

Interviewee: Mary Bloem
Interviewers: Abigail St. Amand, Leah Smith, and Yu (Balian) Yunxiang
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Abstract: Mary Bloem is a sixty-four-year-old woman who has lived and worked in Worcester County for many years of her life. She is the current President of B2B Holdings, a company that connects other organizations with manufacturers of office supplies and furniture, with customers locally, state, and nationwide. She has been working in corporate accounting since the eighties, and thus has an in-depth perspective on how corporate office culture has changed over the years. In this interview, Mary discusses her experiences in the corporate field, the changes she has noticed, the increased role of women and other minorities in higher positions, and how she runs her own company. She offers lots of advice for those who wish to pursue similar career paths, as well as time management and being your own boss. Besides this, she also discusses her personal life, her family, and the ways literature has expanded her understanding of the world.

AS: Hello, this is Abigail St. Amand recording on March 29th, 2023 for the Worcester Woman's Oral History Project at Clark University, along with my fellow interviewers, Balian and Leah. And so before we get started, would you just mind telling us your name?

MB: My name is Mary Bloem.

AS: And how old are you?

MB: Only 64, until September.

AS: So, just to begin, would you like to tell us a little bit about your childhood and what it was like growing up?

MB: I wrote down that I'm the third, I have two older brothers. My oldest brother was named Wayne. And – and when he was 14 years old, he died of leukemia.

LS: Oh, no.

MB: And my other brother is Len, he's going to turn 70 this year. And my older brother died two years before I was born. So, one of my former bosses said to me that if he hadn't died, I wouldn't be here. But I don't agree with that opinion. And things happen for a reason.

LS: Why do you believe your former boss thought you were a, quote, unquote, rebound kid?

MB: Oh, I just figured that's probably his perspective, as opposed to my perspective. He was a great boss though, and I worked with him in Worcester as a matter of fact.

AS: That must've had a great effect on your childhood as well as your family's relations.

MB: Yeah, that's a great question. In some ways, I kind of felt like a shadow in some ways, and my mother was very good at making sure I had my vitamins so that I would live. And it had to be very difficult for them because they, oh, I can't think. I think like 80% of marriages that a child dies, wind up in divorce and my parents had a very good marriage. I was very thankful for my upbringing.

LS: So you mentioned that your mother was consistent on your vitamins and whatnot, do you feel, was she kind of protective and a bit neurotic in that way?

MB: No, just persistent in having those vitamins.

AS: Has that leaked into how you treated your kids when they were little? Were you very insistent on them taking their vitamins, too?

MB: I tried to be faithful with that. She was a good nurse when we were sick. She was good. And interestingly enough, my mother was in some ways a little bit ahead of her time, she turned forty the day before she had me. That didn't happen as much in the fifties as it does now.

AS: So moving on a little bit, what was it like going to school in that area for you?

MB: When I was going to kindergarten, I think, I walked down the street to the little corner school. And then after that, I went to Whitinsville Christian School for eight years.

LS: Would you mind spelling for us please?

MB: Oh, yes. Whitinsville [Massachusetts]. W h i t i n s v i l l e. That's the town that I grew up in. And then, it actually went to the ninth grade, but I chose to go to Northbridge High School in the ninth grade. Northbridge is just in N o r t h b r i d g e, pretty straightforward. And I graduated from there in 1976, and then I thought I was interested in being a nurse or physical therapy, but I didn't get accepted to the college I wanted to, so I was opting for nursing and went to Calvin, now, University, it was Calvin College back in the day, for a semester. And I didn't like living in Michigan because they didn't have very much sun, and it was different back then because you didn't go to an orientation. I had never been to Michigan. I went for the first day or whatever, my parents took me out, they were very kind. So I wasn't too thrilled with that, but I decided to go back into, to business more so, and I worked a semester and then I went to Quinsigamond [Community] College for two years and graduated. I took accounting there and it really sparked my interest. So then I went to Bryant University now, was called Bryant College back in those days and got a degree in accounting, but I went full time and I went during the summers because it was less expensive and you can get your credits in. And then I actually had three courses left that

I finished at night because I got a full-time job at Wyman-Gordon. And I finished all three classes and the company paid for two of the three.

LS: I actually have a couple follow-up questions. You mentioned wanting to become a nurse, was that because you grew up with your mother as a nurse?

MB: No. No, it didn't. It didn't really have anything to do with that. I think I have a gift of encouragement, and I think that I was really more interested in physical therapy, helping people that way. But I'm not really a science person, so that's a good thing.

AS: What was it in particular about accounting that really stuck out to you when you started studying it? Was there one moment where you were just like this is the field that I want to go into?

MB: It's funny because I was thinking about that earlier today. I like to think, the fact that things balance and they agree.

LS: So I guess it was love at first sight for you and the bottom line. So you mentioned that you like to be encouraging and that's kind of why you initially thinking about being a physical therapist. Have you found any ways with your current field to kind of take that spirit and apply it?

MB: Sure. I was just at a WBENC, Women Business Enterprise National Conference, last week in Nashville, Tennessee, and they have a big exhibit area and my husband says it's a salesman's dream, because you go there instead of having to knock on people's doors or see people individually, you get to talk to them. All in all, they come to you instead of you going to them. That's how he says it, actually. And one person who I talk to and just received an email from before I came here said, "Oh, I really liked the fact that you said to me, she stepped out to talk to me." So I think that was an encouragement for her.

AS: Was this your first time going to that event, or is this a common occurrence?

MB: It's the third time I went. I went pre-COVID in 2019, I went to Baltimore [Maryland] and then I went post-COVID in 2022 to Atlanta [Georgia]. And then this one this year was in Nashville.

AS: So, you've seen many places around the country.

MB: Yeah, yeah.

LS: A little bit more about this. What was the size and scale of this event and what did you get out of it?

MB: That's a great question.

LS: Kinda, paint me a picture with your words.

MB: There were almost 4900 people there, which was bigger than the previous year, which was about 3000. So it was a little bit louder, a little bit more draining. It was held at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel Center.

LS: Spell those?

MB: Say that again?

LS: Spell those?

MB: Oh, yeah, Gaylord G a y l o r d, Opryland O p r y l a n d Hotel and Convention Center. And what did I get out of it? A lot of networking, talking to different people, some potential business, hopefully, and to see Nashville and be a tourist ahead of time.

AS: Do you particularly enjoy going to these conventions, being in these places?

MB: Yeah. It's good because you meet with other people. There's some educational part of it, too. They have what they call industry labs currently on different topics, and talking with a lot of different businesses.

LS: So what were those industry labs like? You kind of widen those?

MB: Yeah, they had one on acquisitions and mergers that I went to that was pretty good. And another one on energy, the energy companies, big ones, Chevron, Shell, Exxon, BP. And, they're thinking that their future is not going to be in oil and gas down the road. So they're starting to think about that.

LS: Not if I, the bio major, have anything to say about it.

YY: Is this old, or just came out after Covid time?

MB: No, WBENC Women's Business Enterprise National Councils, I think this is their 26th year.

YY: 26th year?

MB: Yeah.

LS: How did you find out about it, by the way?

MB: Oh, that's a great question. In one of my husband's jobs, he worked for a company that was minority women-owned. Maybe I better start at the beginning. He grew up in an office supply business—stationery, his father had a stationery store. This was before Staples and Office Depot came into being. He started it in 1972 in his basement with a printing machine and grew it. My

husband and his brother worked for them and took it over in 2009, I think, and ultimately sold it. Well, I'm gonna be a little confused on the dates. I have to think.

AS: It's fine. It's fine if you don't have the exact dates.

MB: Well, I should know, but they sold it. No, they sold it in 2009 to New England Office Supply, which was minority women-owned. So he was exposed to that type of business there and got some good customers, and then New England Office Supply sold to W.B. Mason. The point of the question was how did I get into the WBENC part of it? So then when I started my business, I pursued that, being woman-owned, because there are benefits to it and continuing some of the business relationships he had.

LS: So I take it your husband and all of the supply business was kind of an inspiration for you and your work on B2B?

MB: Yes.

AS: And that's really interesting, but I want to know how you got to the point, because we've heard about as far as you graduating college. What was your trajectory in getting to becoming president of this-

LS: Where has life taken you career-wise, family-wise?

AS: We can break it into smaller questions.

MB: Yeah, that's fine. What I said was when I graduated college, I went to work for Wyman-Gordon.

LS: Spell that, please?

MB: W y m a n - G o r d o n. And I actually started, I had three options for jobs, and I wound up starting as a secretary, back in those days, and be an admin nowadays, probably. Then an opening came up in corporate accounting and they had hired two people, I think one externally and one internally that they transferred from the Midwest. That didn't work out. And ultimately, I got the job. But it worked out really good because my boss was good. And he was able to figure out what I needed to do before I got there. Training is always nice in a job. And I worked there from 1981 to 1992. And when I had my first child after a couple of years, I wound up staying at home with him for a while. And about five years later, my second child came along. My husband and I actually had a business together with appointment books for a period of time, they're no longer valid either. Then my former boss called me up and wanted to know if I wanted to work for him again six to seven weeks. And it lasted ten and a half years. But I was a consultant and I only worked, the company was Idera Pharmaceuticals, I d e r a Pharmaceuticals in Cambridge. But I only went into work one day a week and worked from home. It was flexible. I would flex for them and they flex

for me, and their bad clinical trials and they had to have cutbacks. And I wound up going to Osterman Propane in Whitinsville, Mass. O s t e r m a n.

LS: So you said you briefly ran that little business with your husband.

MB: Yeah.

LS: Was that kind of like a big moving image, and what kind of effect on your relationship being both spouses and business partners briefly?

MB: It was good. It was just a small on the side type of business. So it wasn't, you know, like full force.

AS: Do you find yourself often collaborating with your husband?

MB: Well, he actually works for me. He's the salesperson for the most part. And the relationships he built up over the years, he carried some business with them and I bought the ID badging business from a minority woman-owned company, so that's how that all pieces together.

LS: How much do you feel that those connections helped to be able to really get B2B off the ground?

MB: Huge. Because when you buy a book of business, you're not starting from scratch. And secondly, the relationships that he had built up, which is now almost 40 years carried with him and is growing. So that's very helpful.

AS: And I, just going through all those jobs, just describing it as well as raising two children during that time. Was that time particularly chaotic for you or?

MB: No. And then to add another piece to my life. My mother moved in with our family in, I'm blank on years today, at some point in time. My father passed away and she moved in with us and lived with us for 16 years. So I had kind of the adult and the child at the same time. But that was good. She was good. And then ultimately, she went to a nursing home for a while, but she lived to 97, so. So that's good.

LS: Did you feel like it was a lot of responsibility having to juggle helping on your mom and to probably around kids?

MB: No, no, it worked out good. It all worked together.

LS: And since B2B does a lot of office supplies stuff, was it affected by the factory and office closures during lockdown and the subsequent supply chain issues? And if so, what was that like? And how did you manage to adapt?

MB: We're talking Covid, right?

AS: Yes.

MB: That definitely affected the ID badging supply business. And interestingly enough, the previous owner said, "In good times and bad times, the business held because you're either hiring people or getting rid of people or it was good." There was a decline because people were working from home. And part of how we did what we did was PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] products. A lot of people switched into that, which was so-so, because it was a little bit fluctuating market wise. If the market goes down, that's not in our favor.

AS: Especially considering it was such a confusing time and people are buying so much more than they needed.

MB: Yes, yes. Which falls into supply chain to some extent. Supply chain issues have impacted somewhat, we've worked through that pretty well for the most part. But I can think of somebody saying, "Oh, you just got to take care of your customers by having enough product on hand." Well, what does that do to everybody else? You know, it's not helpful.

YY: So the period of working at home, it's since 2019, March, right?

MB: Yup.

YY: And how long have you been working at home? For a year?

MB: Well, I actually started the business in my home in 2018. And then with office furniture, big trucks coming to deliver, we had to go rent space. So we rented some warehouse space in Northbridge and office space, and then in 2021, April 2021, moved the business there.

AS: So you kind of already had a head start in knowing how to work from home?

MB: I still work from home somewhat, but I'm there during business hours for the most part. But I still have my computer at home, so I frequently start my day with looking at it.

AS: Going back a little bit, why office supplies? Why did this particular company draw you in?

MB: That's a great question. There's three pieces: ID badging supplies, custom print and promotional products, and then office furniture. My husband's experience was definitely helpful in having his own clients in business because to start something totally from scratch would not have been very easy. And you work with what you got, right?

LS: Exactly.

AS: Do you think your experience was particularly different in any ways because you were a woman?

MB: In what way, I guess?

AS: Was it any harder to get customers or people to work with you? It's a hard question.

YY: If you compare with another company, but the customer would choose another one. Anything happen like that?

LS: Or how long-term clients have responded to you compared to how they did to your husband years ago.

MB: Well, there's a lot of emphasis on women business nowadays, and a lot of companies have goals, so that helps. But you still gotta make the connection.

LS: Do you feel connections are the most important part of successfully running your business?

AS: Or at least getting started, creating a business like this?

MB: I'm not sure what you're asking.

LS: Do you feel that having connections is the most important aspect to the success of your business?

MB: Well, it could help, but you also have to do the work and deliver and keep them happy.

AS: What has working and doing stuff in this particular area of Massachusetts been like for you?

MB: Well, kind of central Massachusetts, southern Mass. It's been good, you know, small town, and Worcester and the state. And we do business nationally, the ID badging, more so. I'm thinking, but I'm not coming up with what I'm trying to come up with.

AS: It's fine if you can't.

YY: Is Worcester one of your favorite cities?

MB: Sure. I mean, as opposed to Boston. It's easier to get around than Boston. We UPS a lot of products so it doesn't necessarily have to be personally delivered. But to do some deliveries in Boston, you know, particularly if it's office furniture, it's a little more of a challenge. But we work with installers, so that really works well.

AS: What would you say an average day working at it B2B is like? What are issues that are constant?

MB: Well, it's not predictable because you never know what's going to come up in a day. But I have a certain routine in the morning that I start with, like looking at the numbers, mostly my bank accounts, because I want to be sure I'm solvent. I'm thinking, I don't want to be overdrawn and thankfully haven't been yet, and then it depends on the day what else you have to get into.

LS: But what are some things that you generally might do in a given week, month, year? Day to day operations?

MB: You have your accounting cycle, reconciling and stuff like that, but also quotes for customers and, you know, you gotta do your billing and that kind of stuff too, you gotta keep your books up to date. It's much easier if you keep them up to date. Projecting cash.

LS: Projecting?

MB: Yeah, projecting. Do I have enough money to pay this bill, that bill? Cash flow might be another way to say it.

AS: Do you personally prefer working in the office or from home?

MB: Some of each. It's nice to have, and some things, I have some records at home, because some stuff I carry back and forth, but try and keep it as limited as possible. So some things are easier to do at home. It's also easy to think when other people aren't around, sometimes, depending on how much you got to get into a project.

LS: So you mentioned occasional issues with trying to squeeze things through narrow Boston streets and doorframes. Have the deliveries ever been a challenge at all, or were you kind of from the beginning very on point with making sure to have those installer people?

MB: Yes, preferably installers.

AS: I'm sorry, is there a particular thing that you do in your work that you prefer? If you need to take a call.

MB: No, I don't, go ahead.

AS: Is there a particular thing that you prefer to do in your work more than others?

MB: I prefer to work with numbers rather than write, but you can't avoid that in certain things.

YY: Is it most of your customers, you think, are located in Boston or anywhere in Massachusetts, or somewhere else?

MB: We have the region, but we also are national. And some things ship very easily nationally.

AS: I imagine a lot more of the print stuff, more naturally than office building, furniture.

MB: Yes, yes. We can do furniture nationally because there are companies we can work with.

YY: So with delivering office furniture to a customer a couple states away. So, you'll send out stuff through the warehouse located in Massachusetts?

MB: Yeah.

YY: Oh, it's the local warehouse.

MB: Or it can go directly from the vendor to the customer.

AS: Do you find that people particularly choose to go through B2B because of having more women in the company?

MB: Some. Some that's important to.

LS: Percentage-wise estimate if you have one?

AS: It's fine if you don't.

MB: Yeah. I don't know, off the top of my head, that one.

AS: How is this kind of environment of women being in the workforce different now than it was when you first started working in this field?

MB: Well, for one thing, there's a lot more women working, and women have definitely progressed. You know, there's presidents of major companies that are women now. Although I thought I heard a statistic last week that there's still some \$2 million difference between what a woman might make and a man might make. Maybe not a particular position or something like that, so still room for improvement.

LS: So I know you mentioned that you're at a book club, and that has kind of gotten you to read a lot more types of books that you usually wouldn't. So in what way has turned your book club expanded your literary horizons?

MB: We're actually meeting tonight. We usually meet on Thursday nights, once a month. The last Thursday of the month. But there was a scheduling conflict for somebody that this was the date that worked the best. The book we're reading this month is *Three Sisters*, and it's written by the same author that wrote *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, that's a more famous book. To think of what some people lived through and survived in concentration camps, it's not pleasant, I'm not sure it's a book I would have picked up. Maybe I would've, I like history. What other books have we done?

AS: Do you see yourself as a part of history, being a woman president in this company?

MB: Every person's a part of history, right? And we all have a unique purpose, I guess.

LS: So, have you read any books with your book club that have had a profound impact on you?

MB: Well, boy, that's a good question.

LS: Just any book you read over your lifetime.

MB: When we were talking a little bit earlier about oral history and stuff, there was a book we read recently, *Under the Tulip Tree*, and it came about, it's based on true stories, not necessarily completely true, but it was based on FDR during the Depression getting oral, not necessarily oral, written history of slavery. And I think that was a pretty interesting project and time and discussion and period and importance.

LS: Yeah, we talked a little bit about collecting oral histories of people who were enslaved in class.

AS: And you've also, in your life, seen the country change a lot more than definitely we have.

MB: Yes, yes. Now, my husband and I talk every so often, when we were growing up, they used to be, in Boston, on TV, all day long about desegregation. You know, how much has changed, for the better. You know, slavery was a long time period, but definitely improvement in that area.

AS: And what has it, you've probably also seen a lot of the improvements done as a woman.

MB: Yes, yes, yes. Well, when I went to Wyman Gordon, I was one of the first women to be in management. You know, that didn't happen back in 1982, I think, 1981 I started there. There weren't many women in management roles.

LS: How did the people who worked with you kind of react because of that?

MB: Well, there were some and when I came to Worcester to work in corporate accounting as opposed to being a secretary. It was all good, but still breaking barriers down.

AS: Did you receive any type of harassment or mistreatment?

MB: I don't think so.

AS: It's also fine if you don't want to disclose if that's too much.

MB: No, no, I don't think so. Nothing that I can say personally, or I can remember, maybe that's another factor.

LS: Do you feel like your experience is similar to what women who were rising the corporate ladder at that time had? Or do you feel like it was a lot different for most other people?

MB: I think basically similar.

AS: Well, you've been in corporate offices for a long time. How has corporate office culture changed over the years that you've worked in it?

MB: Good question. Just change or change as being a woman?

LS: In general, like in terms of say, I know you're very involved in office supply needs, so maybe how those have changed over the years too?

MB: Well, office supplies is a declining business, in and of itself, and that's not a bad thing. You know, some of that's being done electronically, digitally. I don't know, nothing's coming to my mind to pinpoint anything in particular.

AS: It's fine if you can't.

MB: You know, from the beginning of my career to now, well, there's a lot more women in the workforce doing a lot more different things and varied things, and a lot of women starting all kinds of businesses, and even more so now, as well as women of color. Pride is a big topic now, and at the WBENC conference last week. There's an effort for Latinos, so that's good too.

AS: Do you think your past self, like fresh out of college would be surprised about how many women are in or have more of a role in these positions or how more diverse it is?

MB: Great question. I think probably some, yes, somewhat. Because it's changed. It has changed. Not foreseeing that in the future.

AS: And of course, there's still a long way to go.

MB: Yes.

LS: Yeah, I'm just getting some thoughts to try and see the if there's anything else we'd like to talk about.

MB: When I did start writing stuff, a biography, I actually wound up just taking something I already had, I thought about, you know, the connection that I was born in Worcester, you guys go to school in Worcester, that my path to getting education wasn't just a straight shot. I was on the scenic journey. I liked the scenic journey. What else was I thinking about? I think there was another area, but it's not coming to my mind right now.

AS: So not only are you reading books, but now you're being involved in writing one as well?

MB: True. True. We're all a book, right?

AS: Well, what is that experience in helping to create that biography been like?

MB: Every day is a challenge. Every day. Each day is a gift, though, too. Good question. I'm not sure I have a good answer.

AS: It's fine. Was there any particular moment in your life that really stood out to you?

MB: Oh, boy.

AS: Sorry if that's a loaded question.

MB: No, I'm trying to think of what things are popping into my head.

AS: It's fine if nothing comes up.

MB: Yeah. I guess in some ways entrepreneurship runs in my family, to some extent. My son has started a couple of businesses, my youngest son. My father owned a business at one point in time. My grandfather on my...my mother's side owned a business that my great grandfather started. So that's like five generations, right? And I can't go back further than that because it's in Holland and I don't know too much further than that at this stage of my life [laughter].

AS: Your family may have been starting businesses all the way back here to the motherland.

LS: I mean, there is like I believe, like the - the Dutch, at least in the 18th and 19th centuries, were kind of known for being very into, like, business stuff. Yeah.

MB: I guess along with that, I guess I can tell you this story as well. The town that I grew up in, Whitinsville, until I got married and moved south to Uxbridge, the next town over - big move, right? The machine works is in that town and - and in the 1830s started in the textile business and machinery for that and at one stage was the largest in the world. So that's pretty impressive. But the...the I think the owner, one of the owners died and his wife, they had a farm, Castle Hill Farm, and the cows died of tuberculosis, so they went to Holland. Friesland is a province of Holland, particularly where I'm from, and got Holstein cows and brought them over. And the herdsman that came with the cows must have said to himself, "This is a great country." And a lot of people immigrated to this country and particularly that area and particularly the Dutch.

AS: So they're very grass roots efforts to be like, "Hey, this is a good place! Come on over!"

MB: Exactly. Exactly. Oh, and my great grandfather used to say with his Dutch brogue, I'm not sure it would be a brogue - accent, I guess would be a better word, "The machine does the work, and I get the money." [laughter]

AS: Was there in your hometown in particular, like, is it - is it still a very, like Dutch town or is it...?

MB: There's still a Dutch presence there, although people are much more mobile these days than - but even then when I grew up...

LS: What do you feel makes people more, as you put, it mobile?

MB: I've done some genealogy stuff and we've had some family reunions and I used to think that what made people move was health and work. So work has definitely made people more mobile, more so than when I grew up, I think.

AS: And you've obviously been to many places for work related things. You've been across the country.

MB: The other thing I was thinking about when, when I was - blanking out a little - but things that I was thinking about ahead of time...Now I can remember hearing and I said - wrote this to you when we first corresponded, in September, I'll be eligible for Medicare. Now I can remember hearing about it and...wow. Now it's - it's arrived. Arriving, I guess.

LS: I mean, like, how does that personally, like, make you feel?

MB: I don't know. Depends on what plan works best for me. [laughter]

LS: Yeah. So, yeah, with what you were talking about with people moving a lot for work, do you feel that that's more common nowadays than it was in the past?

MB: I do, yeah.

LS: And do you have any sense of like what about the modern economy and the modern workplace has made it more common?

MB: I guess people go where the jobs are, right?

LS: Mhm.

MB: Education influences what you do for work and where you work.

LS: If people are moving where the jobs are and people are moving a lot, does that mean the jobs are moving a lot too?

MB: Not necessarily. Some people progress well from company to company as you can move up that way. Years ago, some people stayed their whole career at a company; but I think if you move jobs, you can elevate faster than if you stay with the same company.

AS: What has your experience been like just going from company to company? Like, was there a lot of like whiplash from going to different work environments?

LS: And how have, kind of, like, your prior experiences been able to build on one another?

MB: Oh, you're always learning in a job, right? So the more skills you have, [coughing from one of the interviewers] the more marketable you are.

LS: What skills do you feel you've learned from previous jobs that have kind of transferred over to where you are now with B2B?

MB: [chuckle] That's interesting. It seems one common element to some extent has been doing bank reconciliations. In fact, the previous job before this, that was something that was desperately needed for the company at the time.

LS: And – pardon, I'm not a business major - so what do those entail?

MB: [laughter] I'm just laughing because I don't think my children reconcile their checkbooks and maybe you guys don't either [laughter], but I still do. And for business, you have to. That's not an option.

LS: It's just, like, balancing the checkbook?

MB: Yeah. Yeah. Credit card statements.

LS: Yeah.

MB: I don't balance my credit card statement, but I do look at it and look at the total.

AS: Sorry. Was there anything else you wanted to expand upon or talk about further or...?

MB: Not that I can think of. You've done a great job of asking questions. Just - no notes or nothing. I'm not sure I'd be able to do that as well and ask questions myself.

LS: I have, like, notes right here on my laptop.

AS: Do you have any particular advice for anyone who wants to go into your line of work?

YY: Especially for new graduate students.

AS: Yeah, we probably have plenty of business majors here at Clark that would love to hear from you.

MB: I think you've got to follow your passion, otherwise you're not going to be as happy as you might be. One of the things that I have now is flexibility, which is really helpful.

LS: Do you feel like you didn't have a lot of flexibility previously?

MB: Well, say when I worked at Wyman Gordon, you worked 8 to 5. When I worked at Idera Pharmaceuticals, I had flexibility there, which was really nice. And when you're raising kids, that is a nice option to have. When I worked at Osterman Propane, I worked 8 to 5, but I went home at lunch for an hour, so that was nice [laughter]. And now I can - I say I can work as much as I want and have as much time off as I want [laughter].

LS: Yeah I guess that's how, kind of, being your own boss. Speaking of, how was that kind of shift for you? So, like, learning how to be your own boss and kind of, like, find that balance between working and [unintelligible] doing other life things.

MB: Well, the buck still stops here. There are times you just got to get something, bite the bullet and get something done, and you may have to work later and much later. Also, things come to you during the middle of the night sometimes [laughter]. Sometimes. Yeah, sometimes I get up and work. QuickBooks - our QuickBooks system is - it doesn't turn on, the way it's set up, until 5:30 in the morning, it stops at 9:00 at night, I think. I think that's a benefit for me because then I can't do it [laughter].

AS: Do you think, like, modern, like, office setups would benefit more from having this sort of, like, more like working, like, flexibility?

MB: I think COVID has definitely brought that into being because more people are working at home. Some people are working remote in the - in the office certain days of the week. Companies have had to try and figure out how to make that work because there is a benefit to working with other people. You know, so you got a question on something with your computer or how something works. A colleague may be able to help you, sit next to you, but, you know, if you're at home alone, it doesn't go that way so much. I had another thought, too, but it escapes me at the moment.

AS: It's fine. Happens to the best of us.

MB: [laughter]

AS: Do you think a lot of this change wouldn't have happened if the pandemic didn't come?

MB: Oh, I think that definitely changed the workforce. For sure. What do you think? You don't know you're in school [laughter].

AS: It's also - this interview is about you.

MB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, asking questions is always good.

LS: I actually, kind of, along those lines - so, I mean, it's been like three years and a week since the lockdowns started. So. And I know that, like, a lot of people have come back since then, but I can't speak personally to or very well to kind of what the overall work from home to fully back in the office – kind of – ratios are. How many companies do you think actually still have a lot of employees working from home, partially or fully?

MB: Oh, I think it's a lot.

LS: I've always noticed that at least starting, like, I don't know, really, this push to go back into the office environment.

AS: Do you think we're ever going to reach a time where we're all fully back in like office settings, or is working from home going to start becoming the norm, at least partially, in a lot of office spaces?

MB: I have two thoughts on that. Working in office came into being at some point in time, right? Because we had a lot of agriculture – agriculture. People worked on their farms until the industrial revolution to some extent, which pushed people to offices. And the other thought I had as I was talking to a woman last week and she said her company, she went remote in 2012 prior to anything. And I just thought that that was an interesting...

AS: It's - it's really interesting how technology, especially the Internet, has changed how office structures work [clattering]. Do you think you've adapted well to those changes?

MB: Sure [laughter].

LS: Yeah, I can imagine, like, when you started out in accounting you probably had to do everything maybe with a pocket calculator or something [light chuckle].

MB: With a what?

LS: Pocket calculator or something.

MB: Well, when I started in accounting, we used to have big ledger books and things written manually. And I can remember PCs coming in and using Excel or whatever the Apple version is.

AS: Lots of changes to office layout and office culture.

LS: Yeah. Do you feel that, like, as technology progressed in terms of, like, the ability to just manage things on spreadsheets...What was the shift kind of like? Was it like one day you're like, "Oh, I don't have to do this manually!" or "Oh, how do I do this?"

AS: Or was it more of a gradual change?

MB: Well, it was gradual. You had to learn. But it's nice if you find something wrong, change it. Boom, it's done. You don't have to redo a whole piece of paper or whatever.

AS: And of course, while it surely made things easier, I'm sure that there were new difficulties along with that as well.

MB: Yeah, things don't always work out. Technology doesn't always work, right [laughter]?

LS: Yeah. And technology is often what you put into it. That's kind of, like, the thing I learned in my past classes. The computer will do exactly what you tell it to. Nothing more, nothing less.

MB: That is true. That is true.

AS: Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about?

MB: Nothing's coming to my mind. How about you?

LS: I mean, do you feel like accounting majors - how do you feel the environment that accounting majors today are entering in is, with, like, modern technology is different from the - do you feel like it's easier for them? Do you feel it's harder for them? Do you feel...? Like, what do you think that - what would you think the difference is between, say, what your experience as an accounting major was and what a current accounting major here would be learning?

MB: Well, interestingly enough, in 1992, when my first son was born, there were five women in our accounting department that were pregnant at the same time and wondering "what would this child be? Would he be interested in accounting?" One of my friends, her son ultimately became an engineer, and my son went into accounting - majored in accounting. Accounting is a good major because you can get a job when you get out as opposed to a general business major. And he had kind of an interesting experience in that he had an internship with the New York State Lottery [light chuckle].

LS: Oh wow.

MB: They - they had - had to have certain controls in place. And he got that internship, and it was with KPMG, which is one of the big four accounting firms, and as a result of that, he got a summer internship with them and eventually full-time job. And he worked, I think, about five years. He became a manager, but when he was starting his family - accountants in public accounting work a lot of hours, he would - he would work to, like, midnight. I don't think the accountants in my -

public accountants when I was – were - younger worked that late [clears throat]. He went into a - he got a CPA, so that's good. I didn't get that far. He went to a private company, and he worked there about three years, and now he's with a new company [chuckle]. So, interesting enough accounting was a good fit for him, and he's done well with it. My other son is totally different. We say the older one has a CPA and the younger one has a CDL, which is a license to drive trucks and operate equipment. So, two ends of the spectrum.

AS: So it's almost like he took the shipping component.

MB: [laughter]

LS: Yeah, well...

AS: I'm sorry to ask again, but was there anything else you wanted to say or talk about?

MB: That's a good question, and that's always a good question in - in sales or anything: “is there anything else?” Because a lot of times people have something and will say something. I don't - I'm not coming up with anything, but I can think - that's something that we do is ask, “is there anything else?” And if people ask me this, I know there's times I've said, “Oh yeah, I would like this or that.”

LS: How often does that tend to come up where someone just goes, “Oh yeah! Oh yeah, that.” Does that come up a lot, or...?

MB: Yes, it does. That's a great question.

LS: Any, like, notable examples or stories off the top of your head?

MB: I can't think of anything in particular at the moment, but I know it does - it's effective. And for everybody, because sometimes you're thinking about something but maybe don't want to say something, but if somebody asks you that question, you'll say, “Oh, yeah,”. And it's, “I'm - I'm thinking, you know, buying something” more so than anything else.

AS: Well, thank you for spending this time talking with us.

LS: Yeah, thank you so much.

YY: Thank you so much.

MB: Thank you. You've done a great job. I hope you're happy with the end result [laughter].

AS: It's been a pleasure.

LS: Yeah you gave us lots of valuable information. Thank you so much.