael and they introduced me to the Catholic Worker. We started the Mustard Seed and all that.

KP: Can you tell us about like your early time like with the Catholic Worker? What was it like? How'd you get involved?

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GD: We started our—The Mustard Seed was a storefront up on the top of Pleasant Street. And I met them through Michael, connected a little bit with The Mustard Seed storefront. And then they had a little fire, little fire but it was enough to get them bounced out of there. So we used to meet to decide our next step. And we were wanting to start a house of hospitality. So so we did that. We met for over a year really and then first there was a house that we were unable to buy and this is how things work if they're meant to be. Then we saw this house. Frank actually saw this house. He said, "You call me up Geri, I think we have a house." It came just like that [snaps] everything went. In my opinion, if something's meant to be for the most part it will go along like that. Sometimes it will be harder In this case it was just you know [snaps] we got a place just like that. We went to the realtor and Michael the realtor asked him, "Who's going to buy this house?" and Michael said, "Well I will." Frank couldn't because he was a war tax resister so if he bought it we would be in trouble. Now, he often says he should've done it because it would've gotten a big splash, the Catholic Worker house getting taken over by the federal government. So I said to myself, he was only 19, younger than you guys, I think?

EC: Yeah.

KP: Oh yeah, yeah.

GD: So he said he was going to sign for the house so I thought to myself I'm not going to let this kid sign for the house by himself so I signed for the house as well so the two of us were signatures on that house which was 93 Piedmont St. And so then we owned the house and we opened it up with a mass on March 25, 1974 and we allowed people to stay and sleep there and we served at least one meal a day. Some people said we served three meals but I don't remember. Pretty sure we were inundated with people anyways, at that time the only living quarters, the only house in the city, of hospitality at that time and so if you refused a person to come in you were sending them essentially out to the street because there was no PIP shelter there was no Abby's House there was no. The Catholic Charities Shelter had just closed. There just was no place so we took them all in and we had people sleeping in the hallways and in the closets and in the porches. We just had people everywhere. And that was fun.

EC: That's a lot of people.

GD: I don't know. There were some issues at the time because we had some people were war veterans, one war veteran. What was his name? Freddy, his name was Freddy, he beat Michael up because he was between the drugs and the war and all that. I wasn't around for that beating though but he beat him up anyways not severely but you know. And we had older people and younger people and one time I was up at the hospital with a girl who had overdosed and while I

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was up there some one ran up to me to tell me that there was a gun at the house so I left the hospital and drove down toward the house and thought to myself wow Geri you are really crazy you're driving toward the gun and not away from the gun...

[Laughs]

GD: You know? But when I got there the gun had disappeared. The people who had the gun had disappeared and the police who came because of the gun had disappeared, thankfully. So Michael and Richard and someone else, Joanne, had been in Europe at the time and I was supposed to be watching over the house so I called the elders people who had helped us at the time and I told them that it was too dangerous right now to continue and I think it was and we closed the house for the time being until they came back. One of the fellows, Earl, used to—I should give you my book then I wouldn't have to tell you this story.

KP: Oh you wrote a book?!

GD: Yes I wrote a book.

KP: What's it called?

GD: It's called "Saint's and Rascals: A Catholic Worker Memoir."

KP: Oh, I like it.

[Laughs]

GD: You want one?

KP: Maybe, yeah. A rascal, it sounds feisty.

GD: "Saint's and Rascals: A Catholic Worker Memoir" You can share it.

EC & KP: Thanks!

EC: I love the title.

KP: I love it. I love the cover too. Is that in this neighborhood? Is that where you got the house?

GD: That's the original house which is not the same that is there now.

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EC: How many houses are there now?

GD: Well we had one Catholic Worker House, there's another Catholic Worker House with the Schaeffer-Duffy's and Jo Massarelli does overflow hospitality, did she tell you that?

EC: Yeah. How many people a night stay at the Catholic Worker House?

GD: We don't take people in anymore.

EC: Oh, okay.

GD: It's just food. Although the Schaeffer-Duffy's do take people in. I'm going to say six or eight, even more. And Jo just you know. I'll just tell you about Earl. It's all in the book anyway. You're going to read that book now right?

KP: Yeah.

GD: I don't mind giving out the books, but I like to have people read them.

KP: That's true. I know what you're saying. Well I might donate it. Does Holy Cross have a copy yet?

GD: I don't know.

KP: I might donate it to the library because I feel like they would love it. Hm...what was I just thinking? Could you tell us a bit about the relationship between Catholicism and your activism?

GD: Well we were trained really by this fellow Father Bernie Gilgun who was a priest. He's dead now. He was called a Catholic Worker priest he would say, "They call me a Catholic Worker priest, I don't call myself a Catholic Worker priest, but they call me a Catholic Worker priest." [Laughs] So he was called a Catholic Worker priest so he probably trained as he was like a chaplain and we've had mass all along the time. Once a week now we have it about once a month and we still have a connection with the various priests, but not the way we used to. We used to have a woman Joyce Perron and it was her job to schedule the priests for the month or the week. We used to have mass on Tuesdays, once a week and she was good at getting priests. We had every priest in the diocese because she would get them and ask them to come to say mass for us. So I think my Catholic roots prevail. I don't actually believe everything I hear in the church, from the church, but I think I've been to Catholic schools all my life besides two

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years when I went to public school but I've been to Catholic schools all the way through colleges and then I went to Worcester State for my master's degree.

KP: What was your master's degree in?

GD: Education.

KP: Oh.

GD: Yeah, so...now what else do you want to know?

KP: What?

GD: What else did you want me to say?

KP: You know, just whatever you were going to say. I guess another question you might ask. What was it like as a woman volunteer at the Catholic Worker? You had these two main male figures, Frank and Mike, what was it like as a woman there?

GD: Well I still don't think it was that bad.

KP: Okay!

Laughs...

GD: I don't think it was bad at all. Maybe I'm naïve.

KP: Oh no.

GD: I probably should have noticed but we got along fairly well the three of us and, yeah, I don't think it was that bad. Michael and Frank, in my mind, are different kind of men although now men coming up nowadays I think are also different sort of men you know? More accommodating to women, more—Frank and Michael were very good as far as—well I have to admit I depended on them both, especially Michael, because I didn't know about the Catholic Worker at all. So I was really dependent on them to learn and it was Michael who taught me really I think. I'll tell you a little story. I used to be kind of afraid of men. And one day—but I was never afraid of Michael or Frank—one day we were being trained up for nuclear war protest, not nuclear war, nuclear a you know it's in New Hampshire? Seabrook. What do you call that? Nuclear power plant.

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EC: Yeah.

KP: Oh, nuclear power plant, okay.

GD: So we were being trained up for that by and we were in a storefront on Main Street and there was a young man there from Clark University and he spoke to me and he spoke in such a way it was like completely respected me and long story short that man, believe it or not, changed my whole life. It's odd sometimes things can change and you have no idea you changed it. I'm sure he has no clue that he changed my life but because he was so honest and straightforward and respectful of me that I wasn't afraid anymore. It was really amazing and it was an amazing story to me because nor did I expect such a thing nor did I really have an awareness that I was afraid of men either but meeting that kid changed my whole life around. And it was Clark University, I don't know his name wouldn't recognize him of course this is so many years later anyways but I wouldn't recognize him if I saw him but it changed my life.

EC: That's awesome. You mentioned the nuclear power plant protest, were you involved in any other protests? And if so, which ones were they?

GD: I do some demonstrations now and then.

KP: Alright...

[Laughs]

KP: Tell us about it.

[Laughs]

GD: I can't remember. There was some Vietnam era things in the old days and do you know Mike True?

KP: No. I don't think so.

GD: Mike True in my mind is the father of nuclear protests. He's old now, he's in his 80s, but I happened to think of him because we were demonstrating one day and he said to us stand up straight and look like you mean it. And I saw him not too long ago after demonstrating for something that I can't remember now and I said to him, "Mike I stood up straight and looked like I meant it. [Laughs] So I don't do a lot of protesting anymore. One time, oh this is funny

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[laughs]. They have a protest every—Francis & Therese Catholic Worker House protest against the ROTC at Holy Cross so I went to that protest a couple of years ago and it was going to be from 12-1 and we were protesting. The campus police came by we have to get out of here, get out of here, you don't have a permit. Of course Scott Schaeffer-Duffy is a graduate of Holy Cross so he says, "Well our protest is from 12-1." "Well you have to leave." "Well I'm going to go and then come back." So he goes and then he comes back and we're still there and now it's like quarter to one. I had prepared myself to be arrested. I took off all my jewelry and put in some medications if I needed them just in case. Anyway he came back ...he was ready to arrest us all and we took Scott's lead and Scott wasn't about to leave so we weren't going to leave either. Except there was a woman, Theresa Wheeler, do you know her? Theresa Wheeler has a daughter, Janelle and I didn't want the daughter to see her mother get arrested so I sent them away and told them to go home so they went to the car and watched from the car. So anyway we're there and the guards are there and he's saying you have to leave and Scott is saying we aren't leaving until one and the clock is ticking and ticking and ticking and ticking and finally it was one o'clock and we were free to leave. And we didn't get arrested but we were and Jo Massarelli was headed to Australia the next day so she couldn't afford to get arrested. [Laughs]

EC & KP: No!

GD: But we were close to getting arrested that day, really close. The protest that we had at Seabrook, we were being trained in case we were arrested. It turned out to be a legal protest. They negotiated for it to be a legal protest and we didn't get arrested there either fortunately. I haven't been arrested but Michael has. He went to jail for I think 20 days, one of those farm jails where you have to work on the farm. Yep, and what else? I've done a number. Not a lot. I haven't done a lot of protests but I've done some and I've done some Catholic Worker house of hospitality stuff. I was there for five years and feeding—one time we had lettuce soup. Most of the time we had enough food, but one time we had lettuce soup because we didn't have enough food. Didn't have enough food, so we had to have lettuce, serve lettuce. What else you got?

Laughs...

GD: Am I boring you?

EC & KP: No!

EC: Not at all. It's so interesting.

KP: I love your story. No.

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EC: Throughout all your different experiences, where did you find the most inspiration? Was there any books or speakers or personal relationships?

GD: Probably the people. Michael, Frank. Frank wasn't always living in the house but he was greasing my palm every Friday. He was working in the railroad and he used to come down and give me like a hundred dollars for my house every Friday. He always said, "Before you ever call the police call me." So I think the inspiration, probably first of all Father Bernie, we miss him. We really miss him a lot. He used to say mass here for a long time for years. My cat likes you by the way.

KP: Aw. I like your cat. Oh, don't be scared of me.

Laughs...

GD: So Father Bernie, Michael, Frank, Maggie...Maggie Farren. You should be interviewing Maggie Farren. She's in Spencer now but she's a war tax resister.

KP: Was she Worcester area?

EC: We'll have to tell our professor.

GD: Rochester, but she came here.

KP: Yeah, we'll have to record that name after the interview because we are looking to interview some more people to interview.

GD: Margaret Farren, war tax resister. Maggie Farren is—let me just tell you a little about her. She's what we call a Catholic Worker kid because her parents, Arthur and Mary, are among the first generation. They were friends with Catherine Doherty and Dorothy Day. They were in that generation, her parents. So she grew up with the Catholic Worker [Movement] and she's a war tax resister, she's been demonstrating. She'd be a good person to talk to. I'll give you her phone number.

KP: Oh, we'd love that.

GD: Want to take it now?

KP: Yeah let me take it down. Can you tell me how to spell her name first?

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GD: Margaret F-a-r-r-e-n.

exchange phone number

KP: What sort of activist was she again?

EC: War tax.

KP: War tax.

GD: War tax resistance.

KP: How would you describe your role at the Catholic Worker? What did you do?

GD: Sat around and cried.

KP: Aw.

GD: No. Well when I was there you mean?

KP: Yeah.

GD: I was like the mother of the house.

KP: Describe that. What do you mean?

GD: Well people used to come to me and this is what they would say to all of us. Can I talk to you a minute? You knew when those words came out, you were in for something. Can I talk to you for a minute? I was like the mother of the house maybe. At least I fancied myself that. And I was pretty much what I said goes but that wasn't always the case, but [laughs] usually, Michael, Frank or I had the last word on things. Usually of those three, Michael or Frank, I mean, Michael or I had the last word on how the place was run. I was going to tell you a story about Earl. When this fiasco happened about the gun, we closed the house and sent everybody out and I can still remember seeing Earl come down the stairs. It was August and he had a big black coat on his arm. I said, "Earl where are you going now? Where are you going to go?" He said, "Oh Geri I guess I'll go back to the weeds." That's where people would hangout outside and I couldn't bear that so I said, "Oh Earl why don't you stay with us as a member of the family," and he did. And then Charlie, another guy, was indispensable to the community. He slept on the porch until we finally let him in. Invited him back in again. Other than that, well

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what happens in my opinion, the young crowd is robust in troublemakers, not all of them but they are the ones who scattered when there was trouble. They scattered and the old crowd was forced to leave when they did nothing wrong, but we just couldn't keep them there because it was dangerous. So I didn't like that. I still don't like that idea you know? The old people end up leaving, but we managed to keep Earl and Charlie. When they died, they were buried next to one another and we didn't even know that that was gonna happen. First Charlie died and then Earl and they had to find a place for them so I said okay and then the next day we're going down into the cemetery to put him in the grave and where is he placed, right next to Charlie. And he had slept next to Charlie not shared a room in their lives and in their death they ended up next to one another.

EC: That's so nice.

GD: And nobody planned that. It's quite remarkably really.

EC: Yeah, that is.

KP: So now that we've gotten a sense about some of the movements you've been involved with, I was wondering if we can get some quick demographic facts? You know, you're a sociologist, we like these demographics. So you were one of how many children?

GD: Two.

KP: And then, how many years would you say you've lived in Worcester?

GD: Um, 51.

KP: 51? Wow. You go girl. That's your golden anniversary right.

Laughs...

GD: That's right.

KP: And then, I think you retired, but what was your profession?

GD: Well I was a teacher for a while and for the last 15 years of my working career I worked with developmentally disabled adults for 15 years. And those two things are the most—I also worked at a pharmacy for a little while. I worked at a hardware store for a little while but really it was the teaching. I taught for 13 and about 15 years with developmentally disabled which I

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really liked because my job was to enhance the quality of life of these people. And that's what we did. We did a good job and when I see some of the things people going around—one of the women that's a friend of ours, she's in a nursing home now thankfully, but she used to live with two other women and they had a staff and I don't know what the staff did for her because she looked like a mess all the time. And when I said, "What do you eat?" She said, "Oh frozen dinners, a sandwich. "She said this day after day after day so our job was to enhance the quality of life of our people and I think we did that.

KP: And then, are you single, coupled, or married?

GD: I am single. Not coupled either. I've been coupled though, more than once.

KP: Okay.

Laughs...

GD: I'm not married either.

KP: And then, do you think we've covered all the major movements you've been involved in Worcester? What's been going on in Worcester over your life and what do you think you've been mainly involved in?

GD: No I think, I don't think I have. Been mainly involved in the Catholic Worker and Mustard Seed. I did spend nine months in San Jose, California. During those five years I was with The Mustard Seed, I ran away from home.

KP: Wow. What were you doing in San Jose?

GD: I stayed with The Grail which was a women's organization group. They were Catholic, but now I don't think they are. I stayed there, one of my friends, that one with the colors [points to picture] was staying there and I stayed with her and other women from The Grail. That was pretty significant. The Grail women are really...

KP: Why did you leave? Did you have a reason to go to San Jose? And what was it like when you were there? What did you do?

GD: I left because I was worn out to start with and why did I leave San Jose or why did I leave here?

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KP: Why did you leave here?

GD: I left here because I was kind of worn out. When they came back from Europe, I left to take a sit and I was gone for 9 months as I said and I stayed with The Grail. If you want to see some women that were really with it, these would be the Grail women. If you ever hear of the Grail, they're worthwhile meeting. And I lived with them for a while. Then I kind of missed home. I could've stayed because Veronica was working with the farmer's union and she was an accountant for up and down the coast. And she asked me if I could be her assistant. So I could've stayed in California, but I was ready to come home really by then. To get back to The Mustard Seed eventually.

[phone call]

KP: Did we ask about the contemporary issues today?

EC: No.

KP: Are there any contemporary issues today that you feel passionately about or opinions on and how it relates to your activist identity?

GD: Well I haven't been doing a lot of activist stuff I must admit. I'm not happy about the war, killing, not happy about [President Donald] Trump's notion of doing away with the Muslims. I wonder a little bit about what's going on in Africa and countries in Africa. See now we don't hear much about that and I think it's pretty bad. So those are some of the things, but I'm not really going to say I'm active with them because I'm not.

KP: Alright. Are there any questions that we should have asked you but didn't? Like anything that you want to share that you didn't get the change to share? Or?

GD: No, I think that you did fine.

EC: Good.

KP: Okay thank you so much for the interview. I'm going to stop the recording. Sorry I had to step out for a second.

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