

Interviewee: Michelle Jones-Johnson  
Interviewers: Lauren Moreira and Ricky Gonzalez  
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Transcriber: Lauren Moreira



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**Abstract:** Michelle Jones-Johnson was born in Detroit, Michigan. She lived in the Midwest for the majority of her lifetime, and is relatively new to the city of Worcester. She moved to Worcester four years ago in 2010. Prior to coming to Worcester, Johnson earned a bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of Michigan Ann Arbor and two master's degrees. She has worked in the field of Human Resources for the past 23 years at various companies, and continues to do so today as Director of Human Resources at UMass Medical School. She is the wife of the president of Becker College, and they both balance their professional lives and their family life with their two kids. Johnson talks about what it was like to grow up as part of a minority group, along with being a woman.

RG: We are completing a city-wide oral history of the lives of Worcester women aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester. We are focused on the areas of women's education, health, work and politics, community involvement. We want to focus today on the experiences with insert ... [laughter], and thank you for the help with this important project.

RG: So do we have permission to record what you are about to say and use it for our paper and things of that nature?

MJJ: Yes.

RG: Alright then, so let's begin. What is your full maiden name and if applicable, your married one?

MJJ: My full maiden name is Michelle Martinese White. My married name is Michelle Jones-Johnson.

RG: No connections to Walter White?

MJJ: No connections to Walter White.

RG: Just making sure.

MJJ: Nope. [laughter]

RG: When were you born? This is optional.

MJJ: I was- When was I born? I was born in May. [laughter]

RG: Good, good.

MJJ: May 19th.

RG: May 19th. Have- have you ever married?

MJJ: Yes.

RG: What is the name of your current husband?

MJJ: Dr. Robert E. Johnson.

RG: I'm not gonna ask you the next one. Do you have children?

MJJ: Yes.

RG: How many?

MJJ: Two.

RG: Do you have any grandchildren?

MJJ: No grandchildren.

RG: Congratulations.

MJJ: [laughter]

RG: What cultures-ethnicities do you identify with? Family background.

MJJ: African American.

RG: African American. Your husband by any chance?

MJJ: African American as well.

RG: Tell me about your parents.

MJJ: Oh my parents are awesome. I actually have the best parents in the world. My parents divorced when I was 11, and then they remarried, and then I had two really cool step parents. So, I have four parents that are awesome. My parents were very hardworking. They – my mom and

dad – were born in Nashville, Tennessee, and they came to Detroit [Michigan] when I was little. So I was born – I guess they actually came to Detroit before I was born because I was actually born in Detroit. My mom worked for Hartford Insurance Company for her entire career. She moved up – started as a clerical position and moved up through the ranks there and she became a system administrator and retired on her 50th birthday. That was her birthday present to herself.

RG: The best present.

MJJ: My dad was in healthcare and had a very long career in healthcare. Working in Detroit- when all of the managed care structures started to come into place, he did all of that for a really long time. My stepfather worked at Detroit Diesel for his entire career, 43 years I believe, and my stepmother had her own business, medical transcription. She actually just passed away about a month ago.

RG: I'm sorry to hear about that.

MJJ: But I had great parents who, even though my parents were divorced. I never felt like I had to choose. We did things together as a family, which was confusing to my friends. You know they'd come over, I'd go this is my mom, this is my stepmom, this is my dad, this is my stepdad. You know...

LM: That's pretty cool actually.

MJJ: So we did a lot of things together as a family. It was pretty cool. They went to their high school reunion, because they met in high school. So they went to their high school reunion together, with their new spouses. and it was cool to see that they were partying together and having a good time. [laughter] My mom was like, "I haven't seen your dad dance like that since who knows when." It was – it was really fun.

LM: That's awesome.

RG: So where have you lived during your lifetime? I mean we heard Detroit and Nashville.

MJJ: I was in Michigan, we lived in Ohio, and then here. I haven't traveled around a lot unfortunately, more Midwest.

**RG:** Well you didn't grow up in Worcester, that's for sure.

LM: You said you moved only four years ago?

MJJ: Just four years ago.

RG: How was the neighborhood where you grew up?

**MJJ:** So I grew up in Detroit. [laughter] It was a great neighborhood. We – I was on the – actually it was northwest Detroit, and it was very close knit so we knew all of our neighbors, that was back in the time when if you did something wrong as a kid, your neighbor could holler at you and say, “Hey!”

**RG:** If you weren’t born in Worcester, when did you arrive? Year, age?

**MJJ:** I moved to Worcester in June of 2010.

**RG:** How did you come to live in Worcester?

**MJJ:** My husband’s job brought us to Worcester.

**RG:** And what position does he hold?

**MJJ:** The president of Becker College.

**RG:** Where do you live in the city now?

**MJJ:** We live on William Street right by Elm Park.

**RG:** Have you lived in multiple areas?

**MJJ:** No, that was the only place I’ve lived since I’ve been here.

**LM:** And then before Worcester, did you live anywhere else in Massachusetts? Or was this...

**MJJ:** No this is it. We were in Dayton Ohio, for seven years and then we went from there to here.

**LM:** Oh okay.

**RG:** Do you have any family members who live in the area?

**MJJ:** Nobody, none.

**RG:** How do you cope with that? Do you visit a lot?

**MJJ:** I do a lot of traveling. [laughter]

**LM:** Are they still living in Detroit?

**MJJ:** A lot of my family live in Michigan, not all in Detroit proper, but they still live in different parts of Michigan. I have family in Nashville, they come here, of course not in the winter. They don’t understand this, even though they were from Detroit, it’s something different, and then we travel and go see them a lot, so it works out. Thank goodness for Skype.

LM: Absolutely.

RG: So, do you think this city still faces any challenges?

MJJ: Well I think that they still face the same challenges that every city faces for a smaller city. In terms of jobs, in terms of how do you attract talent to the area and keep them in the area. I mean we have all of these colleges and universities, how do we keep those students that graduate here to want to stay here and build their lives and build their families here, so I think that's a big challenge for Worcester. I think there are a lot of positive things that they're doing to really move things in the right direction and make this a place where people want to come and want to stay, so that's exciting.

RG: Have you seen any changes that the city has done?

MJJ: Since I've been here in the short time I have seen the whole redevelopment of the downtown area, the new companies that have moved down there. It really – I think it's moving in the right direction. I think in terms of the vision for the city. I think the one thing about this community that struck me is that people in Worcester are very proud of their culture and also they are very tight in terms of community and supporting one another. They have this like, this spirit about the City of Worcester and how proud they are of it. I think that was evident when we first arrived.

RG: What – what distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

MJJ: I think one, the sense of community. I think two, the diversity. Different types of people and they're all here together, all the different backgrounds and languages.

RG: The hills maybe. [laughter]

MJJ: The hills of Worcester.

RG: There's nothing that's not a hill.

MJJ: The hills of Worcester, yeah I learned about those. Only because I slide down several of them in the snow. The other thing that I think makes Worcester great is the industry. So obviously you have education, right? You have these bio tech companies and medical research which allows for great alignment. Becker has this great well known, nationally recognized video game design program. The gaming and interactive media industry is growing aligns with the research and some of the other things that are going on in the city. I think there's a great energy in Worcester, I think people are really trying to figure out how to take the best things about Worcester and put them together to make Worcester a world class city, and so that's exciting to be part of.

RG: Do you feel like the city does enough to like empower the students that come here, you know to...?

MJJ: That's a good question, I think it depends on the institution. At Becker they try very much to have different types of experiences to make it transformational. So, it's not just about academics, it's about how you develop as an individual, it's about how you make your foot print in the world, and how to become a global citizen. I think all of those things empower students to know that they can go out and change the world, and they can come and become equipped to make a difference. So it is inspiring to be in a place where there are so many higher education institutions where you can come and get what you need, not just academically but also to prepare you for what lies ahead in the world. Many institutions are faced with educating students for positions and professions that haven't even been developed yet, that in five years or seven years from will now will require creative and forward thinking professionals to solve complex problems. So how do you prepare students for that? I think it's always a challenge, but having all of these institutions here I think is a wonderful thing.

RG: So when it comes to education, where did you attend school?

MJJ: High school?

RG: Yeah let's start there.

MJJ: It was in Detroit. I attended Lutheran High School West. It actually was torn down and no longer exists. It's been really cool with Facebook and being able to stay connected with all of our alumni. It was a great school, it was a small school, and I had great memories there.

LM: Can I ask what the class size was, that you graduated with?

MJJ: Oh, like I remember that. [laughter]

LM: I mean roughly, was it small?

MJJ: It was small. Maybe about 200.

LM: Okay, just so we have an idea.

RG: Where did you go to college then?

MJJ: I did my bachelor's degree at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and one of my master's degrees I did through the University of Phoenix, and then I did my MBA through Syracuse University.

RG: What challenges did you face in education?

MJJ: Well, when I think back on my education, especially at University of Michigan, that was right around the time when they had opened the doors for a lot of minority students through affirmative action. There was a constant challenge of trying to overcome the perception that that was the only reason why you were there was because you were a minority student. When the reality was when I was growing up, my father and I would take drives to Ann Arbor on the weekends and I would always say to my dad, "I'm gonna be a student here," and he would say, "Yes you will." He encouraged that visualization with me really young. When I applied to college, I applied to one college, unlike everyone else, but that's where I'm going so I said I'm not wasting my time applying to a bunch of other schools. So the challenge is how can you be in an institution that huge and that large and deal with those dynamics because it's complex and it's confusing and I remember sitting in a lecture room with maybe 400 students and being the only African American student in the room and that pressure to perform exceptionally well.

So that's one of the challenges, trying to find your space in a college or institution that welcomes who you are as a person and making sure that you have support. I think having access to education is a challenge now. When I was in school my parents sent me to school, at the time we had Pell grants and all these other types of funding. I remember that my father lost his job and I came home for a year and worked, and the promise to my parents was that I would return to school in a year. Now because my parents are my parents, they were like, "Great you're home but you have exactly one year to figure out how to get back to focusing on your education," and I did. I went back to school, I figured out how to get some scholarships and other types of funding and I still graduated in four years. So I think the access to education is still a challenge for students today. Being able to afford a higher education for some families is really a struggle at this point in time... and really to appreciate that I was able to pursue a college education.

LM: Even if the institutions are there and ready to accept students, but being able to go forward with that. I mean I think most of us graduating soon feel that, and you know coming out with all those loans we have to pay back too.

MJJ: And then it starts to impact your financial stability going forward. Even if you are coming out of college with a job, a high percentage of students are coming out in debt, with some long-term financial responsibility.

RG: Sometimes too much to handle when you think about it.

MJJ: Exactly. I think the challenge is you have those students that want to go, want to learn, and get a higher education, and giving them that access and I think that's a critical challenge we face particularly for students of color.

RG: So you know being diverse is a challenge when it comes to the workplace. How does it feel to be diverse and on top of that a woman? Do you think that ever held you back? Like both of those things?

MJJ: In the workplace?

RG: Yeah

MJJ: Oh absolutely, absolutely. In some places it did, but I think you know what happens is as you get older you start to recognize different things, and because you've gone through different challenges you are much more equipped to deal with certain situations. I remember the year I got out of college I worked at an accounting firm. I was a secretary, and I remember going in and thinking I'm pretty smart, I can do some stuff right? But, I was making coffee, typing and running errands. The guys would come in and think I was just supposed to make the coffee and because it was really my first professional job, I thought sure I'd get it. But I remember a few years later after I got out of college working for a law firm and that's where I started my HR [human resources] career. One of the attorneys who had been there forever had an issue with one of his staff, he called down to HR, "I need you to run up here," and I go up there and he's going on and on, he's like "I want her fired today and I want her out of here!" I told him that I would have a conversation with his staff person. Then he says to me that I needed to get him some coffee. So I told him that I would be happy to get someone on his staff to get his coffee. So it's learning how to handle those situations as tactfully and professionally as possible, understanding the politics and dynamics around it and not make it personally about you. I don't take on other people's issues so I let them work that out. I'm focused on doing my job. But it's a challenge, it continues to be a challenge, it's always something that will be with you. You're always going to be a woman, you're always going to be a minority. You can't change those dynamics, so you learn to deal with it.

RG: Do you think you had to work a lot harder to be accepted as normal?

MJJ: Oh absolutely. Absolutely. When I was at the University of Michigan I definitely had more pressure because one, if I didn't go to class, they knew I wasn't there. [laughter] You know, so I couldn't skip classes, I couldn't check out early. They had an expectation. I remember when I had to leave school because of financial difficulties after my freshman year I wanted to talk to someone in financial aid, and I'll never forget what one of the counselors said to me, "Well we don't have any other options for you." They said, "What? You can't play a sport or something?" and I said, "No, I don't play sports." Just the assumption that, well you're black, you should be able to play a sport, and I just thought it spoke volumes about the challenges many of us faced. The individual I spoke to was another person of color and that's what really hurt, really hurt. So, I ended up leaving school, because they weren't going to help me. I'm sorry I'm not that coordinated to play any competitive sports [laughter].

RG: So did you have any supporting groups that helped you out, after freshman year obviously that kept you going, that you know helped you throughout the years?

MJJ: I mean you do have your peers, We had a very strong population – very strong group of African American students, who were really, really smart and really got it. They were all really thankful for the experience. We also felt that it was our right, that we earned the right to be here. So you know, when it was appropriate, I've been to a few sit ins, and a few protests and that type of thing. So I had my peers, you have obviously my family. My parents never told me I couldn't

do anything. Even if I told them I was gonna walk on the moon, they wouldn't say I couldn't. They would say, "Really? Tell me about that. [laughter] What's your plan on how you're gonna do that?" Usually from their questioning, I would understand that I needed to rethink my plan! You have to build your support around you wherever you are. Even when I moved to this area, I didn't know anyone but I had to find my own support system.

RG: So when it comes to work, well you obviously worked outside of the home, where do you work?

MJJ: When I was in the last semester of my senior year in college, because I was such an over achiever I had gotten all my classes done to graduate so I only had one class, Spanish.

RG: That's my forte [laughter]

MJJ: I had Spanish with Mrs. Nizio [laughter] She terrified all of us. You had to take two semesters of Spanish and so I had her before. I could never get another Spanish professor. I always landed in her class. I think she purposely went down the list and said that girl needs to be in my class so I can torture her. [laughter] Aside from my Spanish class, I was bored and I ended up – I don't even know how I got here, but I ended up working for an investment company and they sent me in and trained me to receive licenses to sell stocks and bonds and insurance and all that and I thought, "This is great. I'm gonna go work on Wall Street and make a lot of money." And I worked for that company all semester. At the time, the company had me doing cold calls, and I just hated it, so I remember I went and took my last final at school, went into work, and quit. It just didn't feel right. I didn't feel like I was able to be honest. It felt like I was making phone calls to pressure people into investing their money with the company not supporting them in building wealth for themselves. I remember calling a woman and she told me that wasn't a good time to talk because her husband had just had triple by-pass surgery. My immediate response was, "Oh I'm so sorry to bother you..." but my bosses look at me like, "Are you kidding me, you didn't finish the script?" It was a lot of very high-pressure sales and it just wasn't my thing.

RG: You had to keep your emotion out of the situation and be pure business.

MJJ: Right, so I stopped that and my parents being my parents were like, "That's great, you need to find yourself, we understand, but you have six months after you graduate to find a job." So I worked in hotel management for a few years. Then I worked in higher education administration at Eastern Michigan University with a new Master's in Social Work program that was going through the accreditation process, so I was there for a couple of years. Then I landed a job in HR and I've been in HR ever since – about 22 years.

LM: Can I ask what your Bachelor's degree was in?

MJJ: My Bachelor's degree was in sociology. [laughter]

LM: Oh okay.

MJJ: That's why my parents were like, "Yeah you're going to need to figure that out." I was initially going to go to business school, I mean that was my goal, but I couldn't get through the math, it was hard for me. I couldn't get through statistics. [laughter] So that had always lingered, which is why a few years ago I went back to get my MBA because that was where I started and I had to get it done.

LM: Luckily I don't have to take that.

RG: You just have to grind it out.

MJJ: It's a mind game, that's the other part of it.

LM: And you love what you're doing now? Well, I mean you've been doing it for the past 23 years, so...

MJJ: When I got into HR, it was a very different type of work. There was a lot of focus around working with the people and developing people, training, working with organizations strategically to help the organization move forward, but that focus has shifted because organizations are so challenged right now. In HR there's always the transaction work that has to get done, benefits, people change their name, people want to get paid, so that's the transaction work. The strategic work, when you're working with the leaders of the organization and you're really doing things around organizational development, career coaching, and all of that is what I enjoy most. So where many organizations are challenged is because they don't have the dollars to fund development and training for its people. It's an industry that's really changed.

RG: Did you ever think that because of being a minority or being a woman, some people made your job a lot harder? Like no one didn't take you seriously?

MJJ: Oh all the time. It still happens today.

RG: Do you think there are changes? Where people are now more understanding?

MJJ: I think there have been definite advancements and challenges. I think that's where you as a woman and a minority, you know that your work is going to be twice as hard, if not more so. You can't come in and do some of the things that you see some colleagues doing, you just can't. You know, you can't come in late every day. You have to be on time, prepared and professional. Because what happens is that people, and I don't know that it's necessarily a conscious thing, come in with their own pre-conceived notions about who you are. For example, if I have a different opinion and speak up in a meeting, I've been told, "You're being too aggressive, but when other people speak up, it's not an issue. That is part of that angry, black woman thing that people somehow get caught up in. I think I am just sharing an opinion just like other people were sharing. So it is still a challenge and I don't think that will ever go away. I think people have their own perceptions about things. I think as you see this country move in a different

direction, you see people responding to those changes. We have an African-American president and there are people that are still really upset about the fact that an African-American is leading our great country. But we also experience an enormous sense of support for the changing demographics in our country. These attitudes affect all different areas of our lives, down to our community, so I don't think that the challenges of being an African-American woman will ever go away. I think that challenge is always going to be there.

RG: When it comes to like working, did anyone ever hold you to like a stereotype that you were going to be a certain kind of way and were then surprised when you didn't act that way? Can you elaborate on that?

MJJ: I think that it is an interesting dynamic. So my husband is the president of a college. I had a career when we arrived and planned to continue to work. I sense that it's very hard for some to understand my drive to move forward with my career. I think that is where some of the stereotypes come in. In terms of being female, and having your husband be in a very prominent role and people assuming that my job is to sort of take care of the home and be there to support him. I agree with the supporting part, but I've worked since I was probably a junior in high school and having that level of independence is important to me..

RG: You can't really stop and do nothing.

MJJ: That would drive me off the wall. I think it took me – when we moved here, it took me about a year and a half to find a job. It was hard because you don't know people and you feel very isolated. Working outside the home, especially in a new place, is one way to get your socialization. So, that was really difficult.

RG: Do you feel like you can amongst minorities people, just because your husband's job told you, why are you working? Or they blame you, like you only got the position because of your husband?

MJJ: In some organizations, they call that a "political hire." So then that puts a different pressure around making sure that at work you are on point, and on top of things and you work out your heart so they don't think you're just there to collect a paycheck.

LM: Was there period of time when you had your children that you did stay home, or did you always work throughout?

MJJ: I always worked throughout. I was very lucky, my parents were very helpful with the kids when they were young to watch them. We also had a wonderful babysitter [laughter]. And so, I have always worked.

LM: Always worked.

MJJ: It's been important for me to work, so my kids can see that you have to work every day, really hard. We don't tell our kids that we're sacrificing for you, they didn't ask to be here, it's a privilege to be a parent. So now that they're college students, it's a privilege to say to them, okay we worked really hard, so we want to make sure as you go through college – we don't want you to have to take out loans. Now that is because we had to do the planning beforehand in order to position ourselves to do that.

RG: To recall, you have a daughter, right?

MJJ: I have a daughter and a son.

RG: When it comes to your daughter, has she ever come to you with situations that you have gone through and you help her...

MJJ: All the time [laughter], all the time. She has...she has – I think that she has had some of the normal experiences in high school, those dynamics, social things, between her peers, and really how do you find yourself when all these other things are going on, including the media. That's not something I had to deal with. We had a remote control and we thought that we were big time. [laughter] So you know, this whole social media environment has really been a challenge as a parent. It's too much to try to keep up. I remember the conversation with her when she wanted... Myspace.

RG: That was the first one.

MJJ: Myspace. She was a teenager at the time, but still. We talked about it and said, "If you're getting Myspace, we're getting Myspace." She said okay, and then it was Facebook. "Okay, so if you're gonna have Facebook, we're gonna have Facebook." So we could understand what was going on and set some ground rules around that. The ground rules were whatever is represented on this page stays with you forever. Whoever you let take pictures, whatever you write, if it's something you wouldn't have displayed in your living room, don't let it be present on your Facebook page. Now that they're older, of course they have de-friended us [laughter]. Which is great, because now they're old enough.

RG: So now when it comes to your work, but now housework, is it – how is that?

MJJ: You mean between my husband and I?

RG: Or your kids incorporated?

MJJ: We all pitch in. The kids are very independent. From an early age, as early as we could show them how to wash their clothes without child protective services coming in saying we were being negligent or something. [laughter] and so they know how to wash their clothes, they know how to cook some basic meals. Do they always want to cook? No. You know, they are responsible for their own rooms.

LM: And they both live at home?

MJJ: Actually now they're both in college. My daughter is in Florida.

LM: Oh. She's far away now.

MJJ: I know. Again, she's always been really independent. Our son is a freshman and goes to school close by.

RG: How do you characterize the personal and professional cost of your chosen path? What about the benefits?

MJJ: Tell me that again.

RG: How would you characterize the personal and professional cost of your chosen path? How about the benefits?

MJJ: I'm not sure I understand what you are asking.

LM: So if you were, I think what he's saying if you were to choose a different path, maybe enter a career that was female dominated, would that have made your life easier, or would you change anything?

MJJ: HR is actually very female dominated, but that's not why I got into HR. If I had to change something, I probably would have continued in business and taken a slightly different path. I don't know that I would have not done HR though because I really enjoy it. I enjoy the interaction with people, I enjoy being able to help support people in their professional development. So, those have all been good things, I've met so many wonderful people. I think I've been able to grow as an individual and as a professional, by being in HR. I don't know that there's anything significant that I would change. Does that answer your question?

LM: Within Worcester, we know your position as far as work goes, but are you active in other facets of the community?

MJJ: I'm on a lot of different boards. I'm on the Hanover Theatre board, I'm on the Reliant Foundation Board. I try to do as much as I can. My challenge is that I have a lot on my plate, and I work full time, I have two kids. I consider myself an ambassador for Becker College, and that comes with a lot of responsibility. Then I try to do things in the community. I guess I should cook dinner once in a while. [laughter] It becomes a lot. I wonder how do I get it all done? We've always been involved in the community, that's never been a question, we've always done that. I think now that I have a better sense of my role in my profession, and at the College, I have to think about what makes more sense in terms of my community work.

RG: Do you feel like having so much on your plate ever took away from like family time or things of that nature?

MJJ: It may have. I'm trying to think back to conversations with the kids to see if they ever expressed feeling traumatized by something [laughter]. I think we did a good job carving that out, especially since I was in graduate school when they were young. I think Jasmine was probably five or six when I did my first master's degree. And then in middle and high school when I was working on my MBA. I think they didn't feel like I was neglecting them, but trying to better things for our family. I do remember thinking that at that age all they really wanted me for was a ride to the game and a cell phone. [laughter] They had their own social lives, they were old enough, they were really supportive. If I was studying and the phone was ringing they would say, "Sorry she's studying." I think they were proud of me, they saw that I was doing that and so many other things. I didn't necessarily feel like that caused a problem in terms of family time. I just think they understood that this was something that was important for me to do, as an individual, as a woman, in support of my family. It would be interesting to see what they would say. [laughter] I think the cooking was the issue, or lack thereof.

RG: We know that you are involved in the community, but when it comes to politics, you mentioned it a little bit, do you consider yourself politically involved?

MJJ: Probably not as much as I want to be or should be. I think everybody in the last couple presidential elections were really engaged. I don't know that I was as involved as I would have liked to have been.

RG: The last touchy subject when it comes to things like that, do you think religion has impacted a lot in your life? Do you think it has helped?

MJJ: Absolutely. I think it has guided my life since I was very young. My family is very religious, very spiritual, I learned early on about faith and the power of God, prayer, those are things that absolutely define my life and my family. My family, our journey and how we got to be at the place where we are is because of what God did for us. We didn't know how life was going to unfold. We certainly couldn't have anticipated some of the challenges and struggles that we've had and how we were going to get through those. So it's always been a very prominent part of our lives.

LM: Do you think that all of those organizations along with religion has helped you get adjusted to Worcester? You said that you came here not really knowing anyone.

MJJ: It's been very helpful and I think that when you come to a new place it's sort of incumbent on you to reach out a little more and make those connections. I would say that this has been an extremely welcoming community for us. We were overwhelmed by the way people reached out to us and supported us when we arrived, so I really do think that helped a lot. You have to be open, you have to be engaged, you have to let people know that you are open to friendships and opportunities. So that takes a lot of work and energy. You have to be the person to pick up the phone and make the call and say, "I hope they call me back." [laughter]

RG: Do you think your role helped you out with like you know how your field is HR, you have to deal with a lot of people. Do you think that has helped you with like you know having friends and making connections?

MJJ: I think it definitely did, it definitely did. HR is an interesting field because I think with HR you are – it's a strange dynamic of being very open and inviting and engaging and but you also have to be very good about setting boundaries. Because you're in HR, part of your role is helping the organization protect itself, mitigate risk, etc. so I think that its very helpful in situations where an individual comes in and you're trying to get to know people, you have to be open. But, you also have to understand your own personal values and boundaries, and nto just always go with the flow. If something happens that's against what you believe or you're feeling that's not right for you or your values, you're not obligated to be everyones friend, you really can pick and choose. and that's something we try to instill in our kids. You could not pay me a million dollars to be your age again because I just think at your age you have so many things coming at you and you're trying to stay focused and steady but you got all this other stuff happening and so being able to have those boundaries and filters to say, this is where I'm trying to go... It's hard sometimes because you want to have a lot of friends and have a great social life, but sometimes its lonely at the top[laughter]. You have to be okay with saying I'm good with just having just a few friends, having a few people that have similar values, and they're moving in the direction I want to move into.

RG: [laughter] You mentioned pregnancy, but do you think you had health issues that impacted your family? or held you back from going in that direction as fast as you'd like to?

MJJ: We've had health issues in our family definitely. But like I said you know, I am a very spiritual woman, the health issues that we've experienced in our family, they've been significant but it's about your mind set too. I do really believe that your attitude and how you feel has a big impact on how your life unfolds. Yes there are some health issues with family members that could have been very devastating, could have stopped everything. You have to have the will to keep going and work through it.

LM: I know you've touched on it a little bit, but you seem like such a positive person. Is there one thing that really keeps you going that would you say? or..

MJJ: [laughter] My family keeps me going. I am just grateful for my family. My immediate family, my husband, my kids, my parents. I have a really wonderful extended family of aunts, cousins, and we are tight, every family has some disagreements but at the end of the day we are a family. You know I think what really – my grandmother, who was 86, passed away in April, she was the matriarch of our family. My cousin started to call her Queen instead of her given name, Iona and we all continued to call her Queen. She was our Queen. She was that person. She may have had 10 or 15 grandkids but you could not tell us that we weren't her favorite because she just had that way making us feel that way. When she saw you, she had a little treat for you and she sat and talked to you about life. I think being in the environment that I grew up in with a lot

of love and a lot of support helped me through all of the challenges, and even when I'm down and feeling like, "This is a lot," it doesn't last a long time. I've always got somebody praying for me or playing me a YouTube motivational video or some kind. Even with the kids, I have to remind myself that no matter what it is, it ain't that deep. [laughter]

RG: Do you think that your Grandma impacted you a lot in the way you are, the way you conduct yourself with a lot of decisions you made in your life?

MJJ: I did – I do. She taught me a lot about love, about family, about responsibility, and it's a little thing, but in the years, the entire time I was growing up, we had a big family. So, you know some families, at the holidays they'll pull names, and we'd do that. But my Grandmother always made sure everyone had something under the tree from her. And she didn't have a lot of money but she planned ahead, and even if you got a pair of socks, there was something for you. I think that her ability to make people feel special is something that we try to carry on now that she's not here but you know she taught me a lot about being a woman and being strong. She didn't complain a lot. I mean she had challenges but she didn't complain. She was cheerful, (except at Thanksgiving when she was tired afterwards, she was like, "Okay someone get in there and do those dishes)." [laughter] She just had a really positive attitude and I think my dad and my parents have always had a really positive attitude. So, I think that's how I grew up. People not telling me I can't or that it was impossible, but they would say, "Yeah you can do that."

RG: You know men have this role, same thing with Hispanics, that men come first and then women. Did you have that experience?

MJJ: No I did not. You know I come from a very long line of strong women from my great grandmother, and all the way down. You know it's funny, on my mom's side of the family, we were noticing this trend that all the men that married into the family would end up growing this gray streak of hair right on the side [laughter] It was hilarious. And I don't know if that meant we were torturing them or what? It's been a lot of working together and partnerships. You know I remember my grandmother would have dinner and my husband and I were there and everyone would start making their plates and my grandmother would ask, "Mimi...", my family nickname was Mimi, "Mimi are you going to make your husband a plate?" Outside of that, I didn't usually make plates, but out of respect for her, I did. He would make me plates too, but I think it's very equal in my household. As busy as he is as the president, it is a partnership. He'll do the laundry, I'll fold the clothes. It works out.

LM: Even today, where I don't think those traditional roles are necessarily still present, but do you see with your daughter, for example, do you see still some sort of, I don't know, I think this age today the dynamics between men and women at the college age is very different too, I think it's an interesting dynamic.

MJJ: I'm trying to think about that. She's very independent. So yeah, she'll let somebody open the door for her, sort of a good balance. Even with my son, he's very respectful of women. But he knows how to do his own laundry. I don't know. Do you guys date, do you do that anymore?

LM: That's what I mean, I feel like it's very different now.

RG: It's not the same anymore.

LM: I don't know if that's necessarily for the best. Part of me thinks that those traditional dating may be better than now.

MJJ: With my daughter, the young man has to come to the house and come in the door. You cannot honk the horn. You have to meet my husband and meet me, I think we're very traditional in that sense. If it's someone you're going to date we need to understand who they are and what they're bringing to the table and what their background is. Plus, it's always fun for a dad to get to torture him a little bit. [laughter]

RG: Do you feel like there's any social pressures for a woman to act a certain way or kind of take a step down from leadership and let the man do the job?

MJJ: I guess...I'm sure it exists but I just know so many women who are amazing leaders and experts in their field that it's hard to say. I think it depends on the woman and what she feels about herself and her power as a woman. I feel that's where the pressure may be. If she feels like she cannot be in that kind of role, she cannot have that kind of power, then yes I think she would feel the pressure.

RG: That existed back in the day, not so much right now. Do you think it's more before and what kind of steps people have taken to eliminate it?

MJJ: You know, I do remember back in the day when you were playing a game with a guy you don't want to outsmart him, and might dumb down a little bit, smiling and twirl your hair kind of thing, but that was back in the day. I'm trying to think if I was ever in a situation where I had to act as if I wasn't that bright...

RG: Maybe with athletics.

MJJ: I'm not very athletic, so no. I do know that my daughter, she runs track, I remember when she was growing up, having conversations with her about competition and track. There was nothing better than watching her out run the guys. For her, she was like, "I was trying to outrun the guys." You know and that was pretty cool.

LM: That gave her some motivation maybe?

MJJ: Yeah, yeah. You know I think it's very different. For her, she was never like, "Oh I'm going to be racing a guy." She was just like, "It's my race." and it didn't matter who the other racer was and I think that she bragged about that, "I out ran all the guys!" [laughter]

RG: This is just one other question that we have to ask, now that we're working to tell a fuller story of the history of women, than has been recorded in the past, what should be sure to include?

MJJ: I think really understanding women from a spiritual or inspirational aspect because I think that's what motivates women which creates their experiences and journey and if you really understand that you can kind of think about what motivates women. You can make or create a foundation for the next generation going forward. I think how women have been taught in school has changed over the years and I think to understand how women today are motivated through their education and their experiences as they're growing up. I think that makes a difference in how they think about themselves and what they're able to do and have the power to do. I would just say, I understand there is some historical data and information that you need to gather for this, but I think understanding what motivates women, and at different stages in their lives, because I think it changes...what motivates you now will be different from what motivates you at my age, you go through various phases of your life.

RG: So listening to your story as a whole, do you feel that you're an exception when it comes to being a leader, or do you think this is how it's going to be from here on out now?

MJJ: I think women are more equal, I don't think I'm an exception. As I think about growing up, you know women as I grew up when I was younger all the way through my years have been powerful and amazing and who I had an opportunity to look up to. I think this is the way it is. You create your own destiny whether you are a man or a woman. Women have grown into a place where they really feel they can do that and have the power to do that.

LM: Even if the challenges remain, do you think that women as a whole will be able to overcome them in a sense and not...?

MJJ: I think so. There are going to be challenges in everything that you do. No matter who you are, what you are, how much you make, how much money you don't have you are always going to have your challenges. I think your lens is different if you're a woman, a man, or a person of color, I think you look at things in life in a different light but the challenges still remain. You know that's the part I was telling you about, enjoy this time now, because there are peaks and valleys in life, it's a continuum. There are times when everything's going right and great and times when things aren't going so hot and you either stay down there and put on your... well anyway [laughter] PG...PG.

RG: Well, it's been great talking to you

MJJ: Oh you guys are awesome.

LM: Yeah thank you.

RG: This was a lot more fun than I thought it was gonna be. I thought I would have to read this thing word for word. But this was fun, this was fun.