

Interviewee: Coralie O'Connor  
Interviewers: Autumn Walczak & Ashley Abad  
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Transcribers: Autumn Walczak & Ashley Abad



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**Abstract:** Coralie O'Connor, who swam in the 1952 Olympics in Finland, was born in Worcester in 1934, and had an older brother and an older sister. All of her immediate family has passed; she is the only one left. Swimming was a big part of her life, and she participated in her first swim competition when she was just 12 years old. She attended Purdue University for four and one half years. She participated and swam on club swim teams. As there were not many opportunities for women to swim back then, she even swam on a boys' team one time. After her swim team qualified as a national swim team, they went to Finland for the Olympics and they were there for two weeks. O'Connor stopped competing in the 1960s after she tried out and did not qualify. After this, she became a physical education teacher and started a local swim team here in Worcester. Currently, she is 81 years old and she lives in Worcester. She has retired from teaching but she does water aerobics and volunteers at a local church here in Worcester.

**Transcript:**

**AW:** Alright, so.

**AA:** Let's start with the basics. You were from Worcester?

**CO:** Yes.

**AA:** You were born here?

**CO:** Yes.

**AA:** And then did you grow up here and you went to school here?

**CO:** Public school here and then I went to college. I went to Purdue University in Indiana.

**AA:** Oh really, what made you go there?

**CO:** Swimming.

**AW:** Did you start swimming at a young age or...?

**CO:** Well, yeah, I was 12 when I did my first competition.

**AA:** Was there any family member? Like did you just choose swimming because or was there anyone?

**CO:** My mother made me do it. [Laughter]

**AA:** Your mother made you do it. Well, we can see that you went really really far with it, too.

**AW:** What year were you born?

**CO:** '34

**AA:** 1934, and then do you have any siblings?

**CO:** I have, I had an older brother and an older sister.

**AA:** And then... So where in Worcester did you live?

**CO:** I started out my first four years I was on Beverly Road up near, off of Lincoln Street. Then we moved to Chatham Place which is over by St. Paul's Cathedral.

**AA:** Yeah, I've heard of it.

**CO:** And then when I was 11, I moved out to where I am now.

**AW:** So, you lived all throughout your whole life in Worcester?

**CO:** Yeah, except for the four and a half years in college.

**AW:** That's good, let's see...

**AA:** So, where do you currently live now?

**AW:** In Worcester.

**AA:** Oh, oh.

**AW:** Do any other family members live around here as well or...?

**CO:** I'm the only one left of immediate family. My parents are gone, and my sister and brother are gone. And I have cousins and my niece and nephew, my sister's children all live in—one lives in Virginia and one lives in North Carolina, and cousins in Hawaii, Montana, and Texas.

**AW:** Oh wow, that's a lot. Alright. What do you like about Worcester or is there anything you don't like about it?

**AA:** Or like the city as a whole, because like, we have been studying in class about, the differences between, you know, not just Worcester but the society as a whole like now and how it was, you know, in 1950's and that type of thing. So what changes have you seen in the city of Worcester over time and over the years?

**CO:** Just a lot of changes in neighborhoods. The center of the city, you know, has moved out more from when I was growing up. They seem to be a lot more acceptable for women in sports, which they were not when I was trying to compete and train. I had to leave Worcester to train at a pool in Whitinsville because there wasn't any pool around here that would let me in.

**AW:** How did you get there? By bus or did your parents bring you?

**CO:** Bus. And of course we didn't have car that was back, you know, back in the Second World War, so things were a little tight for us at that time. And so I used to take the bus then my junior year, senior year I had—my parents got a car. And I was able to drive to Whitinsville.

**AW:** That's good. Can you explain more about how hard it was as a female athlete in that time? Was it difficult for you in any specific way?

**AA:** Like community wise too. I play softball at Assumption, so you know, now, they are way more accepting and there's more opportunities for women to compete as athletes. So how like, was it hard to find opportunities? Was it hard to find swim teams? Was it hard, you know, like, how was it different back then than it is now?

**CO:** There wasn't any swim team for girls back then. My parents were able to talk the swim coach at the Lincoln Square Boys Club into having me coming down and it would be just me. He would watch me swim and make corrections. And then give me a workout to do, which I would try to get done, at the Whitinsville Community Center. The YW [YWCA] found their pool on Chatham Street was donated to with the stipulation that there would be no girls competitive swim team. If they wanted to do synchronized swimming, that was okay, but you couldn't do no racing. So, the only time I could get in there would be when there was an open swim, and then I would have to swim around people to do a lane. And my coach at Lincoln Square Boys Club would call my house and say, "The executive director's not here today, I can sneak you in." [laughs] So, then I'd rush down to the Boys Club and have him watch me. And he'd give me a workout and sometimes I would be doing it with the boys on the Boy's Club team.

**AW:** How did the boys react to you being there? Did they ever say anything or make any comments?

**CO:** Not to me. No, they were, they were good, good kids, very good kids.

**AA:** So, I guess going back, so you said you went to Purdue? What did you study there?

**CO:** I was in the science school division, but I did study teaching and physical education.

**AW:** What made you choose Purdue?

**CO:** At the time there was no colleges that had female swimmers, and this one had a swim team made up mostly of Purdue girls, but they represented the town Lafayette School. So I didn't represent the college because there wasn't one. They had a pool, a beautiful pool, but...

**AA:** That's so different than it is right now. So then, so you went to Purdue for four years and you graduated?

**CO:** Four and a half years.

**AA:** Four and a half years.

**CO:** Because, my senior year was the Pan-American games and it was in March and so I qualified for the team to go to Mexico City and I didn't make up all my work when I came back so I graduated in January of 57'.

**AW:** So, how um, did you get into the Olympic portion of it?

**AA:** Like, what was that whole process of?

**CO:** Well, I practiced for a while because it was outdoors. So there was a 50 meter course set up, up by, up on Lincoln Street. And they call it Holland Rink because in the winter time it was a skating rink, but it was outdoors. And my coach would go up there from the Boys' Club and he would watch me swim up there, and give me something, some things to do. And then he decided that it would be better for me if I went out to Indiana and practiced with the Lafayette swim team. And the coach said I was going to eventually have, when I got out there in September and this was in June, because when I graduated from high school. So I went out there and practiced with the girls from the Lafayette Swim Club who were really all members of—were all students at Purdue really. There were only a couple girls from the town.

**AW:** How did you feel about leaving your family to pursue that?

**CO:** I didn't like, I didn't want to. At one point my father—my mother, my mother was the instigator of everything, wanted me to finish my high school in another place around Chicago, which had a great swim team at that time, and go out there and live and finish my high school there. And I would not leave, so I stayed here.

**AA:** And I guess once you got out there and once you started training... So like what actually happened when you got there, like the actual Olympics? Like, what was your experience through that?

**CO:** We qualified at a swim meet in a national swim meet, which was in Indianapolis. And after we qualified, the team all got together and they issued us uniforms, and things like what you see them wearing in the opening ceremonies. And then we got on a plane and went to New York, and then we flew from New York to Helsinki, Finland, and the training out there in Finland with the pool, 50 meters was really great, kind of scary [laughs]. It was fun, when you come out of your dormitory there would be little kids hanging around... [whisper], "Can we have your autograph?"

**AW:** That's funny.

**AA:** Aww.

**CO:** Then we got transported every place, and went and got taken to the embassy, and but I think the most goose pimple part of the whole thing was the opening ceremony when you all march in and because they do it alphabetically, the United States was the last one to go in. And by then the whole stadium was roaring and that was really goose pimply [laughs].

**AA:** So then like, was this multiple days? Like, well yeah I would assume it is, so you started the competition and then like how long did it last for?

**CO:** We were there for about two weeks.

**AA:** Two weeks.

**CO:** But, we weren't competing the whole time. We got a chance to see some of the track and field events. And that's about all I saw was the track and field.

**AW:** Do you still talk to anyone or did you keep a connection with anyone that you were on the team with or the other teams?

**CO:** We did, we did for a while and they have reunions every once in a while, but some of us are gone now.

**AW:** So, how old were you when you entered, 18?

**CO:** 18, just graduated from high school.

**AW:** And then, when did you stop swimming?

**CO:** Well, I tried out for the '52, '56 team I came in fourth and they took the top three. Then I tried out... '60... '64 team I think, but by then I was teaching. I got a job right here in the city teaching phys. ed. [physical education] elementary school. And then, so, I started my own team, the Worcester Swim Club.

**AW:** Oh wow. How did you go about doing that?

**CO:** Put an ad in the paper, found a place where we could have tryouts, which was at Cook's Pond out there at Tatnuck Square. And we picked a team from there, and then the Boys Club coach at that time used to swim with me back in when I was training before. He was on the Boys Club team at the point. So he said, "Come on down, we'll make some time for you." And two days away from—we practiced at the Boys Club. So Worcester was beginning to change a little bit in allowing outside teams and other people to use their facilities.

**AW:** Did you miss swimming after you stopped, or did starting that whole thing help you not miss it as much or...?

**CO:** No, I didn't really miss it because I got very busy with teaching and then with the coaching. So I was really very busy at that point.

**AW:** Did you like coaching?

**CO:** Ninety percent of the time, when the parents didn't interfere with anything.

**AA:** I can relate to that, too, with playing softball. So the Worcester's club team... So when was the first year when, what year was it that you guys had your first team? Do you remember?

**CO:** No, I don't remember. I think it was in the '60s.

**AA:** In the '60s.

**CO:** Yeah. Let's see, my niece was born in '57. Yeah must have been early '60s because she was on the team at the time.

**AA:** And I'd imagine it's still going on right now, too.

**CO:** No.

**AA:** Oh, it's not?

**CO:** We dissolved.

**AA:** Oh, oh okay.

**AW:** What was the most challenging thing you experienced both trying to get into the Olympics and forming your own swim organization?

**CO:** Finding places to swim. Yeah.

**AA:** While, so before you went off to the Olympics and everything, you were around here and you were still going.... When you went to Purdue and you went to school there, did you have a job aside from your education? Did you work at all?

**CO:** No.

**AA:** No.

**CO:** No I didn't work at school, at college either. My mother didn't want me to.

**AA:** She just wanted you to focus on your school?

**CO:** Yeah, school and swimming.

**AW:** Was she really hard on the swimming or...?

**CO:** No, she wasn't an overbearing parent. She was just, she just kind of pushed me along a little bit.

**AA:** She just wanted what was best for you.

**CO:** Yeah, yeah my father went along with whatever my mother said. [Laughs]

**AW:** Who would you say had the most influence on you growing up, your mother or your father?

**CO:** Hmm... That's hard to say. They were both equal I would think.

**AA:** So besides the club team that you did here and the Olympics, is there any other big events in your life or anything else besides from swim that you participated in or has had an influence on you?

**CO:** Well, I think coaching my swim team was. We went a few places as a team. We went out to Lincoln, Nebraska, for a Junior Olympics. And I had some successful swimmers that I was hoping maybe they could make the Olympics some time, but they—it was fun working with the kids. I really enjoyed that.

**AW:** Did you ever have any children? No.

**CO:** No, nope, never married.

**AW:** Smart! Maybe, I'll go with that. [laughs]

**AW:** I was going to say, do you wish you did anything differently or are you happy with the way things went for you? Like if you could go back would you change anything?

**CO:** Well I was engaged, and I think maybe I would've gone back and gone through with it. But, no. I'm pretty satisfied with my life right now. Because he lived in Buffalo, New York, so I didn't really want to live out there. Where are you from?

**AA:** I'm from New Hampshire

**CO:** Oh, okay.

**AW:** And I'm from Oxford, so local.

**CO:** So I didn't offend anybody, haha.

**AW:** Nope. I wouldn't want to live in New York either. No thank you.

**AA:** I guess we can go back. So when you were back in college and high school, women like how-- I guess-- how was the fashion back, like how did you guys dress? Was it, I mean I imagine it was very different than how it is today, but like did you guys wear like school uniforms to school?

**CO:** Not in public schools. No, but we had to wear skirts. We got sent home if we had jeans or slacks on. We were supposed to wear skirts. But other than that, fashion wise I think people dress more sloppily today. We always had shirts tucked in, wore dresses or skirts. The boys always had, not ties, but shirts on and stuff.

**AW:** What was one of the most historical events that you remember growing up or throughout your life that had the biggest impact on you?

**CO:** Well, let's see. I don't know. Hmm.

**AA:** Um, yeah I'm just trying to think. I'm not good with history so.

**CO:** Well, the end of Second World War was a big to do, but I was in camp at the time, but we had a campfire, a group around the campfire, and had songs, and prayers, and things like that. So the end of the war was kind of because my brother was in the war at that time, too.

**AW:** Did you have any other hobbies besides swimming or activities that you like to do?

**CO:** Oh, I like to go camping and travel. That's about it.

**AA:** Who do you usually go camping with?

**CO:** I used to go camping with my cousin, but she passed away. And she would do all the cooking and I would do the driving. I have an RV [recreational vehicle]. But that's



all. And we've been out as far as Billings, Montana. And I went with my sister out to California. So we've traveled. I like to travel.

**AW:** What's the furthest place you've gone?

**CO:** Well of course...

**CO & AW:** Finland.

**AW:** Yeah [Laughs]

**CO:** With my swim team, I went, we went to, London, then competed there.

**AA:** And how long were you guys there for?

**CO:** A week.

**AW:** Did you like London better than Finland, or which one did you like?

**CO:** Well, London was fun because I was old enough to get on a train and just travel. And what you can't do around here that well. So, we ended up, I went to the White Cliffs in Dover and saw them. And different things like that. But coming home from the Olympics in '52 our plane was overweight. So we pulled into Shannon, Ireland, and the men, boys, were able to go out and tour the town but we didn't have chaperones, so the girls couldn't go out.

**AW:** So what did you do?

**CO:** Hung around in the airport. [laughs]

**AW:** What did you do when you were in the airport? Just sat there or...?

**CO:** Oh, no, we went to the jewelry shops and just poked around, looked at different things. And some of the guys were able to stay there because of the plane being overweight. So they let passengers off. We had chartered planes and they let some kids, boys, men, and stay and come back on another flight. But we couldn't even at 18 years of age, we still had to have a chaperone.

**AW:** Wow.

**CO:** And the girls' dormitories at Purdue were women and men.

**AA:** They didn't have any like co-ed buildings at all or anything?

**CO:** No, we had [unable to hear]

**AW:** Was it more men than women at the school?

**CO:** Oh at Purdue? Yeah.

**AA:** So, where did your parents go to school? Did they go to school?

**CO:** My dad went to public school in Worcester. My mother went to elementary schools in Tewksbury, down near Plymouth. Do you know where Tewksbury is?

**AW:** Yup.

**CO:** And, she finished her high school in Brookline.

**AW:** What did they do for work?

**CO:** My father was a printer. He was part owner of Scarbs (?) Press which is not anymore.

**AA:** Is there anything? Any challenges in the city of Worcester that either whether it's back then or now? Any challenges you've like faced or encountered with the society like as a whole that you would like change? Or has there been any big events that happened in Worcester? I don't know, has anything happened in Worcester that has been very influencing?

**CO:** I think Worcester is becoming, emerging from its old boy ways, where female teachers are more unequal with the men. I did feel at times that I was held back because I was a woman in the Phys. Ed. department. And when I would pass forward something to the principal, I wouldn't get it. So then I'd say to the man Phys Ed teacher, "Why don't you ask him?" And he would always get it, ha ha.

**AW:** What types of things would you ask for?

**CO:** Well, I ended up at South High School where they had a pool. They don't have one anymore I don't think, but I wanted to have a swim-a-thon. You know what those are? Where the kids would swim forever to earn money, to get money.

**AA:** Oh, like a relay for life type thing?

**CO:** Yeah, that sort of thing. You've had walk-a-thons and stuff right? Swim-a-thons, so they'd swim lengths. I know that they were having them done at, not in Worcester, but other places, but I was told no.

**AA:** So do you just plan on, so what do you plan on doing now? Do you have, like what else is going on in your life at the time?

**CO:** Just trying to stay well, at 81 years of age.

**AW:** Well, you look good.

**CO:** I still do, I still go to the YW to do water aerobics, I'm not really into swimming that much because I've had bad shoulders. I've had my shoulder replaced, a year, two years ago now.

**AW:** Do you think that's from the swimming?

**CO:** I don't know, it might have been arthritis. My father's sister had very bad hands, arthritis. So I think it probably runs in the family. Maybe the swimming did aggravate it a little bit, but I don't really think that. I can't blame it on swimming because I did enjoy it.

**AA:** Did you ever have an injury from swimming?

**CO:** No.

**AA:** No, what swim event did you do?

**CO:** Backstroke. Didn't like backstroke at first. Because I wanted to be a freestyler. But backstroke was the one that ended up being my best.

**AA:** Yeah, I have roommates that I live with and they're all swimmers, and they're all really good at like freestyle and breaststroke. Those are like their events that they're really good at.

**AW:** Do you do any, like volunteer, or do anything else besides the water aerobics?

**CO:** Oh, I do a lot of volunteering at church.

**AW:** What church do you...?

**CO:** I go to All Saints Episcopal Church, right down the center of Worcester.

**AA:** And what types of things do you do for volunteer there?

**CO:** Well I was in charge of the acolytes for a while. I was in charge of the Eucharistic ministers and the lectors, and I am a chalice bearer. Almost every committee that I have there, I have done. I was a verger, but I really do, that has taken over from my swimming and the coaching and stuff is my church work.

**AW:** Did you always go to church or did you start going at an older age?

**CO:** I took time off when I was in college.

**AW:** Mhm.

**CO:** Then I tried their Christian Fellowship at college, but I didn't like it so I never—I didn't do much of it. Back in when I was growing up, everybody went to church.

**AW:** Right.

**CO:** So there was no question whether I was going to go or not.

**AW:** Mhm.

**CO:** So you just went, and it didn't bother me because I liked it.

**AW:** Yeah.

**CO:** But, I became an Episcopalian because it bothered my sister when she went to the Catholic Church to learn catechism and she would ask the nuns questions, and they wouldn't answer her. They'd say, "Just do what we say." So, she said, "I'm not going there anymore." So my mother sent us to the Episcopal Church.

**AW:** Is there anything else you'd like to add or?

**AA:** Anything else you feel, that you think we should know, that...

**AW:** We didn't ask.

**AA:** Just anything about your life that you thought has maybe made you who you are today, or just maybe how your experiences being a woman has like affected the way that you grew up or, I don't know. Anything? Or maybe things that may have been different back then for you that are different from women now?

**CO:** Well I think women now have more opportunities. You say you're doing softball. When I was in high school, the only three sports we had were field hockey, basketball, and tennis. And they wouldn't start any other teams, but now they have all kinds of teams.

**AA:** How come they wouldn't start other teams? They just...

**CO:** They just didn't want to hire anybody to coach them, or they just wouldn't let us do it ourselves and they said no. They didn't, high schools didn't have a swim team, not even for boys. So everything we did really in our sports was on our own. If we wanted to play softball, we had to make up our own teams. And then there wasn't any swim team in the city for girls. There was boys, the Boy Clubs and the YMCA, but there wasn't any girls' team. And girls couldn't start in the Amateur Athletic Union, AAU, to compete until they were 12. So I could never get an AAU card to even if I wanted to, like even on

my swim team I had kids six years old that were competing. But girls could never do that back in when I was growing up.

**AW:** Right.

**CO:** You had to wait until you were 12. [laughs]

**AA:** That's different then the way it is now.

**AW:** Now there's kids playing sports at like five years old.

**AA:** I've been playing sports since I was like five years old and if I was back when you were my age, like that age like I would've been mad if I wasn't allowed to or anything. Or, there were no opportunities for me to.

**AW:** What inspired you to become a phys.ed. teacher?

**CO:** Well, actually I was going to go to Purdue to study teaching to be a teacher. Then I was going to, after graduating from there, I wanted to go to another school for physical therapy. I wanted to be a therapist. But when I graduated, I didn't really want to go back to school right away. So I got my master's in education, and then I decided that I'd keep on teaching because I was given the opportunity to teach as soon as I came out of school.

**AW:** How did you get that opportunity?

**CO:** Well, I applied for it.

**AW:** Yeah.

**CO:** And, the city did offer me a job.[laughs]

**AW:** That's good.

**AW:** Alright, well thank you.

**AA:** Thank you for meeting with us. It was really cool to hear about your experience. I've never met anyone who was—and I was a big athlete so it was nice to hear from another woman's athlete perspective. So thank you for meeting with us.

**CO:** You're welcome, nice to meet you.

**AW:** You too.

**CO:** And good luck.

**AW:** Thanks.

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