

Interviewee: Katrina McNamara
Interviewers: Suzanne Pepe and Abbey Toomey-Fisk
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Location of Interview: Abby's House, 52 High Street, Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcribers: Suzanne Pepe and Abbey Toomey-Fisk
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Abstract:

Katrina McNamara, a housing advocate at Abby's House in Worcester, was born in Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1967. She moved to the United States by herself to work for an international nanny service. She eventually accepted an invitation from her neighbor to work at Abby's House. Throughout the interview Katrina discusses the struggles she faced growing up in Derry, as well as how the ethno-nationalist conflict known as "The Troubles" affected her. She also discusses her transition into life in Worcester. Katrina speaks of the benefits and challenges involved with her job. She considers the ability to help women in need an uplifting benefit to her job. On the other hand, some women have to be turned away because the organization lacks space and resources for the large number of applicants and sometimes the applicant does not meet the Abby's House guidelines. McNamara laments that this is a difficult reality of the job of a housing advocate. Katrina credits the strong women who surround her as a source of support and inspiration despite some of the emotional tolls of the job.

"It doesn't matter who you are, or what you have, if you don't have a good support system - you don't have anything"

KM: Look how far we've come [referring to digital recorder]

ATF: I know, right?

KM: My sister used to do the—shorthand writing.

SP: Alright, so, I have to read this mission statement part—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 one hundred and fifty national women's rights convention in Worcester we are we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work and politics in the community and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experience with Abby House. Thank you for your help with this important project. I'm just going to ask you, again, that we have your permission to record your oral history and then, you, so for Katrina McNamara on March 16, 2016 can I just have your consent?

KM: Sure, no problem. Yes.

ATF: Thank you.

SP: So, we'll start with questions about like, general questions about family. So, first, what is your full name? Including your maiden name or your married name.

KM: Okay. I was born Katrina Mary McGlinchey and then I got married and it was changed, then, to McNamara.

SP: So how do you spell that? Just so I can...

ATF: It's on..

SP: Oh yeah.

ATF: We have it, we're good.

SP: So when were you born?

KM: When?

SP: Yep, when were you born?

KM: I was born July 22, 1967, and I was born in Derry, Ireland.

ATF: So you have been married, can you talk a little about your husband for us?

KM: [laughs] Well, I have to say, I met him my first summer when I came over here and, the joke is, I came the whole way from Ireland to be married to an Irish-American. Because his last name is McNamara. He is third generation Irish and he's Catholic, which I think, you know, really helps too because you have the same values, and stuff, and he works in Worcester. He's a great husband and he's a wonderful father as well.

ATF: So what type of culture or ethnicity do you identify with?

KM: Irish.

ATF: Irish.

SP: So you said you do have children?

KM: Yes. I have two boys. Connor Patrick, who's fourteen and then Kieran Joseph, who is going to be twelve next month. So, great Italian names.

[All laugh]

ATF: Can you tell us a little bit about your parents?

KM: Okay, my mother is Kathleen Quigley. Her maiden name is McGlinchey. She is—was from a family of eight children. And my dad, James McGlinchey, he was from a family of ten.

ATF: That's a lot.

KM: Yeah, small Irish Catholic family.

[All laugh]

KM: And I have to say, I really had a good, a really good upbringing. Being from Ireland, too. You're brought up in the faith of Catholic, my parents were practicing Catholics. So I have to say, we had a really great upbringing, knowing the difference between right and wrong, how important our faith was to us and a very strong family unit, and I have two brothers and four sisters. And even though I live in America, we're very close.

ATF: Good. Since you didn't grow up in Worcester, did you—do you find it different, living here now, than from Ireland?

KM: I do, and stop me if I go on too long. Where I was born, in Derry, which is in the North of Ireland, it's known as "The Troubles." Ireland to the north of it has always been controlled by the British government, which is not a great thing. So growing up we saw a lot of violence, bombings, shootings, stuff like that, home invasions, stuff like that. The first time I came to America, the first thing I noticed was the freedom. Where I could go from "A" to "B" without being stopped, without having to go through detours or anything like that. Sometimes you don't realize where you come from until you're out of there like, "Wow, I can drive here... I don't even..." [laughs]. It's amazing, you know. I think that sense of freedom, of being able to go where you want to go and not being stopped.

ATF: That's very true. So your neighborhood—what would you describe your neighborhood as in Ireland?

KM: In Ireland, very close-knit. Back home in Derry—I wish I had a picture, but it's a great city, it's divided by a river, the river Foyle and on one side was where a majority of the Catholics lived there and across the bridge, across the river, was the Protestants. A lot of people think Northern Ireland is in a religious war. It's not. It's how the British government came in and divided the people, divide and conquer, you know? So once again, you lived in our community, it's kind of like, everybody knew their neighbors. You played on the street, but also too, everybody watched over everybody's child as well. Because, at any time, a bomb could have went off or if stuff happened when you were in school whatever, parents were available would go meet the children at the school to walk them home and stuff like that there. So it's very close-knit and you have "The Troubles" but you always felt very safe too. If I came home and my

mother wasn't there, something happened, I could always go to my neighbor's house and, you know, no worries.

ATF: That's good. When did you arrive in Worcester?

KM: I arrived in Worcester in 1988.

ATF: How did you come to live in Worcester?

KM: Well, what happened was, I answered an ad in the newspaper back home in Derry even though Derry's a city, it's such a great city. It's a great musical city, everything, but it lacked opportunities. Especially being a Catholic growing up, and so, I kind of knew, even though I came from a close family, I would eventually have to leave. To grow as a person. So I answered an ad in the newspaper said "Nannies Abroad" and I said well, "If I do this, I'll have shelter." So my mother wouldn't have to worry about me. So I ended up, first of all, in Rye, New Hampshire. And that was great. And then I met my future husband, Kevin. He had just graduated and decided to become a responsible bachelor—mark the summer at the beach. I met him and he was actually from Worcester and we dated for a long time and then eventually we got married and moved to Worcester.

SP: So have you lived in the same area in Worcester the whole time or...

KM: Mostly, yes. Before we bought our home we rented around the corner.

[All laugh]

ATF: What challenges do you think the city still faces, from when you originally moved here?

KM: You know what, I think Worcester needs a good facelift. And plus, too, we need to bring more life to it; it's just very run down. There's no great shops or anything like that. I feel bad because when my husband and I, we go shopping, we actually have to go out of the city. We go to Whole Foods in Framingham, we go into Boston for Costco. We go to Natick for shopping. It'd be nice to see that money being recycled in our own city. I know now they're starting to do some stuff like opening hotels, it's great that some of the colleges are moving downtown but we still need to really work at Worcester. Getting like little stores down there again, getting more foot traffic down there, especially during the weekend. It's like a ghost town. Especially with a family, I feel like there's very limited choices to make for families. One of the great things that is happening is the Hanover Theatre, which is wonderful. I've gone there for many shows and stuff like that but, and it's okay for me, I come from this area, but when you have people coming from Boston, it's like "Where are the restaurants?" "Where's the little cafes?" There's nothing. Except going to Shrewsbury Street but you kind of want something in walking distance. I think they are trying to change the image of Worcester but I think we still need to work harder on it.

ATF: I agree with that.

KM: I mean Worcester's a great city, it really is.

ATF: What are some distinct characteristics that you think Worcester has?

KM: Characteristics... let me see. Well, one thing, when I first came to Worcester, I couldn't believe how many great things came out of Worcester. Like, I don't know if you guys know, like barbed wire was invented here.

ATF: Really?

KM: Shredded wheat. The first female college was here. Major Taylor. The cyclist. There's so much history here like Elm Park was the first state park in the United States. There is so much hidden stuff in Worcester that we don't – that regular people don't know about and I think it would be great to highlight this for people. I know during the summer they have the tours like in the Canal District, and I kind of wish there was more of that here to really educate people and do the tourist thing. Like some of the homes here are so beautiful, and the historical parts. I think, once again, if we could market that. Institute park is a great park as well. I think we need to bring the history of Worcester to a light. You have [Robert] Goddard—he was the one who made the rocket. So that as well. A lot of great stuff. As I say, Worcester is a great city, it has so much to offer, but it's all hidden.

SP: A lot of potential, definitely.

KM: I look at all the colleges here too, which is wonderful. The medical schools. We're just growing more and more and more and it's great to see that.

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

KM: Well you know what, I think it's good. It really is. Especially working at Abby's House. We have a shelter for homeless women, with or without children and then we have SRO's [Single Room Occupancies]—58 for women and then 17 bedroom apartments for women with children. We do have a lot of women that come in broken, they come in domestic violence, mental health or anything like that there and there's a lot of great resources for women here. This is a place where they feel safe. They feel comfortable. Just getting people to believe in them, and with that support, we have a lot of women who are back at school. A lot of people are doing volunteering, a lot of people doing self-help groups and stuff like that there. I have to say, the community's very good as well. We have the education part too, and we're in partnership with a lot of different agencies to help women grow and feel good about themselves. We have a lot of women volunteers who have been very successful in business, encouraging these women and also giving them the skills they need for the outside world. We have a lady that comes in and does computers with the women. Another one that does resumes; we have a woman that does

financial planning with them. All these skills, that before these women never had, give them more confidence in themselves. Of course we have great colleges here and it's great to see more women's studies as well being offered to people. Does that answer...

ATF: Yeah, oh yeah.

SP: Of course.

ATF: So we're going to move onto education now.

KM: Oh, okay.

ATF: Can you tell us about what school you attended? [car alarm going off in background]

KM: Okay. From the beginning or...

ATF: Yeah, sure.

KM: It's kind of funny, I've always been at an all-girls school.

SP: I went to an all-girls school too. [laughs]

KM: [laughs] Yep, yep. So primary school to—what we call P1 to P7—once again it was Catholic, we all wore uniforms, which was great, you didn't have to think of clothes. Especially when you come from large families, [laughs] uniforms are wonderful. When I left there we were actually the last girls' class in the primary school. Then it was starting to get mixed. Then I went to St. Mary's secondary school. I was there for five years. Once again, it was an all-girls school. Then after that I went to business studies, Northwest College of Technology in Derry. There I kind of had a hard time. This is the political thing as well. Like you fill out an application, it's so different from over here, you have to state your religion, your nationality, are you Irish? Are you British? Are you British subject? And where I come from, Derry, the British government likes to call it Londonderry. When you fill out your applications, you know, you have your codes? You always had to put down Londonderry. I'm a true Irish person, I wouldn't do it. So, I have to say, I did not do well there because I would not obey the rules. That was another reason for me leaving Ireland as well. Just because I knew I was going to have these barriers and I would never sell myself. When I came to the states, I took the job as a nanny and I started taking classes. I started at University of New Hampshire, when I moved then to Worcester, then I went to Lesley University. Did their Excel program.

ATF: I almost went there. [laughs]

SP: I almost did too.

KM: Let me tell you, I loved it. I absolutely loved it. I did the Excel program which means I had to travel every other weekend to Haverhill and it was twenty-five hours but oh, it was great the teachers were fantastic and they had just great styles of teaching and once again it was all girls—all women in the class, you know? What was great about it too, was like, they really made you think and you didn't have exams, what you had were like research papers. I was studying human development and minored in K-3 elementary. They just don't want you to just learn the stuff and spit the answers back. No. Go out, tell me how does this theory work with you and what questions came up and stuff like that. I was really learning and put it in practice. I had a phenomenal time. And it kind of was like my first time really excited to learn. They were great. And the teachers were all from all different backgrounds as well, too, which was great.

ATF: What support networks and mentoring did you have that were important to you throughout your schooling?

KM: Throughout my schooling? I have to say, I had a lot of help. I'm dyslexic. So I always had problems writing especially if the teacher was giving a lecture. I always had tutors and I taped my recordings as well. The teachers were very good once they knew. Well, let me just sit up front, you know, and please don't ask me to read [laughs] Because I would just freeze up. I would be afraid I'd pronounce something wrong, of course I would try to blame it on the Irish accent. [laughs] That always—that was always a fear. But you know what? Once I went to the professors and told them, had my documentation of what special stuff I would need, it was wonderful and that really helped with the learning at the colleges. And then, I also took classes at the Wilson Center as well just to strengthen my stuff. Nancy, who was the mother of Barbara Wilson who developed the program, she was absolutely wonderful. Because sometimes it's embarrassing you know, saying, "Oh, gosh, I have a learning disability." Because you feel stupid, blah blah blah. No, no, no you just have a different way of learning. She was always positive. And then where I work, here at Abby's House, a woman's organization. [laughs] Annette Rafferty's the founder, Elaine Lamoureux co-founder, and Tess Sneesby these are the three good fairies. These women are absolutely amazing people. And people say, "What do you like about your work?" and I say well where can you go and get nurtured every day? These women are absolutely wonderful they have such a beautiful attitude in life and they always see the positive in a negative situation and I mean they've seen a lot. They've been working—well, Annette, she's eighty-six years old, she's been working with the poor, the down and out, since she was nineteen. Battered women, everything, people in addictions, stuff like that there, and for me, they've been great mentors. Because they've taught you not to judge or anything like that. It's kind of funny because when people come in to help out, they always have the image that the homeless woman is the prostitute, is the drug addict, and it's not. Its women with mental health, its women who have lost their jobs, women who have lost their spouses. As I say, we're one step away from that because we never know how our life can change in five minutes. Good women, hard women that, unfortunately, life dealt them bad... you know... you know... we have women who have been sexually abused by their—by members of their family that really screwed them up and stuff like that. What I admire about these women is they give the power back to the women. They never say, "Well, this is what you should do because you come from this situation.

I want you to do this, this, this, and that.” [bangs table] No. “What can we do to help you? Tell us.” You know? And the value of really listening to a woman and her needs. And I think that’s the most important thing. With these women, the compassion, and how they come here day after day after day helping these women. If you asked one of them for the shirt off their back, they would. I’ve seen them use their own transportation, their own money to help women and support women in every shape, form that they can. What’s great, too, is, my two boys, I always say, what I say is, I don’t raise my child, these women have raised my child because they have exposed them to so much. Elaine used to run the shelter and she would take the two boys over and say, “Okay what do we need here,” and Connor and Kieran would have their checklist. “Well this toy’s not working anymore.” So they do an inventory like what would you think if you were a child coming into the shelter, what would you like to have? Just really great role models and that awareness of other people and you never know what other people are going through. When my son, Kieran, will say, “Mummy, this kid, he’s not very nice, he didn’t do his homework, he didn’t do his assignment.” I said, “Well Kieran, you know what, maybe there’s some trouble at home.” I said, “Why don’t you try being a friend and help him.” So, yeah, beautiful people here, beautiful people and even the volunteers, we have volunteers who have been here thirty years, just dedicated and the fashion show that we did last week for Abby’s was run by volunteers and just the energy, the goodness, the giving back and never expecting anything in return. So those are my people [laughs].

SP: Going back to support for learning disabilities, did you find, did you have the same kind of support in Ireland when you were in school?

KM: In primary and secondary school yes, but at Northwest Techology, not as much. Once again that was a whole different ballgame too, with the situation because it was the first college that was actually mixed with Protestants and Catholics and unfortunately, a lot of the Protestants had the jobs. I mean, I had one teacher who wouldn’t even look at my work because I was Catholic. And my name, McGlinchey, it’s a very political name, my great great uncle was the leader of the Irish volunteers and how that happened was his sixteen-year-old son was riddled to death by the British army coming home from college, my uncle was bound up, my own brother was shot, there was a stigma especially with names as well my name is McGlinchey and this guy—I reported him and everything but there was always that thing coming to class. So that was another reason, you know, maybe it was a pride thing, I didn’t want to let them know that I was dyslexic...

ATF: It’s understandable. We’re going to move onto work now. You mentioned your first job was as a nanny, can you explain a little about that job for us?

KM: Oh sure. Well I answered an ad back home and it was supposed to be through an agency where they’d interviewed the family, they’d interviewed me and it was kind of funny because when I arrived in Boston I was looking for these people. Couldn’t find them, the couple was looking for an Irish girl who was supposed to be five ten with blonde hair and I’m like [laughs] five one brown hair! My first experience as a nanny, it was sad. This woman, her name was

Elaine, she was the guy's secretary, this was his second marriage – her first marriage, and I don't know if the baby came before or after, but she had three really nice kids but she just didn't want anything to do with them. She was in one section of the house and I was here with the kids. No interaction. I did everything with the kids, their music, their homework, this and that and for me, it was really sad because I come from a family of seven and, to me, my mother is everything, she's such a beautiful woman. And she was always there for me, and I couldn't understand, "Why's this mother [laughs] not there for her kids?" I mean it's not like she's working, you know what I mean? So I stayed with them for about eight months. And it was kind of funny because it was the friends of the kids, their parents would give me a slip of paper, "Hon, we know what it's like over there," because I used to work until seven o'clock until the kids went to bed and then she wanted me to work the weekends. Just... you know... prisoner. Kind of. And so, eventually then, I did move and part of me feels guilty because you get attached to the children but they're like "No you have to take care of yourself." So then I got another job working for these two doctors who were absolutely wonderful and I stayed with them for over five years, really nice. They had two little boys and I used to say, "Well I'm the daughter that you never had." They were great; they were so down to earth. They didn't go by titles. Where, the first family, she was so materialistic, blah blah blah. To me, I was never caught up into that. To me, It's like my goal in life is if my children look at me the way I look at my mother, I've done a good job. That's all I wanted. And it was kind of funny because when I met – when I started dating my husband, Kevin, he had gone to Emerson, he was a journalist, all this here, and he goes, "Let me show you my newspaper articles" blah blah blah "I did this and this" and he said, "What do you want to do?" and I said "I just want to be like my mother" he's like "...loser" [laughs] but I was never a career girl. To me, that was my job. And I love being a mother. I worked for Anne and Mitch for over five years and they were wonderful. And actually, when I left they gave me their car, paid for the insurance for the first year and we're still in contact with them, which is great. I've mostly always worked with children, from there I worked in the school department and I worked with Devereux, which is an organization for troubled children. I worked there for over six years and to tell you the truth I had a great time. I never really had any problems with the children. I did job coaching, and stuff like that. I think it's because I always had respect for the children, and vice versa. I used to do little shows and everything with them. I'd have one person with thirty kids and you have kids who had abusers and never had any problems with them, you know, so it was good. The only reason—I probably would have probably stayed there because they didn't want me to leave, but I got pregnant and stuff like that. And Annette Rafferty, who is the founder of Abby's House, is also my neighbor, she was saying, "You know, Katrina, I think you'd be really good for Abby's House, working with the women. The jobs flexible with the baby, it might be better with family." And that's one thing Devereux couldn't offer me was the flexibility that I needed so I said, "Okay I've never really worked with women before. I've always been with children. So I came down and I interviewed. It lasted for over two hours I was like, "Wow" [laughs] but we really connected. I really connected well with Tess and I just felt really good. As I said, you saw there was like more support here. For people with families and stuff like that. So I came here and I have to say when I was pregnant, they were measuring to see who's office was the biggest office because like, "Katrina, the baby's coming to work with you" that's unheard of. When I was saying I didn't just raise my kids, it was the

people of Abby's. just having that exposure to all different people, different cultures, has been a great experience.

SP: So, Annette Rafferty was your neighbor, that's how you came to get this job?

KM: Yep, yep. "Just take an interview, see how it goes." I just connected really, really well with everybody and so thirteen years later, still here.

SP: So how have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles, and interests in your life?

KM: Oh, it's hard. It's hard. I have to say I have two wonderful boys who are so good. They are my first focus which is great. As I say, the job at Abby's is very flexible, I never missed any of their performances, or science projects, or anything like that. What's nice too as they're getting a little bit older, we're able to go to the gym together. Sometimes it's still hard to take time for me but you know what? As long as I'm doing stuff with the children, that's really good. I'm very excited, this year we're going to Ireland for a month, which is great. I think it's really important for them to see their culture and where your mother came from, know that you're Irish. That you are what your mother is first you know [laughs] just learning the whole history of Ireland and yeah... I love music. Especially traditional music. So just exposing my kids to that culture and what rituals we have. Like at Christmas time a symbol for candle and what that means. So carrying on little traditions like that with the kids.

SP: So have they been to Ireland before?

KM: Yes, they were home three years ago. So this will be another big change for them, seeing their cousins. We have small Catholic families. I have four sisters, two brothers. So it'll be nice for them to meet their cousins.

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

KM: The pros and cons... well, I have to say, America has been really, really great to me. I've gotten a great education, I live in a great community, I'm filled—at my work—I'm filled with people who are very supportive and nurturing. The cons... I wish my family was here. That's the one thing I do miss. It's great having FaceTime and all that but you look and you're like—you know you see your sister's there with your mother and, "Oh we just went shopping," and all the stuff that a mother and daughter should be doing together. Christmastime was really really—the first couple Christmases were really hard. Because Kevin, he just has his father and that's it. So you go from Christmastime in a house full of people and all your aunts and your uncles, your cousins, the neighbors. Like we used to have one neighbor who used to make the sherry trifle, another one made the Christmas cake for us. So it was like a big party, the door was always open. In the front room the fireplace would be going and all of that and it's not like you're ever—got tons of toys, we only got like two or three things but I think it was the whole

atmosphere; the fire going, the big dinner, pulling the Christmas crackers and stuff. Also like Easter time we have what's called (?) it means "festival" where it's all the Irish culture. My mother is very involved, when I was there I was involved too like entering competitions for singing or the choirs play so you kind of miss that too, that buzz of the festivals going on. So that's the pros and the cons.

SP: So was your family opposed to you coming to America or...

KM: No. Because of the situations, coming from "The Troubles" they knew the only way a person could grow and develop was—that opportunity was to leave, you know.

SP: Do they ever come here to visit?

KM: Actually, my mother was here in October with my younger sister, Kiva, and they spent ten days here which was awesome. Its good times. Before that, I think Kieran was two the last time she came to visit. My mom's been to the White House [laughs], she's been everywhere, she's in a choir so they travel everywhere.

ATF: Do you have any – how do you feel about the choices you've made in your life? Do you have any regrets, like, things like that?

KM: Regrets? Not really. I mean, leaving home, because you're leaving the security of your family. And basically, when I came out here I didn't know anybody. I think that was God protecting me. But no. No. No regrets.

ATF: Good, glad to hear that [laughs]. So we're going to move into policies and community politics. Do you consider yourself active politically?

KM: Well I do believe in voting, I hate to keep going back to Ireland, but Catholics were only allowed to vote in the 1970s. So I think – and I encourage the women here to vote – your voice has to be heard, let people know, and make sure we're going in the right direction. I'll watch the city council, I vote, everything, I think it's important, I really do. I've made Worcester my second home so I want the best for it.

SP: So have you been involved in community or volunteer work?

KM: Well, I volunteer at my son's school around the holiday times. And also, too, before I worked at Abby's, I volunteered, especially when they had the big yard sales and stuff like that, come out and help and I try to do and yep, that's basically it.

SP: Are there any organizations you feel particularly close to or you're involved in?

KM: Abby's House. Well, you know what, it's because you see the results. Eighty-eight cents of the dollar goes directly to the women. Like when we do tours of students coming in and stuff like that, we say, later on when you guys are out earning your big bucks and you give to charity, see how much of the penny goes directly to that charity. It's amazing. Like, March of Dimes, ten cents of that only goes to the cause. The rest goes to the administration, this and that. Where, here, everything goes to the women. I believe in what I do, and the philosophy here and anything I can do and even when I'm not working I still believe I'm an ambassador to Abby's House. Like the more people that know about Abby's and they support it, I believe it's women helping women and we have to do that. I think it's our job.

ATF: Can you explain for us what Abby's House is for our recording purposes?

KM: Oh sure, alright, as I said, Abby's is going on 40 years, and I said Annette Rafferty is the founder of Abby's house. She used to be a nun. She was sent out on a mission to find out why a lot of women were homeless, why were women prostituting themselves, all of that. So she collected all her data and everything like that, brought it back to the church, but unfortunately they really weren't interested at the time. So she decided "Well, it's up to me." And as I said Annette said she never had any great gifts, you know, but she knew how to bring people together so she put an ad in the newspaper, what her plans were, what her vision was going to be. A number of people attended and this man approached her to say that 23 Crown Street, that he was going to actually rent to them if they wanted to start a women's shelter. So they did that for a couple of years. Now Annette thought it was only going to last for three years, "We'll fix homelessness and that'll be it." But unfortunately that's not the case. Forty years it's actually gotten worse than better. But with (?) the women that were coming into the shelter, a lot of them, you know, couldn't be around their friends or their family. A lot of them victims of domestic violence, and sexual abuse, mental health, but they found like when the women first of all couldn't really afford to live in rooming houses or if they did find a place they would end up going back to their abuser because of the isolation and the no support. So when the house next door became available, that was actually a crack house, they actually purchased this. And once again Annette rallied to get all these people involved. Volunteers, rope grants, everything. And you know once again, a good support system, you know 19 Crown Street then became 16 SRO's for women.

ATF: What are SRO's?

KM: Oh! I'm sorry, SRO's are Single Room Occupancy.

ATF: Okay.

KM: So, once again, this was a safe place for women, and it's been great. It's a single room, the room comes already furnished, so the women don't have to worry about, "Oh how am I going to have money for furniture, this or that." And then they share the common areas, the kitchen, the bathroom, the sitting area. And as long as they follow the rules and regulations, they could stay

there for as long as they want. And a couple years later then they purchased 77 Chatham Street because they needed something for women with children. So we have seven two bedroom apartments there. And then sixteen years ago, the Sisters of Mercy who occupied St. Joseph's building, this building here, could no longer keep up the building or their mission and so they approached Annette to see if Abby's House would take on that, and so we did. And it really is because it's not just renting a room to a woman. Every woman that comes in here they have an advocate. We do a service plan to figure out, "Okay, what do you want to do? What is your goal to work on? And what tools can we give you to help you along your path?" Like I say, we have a food service here. The women do not have to pay for their food, so we know nutritionally they're getting a good meal. And plus too, we have a food pantry as well, so they can come and select whatever food we have. We have a membership to the YWCA, so physically they can take care of themselves. Passes to the art museum, the Ecotarium, the botanical gardens. And then, you know, as I say, the community is so good. We have a lot of volunteers, volunteers who run our thrift store, and so because we deal with a lot of women who have had to just come here, and all they have are the clothes on their back, so we will give them a gift certificate so where they can go downstairs, get clothes, whatever they need. We do make them apply for subsidized housing when they first come here, so when that does come in—which can take up to five to ten years—there is 16,000 women on the waiting list for subsidized housing.

ATF: Oh wow.

KM: We will give them a gift certificate for household items, whatever. If they're going for job interviews; a whole new look. So we have our thrift store, and, also too, we have great volunteers who will come in and teach the women skills. Like we say the computer skills, resume, how to interview, how to dress, financial planning with the women. And also we have some volunteers who will teach them how to knit, sew, we have jewelry making coming up. We have a woman who is going to be doing, kind of like a stress program with them. We also have someone from UMASS doing a nutritional program so the women know what foods to eat for the body. Because we have a lot of women who have diabetes, celiac, and stuff like that. And especially when you're in a fixed project you know, "How can I make healthy meals with what I have?" So there's a lot a lot of support for the women here you know which is nice. But I think the overall thing is she feels safe and also, one woman said to me, "I love the fact it doesn't matter what time I come in here, there's always someone to say hello to. I don't feel alone." Because they all come in as strangers and they build their little communities together which is really nice. And also too we do all the holidays with the women too.

ATF: Yeah!

KM: Well tomorrow we have St. Patrick's Day, so that's going to be great. And we do Christmas, Easter and stuff, and every woman gets presents.

SP: Oh wow.

KM: It's unbelievable, you know, the donations that come in. So this year we had four bags. One was towels, sheets, toiletries; this person did a collection of handbags; beautiful hand bags all stuffed with everything, gift certificates, and also too for birthdays as well, the women get a gift certificate for downstairs to the thrift store. So there's always something and it's funny, because some women are like, "Oh I never got a Christmas present before!" And it's great being able to do it for them, the families, like especially we have two grandmothers raising their grandchildren. You know because the budget is so tight, and to be able to help the children to experience opening up gifts. Like we don't go crazy, "What's the need?" first you know, "What's the need?" first. You know what I mean? Like, we will try and do clothes, winter boots, coats first. And then the toys afterward. But, so, that's really great, and we do a tenant at will here, so the women are not tied down to their lease and it's nice you know because I have an open door policy so if a women's coming through there and a really hard tough time, like especially with the holidays, like Mother's Day or something, we will sit down and talk and stuff like that and I have a poor woman today who is actually signing her adoption papers for her daughter. So that was very emotional for her yesterday, you know? So just let a woman know we're there for them. To listen to them and comfort them I think is a great feeling. We actually have some women who, when their housing comes through, they don't want to leave.

SP: Yeah.

KM: We actually have one woman who has been at this house she's with the Sisters of Mercy and she's been here for forty-eight years.

SP: I was going to ask - like is there a certain amount of time they can stay here? Or are you just-

KM: You know what? It's just [shrugs] especially until their housing comes through but people here for five years, the average would be five years.

ATF: Huh...

KM: But you know, it's a sense of safety and a place where you feel like you belong and even when people do move, when they do get housing, we always say, "You're an Abby's girl for life." They come back for meals, and come back for events, fashion show, just come in and stop if you need to use the computer, or you need help you know, we're still here. When you go out the door, it doesn't stop. It's a long life time—support—we actually have people—one lady, Joan, who was one of the first guests at our shelter, still is with us. Even though she has her own house she still comes in for meals and holidays and stuff like that. It's in one sense for a lot of the women, extended family. It's great how we can care about each other and even though maybe they don't know one of their neighbors as well as the other, but they have their routines down, so if they don't see someone for a couple days they'll come down and say, "Hey Katrina, I haven't seen so and so, is everything okay?" So you know it's that good feeling that, "Wow, someone cares about me and they noticed I've not been there." [laughs]

ATF: and SP: [laughs]

KM: It's really a good feeling. And sometimes it's hard to imagine this building has 54 women and like touch wood [knocks on desk] we have no real problems.

SP: Really? Good.

KM: Yeah, really good. So it's pretty good. And my other buildings, I very rarely have to go up there you know? It's, as I say, it's women helping women. Even though we all have different personalities, we may not like each other sometimes, but as long as you respect each other. And I think that's what makes it work, having respect and I think everyone knows that people are going through their own stuff.

ATF: Yeah

KM: And as I say the holidays can trigger somebody sort of a little more sensitive say, "You know what? She needs some space because it's hard. It is."

ATF: So what is your job at Abby's House specifically?

KM: Me, I am the housing advocate, so any person that comes into our building I interview them and go through their application, and to see if they're a good fit and vice versa. And so I become their advocate, I'll do the service plan with them, I'll check in on them. Some people I see mostly every week to check in if they're going through a really, really bad time. And others may be every three months. But just to stay connected with them and as I say I just have a young girl who just moved into the family apartments. Good kid, she's only twenty-one and, once again, no family support, she's working and doing everything by herself. And I am like, "So tell me what do you think you're going to need help with?" and she's like, "Well I'm just renting an apartment." And I said, "No, but with this we give supportive help to you because we know you don't have anybody." And so she actually signed up for the financial literacy and later on the computer stuff because her plan is to go back to school so right now she's working as a waitress slash cook. But she knows she doesn't want to do that for the rest of her life, it's just not in her career path. But when you have a young daughter and you're the sole provider. You just have to take you know? And plus too she wants better hours as well. But for her to be successful she's meeting with the financial person to learn how to budget so that's a great skill. And it's amazing how many women come in and they don't even know how to balance a checkbook. I think part of that is because women, when they don't feel happy, they want to go out and buy something. But how long do those feelings last?

All: [Laughs]

KM: It's like eating a good meal, after an hour you're hungry again you know what I mean?

ATF: Yeah

KM: And suggesting support groups for them and stuff like that. Letting them know they're not the only ones that feels this way, and it's important to make that connection. But we really advise the counseling outside of Abby's House just because it's too close knit here.

SP: Yeah-

KM: So just letting people [know] what we can assist them with, but at the end of the day it's to make them independent. And we can only give them the tools so it's up to them then to use them.

ATF: Do you provide transportation for the women here to get to places?

KM: We don't. We don't. You know the insurance is too high...

ATF: Yeah.

KM: We are very, very short staffed. You know for medical needs we do provide taxis. But once again we do need to watch our budget. I think it was like eight or ten thousand we spent of transportation. But that includes trains—we had someone who was at our shelter who, her son overdosed, so we charged airline tickets for her and stuff like that there. And you know, we purchase bus tickets too so if anyone needs them we will give it to them, but once again we try and make them as really independent as we can, because their income, a lot of women who are on SSDI [Social Security Disability Insurance] there's one person who only gets five hundred and thirty-eight dollars.

ATF: and SP: wow...

KM: And the highest is probably eleven hundred dollars. You know? So, the person with five hundred, it's hard. And the food stamps are being cut and cut. We open the food bank twice a month so come if you need stuff. Come to the meals, you can get a meal, come to one of your neighbors to get you a meal. So these are some things you can do and plus we have St. Paul's pantry right across here that's open twice a week, so they can go there. Once again, as I say, my door is always open, if they need something come in. We've helped people get dentures. We have a relationship with Rob Roy's where if the women need a haircut or anything, we send them there to get a haircut. QCC [Quinsigamond Community College] and the pharmaceutical [college] they're actually doing an eye testing for the women, and dental and I mean there is a small fee for that, usually we cover it...

ATF: Yeah

KM: For the women, yeah as we say. And stuff I got there too we have a special fund, the Annette Rafferty fund, I forget the full name of it, I'm going blank. [laughs] But you know and so we have a special fund and they're to help women. You know if they're going back to school whether it's to pay for the books—one girl incredible—we have two, three people actually, who came to our shelter all different times. Came into permanent housing here, we got them back into college, and two of them are honors students. And one then was going to Quinsigamond, and then got accepted in the DC.

ATF: Wow!

KM: I know! So it's great and the transportation was so hard until she figured everything out

ATF: Yeah.

KM: So it was great, Abby's was able to buy her a monthly pass, and I think that was like over three hundred dollars. We're trying to do stuff for the women to be—women to feel successful. You know what I mean? And the women are always like, "Oh I've got to pay you back," and it's like, you know what? If you help another person out, that's all you have to do. Just don't forget. You know what I mean?

ATF: Yeah

KM: If you see a woman in need, help her out. And pay it forward. And it's great we can offer that, and then with the families too, being able to offer them summer camps for the kids during the summer. Yeah and whatever we can do. And if a request comes in that we don't have anybody for, I'll talk to Jean, my coworker who is the volunteer coordinator to see if she can get a volunteer to get someone to help me. I have one—two women who want to get their GED, and this is how I relate to one woman because she can't do the group thing because of learning disabilities. So we are trying to get someone who can work one on one with her. So she can feel comfortable and give her the confidence too.

ATF: Yeah

SP: So you mentioned you were Catholic, what role does religion play in your life?

KM: Really, well that's how I get my morals and my values for life, and I think it's really important to, as I say, I had two very—my parents were very strong in their faith and stuff like that, and growing up where I grew up in "the Troubles" too, I think it made it more important. Always made you feel safe, bless yourself when you go out, [makes sign of the cross, laughs] go in, came out safe, and you know too I think being a mother too, teaching the values and self respect, and I just think it's important, you know what I mean? I mean I see so many kids seem lost and I'm not saying be a religious fanatic, or anything like that. I mean having that spirituality and I just—I think it keeps you on a good path, and a sense that we belong to something more

than here. You know? So yeah, my faith brought me here, its kept me good and safe and I rely in it a lot and even when the women here are going through a difficult time they're like, "Alright I'm going to go to St. Anthony."

All: [laughs]

KM: And you know he's right out there. And actually when we were talking about who volunteered yesterday from Easter Seals, and she was saying how she goes to Saint Anthony's and she goes, "And I'm not even Catholic!"

All: [laughs]

KM: And I said that doesn't matter, you know what I mean? So to me it's a great strength. And I'm always checking in on myself, "Am I doing the right thing? Help me to be strong," especially when you're dealing with women who are going through a very difficult time. It's like "No, show me the guidance or right words to comfort this person, or to give them some relief." As I say, we could be on opposite sides of the desk right now. You know what I mean? We never know what's going to happen. So I say, "There for the grace of God." I've had good family support, and I'm very thankful for what my family did. And it's not like I came from a wealthy family, but I came from a family with values.

ATF: Yeah.

SP: I was kind of wondering personally, my mom works in an ER [Emergency Room] so like, she sees stuff sometimes that she brings home with her.

KM: Yeah.

SP: When you hear emotional stories, do you feel like it affects your personal life? Or do you feel like you bring it home with you sometimes?

KM: Sometimes I do yeah. Sometimes I do and its hard. I mean there have been some nights I've been like crying myself to sleep because of a situation I couldn't—that was hard. And there's some of the women that you can't help and that's really hard. Or, we're at full capacity and you have a woman without a job, and a kid and a suitcase, and where are they supposed to go?

ATF: Yeah

KM: There are very limited resources out there for family shelters and stuff like that. One of the things that bothers me the most was, we had this woman—and sometimes you see the cycle, like their parents were in the shelter and the kids were in the shelter, they've never broken the cycle of addiction and it's really hard. And I remember we were having a self-defense class here,

and this woman, she had been in the shelter years ago, but she was a bad addict, and she was really coming in to case the place, you know what I mean? And she said, “Well I want to do the self defense.” And I say, “Well it’s for residents only” and I got there because she was kind of high. “Maybe we can work something out later like out there,” and she goes. “Well my boyfriend’s always beating me up,” and all this. And I’m like, “Well do the restraining order on him.” And I was trying to give her other options, but because we have women in recovery here I couldn’t have her here, I got there. And two weeks later she was murdered by her boyfriend. On the railroad tracks.

ATF and SP: oh my God....

KM: And oh my God I was like, “Ahh.” I was devastated.

ATF: Yeah

KM: Because I’m like, “Did I make the wrong choice with her?”

SP: Yeah...

KM: You know what I mean? That still haunts me today. It’s like—you know if she had—if I had let her in in the sense of “What’s the big deal” you know? You could have let her attend the self-defense class that could have saved her life you know what I mean?

ATF: and SP: Yeah....

KM: So, that’s my biggest thing

SP: Wow...

KM: And you know for me, I was thinking of the whole house, and the people in recovery. You know what I mean?

ATF: Yeah.

SP: Yes.

KM: So, that was a sad thing that happened...

ATF: Yeah.

SP: Wow.

KM: Yeah I know and yeah. And a woman that applied, her application was pretty blank. You know like where have you been? You know you have to give a history of where you've been, or where you've lived. And she said, "Oh no record for the last seven years." So I'm thinking [laughs], "Maybe she was in jail." [laughs]

ATF: True.

KM: And I did a CORI [Criminal Offender Record Information] and stuff like that there, but you know what, something said you know what bring the woman in you know? You just had a feeling.

SP: Yeah.

KM: So the woman came in and the most beautiful woman ever you know. And she was sitting in that chair where you are [points to Suzanne's seat] and she was rocking back and forth, back and forth. And looking around the room to see if she felt safe. And I said, "So, can you tell me a little bit—there's such a gap here. And eventually her case worker came in and she felt a little more comfortable because at the end of the day I was a stranger to her, and she had gone to Colombia, to help with her father that was dying. And after her father died, passed away, she was kidnapped and put into sex slavery.

ATF: Oh my God.

KM: And because she was like the lighter skin she was more valuable. And I'm like "Oh my God." You know what I mean?

ATF and SP: Yeah.

KM: So of course I'm like, "Oh my God, I got to keep this woman safe." Her family actually thought she was dead because there was no contact, nothing like that there. And one time she had escaped, and went to the police and they were terrible. They turned to her and said, "So what? You're giving a man some pleasure. So what?"

ATF: Oh my God.

KM: You know? And then it took her another like three years to get out of that. And I still don't know how she did it. But, so she came here and I didn't have anything available in housing right then and there, so I talked to my coworker who ran the shelter and I'm like, "We've got to put her in the shelter." I said, "She needs something we got there," because even though she had her family here, she had to work on herself first.

SP: Yeah.

KM: You know, to feel safe, and for them to feel comfortable with her, because so much trauma had happened to her. So we put her in the shelter. But then she got so nervous because if a girl didn't come home... She was just having flashbacks. Like that there, and eventually we had someone who moved out, and like let's just change the beds. Usually we just paint the walls, do this and I said let's get her moved in. So when that person moved out within twenty-four hours, we moved her in and it was great for her. And God bless her, the only thing she requested was a rocking chair in her room so she could rock and she said, "I'm trying to deal with this issue but it was a comfort thing," and I said "You rock, do whatever you want to do." You know what I mean? And then we made sure that all her services were in place and stuff like that there. And she couldn't even walk to the store. She had to have somebody with her. You know, just that fear.

SP: Yeah.

KM: But she—once again she had a really great support system, and I remember Christmas time, like come down have Christmas, we had volunteers in performing. It was so overwhelming for her. You know what I mean? And it's hard because she was probably kept in a cage.

SP: Yeah.

KM: And even though this is tight quarters, like that there, it was still overwhelming you know? And the first thing she did when she went in her room was check the lock, so no one could come in you know what I mean? But I have to say she did really well. She just got housing. So she just left about like five months ago—four or five months ago. But she comes in to say, "I'm doing alright."

ATF: That's good.

KM: So as I say, you know the stories that the women come in with, it's like you think you've heard it all. So, yeah, I feel very lucky.

ATF and SP: Yeah!

ATF: How do you define success in your life, and how has that definition changed over time?

KM: Success. Well, like I said, to me I'm not really a career person, even though my husband wishes I was.

All: [laughs]

KM: Because with social services you make no money, but as I say, at the end of the day, who I look up to, I look up to my mother, the strong women at Abby's House, and if I can be half the woman they are, I've done my job in life. I'm lucky. As I said, I came from a family where

values were more important than materialistic stuff. As I say, it's not the house you live in, it's the home, and the people in it. And even the women coming here, it doesn't matter who you are, or what you have, if you don't have a good support system- you don't have anything. When I'm down and out and I call somebody, they're my friend.

ATF: Mmhm.

KM: They're going to be there. You know, and family members. You know? So that's how I define my success. And has it changed? Trying to be a good person, trying to be a positive person everyday so that's it.

SP: So based on your life experience, what advice would you give to woman of today?

KM: Women of today? To believe in themselves. Don't carry pride with you. I think that's a lot of barriers with women here is the pride and the shame when their life doesn't go the way they want. But I say sometimes God puts you down this path to make you stronger. You know, to be able to focus on yourself, a new beginning for you. And to take chances knowing that you have the support behind you. Because we can only learn from our mistakes. You know what I mean? So, and just tell them to follow their gut, you know? And just to believe in themselves.

ATF: Good advice.

[Inaudible talking]

ATF: Now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women, that has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

KM: That we need more services for women. What more services- what number was the question again?

ATF: It's number thirty-nine.

KM: I don't have thirty-nine!

ATF: Alright, (papers shuffling) it's at the top.

KM: Yeah, well you know what? I think in the past, we need to learn, like I said, there's so much buried history in Worcester. Like Abby Kelly Foster which Abby's House is named after. Like the founder, Annette, researched this woman who was a woman way before her times in the 1800s, she was actually a working woman while her husband stayed home. She fought for the rights of slavery and stuff like that. And so I really think it's important for us to research the strong women in history, and what involvement they had and bringing Abby's—I mean bringing

Worcester to what it is today. Like I was going to say, a lot of people don't know like the first female college was in Worcester.

SP: Mmhm

KM: You know what I mean? So it would be great to research that and I think it would be great too to have like little monuments around the city, what this person did, what that person did. Like that. And especially for young girls, to look up and say "Wow, we have strong women."

ATF: Yeah,

KM: You know? We don't have that. And I know that schools focus on the math and science with girls and stuff like that, but know there are other great leaders of women who fought for human rights and I think that needs to be evolved more. And more places like Abby's House, where a woman who has gone through a difficult time, while there is domestic violence, abuse, or she's lost her job. More places that can—where a woman can feel safe to develop herself and just go forth.

ATF: I can agree with that whole-heartedly.

SP: Yeah.

ATF: And for our final question, do you have anybody that you would suggest we talk to for the Worcester Woman's Oral History Project?

KM: I think Elaine Lamoureux—or Tess Sneesby—she was the director of Abby's House for the last thirty-six years,

ATF: Yeah.

KM: And she just stepped down, and Elaine was one of the cofounders of Abby's House. So I think it would be really interesting to interview them, the struggles they had, like what they've built today.

SP: Yeah.

KM: You know what I mean? Because I know Annette was already done, but Elaine and Tess, I mean they used to go to dumpsters to look for furniture, rugs and everything. You know, for the shelter, and and they always laugh at Annette—I mean Elaine—because she is so frugal. It's like, dish detergent, she would fill up two bottles with it, half way, and then fill the rest up with water, "Oh, we got to make this stretch!" [laughs]. And yeah she still does it today. If milk is really low and going to expire the next day, she would mix it with the fresh stuff [laughs]. So Elaine, like her secrets of how she helped Abby's House to be successful with her frugality, oh yeah. Oh

my God, she's actually working this office, and oh yeah, and food too. She's just like, even if it's like two years old—expired—“Oh yeah, we can still use this!” You know? You know? But she's great. And she used to be a nun too. And she's done so much for Habitat for Humanity. She's gone to third world countries too. And even though she retired from doing the shelter, she still works part time here. And oh my God, it's like she's the community activist. I mean any families in the neighborhood that need help, she's right there. Like when she found out not one, but two parents lost a job she was there. “Do you guys need food? Do you guys need this? Christmas is coming up, what can I get the kids?” She'll babysit for people in the community. Oh my gosh, she's a true missionary. She really is. She'll give people rides to the grocery store, and even though she's in her late seventies, and the people she's helping are like in their fifties.

All: [laugh]

KM: You know!?

ATF: Yeah.

KM: She'll be there bringing in their groceries, doing that. She's also involved in Midland Street School, where my younger son is. She is on the committee there, so she's always involved in the fund raising there. Or doing one on one there and stuff. And actually, she's there today because I couldn't be there. They're doing a presentation at my son's class so she's filming for me. But she's wonderful, she really is. And even if she's working in reception and a woman comes in, and she knows we don't have anything she'll just—“Oh, we'll just hop in the car!” and she'll drive them here, drive them there, and they're like, “Is Elaine supposed to be watching the desk?”

All: [Laughs]

KM: You know? Yeah, she would be great, and talk to her because I think getting the early life of Elaine, and what she did for Abby's is remarkable. And you always know when she's in the building because she will come along and turn off all the lights, [motioning towards the window located behind her] “Eh, you've got plenty of light there!” [Laughs] So she hasn't changed at all. And trash bags, she'll take the trash bag out, empty it in the dumpster, and then bring the trash bag back in here. “You don't even need a new one, just use the one you have.” I mean she was recycling before it was, you know fashionable to recycle. When I cleaned out her closet, this is no lie, we had over 100 plastic bags in there.

SP: Oh my God!

KM: [laughs] Yeah! “We got to recycle them, blah blah blah...” you know, use them up and all this. Here it's just, it was just, she's so funny. So funny. I know so [laughs] don't tell her this, but when she comes over to my house, or we're selling food we're like, “Okay how old is this?” [Laughs]

SP: [laughs]

KM: You know?

ATF: Yeah.

KM: But she's terribly—oh my God, such a giver. I mean she sees somebody waiting for the bus, she'll say, "Do you want a lift?" and doesn't have that fear either of approaching strangers, or this, or that. And I think it was her that when I was dealing with a tough situation—like you know I'd always worked with children, never with women, and at that time she'd say, "Well what do you know about stuff?" You know, you're too young to know what I've gone through with my life, like I got there, and even though my experience growing up was different from them, I'd always go to Elaine, "Can you help me out?" and she'd come, like in the crisis, "There's no crisis here! We just have to work out! What does the lady need? Give her the power, let her tell you, not the.." You know? So I think that's kind of where I learned my first lessons of empowering women. You know, when a woman comes in in crisis, you're not taking charge, you're letting them take charge. You're just the listener and the helper. You know I got there, so yeah. She would be good.

SP: Yeah we should take her name down!

KM: Yeah!

ATF: Okay, thank you so much for your time.

KM: I hope it was alright.

ATF: I'm sure it was!

SP: Thank you very much!

KM: I didn't get off track too much?

ATF: No, Thank you!