

Interviewee: Carrie Johnson
Interviewers: Maureen Ryan Doyle and Charlene L. Martin
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Abstract: Carrie Johnson grew up in Natick and Framingham. Her father worked in a hat factory and her mother cleaned houses. She married after graduating high school but moved to California after divorce. She went to college and became a public relations person for a community gangs program. In the interview she discusses her involvement with drugs, her sons, her job as a one of the first African-American reporters for the *Metro West Daily News*, then being hired by the *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*, and her cleaning company. Sparkle developed into a \$3.5 million company with 165 employees. Carrie went on to teach at Quinsigamond Community College and Center for Women in Enterprise and to write a book about her experiences entitled, *From the Pits to the Palace*.

MRD: We're going to start with a short explanation of the history project and why we want this interview. We start every interview this way. We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics. I'll ask you to state your name.

CJ: Carrie Johnson

MRD: Today's date is March 25 and I have your permission to record this interview?

CJ: Yes.

MRD: Great. Thanks. If we could start with your early life, could you tell us a bit about your childhood, your parents. Do you have any siblings, what life was like for you?

CJ: Okay, I grew up the youngest of four. Three of us lived in the house. My step-brother was raised here in Worcester because he was from my mother's first marriage.

MRD: Okay.

CJ: So we were raised in Framingham and during that time when... We used to live in a house and then we had to move out of the house. It was a time when they didn't rent to blacks and there was a lot of racial conflict going on. But the time that we lived in that house was great. We went to school as a neighborhood, kids playing in the street, we used to play baseball, toast marshmallows in the fall, you know all those kinds of things. And many of those kids we grew

up with still keep in touch. But when we had to move out of that house, because my parents couldn't afford to buy it...I believe they were going to sell it. I think my father didn't want it because the bathroom was off the kitchen, or something like that. [laughter] Anyway, we couldn't find a place to live because they wouldn't rent to blacks back then. So, we ended up splitting up. Me and my sister stayed with an aunt, my brother stayed with another aunt, my mother and father stayed in a little motel.

MRD: Okay.

CJ: And we did that for about a summer. When school got ready to start, they found a little one bedroom house in Natick.

MRD: Uh-huh.

CS: And they gave us the option of moving into this little house and making do, or staying the way we were until they found something. Well, we all wanted to get back together so we moved into this little house it happened to be in a small African-American community. The six or eight houses that were there were all black families living there. And so my mother and father took the bedroom. We made the front hall my brother's bedroom, and we dug out the basement. Me and my sisters got the basement. We had the best time in that little house. It had a great big grapevine in the back, and I remember my aunt used to come get the grapes and make wine out of them. We always had the family cook-outs in our yard because it had a huge yard, but it was a little teeny house. So, we went to Natick and then we eventually moved back to Framingham. My mother worked as...my mother did a lot of things actually. She cleaned houses for a long time. When I was younger I remember going to clean houses with her. She had to take me with her because I was the youngest. But I got to go to a private kindergarten because she cleaned for the woman, that kind of thing. And my father worked at the Framingham hat factory, which has a whole history back when women wore hats. He used to bring home the best hats. My mother would wear the hats. And then they closed the factory down and he went to work for Dennison Manufacturing. But my mother, she was a waitress for a long time. She worked as a nurse's aide. She pretty much did a lot of different things.

MRD: Okay.

CJ: And she was wonderful at the things she did. My mother had a fantastic personality. We used to have all of the extras because of her tips. I remember when she got sick and we didn't have her tips anymore, things really got kind of crunchy. But my father retired from Dennison. My mom, she passed away from lung cancer after I graduated, not long after that. And I got married for the first time and had a child. And then we got divorced, and I decided to move to California, which is when my mother got sick and passed away. But as a kid, you know I mean, even though we were poor, my mother and father, they always made do. We never felt like we

were without. My mother was a great cook. Now that we're older and we talk about whether or not we were poor, they remind me of this meal my mother used to make. She made the best gravy in America, gravy and bread. And we loved it. I never realized this wasn't a full meal. [laughter]. You know, we always wanted more. But it's those little kind of things like we never noticed what we didn't have. I don't think we ever went without. She always back then made a dollar stretch.

MRD: It sounds like it was very happy home.

CJ: It was, it was a very happy home. My brother, my oldest brother, who lived in Worcester used to come down and visit us every now and then with his friends. And they had a singing group and I remember I had a crush on the lead singer. I was nine and they were 18. He used to come down and I thought he was God because I didn't see him that much.

MRD: Tell me a little bit about your educational background.

CJ: I did not go to college out of high school. Wanted to, but my next to oldest brother was at Harvard. He got there on a track scholarship actually. My mother and father still had to pay for some expenses. My father was of the mind-set, old school, that you'll probably get pregnant and all that while he was struggling to send my brother to school. So I didn't go to college, I got married.

CM: What year did you graduate high school?

CJ: Nineteen seventy, so I got married in 1971 and it didn't last long. I was too young. So when I moved to California, I went back to college. I was working for an educational program here in this state and met some folks from California who said they would help me get financial aid. So I went to California State University in Los Angeles and sure enough they helped me establish myself as a resident and get financial aid. So I was able to go to college in California. And my first job out of college...I majored in Journalism and really didn't know what I wanted to do, but somebody said I was a good writer so I started writing for the newspaper. And in college I worked as a public relations person for the Community Youth Gang Services Project. The gangs were really...back then there were a lot of innocent people dying from gangs, so Los Angeles, the city and state started a program to try to curb the violence. So I became their spokesperson.

MRD: Sounds like a very tough job.

CJ: It was, it was an awakening to me. Here I was this...although I was 30 years-old, still a kid from Framingham. All of a sudden I was put in the middle of all this. So when somebody got killed or we had to go talk to gang members, you know, here I am talking to these guys and trying to figure out where they're coming from and where they're going, getting them on television programs, getting people to know them and do public service announcements,

because it was huge. And it was a challenge, but I guess I was young enough to jump in and idealistic enough to fit in, and make a difference. And we had ex-gang members riding around with me because it was kind of going into the neighborhoods, but as long as I was with people they knew, then I could go in and interview them and that kind of thing.

MRD: And you felt safe?

CJ: And I felt safe. And the flip side of that, I had to go talk to the City Council, L.A. City Council, and get into the politics a little bit, be available for the news when something didn't work and somebody did get killed, and another gang retaliated. So it was quite a stretch for a first job.

MRD: What a lot of responsibility.

CJ: Yeah, but it worked and I have to say I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it. It was sad to talk to the young people and listen to girls. I did not know about the girls being gang members and...

MRD: Can you tell us a little more about that?

CJ: The first time I came upon it, it was a young Hispanic girl. It was actually a group of them that they were following and we went to talk to. I remember she had bite marks all over her, and her cousin had just gotten killed and some of the guys were all about, "We have to retaliate and you can't just let that happen." And just talking to her and trying to see where her head was at, it was all about...it was all about the gang, it was all about the guys, you know, the boyfriends and this, that, and the other. And it was...I was stunned, they were just young girls.

MRD: Uh-huh.

CJ: And yet the things that they had seen, the things that came out of their mouths were almost beyond my comprehension, having grown up here and not really involved in it other than... You know you saw those things during the '60's. I used to go stay in Boston as a young person—fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth grade---in the middle of Roxbury. I thought it was wonderful because I went and got to see people who looked like me. In Framingham, my family was one of the...I remember in Metro West there used to live...a story one time about the history of black people living there. My mother's family, the Clements, was one of the original 12 black families...

MRD : Really?

CJ: In Framingham. But I always...we were always the minority. They used to let me to stay with my aunt in Roxbury. I thought it was wonderful and plus everybody there was trying to get out to the suburbs. [laughter] I'm going into the city going, "This is great," at that time in my life, before all the riots and when everything happened, I was older then. You know, I thought

that was an eye-opener, and it was and everything that was going on. But it was so totally different seeing these kids, these young women, and what they were doing it was so much...I don't know.

MRD: I'm sure I don't know how anyone would really prepare themselves for seeing those types of things and in a job, you were a young person...

CJ: Right

MRD: ...yourself.

CJ: Right.

MRD: So how long did you stay in that position?

CJ: I was there for about two years before I moved back to Massachusetts.

MRD: Okay. And did you come back to Massachusetts for a job, for family reasons?

CJ: Actually, I came back to Massachusetts because I got divorced, separated, and as big as L.A. was, I felt I needed to go home at that point.

MRD: Okay.

CJ: Another child during that marriage and I just...I wanted to come home. So I came home and stayed with my father actually for about a year before I was able to find housing that I could afford. I went to work for *the Metro West Daily News* as their first black reporter.

MRD: How was that?

CJ: It was interesting. [laughter] It was almost...I had left Framingham...I stayed in California for eight, nine years. And some things had changed. When I came back to Framingham, there was so much... so many more black faces.

MRD: It was change for the better.

CJ: Change for the better as far as I was concerned. You know when I went to work for *The News*, then it seemed to be this separation of the south side of Framingham, the north side of Framingham, you know just the communities and what they thought about them. And, of course, you know, here I am their first black reporter. There were a few incidents where but...I feel I'm good at bringing people around, being a reasonable person. And I had wonderful people there. The woman who hired me, Vicky Osmond, who was the managing editor at the time, we're still friends today. Good friends. She brought me in and there were a couple of incidents where

people were just like...They were walking around on eggshells at first and tripping over themselves.

MRD: Co-workers?

CJ: Yeah. Co-workers, my bureau chief at the time, just tripping over themselves trying not to offend or say the wrong thing or...and they're in a news environment, so there's always that thing that someone's going to sue you or something. But I just...chill out. [laughter]

CM: I'm sure they appreciated hearing that.

CJ: Yeah, to the point where if they were writing a story about something that involved an African-American, they would come run it by me. Things that were like...but eventually it all came around and we all worked really well together. I made some good friendships and I enjoyed it. I was a single parent, so it was difficult working deadlines. The other thing that the first bureau they put me in was Concord, which you never...The first time I had to go to a town meeting of selectmen...I had a great bureau chief. My son was in daycare and had to be picked up at a certain time. So I used to be able to bring him into the news room and let him color while I finished my stories, and stuff like that. That was a good working experience. I went from there to the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*. I worked in the Marlboro bureau for a while and then they brought me into Worcester for a little bit.

MRD: Okay.

CM: Can I ask a question?

MRD: Sure.

CM: Did you have that same experience in school when you were younger? I would expect...

CJ: Yes, yes.

CM: Or was it different with children?

CJ: I think that when I was younger, my take on it...I was good in sports. So being good at girls' softball...when I was in elementary school they measured our rates, and I was the fastest girl runner in the school. And my other classmate, the only other black person in the school, a boy who moved from Boston, was the fastest runner for the boys. So then they put us against each other, and I won! [much laughter] Years later we would be at a bar and the kid from the school said, "Oh, wow," that we just happened to meet him and he said, "Remember when?" [much laughter]

CM: He must have felt really bad. [more laughter]

CJ: So I think that was my...there was no issues there. There was no issues. I used to go to people's houses...and their parents...everything was really okay. I felt different because for me I knew I was different. But they were all very...I didn't have any of those feelings. Of course, that was the time, too, that I started going to Boston to stay with my aunt. So I think I was balanced then. It became...and even in high school, it wasn't an issue. It was more of an issue at one point with the principal there. He seemed to be a little belligerent about things that happened, but he was hard on everybody. That was during the '60's and Black Power and, you know, we were feeling pretty proud of ourselves. And there was a group, a group of us. We might have been in different grades, but we kind of all hung together, partied down at each other's houses, and stuff like that. But we also melded good with the other kids in the school. There weren't any major issues for me in school, in Framingham. The biggest problem was when we couldn't find some place to live. The other thing is that my parents were ingrained in the community in that...My parents were the best, very likable people, and able to deal, and very genuine people. And so, at a young age downtown Framingham was booming and I could walk into any store and charge something because they knew my mother and my father. So they would open charge accounts for us and say, "You're Muriel's daughter, sure. You can buy that." Like I said, we were poor and we didn't have much, but my mother and father just everybody knew them and liked them. And, you know, they were just that kind of people. So some of the folks she had gone to school with because she went to high school in Framingham. The Danforth Museum was the high school. The Framingham High School used to be in the Danforth Museum and when I was coming up, I went to junior high school there.

MRD: Really? That must have been neat.

CJ: So, no I didn't really feel anything.

CM: So, those earlier experiences probably helped you in those situations where you were the first..

CJ: Yes, yes. That all comes from...my mother and my father used to say, "It's all in how you treat people. You need to be able to deal on both ends and see people for who they really are. And know that things aren't...what's going on, isn't always the way it seems. Keep your wits about yourself and deal with people the way they are." My mother worked cleaning houses for people, who when she used to bring me, they tested me in school and found that I was hard of hearing in one ear. And the woman she worked for took me to all these hospitals, all these specialists to be tested, and went on a day journey, and it was great. [laughs]

MRD: How generous of her.

CJ: Yes, generous because she was concerned because she liked me and she liked my mother. But those are the kind of relationships that she built up. Another person she worked for, he was a

doctor and my mother had a bad back. He was her doctor and he always took care of her. They were among the people they were close with.

MRD: And they gave you those values.

CJ: Yes.

MRD: Going back to when you were at the *Telegram & Gazette*, you went from Marlboro to Worcester. Tell us how long you were working there and tell us a bit about your experiences.

CJ: How long did I work there? A couple of years maybe.

MRD: Okay.

CJ: Between Marlboro and Worcester, I'd say. And while I was there, they hired another young man...I was the first...I was the only one there for a while and then they hired a guy, Terry Williams, who actually through Facebook found me. [laughter]

MRD: Really?

CM: Really?

CJ: He said, "Remember me? We worked together." [laughter] He's married, living in New York, so that was nice.

CM: Oh, wow.

CJ: But I had a good experience at the *Gazette*. I had a great bureau chief. I can't remember his name, but I do remember when he retired. As a newspaper reporter, I actually was living in low-income housing because I wasn't making enough money to live in an apartment and take care of two kids and all that kind of stuff. So I ended up leaving there because I started a cleaning company. I actually started it to make some extra money and I started making more money there than I did at the *Telegram & Gazette*. And the potential seemed more rather than going year to year.

MRD: Tell us more. How did you come to start your own business?

CJ: Well, actually I have to say that when I lived in California and got into drugs and all that kind of stuff, and coming home was sort of like running away as well. I ran to California for various reasons. I also...when I was younger, I was sexually abused by a relative, and that didn't work. So then I came here. You can't run away from yourself. I ended up coming back home, and still drinking and all that kind of stuff, and it just got to the point where I had these kids. And I think if it hadn't been for them, God only knows. But my sister and girlfriend I think in trying to help me, helped themselves. They said, "Why don't we start a business? You know, get some

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extra money. We need to make some extra money.” So I was still working at the Gazette and started cleaning offices ‘cuz I did not want to clean houses. After a couple of years, my sister and my girlfriend...they both had their careers, my sister was an office manager and my girlfriend was a schoolteacher. And they left and this cleaning company was going on. During that time I said that we could do it for extra money, and I got accepted in Northeastern’s [Northeastern University] Master’s Program for Journalism because I wanted to be, or I thought I wanted to be in management in newspapers. There weren’t any minorities in management in newspapers back then. And so when I got my Master’s, my sister had left earlier but my girlfriend said, “Okay????????? But I couldn’t get a job without relocating to some little market. And I couldn’t afford to do that. I kept on with the business and it ended up growing, walking into walls, not really knowing what I was doing, no business plan, none of these things. It grew to be a three and one half million dollar company, and I had 165 employees. I did get another partner, five years in. And we worked together it probably could have gotten a lot bigger had we really known what we were doing, watch the industry like you’re supposed to. I’m very good at teaching business planning now. [laughter] And I use my company, Sparkle Cleaning, as a case study. Because I work with women at CWE [Center for Work and Enterprise] in Worcester and Boston. It’s a great case study to say, “Do as I say, not as I did. [laughter] And then you won’t have to go through everything that I had to go through.” During that time we faced a lot of what you might call prejudice. We kind of had a double whammy. We were women in a male-dominated industry. Women clean well but men are masters at making money at it. So it was very...when we started back then, not even knowing it till we started going out after commercial contracts, it’s a very male-dominated, white male-dominated industry. And then here we come [laughter] trying to call ourselves competitors. So, we ran into that a lot where the first time we walked into a conference room with 12 guys in business suits and then there’s us, 12 white men in business suits and then there’s us, everybody’s jaws would kind of drop to the ground, including ours. Okay, but what people would say is, “You’re not qualified.” Well, that worked once. But then after we started doing places like Hanscom [Hanscom Air Force Base] and really getting into government contracts, and then they came back and they said, “You’re not qualified,” we said, “You didn’t really read the quotes from us.” So that happened at Polaroid with a liaison person. So we demanded to see the president. Instead, in lieu of our seeing the president, there were 12 buildings they were bidding on, and they gave us four of them. So we considered that a small victory. But it was tough getting into corporate America because they weren’t kicking the doors open for us. And so we got involved in the 8 A Program which is a program to help minority businesses compete in getting government contracts.

MRD: Could you say that again?

CJ: 8 and the letter A

MRD: Okay.

CJ: And we worked with the SBA [Small Business Administration] with that program and ended up doing quite well. We did Hanscom, we did Devens, we did Newport for the Navy. We did federal buildings up in Maine.

MRD: You were very diverse geographically.

CJ: Yes, we were in four states: Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. So that's really how we kicked off. And then we did post offices, we did a lot of post offices in Boston and Metro West. And we never really got into the big commercial buildings. I think we felt that we were going up against a brick wall. And in the other, getting involved in the 8 A Program, we lost sight of going after the others which would be some of our downfall. You know, the 8 A Program is a nine year program that you go through and then you graduate. And all of those contracts go away. We were smart enough to negotiate additional years, but still when you're in that ??? with companies, there are other things that you learn. You can do well there but the idea is that you continue to do the commercial side too.

MRD: Uh-huh, okay. The discrimination you faced, do you think it was more from being African-American or more from being female?

CJ: [pause] I think being African-American. I remember one time being at a dinner, The New England Minority Purchasing Council. We were at a dinner and I remember they would seat us so you'd be around people who had contracts in the commercial world. And one guy said, "Well, you know we hired one of your companies and it didn't work out." Well, he didn't mean one of your companies, women. He meant your companies, black. And I said, "You never hired another company for any other reason and not have it work out?" So that means what exactly? One didn't work, so forget it. We're not hiring any more. But I think that definitely was the case. But for us the difficulty was both, and we could also never get a loan. It was really hard. I attribute some of that to my credit, which is another reason why I'm good at teaching this. Having lived on government assistance and not been very good with my credit in the beginning, robbing Peter to pay Paul and those kinds of things. We built our company basically on month-to-month receivables. We even went so far as to not pay our payroll taxes one time because we needed it to find new accounts. So it wasn't until...it took 11 years and we were doing two million dollars before we could even get a credit line. And even then it took an accountant, who had been working with us for some time, to really go to the mat with a banker that would give us a credit line. So I think it's probably easier for women now. Like I said, we had to rob from Peter to pay Paul. But in the normal situation, especially today when you're looking at small business and the things that we were doing and the potential that was there, they would have worked with us you would have thought. We've done this. And some of it became that we owed taxes, but we made a plan to clear those up and we did. The IRS [Internal Revenue Service] almost shut us down. [Tape in recording device was changed.]

CM: Sorry about that.

MRD: That's okay.

CJ: Where was I? Oh, the Women's Leaders Forum. So, in our first meeting...what would happen is that in our first meeting, everyone would go around the table and say what their issue was. And then they would chose an issue that was the major one and discuss that for the day. And the first meeting we had gotten notice that the IRS was going to shut us down because we owed them so much in payroll taxes. And I, of course, was devastated because here we are and...This group of women that were around, they were white women. I was the only minority in the room, but I had the largest business by far. I think the next one may have been about a quarter of a million, maybe half. And they started telling me I was running my business like a mom and pop shop, and I was making mommy decisions rather than business decisions, and yada, yada, yada. At first I was angry, and then I had to really look around the room and realize they came from an experience that I just couldn't even fathom. They had husbands or they divorced their husbands and their husbands were paying the mortgage because they lived in a nice house, and that kind of thing. All of them said, "You can't get loan? What?" They were appalled. Of course, I'm sitting there going, "Okay, okay." [laughter] What they did was let me know the power...They said, "You have 125 employees. The IRS doesn't want to shut you down. You need to go and deal with them." So I did. I went and did what they said, and sure enough the IRS said, "Sure, we'll work with you." In six months they were paid off and we were profitable again. Everything was fine, [laughter] at which point an accountant stepped in and helped us get a credit line. So experience, different experiences, trying to keep your mind open to folks that really don't mean you harm, they mean you well. We just have to be able to hold our own.

MRD: You're just coming from a different place.

CJ: I'm coming from a different place.

MRD: So how long did this business go on?

CJ: Seventeen years, 17 years and we sold it. We either sold it, let it fizzle out, or...because we didn't have the money to take it to the next level. It needed to be taken to the next level. The industry had changed and, of course, because of the things going on and us not paying attention, it would have been hard for us to maintain. Sparkle is still going on and it didn't end well. Let me just say that. I would get into it, but my partner...who was my partner, is still in it, so I don't want to do that. But I did end up with nothing, which is another reason why I'm a good case study. I shouldn't say ended up with nothing. I sent two kids to college, bought a house, got rid of my Flintstone [cartoon character] car and bought a real car, [laughter] took my kids on vacation which is something I always... was huge for me because my family could never afford

to go on vacation. You know, we could go to the beach together and stuff like that. It's not that I ended up with nothing. But when I sold the company, I ended up in court for a few years and it ended not the best.

MRD: Okay. It's wonderful although it didn't end the best that you were able to provide your children an education, they went to college...

CJ: And I grew as a person. It helped me realize that...it helped me feel like I was worth something. You know, I had 65 people depending upon me for their paychecks, and making the decisions that I had to make to grow Sparkle Cleaning and keep that growing, really instilled something in me and helped me grow as a person. So I wrote a book about my experience and it's called *From the Pits to the Palace*. It's not really a rags to riches story, it is more personal growth.

MRD: Can you tell me a little more about the book?

CJ: When I first wrote the book, it was sort of like therapy. I'm writing it down, putting it on video. But I actually started the book when I came home to Massachusetts and moved from my father's to low-income [housing]. It kind of started when I was 33, before Sparkle. It kind of takes...there is backstory but it takes you through that process. And then the book takes you through Sparkle Cleaning and the things that we went through, what we faced as women as well as minorities, and how we dealt with those trials and tribulations. It ends with when we sold the business. I have spoken to a lot of women's groups about the book, and I tell the story of what happened after we sold. If I hadn't come as far as I had come, what happened afterwards could have put me right back to when I was starting over. But because I had grown as a person, was confident in me, and liked me, and knew I could do something else, it's kind of helped me move forward. And from it...everything happens for a reason. I believe it's the silver lining from it. I started teaching more and working on another book. I love teaching. I finally found what it is I love. I loved being my own boss, but I didn't necessarily love cleaning.[laughter] I didn't love cleaning. When you're out teaching business courses, you teach that you should start a business that you're passionate about because your chance of success increases. Just like a career, right?

MRD: Right.

CJ: When people look at me and I'm like, "No, I wasn't passionate about cleaning." [much laughter] Mine was a total fluke, but I did love being my own boss. So I'm going through it now, and still wondering what I'm going to be when I grow up. As a kid, I just never knew because I never thought I could do anything. My self-esteem was in the toilet obviously after what had happened and everything...you can't do this, you can't do that. And I started teaching at CWE a long time ago, and I just love it. I do the classes now 14 week Business Planning course. And

then I said that I wanted to try college and I'm at Quinsigamond [Community College]. And hopefully I'll be at another college, and I love it. That's what I'm passionate about.

MRD: Now what do you teach at Quinsigamond?

CJ: They started me out with Business Ethics. And it's a great time to teach Business Ethics with all the material that's out there.

CM: Oh yes.

CJ: Is that an oxymoron or what?

MRD: And it shouldn't be.

CJ: No, it shouldn't be, but it definitely is. And now this semester I'm teaching Speech Communications, which again is right up my alley because it's about presentations skills and about getting them out to talk. And I think I'm good at that. I'm good at encouraging them. And I teach Business Planning at CWE and I also teach a four-week Visioning course for CWE. CWE is great because a lot of the women that are there come from where I came from, maybe not necessarily living on government assistance, although a lot of them are not making enough money. CWE makes it accessible to everybody, so they give scholarships. But just in the confidence building thing and whole can-I-do-this-kind-of-thing. That's where the Sparkle story works well because if I can do this, you can do this. Lost my train of thought there.

MRD: I have a question. You talked about your Visioning course. Can you tell me a little detail about what that is?

CJ: Visioning is so many times that women who come in and want to start a business...they're all over the place. They're doing it for the same reasons I was doing it. They're a single parent and they need to make a better life, now got laid off and can't find another job, and they're older, and nobody is hiring. Everybody is getting to the point where if I don't do something on my own and find another way...But so many times women can't see past their nose. And so they never thought about...they were married for so long and put their stuff aside. And so they never said it all the way through, "What do you want? What's your dream?" Visioning is graphically recording that dream and making you play the tape all the way through. So the first class begins with...we have these outlines, these big huge papers and we have volunteers who do drawings and each person has the time to talk their dream all the way through. What is your idea of successful in an ideal world? You've got the money you need to build your business. What does success look like to you? Not just in your business, but in your home life.

MRD: And that's very subjective.

CJ: And they have the hardest time going, “Well if I had the money,” no you have the money. Okay, you’re successful. What does it look like? And they play the tape all the way through and every time they’ll say, “Wow, that’s the first time I’ve said that out loud.” And they are just so inspired by it. And the next three weeks we talk about...now we’re going to talk about the real world, and what it takes, and how you’re going to get there, and those kinds of things. And so we talk about that for four weeks and it also allows them to dive into doing some research for the business they want to start. At the end of the four weeks they’re able to decide do they want to go forward. If they do, they usually take the 14 week Business Planning course, so they can come out with a business plan.

MRD: Sounds fascinating.

CJ: It’s a great course and I love teaching it. And I love the women and it’s such a diverse group. It used to be mostly white women. And it bugged me. Earlier on CWE used to out into the communities in Boston and tell our stories. But now it’s very diverse; black, white, Spanish, Asian. It’s a much more diverse group.

MRD: And what kinds of businesses do these women hope to start? Or is that all over the map?

CJ: It’s all over the map. There is a lot of boutiques, a lot of retail, a lot of services; marketing, online fashion, household items, that kind of thing. We have a woman who came up with the New England Pet Hospice for people whose pets are dying. You know sometimes pets are like family and when they’re sick, lots of time you go to a vet the first they say is that you have to put them down, but you’re not ready. So how do you make the pet comfortable...just like if you had a family member who had cancer or something like that. So there’s some unique stuff like that. And another one, urban farming, about making cities better and healthier. They’re all over the place. The challenge is to get them to narrow it down, and that’s what Visioning is all about, help them narrow their vision down so they can look at it realistically. It’s pretty good. A young lady just opened up...it’s really good...here in Worcester...the Jacqueline Jase Face and Body Spa. She has very nice offices. As a matter of fact, she does eyelashes. I’m one of her clients.

CM: I was actually admiring your eyelashes. [much laughter] I’ve been admiring them the whole time.

CJ: Normally I wouldn’t tell, but since we’re talking here...[laughter] She said, “You’ve got to come, you’ve got to come.” You know as you get older, which I didn’t know, you lose your eyelashes.

MRD: Absolutely.

CJ: That’s why I don’t have any eyelashes!

MRD: [laughter] It isn't fair.

CJ: [laughter] No kidding! All these things you gotta go through, right? And now you tell me I gotta lose my eyelashes too? [laughter] So, since she was in my class and she launched, I went in about a month ago. So I said, "Okay, I'll do that. I'll get the lashes." She's building up her clientele, she's quite good at marketing. That's what she did in her professional job, so it's really kicking off for her. But she's not far from here, down the street. And she does a great job. Those folks are out there that... There's another woman in Boston who does landscaping, and not just landscaping, design, for wealthy, big, beautiful places. She's asked me to come and look at her gardens so I'm going to. She's wonderful. She's a psychologist, it's her full-time job. And she wants to get into this full-time. And she's got the credentials, she's gone to school, and she does great work.

MRD: What a complete change.

CJ: Yeah. You know what? Sometimes with these women it's just totally the opposite, but it's the thing they're passionate about. She's so passionate about flowers and gardening. Just like Jacqueline about feeling good and the atmosphere... When I walked in there, and it's a small space that she shares, I was like, "Wow. This is nice, like entering another world. Oh, okay." [big sigh and laughter] And that's the way it should be. She had it down to exactly what she wanted and she's doing it. She moved in with her mother, so that she could get it off the ground. And it's great watching these women do these things.

MRD: You must feel a tremendous sense of pride after having been their teacher, their mentor, and then see...

CJ: I also learn from them. I always say, "I'm so proud of you that I feel like a mother." [laughter] The ones that really go through and do it, they have that thing... the difference between them and me is I didn't start that way, remember? I was more interested in just making extra money. I didn't really do a business plan. If I had, honestly if I had, I might not have done it because I would have known that it was a white-male dominated industry. And I would have found all this stuff out and I might have said, "I don't want to do it." I didn't go that route, it wasn't like I had this passion that I want to make real. My thing was, I just want to make money. [laughter] That's real. I want to be able to send my children to college, I want to be able to move into a real, a real apartment. I have three boys, three black young men. I want to show them that they can do whatever they put their mind to, not what I'm doing because they were taking care of me. I have to say they raised a much stronger mother than the one that bore them. And now they're out doing great. And their energy is just so exhilarating for me. Watching them, the ones that jump off, it's just... Another young lady opened up a fitness, a different fitness, I forget what you call it, not a regular fitness. But these things hang out of the wall and they're less, you can

get in shape and all that but not like when you lift weights and you can kind of wreck yourself, none of that. In Newton, she has a really nice place in Newton. CWE is a good organization.

CM: You have your passion now. You found your passion.

CJ: I found my passion. I did, I gotta make enough money at it to make a living.

CM: That's the thing about teaching. [laughter]

CJ: I'm back to like a newspaper reporter. I'm an adjunct, which I like because I don't deal with the politics. And I don't want to deal with the politics.

CM: It's true.

CJ: So yeah, you can more money, but you gotta deal with all that stuff and gotta be the advisor. And I don't want to see that end of it 'cause that kind of changes the... I think it's going to change something. I like just being there and doing and concentrating on this and being able to go home, so I can deal and I can focus. They'll ask my advice and I can say, "You need to talk to your advisor." That way I'm not rubbing with them that way, just this way. And I like that. I also developed a writing course because writing is a passion of mine. I did that because when I wrote my book, some people said, "How did you write a book? I think about writing a book all the time. I've thought about for ten years. I have all these thoughts in my head." Or, "I started a book ten years ago and I can't get through it. I need some help." [laughter] So I go, "There's all these writing programs in Boston, but they're not writer-writers, and they don't want to go to Boston. So I developed this four-week program. It was called *How to Get Writing That Book That Haunts You*. And I had people coming in who had been working on books for ten and 15 years, definitely haunting them. [laughter] And it was all about getting them into the groove and trusting the process. And so at the end of the four weeks they were like, "But we want to do more." So then I developed an eight-week course that talked a little bit more about characterization, the craft.

MRD: Okay.

CJ: Because of where they were, revised it. And then they didn't want to stop there. So then they got me for another eight weeks and we meet at the library. Now I just started another four weeks of the Haunting one again. And I have ten people in it. And it's just interesting because it's about people being brave enough. It's sort of like starting a business. You have to be brave enough to write it and then share it. You know, you're putting yourself out there.

MRD: And that does take courage.

CJ: Woah! [laughter] And you've gotta have thick skin because...and it took me a while to get there...I'm trying to do fiction now. I'm writing a mystery and going from journalism to fiction...

MRD: It's a huge leap. I was about to ask you about your second book.

CJ: It's a huge leap. I took an online course and what I know from reading...you also need to read a lot. I've been working on it for a while. It's tough. If I can just get through this one, it'll be easier. [laughter] Maybe not, but at least I'll feel more...I tell people that you feel good the first time, then you gotta start all over again. You gotta fight back the chatter in your head. Just like when you're starting a business, you talk to people and there are so many negative people. They're going to tell you that you're nuts. And you are, you're a nut. But you don't want to talk to people who are nothing like you because then they're talking negative. We're talking positive here. It's the same thing when you're writing a book. There's so much chatter that it stops you from getting it done all the time. It's the same thing with building self-esteem. The moment that you think that you're on top of your game, something else happens. You crash down. It's a continuous process.

MRD: I think this is a challenge that is just part of life.

CJ: Yes, it is. And I think for women especially...There were no women's programs back when we were doing Sparkle and all that stuff. We were kind of operating in a vacuum. And now there are so many women's groups and women are starting...not just starting, it's been going on for a little bit now...to network and help each other, what men have done forever. That's why they're successful and women are starting to do that and not be afraid to talk to each other and share their experiences. One of the things about the book, some people say, "How could you put yourself out there like that? How does it feel?" The funny answer that makes everyone laugh is, "Well there's nothing left for anyone to whack me with." But the real answer is that I felt if it can help somebody else, even if it's just one person, every time I go talk at least one woman will come up to me and tell me her story. Either she's been abused or she's a recovering alcoholic or a recovering drug addict or whatever, and they've never told anyone before. And it was the first time they were able to. My thing is if you say it, then it doesn't have any power over you anymore. Who cares? It's more about who you are now and what it took to get there. So for those women that one person who comes out with this, okay, it was worth it.

MRD: And having heard or read your story, they feel safe in your presence.

CJ: Yeah.

MRD:...to be able to say that.

CJ: To be able to say that...It makes me feel like, okay, because I didn't know if I should put this out there. Before I did it, I had my kids read it. My oldest son always kind of pushed me off. [He said] "Yeah, I read it." He picked me off the floor many times. My middle son lives in California and there's a part in the book where I come home a little bit loaded and he goes, "What kind of mother are you?" And I remember how devastated I was, so he read it and he sent me a text about three or four o'clock in the morning. His text said, "Wow, this is great. I laughed, I cried, it's so good. I'm only halfway done." And then my youngest son, he took a bunch of them to school and sold them to students and his teachers. [laughter] There you go, the entrepreneur.

MRD: Absolutely.

CJ: So I feel like I got the stamp of approval from them. I put it out there. And I figured if they were good with it, and they were, that I could do that.

MRD: We're coming to the end of our hour and I just want to ask you if there is anything else you would like to discuss, or if there is a question that I did not hit upon, any advice you would give to young women coming up.

CJ: There's two quotes that are all about everything that I value, that I try to convey in talking to women, because we just need it. One is, "Confucius say, the greatest glory is not in never falling but in rising every time you fall." And the other one is...we'll go from Confucius to Henry Ford...[laughter], "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." And all of that is what it's all about the way you think and you gotta keep getting rid of that chatter. And step up there. You never know. My mother would say, "Any which way you can. Where there's a will, there's a way. God take care of you. Amen." [laughter]

MRD: Thank you so much, Carrie. This has been terrific.

CJ: Thank you.