

Interviewee: Jeanne Tolomeo  
Interviewers: Megan Kasala-Hallinan, Melanie Freitas  
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Transcribers: Megan Kasala-Hallinan, Melanie Freitas



**Abstract:** Jeanne Tolomeo was born on June 20, 1948 in Springfield, Massachusetts. She attended West Springfield High School and after graduating moved on to become a restaurant manager. At the age of forty, she attended Assumption College as a member of the Continuing Education Program and earned her college degree, which allowed her to pursue a career as a geriatric care manager. Jeanne currently works at Fletcher, Tilton, and Whipple in Worcester, Massachusetts. In this interview, she briefly discusses her childhood experiences and goes into great detail regarding her community involvement and dedication to her work. In addition, she shows a strong commitment to her faith and expresses how it is an important aspect of her life. She addresses the fact that she is currently working on creating a balance in her life to make time for both her work and her family. Overall, Jeanne expresses how grateful she is to play a major role in each and every family she works with, while having the opportunity to help others in her daily life.

**MH:** We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of W-Worcester women aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Ri-ights Convention in Worcester [Massachusetts], we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics/community involvement. We want to focus today on your past experiences. Thank you for your help with this important project.... What is your full maiden name?

**JT:** Jeanne Tolomeo.

**MF:** When and where were you born?

**JT:** I was born June 20, 1948 in Springfield, Massachusetts.

**MH:** Do you have any children?

**JT:** Yes I do, I have two.

**MH:** What are there names, and can you give us a little information about them?

**JT:** Sure, Dawn Elisabeth Whittaker, she's now Hurley, and she has one child. So I have a granddaughter with her. She went to school in Longmeadow [Massachusetts] at Bay Path College, and at that time was a two-year school, and then she finished her second two years at Anna Maria College. And my son is Kip Whittaker and he lives in Barre, Massachusetts and has three children. They both work for insurance companies.

**MH:** Have you ever been married?

**JT:** Yes I was.

**MH:** Can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

**JT:** Sure, they were both first generation Italian descent. They were – my father was born in Pennsylvania. My mother was born in West Springfield [Massachusetts]. Their parents came from Italy on the ships that they ca – traveled on, and I researched that-- I have the ship names. They – my grandmother and grandfather started a grocery store, which is near the Big E in West Springfield [Massachusetts]. And started in this country without knowing anybody, and – and grew a population with other Italians, started an Italian club, the Dante Club. And my grandmother started the Daughters of Columbus, which is a national organization. She started the chapter in West Springfield. My other grandmother came from the southern part of Italy, which was different than my mother's parents from the north. And there were constant bickering in my house by my father on who knew how to cook. That wasn't my mother [laughs] she cooked North Italian. So, my grandmothers both have thirteen people in their families. My grandmother, my mother's mother, she was the first of thirteen. My father's mother was the last of thirteen. And one came from wealth, my father's mother came from wealth, and the other, my mother's mother, did not. She came from poverty. And my grandmother came here originally to take care of her brother, the priest, in Pennsylvania. My father was a milkman. He had to quit school early, and my mother did as well because she had to work in the store. So, they both had to quit school before graduating to help out with the family.

**MF:** Where have you lived during your life?

**JT:** I lived in West Springfield and then I moved to Holden [Massachusetts].

**MH:** What was your neighborhood generally like growing up?

**JT:** It was a busy street. We grew up on Route 20 in a five apartment house. We shared a bathroom with three other apartments in the house so we had the toilet with the overhead flushing box was on top. The bathtub was on those feet and we had two other apartments that shared that bathroom. I was one of four children [laughs] so it was kind of tricky every once in a while [laughs].

**MH:** Were you close to your siblings growing up?

**JT:** I was the oldest, so, I would say as siblings go yeah we were close.

**MH:** Since you weren't born in Worcester, when did you arrive in Worcester?

**JT:** I think it was 1975 when I moved here with my children and my husband at that time.

**MH:** Do you live in the – you don't live in the city now right?

**JT:** No I live in Holden. I still live in the same house.

**MH:** Do your family members live in the same area as you?

**JT:** My daughter and her husband and child live in Rutland [Massachusetts], and my son and his family live in Barre. So it's pretty close.

**MH:** Where did you attend school growing up?

**JT:** West Springfield and my high school was West Springfield Senior High School.

**MH:** Where did you attend college?

**JT:** Assumption College [laughs] That was the best part of my schooling was Assumption College, yep.

**MH:** What was your major?

**JT:** I was in the continuing education program so I didn't go to college 'til I was forty so, my major was in liberal studies, and I concentrated on theology and the social sciences.

**MF:** What were your challenges in education?

**JT:** I was so excited to be going to college 'cause I always wanted to go and so – that – when I was forty I had the chance. The challenge was: after being out of school so long could I really do it? And then it became, will I have enough money to do it? So – so that was challenging. The other thing is I really wanted to experience what it was like to go during the day so Assumption had a really good program where you could attend some day classes and go with the regular college students, which was incredible for me because everybody was so nice to me that I would meet them in the library and they save seats for me it was absolutely in – absolutely incredible. So it wasn't challenging so much after I got accustomed to studying again. So after the first class I was there it was just, just keeping up with the young ones [laughs].

**MH:** Upon finishing your formal education what did you see as your options?

**JT:** Well, I – I really...I really wanted to be a pastoral counselor but I didn't have the money to continue with my master's. So I knew I wanted to work in some kind of field where I could help people because I had originally come out of hospitality so I was a restaurant manager and I knew that I didn't want to continue that anymore I wanted to do something else. So, I started working for a – a couple, well one Assumption alum undergrad and one master's -- a husband and wife that worked at Smith Barney at the time. And they were looking for somebody so they hired me and I was working with their clients in the elder community. And so then I decided how can I work with elders more because the financial part is not that interesting to me, but working with

elders in the community was very interesting to me. So, I tried to find a job that would help with that and that's how I landed here at Fletcher, Tilton And Whipple. And, 'cause they had custodial work here. So then I just didn't want to do custodial [background noise, men talking loudly] work because I wanted to help more with the roundness of a person. And I had very fortunate opportunity to work with our elder population and to become a certified geriatric care manager. And now I help with their care giving needs and their monetary needs, placement in nursing homes and hospitals, but it was a journey it just didn't happen right away. So, my first goal when I got out of college – I was like oh I didn't want to work in hospitality. But, then I was because I was at the Science Center working for a couple years. I just couldn't figure out how to get out of that, and I was very grateful to the Assumption alum that gave me the opportunity to work at Smith Barney and that led me to here.

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

**JT:** I'm sorry I didn't hear you. What?

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

**JT:** Well here because I was given the opportunity to grow in the geriatric field, we have an attorney here that saw growth also in special needs and he has been really the – the person that has strongly suggested that I get certified in geriatric care management and join the national organization of geriatric care managers so he was the one that kinda pushed me that way. But what I found is that in working that – in that community and also working in our special needs population that I needed somebody already out in the community doing this kind of work 'cause – 'cause I certainly didn't know how to do it all or even learning the stuff so I was able to join some of the groups in the community the Worcester Area Geriatric Social Workers, the Worcester Elders Networking Group and there's another elders seniors networking group and through those folks I have been very fortunate to have – to develop friendships so that it's helpful for me when I am dealing with a situation for an elder client. I know who to call in Worcester and in the community to get help to place them or get them care giving in the home or some kind of supports or nursing home care or assisted living. So, in the community I've really found a lot of mentoring with other geriatric care managers too.

**MH:** Can you describe your job, like, on a day-to-day basis, like, what you would do, like a typical day?

**JT:** Well, typical day is never typical [everyone laughs] but for example today I have been completing – putting one of the individuals that I have at a local nursing home into hospice and I have had to be in constant contact with her brother, her only living relative, that lives in England who can't travel to the United States because of his health issues. So, I have been working with him as a geriatric care manager to – to make sure that her hospice caregivers are in place, that I've chosen the hospice agency. He wanted doctors changed because he didn't like the doctors she had just by hearing how he was managing her care so we've had to change that, so I've had to do that I had to – and I'm getting a positive outcome because part of my networking is to come to appreciate the hospice care givers and the wonderful work that they do. It's amazing to me. And then I have other issues, I'm dealing with a very angry daughter that doesn't know how she's going to deal with an assisted living because she's getting le – nasty letters from an attorney that wants to evict her mother and where's she going to go and so they have – she just gave it all over to me. She says you deal with it 'cause I don't wanna do it anymore. So, I was very happy that I have that network of friends in the community with the WAGS [Worcester Area Geriatric Social Workers] groups and everything so I could call them and I think we're going to get a very positive, calm resolution rather than having things escalated to where they shouldn't go. So thank God I have – I have some friends like in the community that are working at these places. So and then I can be doing that, choosing a Medicare D plan for a client, which is the season right now to do that. Helping a client move to Florida for two months, taking care of her house to make sure every thing's closed down properly and will come on when she comes back. Just got a call today and another call from the client whose father passed away and her mother has Alzheimer's and she's living in her home by herself so we need to process the estate and then we need to put all the estate planning documents in place for Mom and we need to get Mom in place in a – a safe environment so that she can be somewhere everyday in a daycare or so – something like that if she doesn't want to be placed in a nursing home at this time so I follow the lead of clients and what they wanna do, so my day is whatever the client wants it to be (laughs).

**MH:** What are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework?

**JT:** I do everything 'cause I live by myself [laughs], and I can't afford help so I do it all [laughs].

**MH:** How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles, and interests in your life?

**JT:** Right now my – I – I have and I – I don't always do a good job because I end up putting my job before anything very often because I have so many people in crisis. So, I haven't been doing

a good job of balancing my work, because I feel like I'm part of everybody's family that I work with and my own family so that's been – that's been a challenge. And to get my house – housework done, that's – almost never happens [laughs].

**MH:** What are the personal and professional costs of your chosen job?

**JT:** I don't have time for personal relationships, because all my relationships are with the families I'm working with and my clients, that's...

**MH:** Yeah.

**MF:** What about the benefits?

**JT:** I get to be a part of a lot of people's families [laughs] and I get to help them through the struggles and – and help them feel better about the decisions they – they make and empower them to feel that it's okay to make a decision like to go on hospice, you know, help lead them, so I'm pretty comfortable with that...

**MF & MH:** Yeah

**JT:** ...part of what I do [laughs].

**MH:** Do you consider yourself actively – active politically?

**JT:** Well I can't say active. I do vote all the time, but I wouldn't say I'm an activist [laughs].

**MF:** Have you been involved in volunteer or community work?

**JT:** I have.

**MH:** Can you describe some of them?

**JT:** Well I used to volunteer up at the New England – well it's the Ecoterium now. So I used to volunteer there. I do some volunteer work through different – like through the WAGS [Worcester Area Geriatric Social Workers] group. We do volunteer situations there where we might get together to pa – and give – collect things and give things away. But I – I don't do as much volunteer work as I want to because I'm just working all the time. But, I – I'm learning to separate things out [laughs].

**MF:** What role has religion played in your life?

**JT:** Major. Very major role. And it's all due to Assumption College, and the Chapel and people at the Chapel. I've been very active as a liturgical minister, but the past two years I have been very lax in my duties as a liturgical minister because I'm always working. I am 24/7 so, [everyone laughs] so – but, I'm planning to work on that I hope. That's the big fault of mine that I get totally enmeshed in my work right now and I haven't had a chance to do anything else...but I love what I do, so that's not all bad [laughs].

**MH:** Have you had any major health issues that have impacted your life that you wish to talk about?

**JT:** I haven't had any. I know what things I do that's like – kind of like...I'm on the Alumni Board at Assumption College

**MH & MF:** Yeah.

**JT:** That's a volunteer thing. I was past president of that too. Yes, I'm trying to think what have I done, I know I've done something [laughs].

**MH:** What are your experiences in accessing quality affordable healthcare?

**JT:** What is my what?

**MH:** Experiences in accessing quality affordable healthcare.

**JT:** For myself?

**MH:** Yeah.

**JT:** For myself? For myself I'm very fortunate. I work for the firm so it provides us for with affordable healthcare. For others...the group of clients that I work with it's been a challenge.

[papers rustling]

**MF:** How were girls treated when you were in school?

**JT:** We were treated like girls. [everyone laughs] it was really – it was like girls. We were – well...I don't think we were treated badly at all. We had to wear dresses and skirts we could never wear pants, that was one thing that was different. We couldn't wear sneakers but that was all – it was the times. Boys couldn't wear jeans, you know we couldn't wear jeans there [ambulance in background]. I didn't think we were – I thought we were treated fine in West Springfield school system I didn't have -- no complaints – it was the times [laughs].

**MH:** Yeah. What difficult transitions did you go through in moving from childhood to adulthood?

**JT:** Hmm [ambulance in background] I think one of the...was trying to figure out what I – what I wanted to do when I grow up, and I didn't even figure that out until now. I – somebody had said to me growing up I had all kinds of things I wanted to be: an interpreter for Italian and live in Italy, a nurse, a schoolteacher, all those things. And, oh, my first one was I wanted to be a nun [laughs]. You know, so you go through all these things, and then you never know what you want to be. And even –even though I wanted to be a pastoral counselor that's not what I ended up being. Although some of my friends tell me that's what I do. So, I guess so [laughs] but [laughs].

**MF:** What memories do you have of significant historical events that took place when you were growing up?

**JT:** Well, as most people from my generation would say was when John Kennedy was shot. That was probably the most... terrible thing that happened. And then the Vietnam War was pretty bad too. It was awful. So we had some pretty bad things happen. But the first thing was as they say everybody remembers where you were when John Kennedy was shot. And ... I do, and then I just remember the terrible things from the Vietnam War. Just awful ... then there was the Pope's being – Pope being shot at [tearing up] and his forgiveness for his assailant.

**MH:** How do you get through tough times?

**JT:** I have a very good best friend. It's God, Jesus, Saint Theresa [laughs]. It's – It's through my religion. That's how I – through the Catholic Church, through my faith.

[laughter]

**MF:** How do you define success in your life? And how has this definition changed over time?

**JT:** I – I would define success in my life is by how many people I can help and hopefully make happy. But at least success if I can help somebody. And hopefully they will be happy...and that hasn't changed [laughs].

**MH:** How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life and do you have any regrets?

**JT:** Well, sometimes I had some regrets but then I think about the choices I've made and I wouldn't be here if I didn't make those choices. So I don't know if I've made any bad choices be – because you have to define bad, so if they were bad choices in the beginning I wouldn't be here and I am so fortunate to be here and doing what I am doing today that I don't have any regrets. It sounds like a Frank Sinatra song. [laughs]

**MH:** What were your most significant extracurricular involvements?

**JT:** In college, in school or...

**MH:** Just overall, anytime in your life.

**JT:** Well, when I – I remember when I was in high school. My – one of my extracurriculars was Future Teachers of America. I just loved doing that! I went back to the grammar school I was in with my principal and I could – I was like the teachers in grammar school and I sat in the teacher's lounge and I was only in high school I thought that that was pretty cool [laughs].

**MH & MF:** Yeah

**JT:** That was wow. I was in clubs like Spanish, Latin all of those clubs. Those were pretty interesting. I did work in libraries, which I loved working in libraries at the high school level and public library. And I was more politically active when I lived in West Springfield and I felt it was kinda interesting to work at the polls [laughs]. Probably do it again some day, but...but I like volunteering. If I didn't have enough to do I would find some volunteering to do. Probably with children and the special needs population more of that.

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

**JT:** Well I'll go back to I don't think anybody makes a mistake to carry them through to where they are in their life as they give back positively, and **I would say to women it's never too late to go to college, never too late to think you can't change a career, no matter what your age is, there's always some network or something that you can find either by volunteering or by connecting to work in a job or in education to bring you to another level. I just think you can never ever think no matter how old you are that you...you have to – you're stuck in a rut and you can't do anything else. I think you can always find an avenue to go, and it might take you lots of different jobs and lots of different places, but it's where you end up that's really, really important. So, never give up [laughs].**

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

**JT:** That we can be powerful if we choose to be. And we can make a difference if we want to.

**MF:** Is there anything else that we haven't touched upon that you would like to talk about?

**JT:** I don't think so [laughs].

**MH:** Is there anyone else you would suggest we talk to?

**JT:** You know, I've been thinking about that and I haven't – I haven't come up with – well I have a few ideas so I'm not sure what you're – what the requi – prerequisites are for you to...

**MH:** They just have to have some connection to central Mass.

**MF:** Yeah, to Worcester or something.

**JT:** Do they have to have a longevity of time here or?

**MH:** They just have to have some connection.

**JT:** Some connection. Okay. I have an attorney that just started working with me that's an Assumption grad – undergrad.

**MF:** Oh, really.

**JT:** And she – she worked in Boston [Massachusetts], at a boutique elder law firm and now she's working with me, and I know she's only twenty eight, but I don't – she's always lived in Worcester, loves Worcester, wanted to come back and work in Worcester [laughs] and now she's stuck with me [laughs]. So I've been thinking about if she – if you think that she would be appropriate.

**MF:** Yeah I'd say she'd be.

**JT:** Okay I'll let her know [laughs]

**MH:** Thank you.

**JT:** You're welcome.