

Interviewee: Cathy Sessions
Interviewers: Danielle Tagarelis and Amy Nguyen
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Abstract: In her interview Cathy Sessions describes attending St. Lawrence University and being on the first women's ice hockey team and then attending Boston University to earn a master's in social work with a specialization in gerontology. She also discusses her interest in alternative medicine and competitive sports. She talks about her career path and her current position as Marketing Director at Notre Dame Health Care as well as her views on aging and success.

DT: Alright, can you just state your full name including both the married name and maiden name if applicable?

CS: Cathy Sessions

DT: Alright, and today is October 21 correct?

CS: Yes

DT: Ok.

DT: Alright so first question when were you born?

CS: September [], 1955

DT: And have you ever been married?

CS: Yes, I've been married two different times.

AN: Alright what were your husbands' names?

CS: [Laughs] That's funny; both my husbands' names are Frank.

AN: Oh, wow

CS: So, Frank number one...

AN: That's cool, how did you meet your most recent husband?

CS: I met my most recent husband by putting an ad in the newspaper.

AN: Oh really! [pause], very cool. That's kind of like online dating.

CS: Right, right this is many years ago, probably [pause] 18-20 years ago.

CS: I put an ad for a "golf partner wanted" and he answered.

AN: Oh, wow.

WW: Very cool

DT: Do you have any children?

CS: I have one stepson

AN: What's his name?

CS: His name is Graham

AN: Graham

CS: Graham Binder

DT: Do you have any grandchildren?

CS: No

DT: No

CS: Not yet [Laughs]

AN: How old is Gram?

CS: He's in his 30's so...

DT: OK

CS: He just got married last year and just bought a house. Just was visiting him this weekend in D.C.

AN: Oh, he lives in DC?

AN: That's nice.

DT: And can you tell us what your family background is like?

CS: Oh well, I grew up in a family in Connecticut and I'm the youngest of five kids.

CS: My father had a clock company, he kind of founded his own clock company, and so all five kids worked in the company in different capacities growing up. It was a fun way to learn business from all these different perspectives. So that's how I grew up.

AN: What kind of activities did you do there? Like what kind of work did you do?

CS: I specifically usually worked in the office doing filing, just doing accounts receivable and sometimes you need to do some packing. It was a small company this wasn't a big company so it started in our cellar, in fact it was a very small company.

DT: And did you eventually expand?

CS: We moved a couple times so it became a larger company and then it stayed in the family for many years. My father died when I was fairly young when I was 16 and then my mother took over the company after he died. Then she died also very young so then my brother was running it for a while and then the recession hit so something like clocks became just a nonessential so we—it's no longer in the family, but it was so much fun. It was really a great place to grow up and a nice business to be a part of.

AN: Where have you lived during your life?

CS: Well I've lived...grew up in Connecticut then went to college in upstate New York. After college I moved to Boston where I lived for probably 20 years and then moved to Central Mass. after I met my husband.

DT: Very cool.

AN: What college did you go to in New York?

CS: St. Lawrence [University].

AN: Did you like it there?

CS: Upstate New York.

AN: Did you participate in any clubs or sports?

CS: I did. I was on the first women's ice hockey team.

DT: Wow

CS: So, the first year we got a group of women together and then we traveled and played different schools when...

DT: Wow

CS: ... women's ice hockey was just beginning so that was fun to be a part of that.

AN: That's huge.

CS: I know.

CS: Now it's an Olympic sport so it's been fun to watch how the sport has grown.

AN: Very cool.

AN: What did you major in?

CS: I majored in sociology and religion.

WW: Oh, cool.

CS: So I always had an interest in eastern religions so I studied a lot of eastern religions at college. And then after I moved to Boston then I went to Boston University to get my master's in social work.

DT: OK.

CS: I went to a two-year undergraduate program there, in Boston, and specialized in geriatrics. My interest has always been working with older people so I got a special certificate in gerontology...

DT: Oh, wow.

AN: Very cool. That must have been a big change from upstate New York to Boston.

CS: Yes, yes

CS: It was.

CS: Yes, it was a great change actually.

DT: And based off of where you had said you lived, what were the neighborhoods generally like? How would you explain them?

CS: Well that's a good question. I've never really had a good experience living in a neighborhood where I grew up in Connecticut the street that I lived on just did not. It was just odd businesses; there were a couple of funeral homes and there were—it was just an odd. There was no sense of neighborhood or community. Then when I moved to Boston I didn't really know—I first moved to Jamaica Plain and it was just, it was not a real sense of neighborhood I just did not know any of the neighbors. I lived in a group house with other people. We knew each other obviously but in terms of being connected to the neighborhood um there was not that experience [pause] and there has been no place where I have lived, except where I am living now this is the first time that there's really a feeling of community and neighborhood. I live in a 55 plus community it's a condominium community and it's very close neighborhood of people.

AN: That's great

CS: And so there are lots of activities that we're doing with each other all the time. So this is my first time of really knowing my neighbors and having a sense of community

AN: And how long have you lived in this community for?

CS: Five years

DT: Alright, sorry. We're just skipping around on some questions. This one is kind of tricky. What challenges do you think this city still faces? So Worcester, what would you change about the city, if anything?

CS: That's a good question. This has been a very hard transition for me to come from Boston to Central Mass. That's my one piece of dissatisfaction.

CS: Because Worcester, to me, has so much potential but it doesn't quite do it. In terms of you know having little neighborhoods where you can kind of walk around and feel—just coming from DC that has all these little neighborhoods and the restaurants and the the culture and the ...

DT: Very true.

CS: And Boston does too, and Worcester, there is just not that sense of a neighborhood feeling.

DT: I know what you mean.

CS: I know and it's so—I don't know how to change it. I know Worcester is working so hard at trying to develop its potential but it—and what's been frustrating for me since I moved here...when we first moved here there was a movie theatre that we loved that showed independent films and you know you go and there's (?) I forgot the name of it and that closed then all these restaurants that we loved closed.

CS: It was just, I don't know, there's something about Worcester that can't support alternative kind of things so it has been a frustration. There are nice things in Worcester, you have to look hard to find them, and it's not in one area.

CS: You know what I mean?

, CS: I hope I'm not offending either one of you...

AN: Oh, no you're not!

CS: [LAUGHS] or Worcester people.

AN: And what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

CS: I don't know a lot of the politics of Worcester. My sense is that that there have been a lot of strong women in Worcester. I mean the mayor has been a woman and there are some great community organizations that have strong women so I feel that women certainly have a powerful voice in Worcester. I don't think that's the issue.

AN: OK

CS: So, I don't know enough about the inner workings of Worcester.

AN: That's OK.

DT: Don't worry about it.

CS: But my sense, you know, the woman that was the mayor was very good and popular.

CS: There are a lot of women-run businesses.

AN: That's good. We need more women in the business field.

CS: I know we do.

DT: We're going to kind of switch it over back to education which I know you talked a little bit about earlier. What were some of the challenges that you experienced with education?

CS: Some of the challenges, I feel very lucky that I didn't...that my parents were able to afford me going to college without taking, you know, big loans out so I never really was faced with a financial challenge plus it was a lot less expensive than it is now. When I got my master's I didn't feel a particular challenge. I loved education I loved taking—I am always taking a lot of classes even now to further my professional goals. I'm really interested in alternative health so I take a lot of courses in alternative health particularly working with elders.

DT: Could you tell us a little bit more about what alternative health is? Kind of like the courses you took and...

CS: I have taken a lot of courses in Chinese medicine and Qi Gong Meditation with elders. We teach a class here called Ageless Grace which is a really unique fitness program; a fitness and wellness program that works your brain and your body at the same time, so it's pretty unique.

DT: Interesting

CS: I'm a certified trainer in that so I'm always studying those kinds of things.

AN: Interesting, that's very cool. Do you think..., would you say that like you had a fair opportunity or chances when you were in school compared to like the male population?

CS: Yes

AN: Yes

CS: I never felt I was discriminated against. I always felt—I've never experienced it. Well, I've always been in female-dominated roles so healthcare is a female-dominated profession. I did always think in social work school, I thought it was interesting that there were many more female students in social work school and then when you got out all the leadership positions tended to be men. I'm thinking how that could be, because...

DT: [laughs] right

CS: ... [laughs] there are so many more women in social work school, but the men had the ability to assume positions of authority which seemed kind of odd so that was the only thing that seemed odd to me.

DT: What support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

CS: In social work school there are lots of opportunities for mentoring because you're doing field placements. So each of the two years I had a field placement supervisor, I was lucky to have two really good supervisors that I learned a lot from and both were women and very well known in their field. I was lucky that social work training just allows for that so you have that two years of just being mentored by someone instead of just being thrown into the work force.

AN: [LAUGHS] And not have a clue.

CS: I know, I know so yes and unfortunately—normally the social work school is a two-year program. My time at social work school was three years because I had to take a year off to go home and care for my mother who became terminally ill while I was in school. Although, that was a great life lesson to be with her during that time. I don't know what I'm trying to say. It was a very powerful time.

DT: What was your very first job? I know you talked about your family's clock shop.

CS: My first job was when I first moved to Boston, I worked in a bookstore, at the MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] Bookstore.

AN: Oh, my gosh.

CS: I loved that job; that was my favorite job because everyone was in the same kind of transitional state, so kind of young people. That wasn't going to be their permanent job, but it was just so much fun and it was a job that it's interesting to be on a college campus that was a strange different college campus than I had been used to because, obviously MIT is not a liberal arts college.

AN: Right

CS: It was unusual and I worked with a lot of comedians that were trying to make it big. In fact, one comedian that I worked with made it very big, Steven Wright. He's a big comedian that was on Johnny Carson all the time and he's really a big and it's just great...it was fun.

CS: Lots of laughs and ...so that was my first job.

AN: Okay, cool. What other jobs have you had?

CS: So after working at the bookstore I went to graduate school and then I started the more professional route.

AN: I see, okay.

CS: So I worked in a hospital that I had done my field placement for. It was called Jewish Memorial Hospital. It was across from a chronic disease hospital in Boston and Roxbury and I worked there for 10 years, 12 years in the geriatric psychiatric unit. I worked there for a while then came out to Worcester and worked at Memorial Hospital for a few years, went back to Quincy and worked in a nursing home rehab place for a few years and then I worked here [Marketing Director for Notre Dame Healthcare] since we have been open for 15 years. So I feel like I've had longevity in each of my jobs.

DT: What were the kinds of positions? Because I know now you're the Marketing Director, correct?

CS: Right, right so the other positions in the healthcare settings were usually social worker. I was the director of social work for several of the nursing homes. When I worked at Memorial [Hospital], I worked as an admissions director. They developed a new transitional unit, transitional rehab. unit, so I did some social work and admissions for that, but most of the other jobs were social work until coming here. I do admissions and marketing so I still am doing social work because I'm working with families and residents as they come in. We had a resident move in today who was just so anxious and so scared and so I am still using my skills as a social worker.

AN: That's great.

DT: And what has this work meant to you?

CS: It's funny because when people ask me what I do and their first words are, "Oh isn't that depressing?" and my response is always, "No, I really enjoy working with older people and it may be because I—growing up I didn't have the exposure to the older generation. Both my grandparents died very young. I hardly knew them. Both my parents died young, so maybe part of it is that longing for something that I didn't have. I find it's a generation that is very gratifying. They are very appreciative of any little thing that you do and there's just so much that can be learned about how people age so differently. People age in such a unique way so I've learned I have a lot of models of ageing in all my work places and kind of how I want to see myself ageing.

DT: I've never thought of it that way.

CS: You know, there are some people that age in a way by expanding themselves and many just become so within themselves which isn't healthy. So I want to be a positive ager.

AN: I see. How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, or roles in your life?

CS: I'm really good at that. I'm not someone who—I have good balance in my life. I have a lot of interests outside my work that are really important to me so I try and keep, you know, all the parts of my life going. Physical exercise is really important to me as a way of managing stress and that's something that I'm really diligent about, doing the stress management techniques, the Qi Gong, yoga, mediation; those are all things that I do because this work can be stressful. When you're working with people and working with people at a difficult time in their lives it can be emotionally draining. So these are all important things to keep me nourished and being able to continue to give to other people.

DT: And I know you just touched on it a little bit but what are some of the pros and cons of the path that you have chosen. Like the job and ...

CS: Well the pros are it's been emotionally gratifying, it's been—I've met some great mentors along my path and so the emotional gratification. The minuses would be the financial. Obviously the salaries in healthcare are not what they would be in business [laughs]. So it hasn't been a moneymaker in terms of a career path but in terms of my life satisfaction it's been good.

AWW: So do you have any regrets at all?

CS: Not terribly, I mean I think about sometimes would've—because I do like business, how would it have been if I had gone to business school or taken another path I don't know.

DT: And just kind of...maybe not work but overall in life do you have any regrets or anything you wish you could have redone or...

CS: No, I don't. There's always the question of [pause] of children. You know I wrestle with that sometimes, I mean I have a stepson, but I never had that experience of raising a child so that [pause] you know there may be some regret there.

DT: Alright so, this is kind of a touchy subject for some people but you don't have to answer if you don't like but do you consider yourself active politically?

CS: Yes

DT: Alright

CS: That's not touchy for me at all.

DT/AN: [laughs] Alright, perfect.

CS: I know, I know

DT: Have you been involved in volunteer or community work?

CS: We do a lot here [Notre Dame Healthcare] in terms of community work. We do volunteer with the United Way and we have a lot of kids come over from different schools you know we support community agencies. We do a lot of work. Personally I do some—I mean I've volunteered on some political campaigns over the years and you know I can get passionate about, about that so.

DT: Would you like to tell us a little bit about some of the campaigns you've done?

CS: My first campaign was working for [U.S. Representative] Barney Frank when I was living in Brookline.

DT: Oh wow.

CS: So he was running so that was a great—that was my first time and it was great and so I've done that and [pause] so I'm very liberal [laughs] so I tend to work for—I worked for [President Barack] Obama when he was running for the first time.

DT/AN: Oh wow

AN: What was that like?

CS: Well, I didn't do much. I mean I stuffed envelopes, I held signs. It wasn't huge but you feel like you're doing something. It was fun. My brother, is a judge, a federal judge in Vermont, and he was appointed by [Bill] Clinton when Clinton was President and then he got appointed to be head of the sentencing board, so he had to be...so he had to go down to Washington and so his ceremony was in the Supreme Court, and oh my God it was such an honor and....

AN: That is so cool.

CS: ... that was really fun.

DT: Oh, my goodness, that's awesome.

CS: So I was a part of that and...

DT: That's so cool.

AN: That is really cool.

CS: Anyway

AN: What role has religion played in your life? If it did.

CS: Well it's always been in the background. As I said, I studied religion in college.

AN: Right

CS: So it's always been kind of underlying who I am. I've experimented with going to different types of churches. When I lived in Boston I went to Quaker services then I went to a Unity church in Brookline that I really liked. Since I've moved here I ... I grew up a Protestant although neither of my parents were really active in the church, and so my first time really with an organized religion is when I took this job and this is owned by the Sisters of Notre Dame so it's a Catholic-oriented facility. That's been such an education for me because I was not raised Catholic and I've enjoyed being in a Catholic facility. I like being in a spiritual atmosphere but I'm not aligned with one particular organized religion. I'm taking an online course right now, "Zen in Everyday Life," so I'm studying Zen, I'm dabbling.

AN: Very cool

CS: But it's important,

AN: and what is Zen like?

CS: Zen [pause] I'm early in the class.

AN: OK

CS: I'm only on the second or third day of the 30 days month so for me what it means is just appreciating the moment and being with what is and being present for each moment of your life. So that's what I'm working on right now.

AN: I think I need a class like this.

DT: I know [laughs]

CS: [laughs] I know it's really—it's hard because there's so many—I'm naturally a worrier. To try to step back and kind of rein in those tendencies it's hard.

DT: And how have health issues impacted your life? Or those in your family?

CS: Health issues. I've been very healthy so I feel very fortunate so it has not impacted me although recently I had kind of a health scare and it made you appreciate what all the people that I work with go through every day and the fear of waiting for test results and all that. Things have come back okay. Health has impacted my life with the death of my parents at young ages so there's always the fear of—that you're vulnerable, that because both of my parents were healthy and one died of a brain tumor and the other of a heart attack at 58, so I've grown up with the fear of loss and also the fear of not knowing. Just health can change at any given moment.

DT: True. What are your experiences in accessing quality affordable healthcare?

CS: I feel like because I've always been employed and I've always had healthcare as part of my employment and so I've always had good healthcare. I mean I've had frustrations just like everyone else does, when you go to the emergency room and your [laughs] waiting for however many hours. You know either with myself or with my husband but the healthcare's there. So unlike the fear of living without healthcare coverage I have not had any experience of not having immediate access.

DT: Whose health are you responsible for besides your own? So maybe the place that you work or your home life.

CS: Whose health?...I'm not sure if I understand the question.

DT: So whose health are you responsible for besides your own? So do you look after anyone or...

CS: No except for the people here. We have 120 residents here.

AN: Wow

CS: Myself along with a team of people are responsible. For my husband, I do the worrying for him because he's not a worrier [laughs].

DT/AN: [laughs]

CS: I'm kind of responsible for him and that's it. Graham, my stepson, he's healthy and married and living on his own.

DT: Could you maybe explain like some of the things that go on around here? That you could talk about, like maybe some of the activities that you were talking about earlier or what this kind of has to offer to its residents and such.

CS: People come here when either they're living at home or they're just not able to manage independently anymore. They don't want to be alone or they can't be alone. They need physical care so they would come here. They have their own apartments and then we provide basic services; we provide the cleaning, we do the cooking all the meals, we have staff that can help give them medicines, help them with bathing and dressing and these kind of things. We also take a number of people with memory loss, that's what brings a lot of people into a setting like this [assisted living, rehabilitation, and hospice care] so what we find ourselves doing a lot is providing cues throughout the day to people to know where they should be or you know just sort of general orientation. I'm doing that a lot and also just because it's a hard adjustment for people. The person who moved in today is just so, she's so scared and she's not someone who's ever been alone in her life.

Change is so difficult for them, for this generation. I mean change is difficult for all of us at any age, but this generation is used to living in the same house for 60 years.

AN: Right

DT: Very true

CS: The new generation, my generation, is not going to have a problem coming into a place like this because we're used to moving. We like to be around people. This generation is just very difficult; they're just kind of stuck. And so a lot of my work is just going around and just trying to just give someone a touch on the shoulder and just say it's okay, it's nice to have you here and just a gentle reassurance that we care about them, we know who they are as individuals, and that this is a community.

AN: How do you define success in your life? And do you think that success has changed?

CS: Wow

AN: It's a tough question.

[every one laughs]

CS: I know, I know.

AN: There are fun questions at the end, I promise.

[every one laughs]

CS: I know, success, it's—I know so many people define success monetarily and if you reach a certain status.

AN: Right

CS: That isn't my definition of success and its interesting in this class [Zen class] the first day, the first class, this is one of the questions that we were to ponder for the Zen...

AN: Your Zen class?

CS: ... and what makes a successful day for you, what makes a good day and so I've been pondering the question.

[every one laughs]

CS: For me it is when I go home feeling good, when I know that I've made a difference. It can be the smallest of interactions, but you know that interaction made a difference in someone's life. I would say that is my definition of success and being a good person, being proud of the decisions you've made and ethical stances you've taken, and so that's how I would define it. I feel like I've done that. I've lived a good life and ...

[every one laughs]

AN: ... not a lot of people can say that.

CS: I've treated people well. It's not—and that's why I was so uncomfortable when you called about interviewing because I was like well I'm just me and it's not—I'm not a big high profile person.

AN: We're not looking for a high profile person.

CS: Right

DT: Everyone's interesting in their own way.

CS: Right I know. Sometimes it's those little interactions. We have someone here in the building that has led a very, very high profile life, but yet they're facing a health challenge in the same way that everyone else is facing a health challenge here. So all that

stuff that they had before, it doesn't matter now. He still has to do the same work internally that every other person has to do.

AN: Right

DT: What memories do you have of significant historical events that took place when you were growing up? Were there any that stick out to you?

CS: Historical events?

CS: Well, I remember the day that Kennedy was shot. I was young at the time, but I do remember. I remember I was told in the kitchen and that kind of thing so I remember that. I remember the Watergate hearing and it was interesting because both my parents were Republicans and they raised five very liberal kids.

[every one laughs]

AN: How did that happen?

[every one laughs]

CS: I know, although I think today's view of Republicans is—I think my parents would be more—they were not as conservative as today's Republicans so I think it would be different, but it was always—it is interesting how that happened and where all five of us are working in some kind of giving field. Very involved in community work or some kind of—my sister is a social worker. She's a professor at the social work school at Smith [College] so they must have instilled in us some values about caring and wanting to make a better world.

AN: This is an odd question, but how old were you when you were allowed to date?

CS: My first boyfriend probably was when I was 16 and it was, it was a hard time because 16 was when my dad died. It was a hard to start dating [pause] I felt I was leaving my mother and so it was kind of a hard difficult time, but I do remember having a boyfriend at 16.

DT: This is kind of a fun question, but what was considered fashionable when you were a young woman?

CS: What was considered fashionable? [pause] Oh the fashion, it just kept ...keeps changing so much. I remember as teenager bell-bottoms were just the big thing, I

remember wearing bell-bottoms, and then my mother had a very conservative look, she liked, do you know, like Lilly Pulitzer?

DT: Pulitzer? [laughs]

CS: She liked those kinds of colors and so she wore a lot of that [pause] so I don't know.

DT: What did your parent's education consist of? Do you know?

CS: My parents, both my parents had a junior college degree so they both—my mother went to Pine Manor Junior College and my father went to Nichols Junior College in business. It was unusual for the time with my mother to go to college; a lot of women at that time didn't go to college.

AN: Did she have to fight for it?

CS: I didn't...I don't think so, no, she was a real independent woman. She's a cool lady.

DT: What difficult transitions did you go through when moving from childhood to adulthood? I know you talked a little bit about your parents passing.

CS: Right, right that was the toughest and particularly my father's death at 16. Then I went to college and I hadn't really dealt with it [her father's passing] and I remember sitting in a class and this was a great teacher and so he brought up something and then all the floods of emotion came up around my father's death that I had never dealt with and it was, it was scary. So that was tough because I grew up in a household where you didn't talk a lot about feelings. I really didn't have an opportunity to really talk about it so that made it difficult. Then it was hard because I felt guilty leaving my mother in adulthood because, you know, I was leaving her alone and so that was kind of a difficult time.

AN: It sounded like you were the youngest right?

CS: Right and they were all—all my siblings were out of the house so it was really just me.

AN: With the most responsibility.

CS: I know, I know. [laughs] But she was, she was good; she obviously wanted me to leave, so I moved to Boston and—but it—that was just a hard transition time.

AN: I bet.

[Pause]

DT: When you were not at home where did you usually spend your time?

CS: Growing up? On the golf course.

CS: My dad taught me and I used to compete a lot as a junior.

CS: I would travel around the state and play in these little junior tournaments which was unusual because girls at that time didn't play.

AN: Did he [her father] encourage you to play sports?

CS: Yes

AN: That's really cool.

CS: That was fun and I still do compete a lot [pause] now.

AN: With your husband too? Does he play golf?

CS: He does, yes.

CS: Sports have always been really important to me. In a lot of ways it's a great outlet and it's something I've always felt confident in because I'm good at something. When you know you're good at something, that's a nice. It's just good to have that in your life; something where you just—your confidence, helps breed confidence in other parts of your life.

[every one laughs]

DT: Alright so based on your life experiences what advice would you give to women of today and to future generations?

CS: Just to be yourself. I just see so many woman that try to be something they think men want them to be. It's so hard, it's so painful. Just to be yourself and to know that you can do anything. I mean the sky is the limit at this point that you can do anything that you want to do really.

AN: Did you also have that mindset when you were younger too?

CS: I think both my parents—there was no—I don't remember any messages or subtle messages about you can't do this because you're a girl. I just didn't have that. My mother was a really good athlete and she was a horse jumper. She still holds the state

record in Connecticut for horse jumping for height, so I must have learned bravado and there was no—I do not remember any messages that my brothers could do something and the girls couldn't. So I feel lucky that way.

DT: That's great.

AN: Well I don't have any more questions.

[every one laughs]

DT: So thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to meet with us.

CS: Ohhh, well that was actually fun.

DT: It was very interesting

[everyone laughs]

CS: Oh yes.