

Interviewee: Marissa Pyatt
Interviewers: Lindsay Hajjar, Thea Hickey, and Jenna Snyder
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Transcribers: Lindsay Hajjar, Thea Hickey, Jenna Snyder



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Abstract: Marissa Pyatt was born in Arlington, Virginia, in 1986. In 2016, Marissa found herself in Worcester for the first time, taking on the role as Director of Supportive Services at Abby's House. Abby's House is an emergency shelter for women, founded in 1976 at the beginning of the battered women's movement. When she was a young girl, Marissa's father murdered her mother, and so she was raised by her maternal grandparents. She attended Virginia State University, an Historically Black College and University, and then went on to get her master's degree in clinical mental health counseling at South University. In this interview Marissa talks about social equality and the importance of understanding how you can help others. She says, "I think people don't understand their privilege, and we as a group, not just Worcester, not just women, but as citizens, as humans, need to be able to understand our privilege and how it intersects with oppression." Marissa also touches upon her own childhood, the struggles of being a twenty-first century mother, and the importance of social justice and political action.

TH: We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with Abby's House. Thank you for your help with this important project.

TH: Okay, so, what is your full name, including both maiden and married name, if applicable?

MP: Marissa Elizabeth Pyatt.

TH: When were you born-when were you born?

MP: I was born on July 5th, 1986.

JS: Have you ever been married?

MP: No.

JS: Do you have children?

MP: Yes.

JS: Do you have grandchildren?

MP: No.

JS: What cultures, ethnicities do you identify with?

MP: Black.

JS: Can you tell us about your parents?

MP: I have a mother and a father. My father was in the Navy and my mother primarily was a stay-at-home mom. My father, however, murdered my mother when I was younger, so I was raised by my maternal grandparents.

LH: Where have you lived during your life? Did you grow up in Worcester and what neighborhood?

MP: I'm not from Worcester. I actually relocated to Worcester about five and a half months ago. So, I was born in Arlington, Virginia. Grew up in Asbury Park, New Jersey, and then I went to Richmond, Virginia, where I did my undergraduate and graduate studies. Worked there for some time, and then moved to Massachusetts.

LH: How did you come to live in Worcester? Like what brought you here?

MP: Well, my fiancé is actually doing his residency with Cambridge Health Alliance in Harvard. He's doing his doctorate in counseling psychology. And so, part of his program requires that he do a year of residency at a hospital, and so we relocated to Massachusetts for that reason, but I was seeking a job that would allow me to give back, to work with women, to work with low income and underserved populations. And so, in my search for employment as we were moving, I found the position at Abby's House.

TH: What did you study in school?

MP: For my bachelor's I studied criminal justice at Virginia State University. And my master's, I studied clinical mental health counseling at South University in Richmond.

LH: Hmm.

[Phone dings]

LH: Let's see. Even though you've only been here for a short amount of time, what distinct

characteristics make Worcester...like what do you think are distinct characteristics that make Worcester the place that it is?

MP: There's so much history here. Like my first month that I was here, like I literally would take my lunch break and just walk around. With nowhere to go, I just would go and look at all of the buildings and like look up different places to figure out. You know, people would say, "Oh go here, go here." And even going to like The Pickle Barrel, there's so much history. Different little stops where we can eat, and things to do. So, I think Worcester has a unique culture in itself because it's a lot of family owned, family focused community. It's a community feel that's unique, that I haven't found in a lot of other places and most of the time you think of cities or coming up North, you think about the hustle and bustle, but Worcester's almost—it's fast-paced, but there's a slow feel to it.

LH: Mhmm.

TH: Do you live in Worcester, or do you live outside of the city?

MP: I live outside of the city.

TH: Okay.

MP: So, I actually live in Quincy.

TH: Oh.

MP: But I'm in Worcester every day for work, and sometimes on the weekends.

TH: Yeah, okay. Do you have any other family members that live up North, or are they still mostly in New Jersey and Virginia?

MP: New Jersey and Virginia--

TH: Yeah.

MP: --and Georgia--

LH: Oh, okay.

TH: Okay.

MP: --so we're actually—the only—I have a cousin here, but I just met her because I moved here.

LH: Yeah, that's really interesting.

MP: So it's kind of like when your family says, "Oh wait, I think you have some cousins that way. Let's find out." [laughs] And so, I met my cousin for the first time coming here, and she goes to—I forget the name of the school that she goes to. It's in Waltham...but anyways...

TH: Brandeis?

MP: Brandeis. So she's going to school at Brandeis. So we met ...

TH: That's awesome.

LH: Wow.

TH: Yeah.

MP: ... because I came, I was coming here. And so when I actually came to interview here, we drove around Worcester. So, she picked me up from the airport, from Logan, and then we came and drove around and it's just—it's so much to do here. It's so much to look at. And then there's a lot of colleges and universities that have their own culture and they bring their culture here as well so...

LH: Yeah. When you said like the hustle-like when you think up North—you think the hustle and bustle, like is that one of the biggest differences you've noticed like between living like in Virginia and then living in Massachusetts? Like the different fast-paced lifestyle?

MP: Not necessarily. I lived in Richmond, which is the capital of Virginia, and I lived downtown. So, I think the difference here is that you can't necessarily—when I say here, I'm saying up North in general—

LH & TH: Yeah.

MP: ..you can't like if—when I first moved here, if I said something like, "Hello," to somebody in the street, they would look at me like, "What the heck is wrong with her? Like do you need help?" [laughs] So that's how it was for me coming up here. In Virginia, you know, you say, "Hello," but you don't really say, "Oh I'm fine," if someone says, "How are you?" You know, you just keep going. So, I think the difference in Worcester is that people are so fast-paced, they're so busy, but it's almost like Worcester has a little bit of that Southern feel to it. You know, it's a little bit of that, "Oh I'll hold the door for the person behind me. I might not speak, but I'll hold the door." So, culturally, there's some similarities to the South that I find in Worcester that I don't find in Quincy, where I live.

TH: Yeah, that's really interesting.

MP: Yeah, so it's definitely—Worcester has a unique culture as well.

LH: Yeah.

TH: What challenges do you think that the city still faces, and what would you change about the city if you could?

MP: I think some of the challenges that the city faces are some of the challenges that we face nationally. I think people don't understand their privilege, and we as a group, not just Worcester, not just women, but as citizens, as humans, need to be able to understand our privilege and how it intersects with oppression. And so there are so many people—like at Abby's [House], we provide services for women that have all different needs, from substance abuse, to trauma, to rape, to eviction. But here we try to preserve that human dignity. In the community, I don't see that as much. You know, there are a couple of agencies that work hard to provide services, but I think that responsibility should be something that we all share, to make sure that the person next to us is honored as a person and their needs are met. Granted, I know that we can't just say, "Oh I'm going to keep somebody in my house and they're going to have shelter and I'm going to feed everybody and I'm going to clothe everybody," but that person is still somebody that needs to be respected and deserves to be respected. It's just a lot of disrespect. It's a hard time now. It's a hard time to live in. Especially for me being a woman of color, it's very hard. Every day I send my son to school and I'm like, "Oh well, what's going to happen? Am I going to have to answer questions about why people are getting shot?" It's just a hard time to live in, and I think just a simple gesture of greeting somebody, sharing your privilege, would allow somebody to live more comfortably in an uncomfortable time.

TH: I agree with that.

LH: Yeah.

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

[Phone vibrates]

MP: I think that varies. I think it varies on...again it goes back to privilege. It goes back to what services they can access. It goes to the level of education that they have, what universities they're studying in. It's hard for anybody, today, to make it. I can only attest to the women that I see, not only coming in for services, but the women that I work with and the women that I've connected with in the community, everybody has a story. I think there are two sides to that story, most of the time three. There's person A, person B, and then what really happened. But I think for women in Worcester, it's been a fight. You know, I think about the stories that I hear from Annette Rafferty, who's our founder, her time in coming up and the people that have been at Abby's for 10 years. I have people that I work with that were born and raised in Worcester, and

there's always some struggle no matter which angle you look at it. There's struggle and then there's happiness. But I think the fight that's been fought, there's no such thing as a true winner. You know, there's always going to be a struggle for women, down to equal pay, equal benefits. I think there are women that have done great things here in Worcester, but I'm reminded everyday by the women that I serve here that there's so much more that needs to be done. You know, there's—I think there's just a lack of respect for some of the contributions that women can bring to the table. I think there's channels and avenues that are being accessed so women can have a stronger voice, but I still see that there's a lot of room for growth, and I think that some women don't realize that they have a voice here. You know, the women that come in everyday, I'm constantly hearing, “Well, you know, there's no one in the city that can help me, or there's no one that understands my struggle.” My response is pretty much consistently the same. “Well everyone has a struggle, and no one is ever going to see the same struggle that you have.” I think just as Worcester has a small time feel to it, that also can be a blessing and a curse. Some people have only been here, only have known Worcester, and so the challenge and the opportunity that comes with stepping out of your comfort level can be overwhelming for some people. But I definitely see that there's been some growth from what I've heard, because again, you know, I'm new to Worcester and my, I guess, opinion, is based upon the women that I serve every day.

TH: So, aside from like the fast paced-ness, what other distinct characteristics do you think make Worcester the place that it is?

MP: There's a lot of culture. There's a lot of cultural pieces that are missing in other communities. There's something here for everyone, is what I'm finding, from art fairs, to farmer's markets, to drum circles. I think not all places have such variety. They might have, you know, one festival a year, or, but I feel like there's groups and activities that happen more frequently here in Worcester than in some of the other places, which allows people to connect. You know, connect culturally, to experiencing culture. To find new ways to connect to other people.

JS: So, back to education. What challenges did you face in your education experience?

MP: Financially, it was very hard to go to school and finance it on my own. I chose to go to a historically black college, which I felt I needed to do for me, which was a challenge to explain that to my family. You know, you've gotten into some good schools, why do you want to go to an HBCU? You can go visit. And for me, I wanted my family to be proud of me, and, you know, I'm going to college. I'm doing this on my own. This is a choice that I've made, but I also wanted them to respect my decision to go to an HBCU. And that was important for me because I grew up being one of the only people of color in my classroom, music lessons, and dance, and I found once I got to school, I was in an environment that I didn't even know existed. You know, I'm getting served food on a farm that started out as a plantation, and then was owned by sharecroppers, and now fed college students. I'm walking to class on pieces of the Underground Railroad. It was a piece of history that I wouldn't have gotten anywhere else that I didn't get coming up in public or private school system. So for me, the biggest challenge was having my family understand that decision to go to an HBCU. Financially, it was hard. I worked every year.

I worked on campus, I worked at Sam's Club, I babysat, I did anything that I could to keep my head above water. And then for my master's program, I had to work full time, do an internship program just 30 hours a week, and go to class three days a week, so, you know...the struggle is real [laughs], when you're trying to better yourself and you don't have as much support. I mean, for people of color, it's challenging to make it to get the first degree, and there are a lot of people who are of color, or who are children of immigrants, who are getting their first degree and their parents haven't had that opportunity. So, there's pressure. It's a lot of pressure on you to do well and succeed and to be successful. And then once you get there, you feel like there's so many resources that, you know, you can't access. So I mean, the limitations were many. There were plenty, but I made it, and so I'm hoping that the path to education, and higher education, beyond a bachelor's degree would be easier for my child.

JS: How did your parents take, like, how did they feel when you got your master's degree?

MP: Well they were really, they were proud. They did come to my graduation. They did not come to my undergraduate graduation. It was challenging with being raised by my grandparents, with my grandfather being sick, for them to travel. So, it just so happened that the doctor approved him to fly for my master's. So, it was good to have them there. It was, for them to see that I made it to that point. But I think more importantly for me, I knew that they were there for me regardless, and then for them to be—my pop and, you know, my mom-mom, my grandmother—I felt like—I felt like that was even better. So, I made it while they were still here.

LH & TH & JS: Yeah, yeah that's really special.

MP: Yeah.

JS: Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

MP: For my bachelor's or my master's? Because I worked for a while before I got my master's.

JS: Master's, yeah.

MP: So for my master's degree, I have a clinical degree. So in Virginia, before I moved here, I had a provisional license. In Massachusetts, I'm working towards switching my licensure status to be approved in Massachusetts. So, I'm not sure if my end goal is to actually practice as a therapist, but I felt like I needed to go that route to have the training and the understanding of the needs of people that experience trauma. Ultimately, I know that I want to work with underserved populations. I'm just not 100% sure what that completely looks like. I know that there are plenty of options for me. I think right now being at Abby's, I'm getting to have both ends, you know, helping people and then shaping a program.

JS: What--

LH: --What. Oh sorry. What did you do with your undergraduate degree? Did you like apply that in your job that you worked in between getting your master's or?

MP: Yep. So, after I had my bachelor's I worked as an intervention specialist for victims of domestic violence. So, I did counseling, support groups, safety planning, shelter advocacy, a lot of trainings, speaking presentations, hotline calls, those types of things. I did that for about four years--

LH: Mhm.

MP: And then I worked at Virginia State University in the counseling center, working with the grant program to provide education and support for victims of sexual assault on college campuses.

JS: What support networks and mentoring have been important to you throughout your educational experience?

MP: While I was doing my undergrad, I had a mentor from the Betterment of Brothers and Sisters Incorporated, which is a mentorship community service based organization that was on the campus at VSU, and that organization really just helped new students come in and figure out, you know, the law of the land and how to navigate the system, and get the help that you need. So, after my first year, I decided to join the organization and I also mentored throughout my time at Virginia State. And having that support while I was at college was great because I'm coming from a different state, I didn't know anybody, I was the only person from my high school that went to Virginia State-that year anyway. So, having like a big sister on campus was totally awesome. Especially when I had complications like, Oh there was no housing because it was full and I have to stay here and what do I do?" And so, having somebody that wasn't just, you know, a school counselor or a staff person at the university-that really knew what it was like, because they had been in similar situations, it was very helpful. I also graduated from the Women of Color Network's Women of Color Leadership Project. So, that in itself is pretty similar to a degree program, where I spent almost two years learning how to do things like grant writing, program development, caucus building, and then not only complete that program, but there was a requirement that we also mentored other women of color that are coming up through the leadership program as well. So, I think connections around mentorship that are open-ended, meaning I don't only see myself as a mentor but as a mentee, because the person that I'm supposed to be mentoring very well could teach me things that I didn't know that I didn't know I needed to know.

TH: Yeah.

MP: So, I think mentorship is just very valuable.

LH: You talked a little bit about this, but what was like your first job? Like--

MP: My first job--

LH: --Like ever.

MP: --ever?

LH: Sure.

MP: I was making ice cream cones at Dairy Queen [laughs]. And it was like the best thing ever [laughs]. That was-I don't know if they do this up here, but do they turn your Blizzards upside down?

LH & TH & JS: Yes.

MP: Yeah so, I had to like flip Blizzards [laughs], and it was just cool, you know. It was summer time, making ice cream cones. I was struggling to get the curl on top of the cone [laughs] for a while--

JS: Mhm.

MP: --but it was really cool. I mean, well, it was my real job--first real job besides babysitting. It was cool to be in an environment where it was fast-paced and people would just come and you would see like all kinds of kids get excited to get sprinkles [laughs], also known as jimmies up here [laughs], on their ice cream cones. So, I mean, it was a really cool job to have.

LH: Yeah. Are there any other like key jobs that you've had that have shaped like your experience? I know you talked about like Sam's Club and babysitting and stuff. But like--

MP: I think...

LH: --are there any ones that really stand out?

MP: My internship.

LH: Mhm.

MP: So, for my undergraduate degree, I was enrolled in couple victimology courses, and we had to do an internship related to victim services. And so, I did my internship at the Commonwealth Attorney's Office in the victim witness department, and I saw that people were coming in with all kinds of issues. In particular, one day this lady, and this might be a little gruesome, but she owned a store, like a convenience store in the city, and somebody robbed the store and they shot her husband and her son and so, I mean, their brains and everything were just spewed. It was

horrible, and so I actually got to go to the crime scene and the sessions and it just—I was on a ride along [laughs]. “How did this happen?” That was one of the requirements, you had to go on a ride along. And so it was gruesome, but I saw that it was just, “Okay, well we need your testimony, what did you witness?” and that was it. And then, “We’re just going to send you on your way. Hope everything works out for you,” type of thing. So, there wasn’t really support provided after that. I mean the lady that I was interning under, she was great. You know, she would follow up with the people that were victimized and let them know what options they had, but the options were so limited. They stopped after legal advocacy. After informing them when their perpetrator would be released or tried or getting certain testimonies recorded for children that have been assaulted, and that was it. So, I felt like it was like almost like triage. Like, “Oh this happened to you, let me just put a band aid on it and, you know, send you on your way,” but in fact that person probably needed stitches or surgery.

LH: Mhm.

MP: So, that’s how I really got into the advocacy services. You know, starting my degree and going through the motions, I probably was headed more towards either probation and parole, or to law. But then I saw that there was so much of a need for advocacy based services for somebody that’s neutral to not tell me what I have to do, but let me know that there are things that I can choose to do. And from there, that’s how I got into the domestic violence services, intervention services. And even with that, there was a lack of clinical needs. There was a lack of trauma informed care, and so that’s how I ended up getting my master’s degree. It started with an observation that the services that we had just weren’t good enough. I don’t know that they’ll ever be good enough because I don’t know that anything can ever reverse a homicide, or a murder, or a rape ...

LH: Mhm.

MP: ... but I felt like there needed to be a better standard of care.

LH: What has this work meant to you?

MP: Work in the movement—I consider this a social justice movement—it’s meant a lot to me. It’s shaped who I am. It helped me find out who I am. I think from losing my mother, and witnessing her murder, gave me a different understanding of intimate partner violence, to looking at the cultural needs in service delivery, down to understanding if someone has a mental health need, a substance abuse need. And then that gets you to so many different layers, like oppression and, you know, race relations, and all of it’s kind of enmeshed in who I am, because I see it every day with the work that I do. From answering a call for someone looking for shelter, to writing—I have a blog—to getting responses to blogs that people feel like there’s no help or there’s no benefit or there’s nothing that’s going to help them be able to overcome whatever obstacles it is. So, I think I’m not able to solve everyone’s problems. I’m not able to help everybody, but if I can listen and step down from my platform of privilege that I have, then

maybe I can empower somebody to see their options or to create another option if one doesn't fit within their needs.

LH: Do you want to just talk a little bit more about your blog, that really interests me. Just touch upon that ...

MH: [laughs]

LH: ... a little bit more.

MP: [laughs] So, my blog, I don't blog frequently. I blogged when I moved. And so, the last piece that I wrote actually, somebody flagged on my blog. It's actually very political and related to the political movement, but the key thing is about privilege basically and how we as Americans, we talk about our privilege and what we are entitled to. We all fill a title, for example, the pursuit of happiness tells us that we're entitled to be happy, but we don't talk about how we obtain that happiness, down to taking our nation from the first nation, which is native Americans, you know. So, it just kind of analyzes the things that I've experienced every day as a person of color, as a woman, as a mother, as a mother who works, as a mother who had to stop nursing before she wanted to. And the limitations that society puts on me as a woman. So, they're triggered based upon things that trigger me, and it's an outlet. My blog is anonymous so it's not linked to my name or—it gives me a way to communicate in a different way than I could—because of my connections in the role that I play to support people. I feel like being able to have a blog, being able to talk about tough issues, not to say that I'm hiding behind the shadows, but if people read my blog and came into my job, or—I feel like they would feel that I'm skewed one way or another ...

TH: Mhm.

MP: ... and I don't think that my blog looks one way or another because each story is my own. It's talking about my experience as somebody that's from the United States. And I think that the thing with social media, and blogs, and vlogs, and different ways to express, I feel like sometimes people see social media as the truth instead of exploring other options, other realities, looking through things from a different lens, and that's what I do in my blog. I try to find something out that I don't know, that I didn't know, and educate myself and encourage other people to do the same. You know, wwhat is it really like to be a mom that you have to take your child to daycare, you know? What is it like to be told that you can no longer nurse your son, but yet people are, you know, chastising you because you're using formula, you know? So, these are just the things that I experience every day that I guess as the pressure builds, I release through another piece on my blog.

LH: What are some of the primary responsibilities in terms of housework and childcare that you face?

MP: My partner is excellent. He's a really great father. So, our roles are shared. I do laundry, he does laundry. I'm not saying he can get, you know, a barbecue stain out of a white shirt [laughs], but he does the same thing. So, I mean, we both take out the trash. I think at home our roles are pretty much the same. The difference—the differences I think are there are some things that I'm better at, and there are some things that he's better at. He's a better cook than I am, so if he ever finds this out, he will finally know that I admitted that [laughs]. So, I think at home the challenge is just finding the time.

LH: Mhm.

MP: Being at work. I work full time and then I come home having to find the time for every little thing. So no, my home isn't A+ clean, but it's clean enough. I'd rather spend time with my son than worry about mopping every couple of days. And with childcare, I send my son to nursery school, which he loves. He's doing well, but it's still hard as a mom to know that from six weeks old he's been in childcare, but in order to work and to afford my lifestyle, I have to send him to daycare, which was a shocker because up here, daycare is like a mortgage. In Virginia it's drastically different. I'm paying probably three months of daycare a month here.

LH & JS: Wow.

MP: So, the rates are drastically different.

TH: That's crazy.

MP: Yeah, it is.

TH: Did you find that, like, with your fiancé, that—did you ever have to have a conversation about like sharing the responsibilities, or did it just happen naturally that you guys would like trade off?

MP: Yes and no. We have conversations every once in a while, but I feel like we had those conversations when things changed.

TH: Mhm.

LH: Mhm.

MP: So, even like when we were dating, it's been, you know, he would cook, I would cook, or we would have, “What do you want for dinner?” And if it was something that he was better at then he would cook it--

TH: Mhm.

MP: --or...you know, “Hey I'm going to be coming home late, I'll put the dishes in the dishwasher, can you put them away?” Or I started a load. Most of the time it's by text message with our schedules-

LH: Yeah.

MP: --“I started a load of laundry, can you take it out?” I think the only challenges when my son was born, was helping him understand like certain things that we had to do, like why we have to boil the bottles and not just wash them [laughter], or you know. Our dishwasher was broken at the time [laughter], we could have just put them in there. But, you know, having that conversation, I think there were just some things that somebody told me, too. So, it wasn't something—we didn't have to talk about gender roles and stereotypes or anything like that. I think it was really just conversations based upon our family needs and when things kind of shifted. Like, you know, the other day, his schedule changed a bit, so it's, “Well I'm not going to be able to do this for the next couple of weeks.” So, I think we've had a pretty open conversation about it, but at the same time he works within this movement. So, I think he's been privy to some of the conversations ...

TH: Yeah.

MP: ... about, you know, gender roles, stereotypes, and that kind of thing.

TH: Mhm. How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles and interests in your life?

MP: Well my son is first for everything. Before my son, I kind of just went with what I needed to do. I tend to—I mean I journal, I keep a planner, I have alarms for everything [laughs] that remind me, “Oh I need to do this.” And I think that helped me [laughs] ...

TH: Mhm.

MP: .. be a planned mom instead of a mom that, you know, is unstructured, because my schedule is so busy. And even as a mom it's hard to be structured. I can set every alarm and every reminder, and my son will say, “No ma.” That's his favorite thing right now [laughs]. “No ma.”

LH & JS: Aww.

MP: So, “Do you want a cookie? ‘No ma.’” [laughs] And then he'll eat the cookies [laughs]. So there's no way that you can plan as a mom to structure your day. You can plan and hope that you can do at least five of those things and sometimes I get three done and that's great. But I think prioritizing, I find—I meditate a lot, like I have to separate and leave stuff where it is. So, if I don't finish something at work, it has to stay here ...

TH: Mhm.

MP: ... and that's it. You know, I just check out, put it in it's little drawer, and it'll find me tomorrow. That allows me to go home and focus on my family. But there's also challenges, you know. And sometimes things can be overwhelming when I have three people that need help with one thing, and two people that need help with something and I have to make a decision. You know, I'm only going to be able to see two people today, how do I do that? And so knowing that I'm doing the best that I can every day is all that I can do and I can't do more than that. And so...balancing, I'm not sure that balancing would be the best word.

TH: Mhm.

MP: I would say I'm just doing the best that I can.

TH: Yeah [laughter]. What do you think are the pros and cons of the path you have chosen?

MP: I'm going to say that I don't feel like there are any cons, because I've gotten to where I am because I needed to.

TH: Mhm.

MP: So I'm thankful for my past. I'm thankful for my present-where I am and I'm looking forward to my future. And so with that, everything that's happened in my past is shaping who I am, I learn. So if I didn't do some of the things that I've done, I wouldn't know some of the things that I know now. I wouldn't have some of the experiences that I have now, and I think my future is bright. So, I feel like we as people, we have free will and I believe that destiny is what it is. So, whatever my end result will be was already planned and my actions simply either expedite or slow that process, but the end result will be the same. And so, I feel like I'm on the right path. There are times when I get frustrated with my path [laughs], or obstacles, but I learn that there's something that I need to evaluate within myself, and sometimes that means to let go.

TH: Mhm. This is sort of the same question, but how do you feel about the choices you've made in your life, and do you have any regrets?

MP: I don't have any regrets. I'm pretty sound in my choices. I think some of the choices that I've mad, .I don't think I can fully regret them.

TH: Mhm.

MP: You know, like when you think about student loan debt, I needed to go to school ...

JS: Yup.

MP: ... I didn't know all of these things, but I didn't know. So, can I really regret that decision if I wasn't fully educated?

TH: Mhm.

MP: So, I don't think that I regret. I think every decision that I've made has helped me to plan for tomorrow, and so I know now, so I can share with other people even if that's through my blog, that, "Hey, these things could potentially happen."

TH: Yeah.

MP: So.

JS: Do you consider yourself active politically?

MP: Yes.

JS: Have you been involved in volunteer community work?

MP: Yes, registering people to vote.

JS: If so, what groups did you work for or with for?

MP: I just helped people to register to vote with like the student union on campus. I didn't really do too much with either party. I don't identify as Republican or a Democrat, but I think the importance of not only women's right to vote, but all people's right to vote who are eligible to vote is really important. And so, I actually spoke at a workshop a couple months ago for like a summer program that was ending, and I talked about the importance of voting, and what my first opportunity was like when I went to vote, and it was really scary actually [laughs. But I got to talk about my experience voting, and my—I guess the conversations that I've had from family or friends or peers around voting. Coming up what was the conversation like and what was that experience like? And so, I think for me, it's important that people understand that they have the right to vote. Some people might choose not to do so, but just to understand that you have that right and to be educated about your options, and the importance, and the people that have worked hard for women, and for people of color, to be able to vote is really important.

JS: Were you involved in any other organizations in your community?

MP: In my community, I did—I was part of an entertainment group so we did fashion shows. It was a non-profit, and so we—basically all the proceeds from like our shows and things like that went to provide free summer camps and programs for inner city youth to keep them off the streets during the summer. And so, they got paid to go to a fashion show practice, play practice and put on these events.

TH: That's really cool.

JS: Yeah.

MP: So, it was another way to mentor to young children, teenagers, and to give them an outlet, you know, to express themselves. What else did I do? I feel like I did a lot. I volunteered on the Board of the State Coalition for Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence. I also chaired the Women of Color Caucus. So, I've done a lot of different, I guess, things to utilize a platform to speak.

JS: What role has religion played in your life?

MP: So...that's a multi-faceted question [laughter].

JS: Yeah.

MP: So, I was raised, my great grandmother was a minister—Baptist—and then my grandparents were African American Episcopalian, which is a mouthful. I myself am non-denominational. So, religion is important, but I'm not sure if it's structured religion that's important. I'm more spiritual. I identify as a Christian, but I think spirituality in itself is more important to me than saying that I belong to a church, or, you know, a church helped me do this. Or, I go to church now, I still go to a non-denominational church, and I feel like religion is important. It's important for me to have a connection to people that are connected spiritually to whatever higher being that they believe in. And so, there are people that worship at my church that don't identify as Christian, that don't identify as a follower or believer of any religion in particular. And I think having that model of practicing faith allows my church community to embrace everybody for who they are and whatever differences that they might have.

LH: How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family? I know we talked about your grandparents but...

MP: Yeah. So, health has been an interesting thing for my family. I think my grandfather, he's old. He's had kidney issues, liver issues, blood pressure. He's been diabetic since I can remember. So, I think watching not only his health, but my great grandparents and great aunts and uncles, it encouraged me to be more healthy. Not to say that my grandfather wasn't, I think his weakness has always been a Pepsi, but I see the different issues that my family has faced, and it goes back to having a lack of healthcare. You know, even now, there are people in my family that don't have health coverage. The Affordable Healthcare Act is supposed to make it more affordable, but on their income, it's, "I can afford the premium, but I can't afford the copay," or the bill that comes with the services type of thing. So, I think it's challenging to know that there are things that have been put in place to make things better, but you know, they don't get better. I remember when I had my son, and I had health insurance, and the doctor's office told me I had to

prepay for my labor and delivery, and I was like, “Wait what? I'm eight weeks pregnant.”

Cell Phone: It happened when she graduated the next year.

MP: Sorry.

Cell Phone: When she headed off to medical school, who ...

MP: I don't know how that happened [laughter]. I listen to Audible, [laughter] so it's a story that I was reading. But the OB told me I had to prepay for my son's labor and delivery, and I'm like, “Wait a second, you just told me that I was pregnant like two weeks ago [laughs]. What are you talking about?” I have a whole—like they literally gave me a bill with the payment plans that I would need to pay before each appointment. So, not only was I needing to pay my copay, I needed to pay whatever the bill was going to be for when they delivered my child at the hospital. Like this is crazy. Like I had never, I had never known that that's how—I mean I'd never needed to use my health insurance other than, “Oh I need a physical or I need to get a flu shot or the basic routine things.”

TH: Mhm.

MP: For me, somebody that had insurance, I was still like sticker shock when it came to how much everything was going to cost. So, I can only imagine how it is for other people. So, I understand the value and the benefit of health insurance and health care, but I still understand the reality that it's not obtainable for most people.

LH: Yeah. Whose health are you responsible for besides your own? Your son and--

MP: Yeah, I have my son and my poodle. My doggy baby.

TH: Aww.

JS: Aww.

MP: I have a doggy baby [laughs]. My doggy baby. My fiancé, I encourage him sometimes to go to the doctor [laughs]. You know, “You might want to schedule a dentist appointment, it's been about eight months” [laughs]. But for the most part if something's wrong, he'll [say], “I'm going to the doctor.”

LH: How do you get through tough times? What kinds of thoughts keep you going?

MP: My son keeps me going. He is the happiest. There's a picture of him back there.

LH: So cute.

TH: He's adorable.

MP: He is the happiest baby ever, and I remember one day being sad, and it was just he and I were home, and I was crying. And he said "No ma." He just laid with me and gave me a hug, and then two seconds later he's like [gasp]. He wanted to play peek a boo [laughs] because that makes him happy [laughs]. And so, he keeps me happy. There are tough times, it's like everyone has tough times. Everybody will face them. But, the power of your thoughts, I think most people don't understand. Thoughts are so powerful...

[Phone vibrates]

MP: ...and so I'm constantly reminding myself like you've been through worse [laughs]. This isn't the worst that could happen. I'm blessed, and I think I remind myself, I woke up today. I have clean clothes. I have food. It might not be what I want, but I have food and I'm not hurt. You know, I'm not hurt, I'm not physically hurt.

LH: Yeah.

MP: And so, that in itself, especially in the line of work that I'm in, is enough to keep me going.

LH: How do you define success in your life? Has this definition changed over time?

MP: Yes, it has changed over time. Right out of school success was, "Oh getting a job with benefits." Like that was the thing. Let me get a salary job, not a hourly job, and then let me get benefits, and if it has a 401k like I'm doing even better [laughs]. So, I think that was my idea of success. And for me, for a long time, I felt like I had reached success because I had an apartment. You know, my first apartment all on my own. I had a car. I bought my first car, I had a savings account, I had investments. So, to me, that was success. I was able to say that—I had gotten to that point, by the time I was twenty-three, and now I look back and I'm like, "Oh yeah you were so foolish." That's monetary, you know? That's not—yeah you have your degree, you have a job. But now—success I think, I measure that daily. I don't think that there's one overall definition. But to me, today a successful day would be doing the four things that are on my to do list that are red. And I need to accomplish those. Success is being able to feel that I've done the best that I could and if I didn't, I rectified it. Being able to take care of my son. Being able to empower somebody else to talk about tough topics, to share their privilege, to understand the tough things that are going on in society today. I mean the things that I thought were a measurement of success before, I think I've also obtained at a time when the world isn't what it is now, you know, and that honeymoon period is over.

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

MP: Find out who you are and celebrate yourself. Find out what you like, what you don't like, and put on your thick skin when you go out every day. It's always going to be, for every positive thing that you feel like you've done, I'm so proud of myself, the world will have six negatives for your one positive. And so, you know, don't let anything permeate your skin. Stay true to who you are. If you know that this is what you want to do, then find a way to do it. Society's way might not be your way, so create your own way and-and do it.

TH: 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?

MP: That we-we as women have come a long way, but we still have miles and miles and miles to go, and that won't happen until we stop putting each other down and uplift each other. Like we are our sister's keeper, and we have to—we have to empower each other. We have to put aside all of the—I look at—we don't have a lot of cable channels, but I look at like the Real Housewives and you know Little Women of L, all this stuff that you're fighting over, it's so trivial. Put aside all of that, and really help somebody else. Like I would want to challenge everyone to take one day out of the year to do something nice for somebody else, for another women.

TH: That's really nice. Is there anyone else you would suggest that we talk to-like have another group conduct an interview-is there anyone you want to recommend?

MP: Parley, she's a writer too. She actually works here. Parlee Jones, and she does a lot of activities in the community, sometimes she's on a radio show. She's born and raised here in Worcester. She has a great lens, you know. She can take you 40, 50 years back into the history of Worcester, and then also share some of her struggle as a woman, and as a mom, here in the city.

TH: Okay. Yeah. Thank you.

JS: Thank you.

LH: Thank you so much.

TH: Thank you so much.

MP: Oh, so, you guys need this.

LH: Yeah.

TH: Yes.

MP: I'll fill this out for you.