

Interviewee: Alicia O'Connell
Interviewers: Caroline Bercier and Madeline Vitale
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Abstract

Alicia O'Connell was born in Worcester, MA in 1979, and raised in Auburn, MA. She attended Auburn High School, then graduated from Bowdoin College in Maine with a degree in Women's Studies and English. She later attended New York Law School. She is currently a real estate attorney at a local firm, called O'Connell and O'Connell. In 2014 she was selected as a *Worcester Business Journal* 40 Under Forty awardee. Alicia discusses her involvement in the Worcester community at length, volunteering at numerous organizations within the city. She reflects upon her experience advocating for women's rights, and some of the ways that she contributes to the lives of women and girls in Worcester through her volunteerism, putting an emphasis on mentoring and leadership. She touches upon the character of the city itself as well, both on what makes it special and on the challenges that it faces, as she and her family have a connection with the city that goes back many generations.

CB: So, we're completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics slash community involvement. Thanks for helping us with this important project! And, just so we have it on record, we would like your permission, Alicia O'Connell, to record your oral history on this, the seventh day of November...

AO: [laughs]

CB: [laughs] ...for archiving in the Harvard library, and could also possibly be published on their website.

AO: You have my permission.

CB: Thank you. Okay, so, now into the really general questions, so it asks what your full name is, including both maiden name and married name if applicable.

AO: Sure, my name is Alicia Maryse O'Connell, I'm not married, I'd like to be [laughs]; we're working on that [laughs].

CB: And where were you born?

AO: I was born in Worcester, and was raised in Auburn.

CB: Oh cool. And then, do you have children?

AO: I don't have children of my own, but I'm in a relationship with a wonderful person who has two kids. They spend a couple of days a week with us, and they're great. Their names are Scarlett and Bear—that's his real name, like black, brown, polar—and right now they're five and four years old. And then, I have a dog, Toby, so I tell my parents that he's their grand-dog. [laughs]

CB: Okay, oh, so the next question is what cultures slash ethnicities do you identify with, like family background.

AO: My dad's family is Irish, and my mother's family is Polish. I don't know that my generation or yours really identifies that way anymore. If someone asked me how I identify, I'd say as a woman, as a feminist, as a lawyer, but my parents certainly identify as Irish or Polish depending on what side you're asking, and my grandparents did even more so.

MV: I think you missed the second question, when were you born?

CB: Oh, good call, when were you born?

AO: I was born in 1979, I'm 36 years old.

CB: Okay, do you have anything else you want to tell us about your parents? I know we talked about their...

AO: Yeah! I definitely do, my parents, well, my parents—actually can I talk about my grandparents? Or is that another time...

CB: Oh, no, go for it.

AO: I have only lived in Worcester for three years, I was raised in Auburn as I mentioned, and my father was, too. But my mother grew up in Worcester on Vernon Hill, and her parents did, too. My father's parents also grew up on Vernon Hill in Worcester. My grandparents' grandparents are the generation that emigrated from either Ireland or Poland, and they were all in Worcester, so my family really is a Worcester family, even though I didn't move here until a couple of years ago. On my father's side of the family, my grandfather's father and brother

[worked in] a mill. I believe they made cloth for soldiers during World War II, and after the war, they made men's and women's suits. I live four houses down from the house that my grandfather's father's brother built on Coolidge Road in the 1920s. My paternal grandmother's father was a policeman in Worcester, and I have a really wonderful black and white photo in my house of him working. My father's sister has said that the reason my grandparents moved to Auburn to raise their kids was because the town of Auburn was building Pakachoag Golf Course, and my grandfather really wanted to be close to it. Otherwise they would have stayed in Worcester, because they were Worcester people. My mother's family all worked in mills. My grandmother was a milliner, she made hats, and my grandfather worked stitching and knitting in a mill. There was a really big Polish cultural community in the Vernon Hill area, and the church, Our Lady of Czestochowa—St. Mary's Church—was the center of everything. My mother, her sister, and their cousins, who are all very close in age, all went to school there, so everything was church, school, and community. They all really had this city as their backbone growing up.

CB: Oh, that's fun, my grandpa goes there all the time.

AO: Yeah, so that's a little bit about my family, and I'm sure I will talk about—I'm an only child—I will talk about my parents more [laughs].

CB: You hit a lot of the coming questions with that. Okay, so we got some of the, when you were in Worcester and stuff, so what was your neighborhood in Auburn like, since that's where you were raised.

AO: I don't really feel like I had a neighborhood in Auburn. I grew up on Pakachoag Street, this is a main road in Auburn, so I had just a few close neighbors growing up. I had a pool in my backyard, so summers were a big deal at my house. My mother was a teacher for her career—she taught fourth grade elementary school in Millbury—so she was home summers. We often had the neighbors, and as I got older, my school friends, over in the summer. When talking about my father, I always laugh because—this is a visual so this'll be hard for the interview but—my parents' house where I grew up is at the top of Pakachoag Hill, the office where my father started his law practice is at the bottom—this is where I currently work—and then my grandparents' house where he was raised is at the bottom of the hill, and he went to Holy Cross [College of the Holy Cross]. Pakachoag Street connects to College Hill, so it's like [traces path of hill in the air with her finger] Holy Cross, grandparents' house, my childhood house, office.

CB: [laughs]

AO: My father didn't really leave except for going to law school in Boston. So it was a busy street, but we did have nice summers with the pool [laughs].

CB: Okay, so then it asks where you live in the city now.

AO: I live in Newton Square, on Coolidge Road. I really love the neighborhood and the city. I have only been back living in the area for about five years. I went to college in Maine, at Bowdoin College. After college I moved to Washington DC, and worked for non-profits doing women's rights work. I worked for the Feminist Majority Foundation as a campus organizer, and then for Women for Women International in their development department. Somewhere in that time I decided I wanted to be a lawyer and went to New York City for school and my first job at a big firm. When I came back to this area to work with my father at our law practice in Auburn, I really didn't know where I wanted to live after living in bigger cities and, having grown up here and not knowing how the towns and the city have changed, I wasn't sure where would be the best place for me. Growing up, I really loved going to my aunt's house in Tatnuck Square for holidays and I love her neighborhood. Eventually I decided that I really wanted to be in Worcester because I really didn't want to commute to work and I wanted to be in a city. I initially rented an apartment on Richmond Ave, and I would drive by houses for sale just looking. The house that I live in now was for sale and I drove by it and thought, "You know what, that's a really grown up house, I don't know," and then people in my life reminded me that I was in fact a grown up, and it was such a good decision. The house was built in 1925, it has a lot of character, and the people who owned it previously made some updates that made it modern enough for a young person to want to live there. I've met wonderful neighbors. I really appreciate living in Worcester because there's such a great sense of community. I work with a lot of community groups in the city so, it's nice to say I live here too, I don't just come in and volunteer and sit on a committee and go back to my suburban house.

CB: Alright, and you already talked about your family members, a lot of them still live around here?

AO: My, my parents are here, my grandparents are all passed away, but my paternal grandmother, during my lifetime, lived in Auburn, so that was wonderful. When I moved home after the New York, D.C. years, she was getting close to the end of her life, so it was really good to be here for that. My maternal grandmother lived on Vernon Hill her whole life. My mother's sister lives in Millbury, father's sister lives in Worcester, and a lot of my first and second cousins are around, although there's some that are scattered. I think my generation and your generation, we like to travel, we like to live in different cities, maybe sometimes we come back home, maybe sometimes we don't, but the older generation really stay put. I do see my extended family and we have a lot of holiday traditions.

MV: Okay, so what challenges do you think the city faces, and what would you change about the city?

AO: I love Worcester, one of the things that made me want to live here when I came back around age thirty, was that I do think there's a core group of people, whether they're college students, people my age, people a little bit older, who really see a potential in Worcester being a place where people want to continue to live, people want to move to. There's a thriving arts community, there are a lot of agencies in the city that work with kids to make sure there are

activities after school, to the fact that there are restaurants and shops that are improving. But I, of course, see things that need improvement. We need to better with addressing homelessness and drug use, for example.

MV: Okay, so I guess you talked about what changes you've seen over time, so what distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

AO: I think that we have such a rich history in industry and manufacturing, and all of the firsts that we can be proud of. It seems like Worcester has invented everything! The Worcester Historical Museum has great displays of, "We invented the smiley face!" and "We invented this and that and whatever." The first Valentines were produced in Worcester. We have a lot of things to show off.

MV: What distinct characteristics make it the place that it is?

AO: I think it's cool that even though the manufacturing and industrial age has passed us, now some of factories and mills have been converted into living spaces, art spaces, and restaurants—that's unique.

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

AO: I think it's difficult to speak generally. As you know, we have several colleges, we have several businesses, we have several law firms, so I would hope that women generally at this point in our lifetime would have good experiences. We just had a municipal election, and several women ran for school committee and city council, it seems that women have opportunity in the city. I, myself, am often surrounded by women in strong leadership positions by virtue of my volunteer commitments. I'm on the board of the Abby Kelley Foster Charter School, I'm on the board of Girl's Inc., I'm on the Leadership Council of the Women's Initiative of the United Way, I'm on the board of Arts Worcester. These groups are mostly led by women, or are comprised of half men and half women. It's really exciting to me to be on a board or on a committee with this makeup, and to see the experience that women bring to the table to make decisions. Then it's hard, sometimes, to return to my regular job, where I work in a field previously dominated by men. I have been personally introduced as a "lady lawyer" or a "female attorney," and thought, here I am, I do not look like a man, I don't think there will be a mistake here, or, if I was also introduced by name, I have thought, my name is not androgynous, there's no mistaking I'm an attorney who's also a woman! And so, I do think that no matter how far educational, career, and political opportunities have come for women in Worcester, in likely many fields, not just the legal field, a generation above me, above you, there will be people who are still adjusting to women in professional fields. I have a staff of legal assistants who are women, and they're referred to as "the girls" by other attorneys. I've had conversation with my father (my business partner) about how that's demeaning, and how they have titles. Or names!

MV: Okay, so, moving on to education. Where did you attend school?

AO: I am a graduate of Auburn High School. I went to Bowdoin College in Maine, where I was a Women's Studies and English double major. Then I worked for a few years before going to law school. When I was working in Washington D.C. at the Feminist Majority Foundation, I started to meet lawyers who were doing something much more fun than what my father and his colleagues were doing, which was all I knew growing up. I went to New York Law School, in the Tribeca neighborhood in New York City.

MV: And what were your challenges, if any, in education?

AO: [pause] My mother, as I mentioned, was an elementary school teacher, so she definitely was aware of how I was doing in school. I think she either inspired me to do well, or when I was young, she made sure I was doing well, and I think that at a certain point it was expected that I was going to do well. I liked school. I don't think when I was going through school, I felt like I had challenges. Now that I work with middle school girls and high school girls through Girls Inc., and the Women's Initiative of the United Way, I see girls going through so many leadership programs. Watching the girls, I think, "I wish I did that, I wish I had that, I wish my mom sent me to that, I wish we knew about this." At one point I told my parents this and they said, "You didn't need that!" But of course I did. Their reasoning was that I did well in school and I wasn't shy, but I never really felt like I had a mentor. High school guidance counselors made sure your college applications were sent in, and I had great teachers, but I think that it would have been so helpful to have more, a little bit more structure, a little bit more guidance. I feel selfish saying that because I have great parents and I had a good education.

MV: Okay. It says upon finishing your formal education what did you see as your options, which you kind of touched upon, did you have any other...

AO: When I graduated from Bowdoin, I hadn't prepared as well as a lot of my friends did for my first job. I started as an intern for the Feminist Majority Foundation, and I was lucky enough that they hired me afterwards. Although not knowing exactly what I was going to do was somewhat typical of my generation. Now, just 15 years later, the economy is different and there's a lot of focus on what you're going to make as a salary during your career. I think colleges are—and middle and high schools, and outside programs, before you get there—focusing on careers and just what there is out there more explicitly. Students either go to college with a clear idea of what they're going to study, or before they graduate have a good idea. I was not as focused on what my career would be, so I'm very glad that I took a couple of jobs before I went to law school. Now a lot of young people will ask me advice about going to law school, and it's a very difficult conversation to have because law school is not fun. College is a lot of work but it's a good few years—you make a lot of lasting friendships, you learn things that you did not learn in high school, you read things that never would have come your way before. I just had to clean out my bedroom at my parents' house and reorganized the bookshelf of all my college books and just thought, "I cannot believe like I read this!" I never would have been exposed to that if I didn't go to Bowdoin. In law school, you learn how to think like a lawyer, write like a lawyer, and

sometimes practice like a lawyer, but what you read is not the same. If you go to law school, you should want to be a lawyer and practice law afterwards. Sometimes that's a hard message to get across to those asking.

MV: Okay, and what support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

AO: Growing up and through my first law firm job, my support network was absolutely my parents and my very close friends, and since I've been back in Worcester, it's grown so much. When I moved back here a few years ago, I was very grateful to be here and very happy to be working with my father, but also a little bit lost because I was curious as to how I was going to sort of find my people. Within the first year I was here, someone recommended that I go to the annual fundraising event for the Women's Initiative of the United Way, and that actually was the springboard for finding the rest of my support network. The Women's Initiative is a leadership and philanthropy group for women who raise and grant funds for girls age ten to 14 in Worcester. One United Way staff member runs the Women's Initiative—it is otherwise committee-run and everything is volunteer-based. The Women's Initiative put on twice-yearly financial literacy conferences for eighth grade girls. All of the mentors at the conferences are professional women, so the girls get to meet people from the community who are volunteering, and hear about the jobs that we have, and play games to learn about budgeting and personal finance. So, the day that I went to that first fundraising event was the first day that I heard about the financial literacy conferences, and I thought, "I'll volunteer for that!" I then got more involved with Women's Initiative, and became the chair of the Financial Literacy Committee. A lot of the girls that I met through the Women's Initiative are students at Abby Kelly, so I eventually asked the chair of the board there if there was a way I could get involved at the school, and there were board openings. And now I'm on the board of Girls Inc., where the Women's Initiative funds programs. By volunteering I've met women who have really helped me find my place in the community and they are my support. I hope they know it, I think they do [laughs]. I should probably tell them [laughs].

CB: Okay so we got your first job, did you say your first job was with the Feminist...?

AO: My first after college job was at the Feminist Majority Foundation that is right outside of Washington D.C. in Arlington Virginia. They are non-profit founded by Eleanor Smeal, she's a former president of NOW, the National Organization of Women. A lot of the national women's organizations, or reproductive rights or reproductive health organizations like Planned Parenthood or NARAL [National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League], they go through a series of executive directors; Ellie, as she's called, she'll never leave this. If she retires, the Feminist Majority Foundation might just disappear, this is her organization. They have several programs, but what I worked for was their Campus Program. A lot of the national women's or reproductive rights organizations will have a campus program where if there's a women's resource center on campus or a women's rights group on campus, you can affiliate with a national organization, and work on their campaigns. So I was a campus organizer, and we went

to colleges in the Northeast and the Southeast, which was an interesting juxtaposition, and we worked on getting emergency contraception over the counter. This was more than ten years ago, because it wasn't over the counter yet. And we worked on something that is consistently worked on which is making sure Roe versus Wade isn't overturned, as an education piece for college campuses. A lot of the students that we worked with just needed confidence because a lot of these issues are not comfortable to talk about on campuses, and you get a lot of backlash. We made a non-profit salary and when we went on these trips, we would be gone from ten days to two weeks with one other campus organizer, and you would either stay with a staff's family member or friend or in a hotel. But we were based in DC, so we would always network with the other reproductive rights organizations in town. On the anniversary of Roe v. Wade we'd go to the Supreme Court and attend a vigil. I'm very liberal and I'm very comfortable with my politics, and most of my friends, we had the same belief system. This was my first adult experience in the world, this is it. Washington [DC] is a very transient city, meaning, a lot of people go down to work for an issue, like reproductive rights, or animal rights, or the environment, or you may work on Capitol Hill, then just take off when you're done. But it's very easy to be surrounded by people who believe what you believe. So basically I was talking about being pro-choice, like all the time, and it was normal, and no one thought it was awkward or uncomfortable or weird, and I had to basically had be told that it wasn't normal dinner conversation, and so that was an interesting experience. My boyfriend at the time—he is Canadian and worked at a Canadian Embassy, and most of his colleagues were diplomats. And he would have to remind me to talk about neutral topics. When I moved to New York, I remember thinking, "I'm moving to the most liberal city," and I quickly realized that when you go to a less political environment—anywhere outside of DC—with all sorts of different people, you usually talk about normal regular things and I was realized, "Oh I have to like figure out who I can talk about this with. It's not just something I can talk about." It was a very funny experience for me [laughs].

CB: Do you mind my asking if you found—it sounded like you were hinting at a difference between like when you would visit northern organizations versus the ones in the southeast. Did you find a difference with the organizations there or a difference talking to people, or....

AO: If I went to a school in Boston to visit a student group, there would be at least 15 students, men and women or all women that identified as the reproductive rights group or the women's rights group, and, say, in Florida, there'd be two. There was one school in Georgia that I went to, a very small private school, but there was one student and she was so nervous, and she hadn't formed a group yet. She thanked us for visiting and bringing materials. We had dinner with her and a friend she thought would be interested, but the friend did not have the right mindset.

CB: Yeah, that's what I was thinking, maybe a little less organized...

AO: Yes. The students in the Southeast were less organized because the environment was still just not welcoming, for these discussions, which is just sad.

CB: Yeah. Okay, so we kind of talked about the “saving the day at night” thing, your almost two different kinds of work, if that’s right. So one of the questions is, “What has work meant to you?” But I know it sounds like they’re both very important to you, but kind of different. Maybe, if you wouldn’t mind, elaborating a little bit more?

AO: On the two kinds of work that I do?

CB: Yeah.

AO: I like my job, my regular job, as a lawyer. I’m proud to be a lawyer, I like the work that I do, but it’s very regular work. The feeling I get when I’m mentoring children or teenagers, and the feeling I get sitting around a table with professional women who have a lot of experience in their career or in their community work, or a history in being involved in the women’s movement, is vastly different than the feeling I get when I’m drafting legal documents. So I’m very grateful for the ability to work in the kind of office I do. I work in an office with my father, and we are able to give each other time to do things that we like to do during work hours, that is something that would be very difficult to do if we did not work with each other. There is not a day that goes by that I don’t do something for any of my volunteer commitments, whether it is writing something, making a phone call, going to a meeting, or going to an event. Some of my meetings are at night or before work, but there is usually something during the day that I am doing that is not technically my lawyer job. And I’m very grateful for that opportunity. When I worked in New York at a large firm, there were exciting pro bono opportunities, but it’s difficult for a new lawyer to get the pro bono work that you want.

CB: Okay, these are slightly less related probably, but I don’t know if you had anything you’d want to elaborate on in primary responsibilities for housework, and then it asks about childcare, that kind of thing. Okay, and then it seems like it’s trying to get at how you balance the work and home life.

AO: Those probably aren’t as relevant to be because I don’t have my own—I have kids at my house a couple days a week that my boyfriend is responsible for, primarily. We share the time together, but he takes them to school, things like that.

CB: Yeah.

AO: I wish they were! I wish they were with us all the time! [laughs]

CB: What do you think are the pros and cons of the path you’ve chosen?

AO: I honestly couldn't be happier right now. Growing up, I never thought I would be in the Worcester area. I never thought I would be a lawyer. I never thought I'd be working with my father. But I feel like my days are magic. I get to go to work, get paid, feel proud to be a professional, and then make a difference in the community, and work with amazing women while doing it. I can't imagine anything being better than that. One thing I love about Worcester is that everybody knows each other, and in all the organizations that I'm involved with, there's so much overlap. When I was in New York, there are so many lawyers, there are tons, I mean there are so many national organizations that are based there, whose national headquarters are there. But you are working so hard that I didn't even want to join a bar association there because no one would care if I miss something because there would be so many other people there. And you don't have any time to do anything. So I'm very happy here. It's difficult to work in a family business, but the pros always outweigh the silliness that happens when you work in a family business. I think also, my generation is the first that experienced so many options in life, so you might find your career in your 30s as opposed to at 20 or something. I didn't know that I would be so happy here, so I experienced all these other things, but I wouldn't have traded living in DC or New York. I've mentioned my boyfriend's children. I am very maternal, I love children, I don't know if I'm going to have my own children—I really don't know, but I have these two children in my life. I think that had something been different in my career path, I might have had children earlier, I might have met someone earlier, but when I think of my personal life now I never would want that to change.

CB: That's great! Okay so, I think we kind of got that last one too, already. We're going move on – this is a fun one – about politics and community involvement

MV: Yeah, so obviously you're very active in women's rights and everything, but do you consider yourself active politically – I guess any other aspects of politics?

AO: Yes, I do. I support local politicians in their campaigns. The most recent municipal elections for City Council were a big deal in Worcester. There were so many people running for at-large seats. That doesn't typically happen. So I did support visibly one candidate. I supported others, of course, but not as visibly. I would love to run for City Council. I don't know if and when I will do that. It's a big commitment. I've always supported politicians, whether local or national, by making donations. I proudly vote in every election, I get my sticker and show it off. I'll always remember getting sent to register to vote when I turned 18, by my Social Studies teacher in school. But yeah, I think it's important to be politically aware [laughs].

MV: So the next question is about volunteer and community work. Did you want to talk any more about the organizations you're with?

AO: I've probably said enough, but if there's more...

MV: I mean there's just like a bunch of like sub things, like what are the organization's main goals? What were some of the main programs? What did the work consist of? Maybe what would you consider the group's major accomplishments?

AO: The United Way of Central Massachusetts starts a new campaign every year to raise money to give grants. So they raise money, then give money. They typically go to corporations and big businesses in the city to raise money—Saint Gobain, Hanover Insurance, University of Massachusetts Medical. The Women's Initiative of the United Way, the affiliate that I'm involved in, has a totally separate fundraising mechanism. Individuals become members by donating at least 100 dollars. We then grant our own money to programs that we select— it's usually around 300,000 dollars a year. I mentioned earlier that there are [those] that do a lot of the work—the Community Investment Committee solicits grant proposals from whoever wants this money, and does an amazing job of researching the programs that are asking to be funded, and then makes recommendations to the Leadership Council, which I sit on, and we vote where the money goes. And it's an amazing feeling. In addition to sitting on the board, I have been involved in programs at Girl's Inc. I have mentored for Leadership Academy, which works [with] juniors and seniors in high school. It's a 12-week program. Volunteer coaches are professionals in the community, and in every session for 12 weeks a new topic is taught. Dressing for Success, communication, college visits, organization—I would have loved that when I was young. They have a program called “Eureka,” where girls start the summer before eighth grade, and go all through high school graduation. And in the summer they have externships at STEM-based companies. Somehow my law office made it into being STEM-based. I host an extern, and I basically make her my little buddy for four weeks. We go to the Registry of Deeds and the courthouse, and real estate closings. I always hope that she has as much fun as I do. I'm very happy now to be on the board of Arts Worcester, because that's another way to sort of show off the city. Arts Worcester is a gallery on Main Street, and it shows off the work of local contemporary artists. There's a gallery opening every six weeks or so. We have to make decisions about the gallery during our meetings, but then we also get to go to the openings and greet everyone who comes in. The City Manager came to our last opening, and so it was nice to greet him and welcome him, and he asked, “What kind of art is this?” [laughs] He said, “There seems to be a fall theme.” I said “I guess so. It's also contemporary art.” [laughs] “Made now.” [laughs] So, it's a great combination of things to do.

MV: Definitely. So what role has religion played in your life, if any?

AO: I don't define myself as a religious person. I was raised Catholic though, and am confirmed. My father goes to church weekly. I do admire the priest at the church that I grew up in, I just don't find myself comfortable in a Catholic church with my personal beliefs. But both of my parents are Catholic. My mother went to Catholic grammar school through college. My father

went to the College of the Holy Cross. So it definitely was something that was part of my childhood. I often think, “Should I find something,” because religion is such an important thing to so many people, but I haven’t done so yet. I sometimes ask my father questions about Catholicism, like, “Why do Catholics believe this” or “Why do Catholics do that,” and he sometimes—actually, most of the time!—does not have the answer. And I’ll say “Dad, you’re the one who goes, can you please figure this out for me,” but, he’ll say “I am so grateful for so many things, so I go to church because I’m grateful.” And I really like that. I should probably find a place to go and be grateful once in a week. [laughs] So, we’ll see what happens with that. [laughs]

CB: Cool, then we’ve got a section on health. I guess this is one of the topics they want to focus on, but some of the ones might not have really specific answers. But how have health issues impacted your life and your family, experiences accessing quality and affordable healthcare – I don’t know if you have anything you want to talk about with those.

AO: I probably don’t have answers for what they are specifically looking for with those. I mean we have been fortunate to have health insurance and doctor’s visits and everything like that. But one thing that comes to mind is that my paternal grandmother was a nurse, and I actually took a little time to prepare for this interview. My paternal grandmother passed away a few years ago, and in cleaning up her house, my aunt found old pictures and what could be scrapbook clippings. My aunt made a scrapbook for my father just of all these wonderful things, and there was a page where an article from an Auburn newspaper of my grandmother running for the town Board of Health. She was a nurse at Saint Vincent’s Hospital, then she was a visiting nurse in Auburn, and then she ran for the Board of Health in Auburn and won. It just made me feel so good that to see “Vote for Mrs. Philip O’Connell,” Mary Jane O’Connell, and there was a paragraph that said she was the president of the Women’s Club at my family’s church. She’s on this board of directors, she was doing all of these other volunteer things. I thought “I take after my grandmother!” and wished she knew what I was doing now. [laughs] But, she would always talk about being a nurse, and the doctors then versus the doctors now, which was an interesting conversation to have.

MV: How do you define success in your life, and has this position changed over time?

AO: Oh gosh, it’s definitely changed. I define success as happiness. I’m sure in the past 15 years I thought money, title, or working in a certain place defined success. I was very proud of where I went to college. When I went to law school, I didn’t get a great LSAT score, and I actually applied twice, because I was not getting into law schools that I wanted to go to, and eventually I went to a third tier law school. I had a really hard time with that then. I thought, “I’m smart. Now am I going there?” [laughs] And when I got a job at the law firm in New York City, I explained

to my parents what a big deal it was, because I didn't think they knew. But now? That attitude is gone.

MV: Based on your life experience, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

AO: Just to take your time figuring out what you want to do, and every experience is a learning experience. You don't need to do what people expect you to do. If you have a head on your shoulders you'll figure it out.

MV: Okay, so 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? We were kind of confused by this question, so...

AO: [laughs] When I was just a couple years older than you, I started working at the Feminist Majority Foundation, and people would ask, "Why are people using the word feminist? Why do we need it anymore?" And even today, people still ask, you know, "Why is there still feminism? Why do people call themselves feminists?" But as long as women are still becoming the firsts of anything—in education, their careers, in politics—we still have to be talking about feminism, being proud to be a feminist, or talking about women's history. Most people define feminism as social, economic, and political equality between men and women, and then you can take the step of saying and acting upon it. Some people are uncomfortable with that, but I think it's very simple if you think about it. So if you are continuing to tell the history of women, I think it's important to ensure that people know that it's not complete without a mention that we still need feminism.

MV: Okay, so now we have additional questions, and I guess we can go over a few. What major historical events in Worcester have occurred during your time here? Did they impact you personally?

AO: When I was in college, the Worcester fire happened in the Cold Storage building. December 3, 1999 six firefighters died. It was such a devastating event that President Clinton and Vice President Gore both came to the memorial service in the city.

MV: [to Caroline] Do you want to do five, or... [to Alicia] It says, "How were girls treated when you were in school?" Did you have any - I mean it wasn't that long ago, but....

AO: I did not have any – I don't recall any differences...

CB: Yeah, a lot of these are directed towards older women. One of them is, "What was considered fashionable when you were a young woman?" [laughs]

MV: So when you were in school, did you have any involvement in extracurriculars, in clubs, stuff like that?

AO: When I was in high school, most of my extracurriculars involved singing. I was in every choir. I was in chorus, show choir, jazz choir, select choir. I did summer theater. I did yearbook. We had an Amnesty International chapter in my high school, which probably started my social justice involvement. And I worked. I started working at the law office that I work at now, when it was just my dad, filing after school, and when I got my license, I did errands for them. So that was really my first job. [laughs].

MV: What did your parents' education consist of?

AO: My father was public school educated, then went to Holy Cross, then he went to Suffolk University Law School, and my mom went to Saint Mary's in Worcester, which was affiliated with their church, Our Lady of Czestochowa. Then she went to Rivier College, I think it might now be Rivier University. That's in Nashua, New Hampshire. I think she might have taken a few classes at Worcester State towards a master's degree, but did not complete it.

MV: There's what transitions did you go through in moving from childhood to adulthood?

AO: I'm sure I went through many. Not really remembering them right now. I – you know being an only child, I feel like I've been an adult since I was ten.

MV: Then I guess just like – in everyday life – are there particular areas in the city where you spend a lot of time? Do you have any hobbies or regular leisure activities that take you outside the home?

AO: Toby—my dog—and I, like to explore Elm Park and Newton Hill. And with Scarlett and Bear, the kids, we love to visit local farms. My boyfriend is a chef, and he is very involved in the farm to table movement. I love being outside—I like to hike, and pretend that I'm a runner. I also really like being home. I love my home so much, so when I have time I just really like to be there. And I like to see my friends. I like music a lot. Before I entered the relationship that I'm in now, I would like to see music out in local spots, but he is working a lot in restaurants, so I now savor the time that I can be home, and not out. Things change as you get older! [laughs]

MV: I think that wraps it up.

CB: I think that sounds good, yeah.

AO: Cool! Thank you so much, that was so fun.

MV: Thank you!