

Interviewee: Lynn Cheney
Interviewer: Megan Clapham, Sierra Grybowski
and Hannah Pennings
Date: March 21, 2024
Place: Assumption University
Transcriber: Sonix.ai (edited by interviewers)



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Abstract:

Lynn Cheney was born in Worcester, MA, but grew up in Connecticut where she attended Woodstock Academy for High School. Lynn has one sister, no children, and has been divorced. Lynn has many ties to Worcester, including living in the city during various stages of her life, along with owning a small business in Worcester, and her participation in various charities and organizations within the city. Prior to January of 2024, Lynn owned and operated a small business, *Maker to Main*, which was a curated grocery store with local produce and had a variety of other sourced items from small local shops and businesses. In this interview, Lynn discusses both the successes and hardships that come with starting, and running a small business. Lynn shares how owning her own business came with challenges, however, it opened her eyes to many experiences and connected her to many amazing people within the Worcester community.

MC: Hi.

LC: Hi.

MC, HP and SG: [Laughs]

MC: Okay. So, okay. what is your full name, including both maiden name and married name, if you're married.

LC: Sure, Lynn and Cheney is my entire name, and at one point in my life, I was Lynn Stromberg. But I'm divorced.

MC: Okay.

LC: And I'm never doing that again.

MC, HP and SG: [Laughs]

SG: Marrying or divorcing?

LC: Both [laughs]

MC: Where were you born?

LC: I was born in Worcester. I spent the first five years of my life in Whitinsville, Massachusetts, and then my parents moved us to Brooklyn, Connecticut. And I grew up in Brooklyn, Connecticut, went to Woodstock Academy, just over the border in Connecticut as well. But my ties to Worcester are vast, and I live here now.

MC: Okay. So you said that you were divorced, what is the name of your former spouse?

LC: Stromberg is the last name.

MC: All right.

MC: Do you have any kids?

LC: No, cats.

MC: Cats? How many cats?

LC: Two cats.

MC: Two cats, nice. What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with?

LC: Caucasian.

MC: What about, like, family background? Do you know anything about that?

LC: Yeah, mostly, mostly German. I'm sorry, mostly English, a little bit of German, and then, like, the tiniest bit of Irish. But my grandfather thought we were, like, full blown. Full blown Irish. Definitely was, like, all for it, yeah.

MC: Got it [Laughs], Okay.

LC: We didn't want to break his heart, we didn't even have the audacity to tell him that.

LC and MC: [Laughs]

MC: Tell me about your parents.

LC: My parents, I refer to as my cute little married couple. They've been married for, oh for 52 years.

HP: Wow.

LC: And they still genuinely like each other. It's - they're pretty remarkable in itself, but they are a powerhouse couple. And they - my father enlisted during Vietnam, and they were already dating. They - my mom was, I think 18, and he was 20, and they were already dating, and he enlisted and went off to war and came back and married her. But he knew the first day that he was going to marry her.

MC: Wow.

LC: And he told my grandmother, his mother, that he's - and oh, also told her, my mother that too. My mother thought he was crazy [laughs]. And- but they've been together collectively now for I would say what is that, 55 years together.

MC and SG: Wow.

LC: Yeah, it's crazy.

MC: That is.

LC: It's crazy. It's awesome, it's awesome.

SG: And to still genuinely like each other.

LC: Right, and the hardest part of their marriage was when they both retired. When they both went through retirement because they didn't know how to then live with one another again in a way that was not focused on children or working, because they both worked slightly opposite schedules for the majority of their marriage. So, but yeah, they're awesome. They're like incredible role models, not only for marriage, you know, and for lifelong goals and what not, but just two dynamic, amazing individuals.

HP: Do you know how they like originally met?

LC: Yeah, he dated her best friend.

HP: No way [laughs]

LC: Super funny. Yeah, yeah. It's great. It's great. Yeah [laughs]

HP: That's amazing.

SG: Is she still her best friend?

LC: No, no, no. Surprisingly, they actually- I mean, they kind of keep in touch a little bit now. Like, they spend more time with their friends that they had when they were in high school, and neither one of them...My mom went to a year of college and then ended up dropping out and married my father. I can imagine her parents were not very excited about that.

MC, HP and SG: [laughs]

LC: But [laughs] nonetheless and then – he - my dad never went to, to college. He went to, he went off to war. But, yeah, they just they never really kept in touch with friends from college or high school or anything like that. A little bit here and there. Then-when their 25th anniversary came up, my sister and I threw them a huge surprise party and invited all of their previous groomsmen and bridesmaids, and they had not seen them, many of which since their wedding.

HP and MC: Wow. Wow.

LC: Yeah, yeah. It's crazy.

MC: That's crazy.

LC: Yeah.

MC: Wow. Okay, so we said you were born in Worcester and then moved to Connecticut. Where else have you lived?

LC: Right. So, I lived for a brief time, I lived in Enfield, Connecticut. I was working in a - I worked in hospitality. I was working in the hotel industry when I got out of college. For the most part, I spent only one year of college living in a dorm, and then very quickly realized, I do not want to be here. And I went to - when I went - at that time, I was at Westfield State, and I left and moved back home and then pursued the rest of my college career at Eastern Connecticut State University, commuted from home. And after I graduated, I moved to Enfield, Connecticut. I only lived there for a very short amount of time, maybe a year at best, I think it's a little fuzzy. And then from there, I moved to Dudley [MA] and that is how I began my... And that was in 2007, and that is how I began my process to kind of reconnect myself with Worcester during that time.

SG: What did you get your degree in at college?

LC: Communications. Yes, with a minor in performing arts.

HP: That's cool.

LC: [laughs]

HP: That's really cool.

HP: I want to know more about that.

LC: [laughs]

HP: What shows, like what kind of shows did you do in college?

LC: When I was in, well, more so in high school. In college, I was actually a dance instructor when I was both in high school and in - and then also in college as well. Surprisingly, I was not probably what you would think of a dance instructor. I taught hip hop, funk and ballroom - more of the Latin style dances than I did. Like the, you know, although I can do the waltz and, you know, foxtrot and all that stuff. I would prefer not to. I prefer to do the Latin style ones, so I did a lot of the choreography for the shows that I did when I was in high school, and then also did that when I was in college. But I didn't really do a ton of shows in college because it was only my first year that I was at Westfield. So, I didn't have a whole heck of a lot to do. I started their dance, their dance club, and just I did more of the theater behind the scenes stuff and what not. When I was in, in college, I didn't really do a lot of the shows themselves or wasn't as involved in the college campus, predominantly, I think, because I commuted.

HP: Okay. So, were you just a dancer or do you like acting or singing or...?

LC: Acting, acted too, so yeah. So, like when I mean, in high school in itself is like our senior year of high school was - I was involved all four years. When I was in high school, we had a very big theater department in in our school in itself. And we did Grease the final year of high school, which was so amazing. And it was all of our - we're all the five of us were really great friends, and the five of us landed all five lead roles. So that's fun. I was Frenchy, and so I no longer can chew gum appropriately. So, so, it was definitely some consequences to that. But yeah, it was an amazing, an amazing experience. So, I did the choreography. We had dual casts because we had so many shows that we had to do that. We decided that initially the, the director wanted to do it as an understudy program for like in case, in case. Right. In high school as if someone's not going to be in the show for high school. I think it more or less had to do with the fact that he wanted to make sure that there were other students that got the opportunity to do that, since all of the seniors were going to graduate, and he wanted to give opportunities to other people. So, he ended up splitting up some of our friends and put them in, like the understudy cast and whatnot for like, the guy's side. Not cool. But that's right. No one holds a grudge. So ultimately that was... Yeah, it was great. It was a fun, fun, fun experience. And West Side Story was another one that we did. And we always had to do a like a historical play. So, we did a lot with Shakespeare and so forth. Two Gentlemen of Verona, and there was a lot of Macbeth and what not. We did a lot of those things as well too. So, yeah.

MC: Are you still involved in, like, the arts and stuff?

LC: Not directly, no, although my two stepdaughters like to ask me to. I call them my stepdaughters. We're not married, but they're close enough. They always ask me to, you know,

teach them to dance and do things like that, too. So. But I don't really - I don't really do much of anything with the arts and of itself, although I foresee this new role that I'm in right now that might change. So, since I have a little bit to do with some of the programs that I'm starting to see, that what we fund for this new job that I've taken on is - may have something to do with, like, you know, it has a lot to do with youth. And so there may be something down the road that, that ends up being part of my life again. And also, not working as many hours somehow leaves time to do other things. I really, genuinely did not know there were other things other than work.

SG: [laughs]

LC: So that's it's a whole life experience right now. Definitely.

MC: Okay. How have you balanced different priorities and responsibilities with interests in your life?

LC: Not, well, yeah, I just mentioned that. Like, is that, that concept of, like, work life balance? I am awful at it. I'm like, yeah, I'm living by working. That has been when you're an entrepreneur. And since you guys, should I step back? Should I tell you these things like what I've done in my work history or where...

SG: I think it's going to end up coming into that.

LC: Okay. All right.

MC: Just go for it.

LC: You got it. So, I - 12 years ago, I started a company called Lettuce Be Local, which was the first food hub for Worcester. In all of Central Mass, which by that food hub can mean anything. A million different things to a million different people all over the country. And there certainly - when you say the term food hub, that can mean something different to everybody. But what I did was I aggregated local food directly from farms to restaurants, breweries, small farm stores and schools. And did, you know, farm to farm aggregation and solely to connect people to local food, because that had happened and was happening in every other aspect and other areas of the country and even happening in areas of Boston. But it was not happening anywhere else in the state, specifically in Worcester. And I had this crazy idea and I didn't really think it through. Not one bit. I just saw that there was a problem and that I thought I could help. And I had no business plan, no business sense of what I was doing whatsoever. I just got laid off from my job, and I had prior to that had created a blog which essentially was really just a Facebook page back in the day when that was cool to do that. I had just called it Local Lynn, and it was basically just a way for me to share information about how to source food locally, because I was the crazy person that drove 20 minutes to get eggs, or drove 15 minutes to get where I would get the best cheese, or who was the best, who grew the best tomatoes or whatever.

LC: Like, I already knew all of those things based on some of the relationships that I was building with the farming community for myself personally. And then I created that Facebook page just to kind of share the knowledge that I had. I didn't know anything about it. But then when I got laid off, a friend said to me, "How do we make Local Lynn make you money?" And I looked her dead in the eyes and I said, "You are crazy," I said, "I'm just going to go get another job in sales, because that's what I've done for the last, you know, 15 years of my life." And she was like, "No, I'm, I'm serious. Like, how do we make this happen?" And I said, "Well. I haven't the slightest idea." And she said, "Tell me what you see, what's the problems that you see?" And I said, "I can tell you that in the culinary industry...", mind you, I had been working in a hotel that had just gone through a multimillion-dollar renovation process to, to launch a restaurant in a new part of the boutique hotel that would allow it to have a restaurant that was supposed to be farm to table.

LC: And I was mad that it was not farm to table. And having one appetizer or one ingredient for one appetizer does not constitute a farm to table restaurant. And as a result, I thought, if I'm doing this, if I'm the crazy person that is driving to all these different farms to source my food, why doesn't that exist currently to help a chef have access to food? And she said, "Well, it sounds like that's you're the caveat. You're the person that can make that happen." And I was like, once again, "You're crazy." And so I said, "Let's see if I can make that happen." And I left that conversation with her and I at the time was married. And I drove home and said to my husband. This is crazy, but she gave me this idea. Do you think there's some validity to it? And he was like, "Oh my God, yes, and you could totally do that." Imagine if. And now, first of all, my ex-husband's a great, great person. And we're - and although I've never haven't spoken to him since our divorce I don't wish him ill will, but he was a pipe dreamer, and he was like, you could be doing, like, all these things with trucks and then bringing the food and, like. And I was like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute here," and then I was like, "I haven't thought any of this through."

LC: And he's like, "No, but there's something to this," and the excitement that he had just re-energized the feeling that I had. And I just kept wrapping around the thought in my brain of all the farmers that I knew that struggled, that were struggling so much to try and market their product because they just farm, they don't have time to do anything other. I thought, you know what? All right. Maybe there's something to this. So, then I saw farmer a couple days later. This farmer is someone that is very, very dear to dear to me. I consider her like a grandmother. And because she's in her 80s now, and she farms 200 acres by herself.

SG: Oh, my goodness.

LC: And she's like a true, true hero. And not only to me personally, but just to the community, right. And no one would know anything about this because she's so humble. I said to her, "I have this idea, what do you think if I were to take your food and then bring it to a, like a restaurant to a chef," and she's like, "Oh, yes, yes."

SG: [Laughs]

LC: And then try to get me the box. And I was like, “Whoa, whoa, wait, wait. This is conceptual. Like, I haven't thought really any of this through. This has been like a matter of like 36 hours in my head. I have no idea.” And she goes, “I know, but okay, well, just let me know when you're ready to do that.”

LC: And I was like, all right. And then I left. And the next day I called her and I said, “You know what, I'll take that case and give me two more cases.” And I threw them in the bed of my truck, and I drove them to the first restaurant. And that is essentially the grassroots effort of how I started Lettuce Be Local, lettuce, like a head of lettuce. Yes, that's a play on words. Lettuce Be Local. And then I went from one chef with ten farms, and then built that over the course of 12 years to somewhere around roughly 200 farms. And then I was delivering just before the pandemic, I was delivering to about 45 different restaurants and farms and so forth. So, about two and a half to three years in, I finally wrote a business plan. You know, you should do that, right? I had no idea. I mean, in my defense, I did go and sit down with SCORE and the Small Business Association to figure out, like, should I be doing this or is there like, something legally that I need to be doing? I had a good friend who ended up being my accountant. He did all of my articles of organization and got my business through this, all the proper channels that needed to happen so that you pay taxes, right? Because that's really what, what it boils down to.

LC: But I still had no idea what I was doing. I just would wing it every day and even to the end. And in 2019 my - I was already divorced, and I'm now with my, my current partner and he received - kept receiving a phone call from someone in the city that kept bugging him about a project that he was working on or that she wanted him to work on. And I said to him, I go, “Okay, has she called you three separate times or are you just telling me this three separate times because you've forgotten that you've told me already?” And he said, “No, she keeps bugging me.” And I said, “All right, here's the thing. I don't know why you're supposed to meet her,” and I said, “but ultimately, this is something - there's some reason why you need to meet this woman. And I said, regardless of why you think that you don't want to do whatever it is that she thinks, that you think she's going to ask you to do, right. He's a consultant for hospitality. He owns restaurants, you name it. And I said - and everyone goes to him for help in the city or really anywhere in Central Mass or what have you for his expertise. And I said, “go meet her because there's something to this,” and he was like, “Okay, fine.”

LC: So he went and he met her. And in that conversation, she was in the process of going through a multimillion-dollar renovation for an apartment building on Main Street in Worcester and said, “I'm looking to now have there's other spaces below this.” And he goes, “Great, tell me what those are,” and she said, “Well, you know, the residents are up above. And then the first floor should be spaces that would support residents that live above and provide things for them, one of which will be a daycare and then the other location, we're thinking maybe it should be like some sort of grocery store or something,” and he was like, “Tell me more about that”, and she said, “Well, I don't really know, but it should just be like a market where people could get

groceries and get food and whatever,” and he goes, “Great, how do you feel about local food being in that market?” And she said, “Oh my God, that would be amazing,” and he goes, “Great. have you met Lynn from Lettuce Be Local?” And she goes, “I have - I don't know who that is,” and he's like, “Really?” Like there's still people that don't know that. And I was like, all right, well, that's a little obnoxious. But regardless, he said, “You need to meet her and because she will build that market for you.” And then that was in July of 2019.

LC: February of 2020, I opened the doors to Maker on Main, on Main Street and that location. As the first grocery store really in all of Central Mass, especially in Worcester, that supported local food and local makers. The name change came from a couple things. One, it was imperative that when I changed from Lettuce Be Local to Maker to Main, because the vision and the, and the mission was changing slightly in the sense that I wasn't just supporting local food makers, but the goal was to support all makers of local things. So, if the guy who's making dog treats from spent grain from craft breweries in Massachusetts wants to sell the product in the store, well, that fits. That should definitely go in there. Or the woman that makes candles, because that's the new direction that she took her career, great, let's support you too and have a space for that as well. So, it was a maker of all things that were—and small businesses and to support and to incubate even more local businesses to move forward, all in one space within 1700 square feet. Ultimately, Maker to Main was not just bringing makers to Main Street. It was also to bring makers to mainstream, to give them an identity, to project their story and their voice so that as an independent little tiny business, they could be heard in a larger, in a larger scale and to really highlight them.

LC: And also, because Lettuce Be Local was embarking on a trademark. And I had been going through litigation for my trademark for a long time, and ultimately, we needed to make sure that, that Lettuce Be Local trademark did not end up causing any sort of issue with my new landlord and so forth. And so, as a result, we said, “You know what, let's just kind of put Lettuce Be Local on the back burner. Launch a new business, new tax ID number, all of the wonderful things that go along with creating a new business and a new name and then just kind of evolve Lettuce Be Local into Maker to Main.” Because no, in fact, I was not just selling different varieties of lettuce in this new store, which I swear to you, I was asked multiple times [laugh]. So yes, that was the plan, move it to Maker to Main. And the goal was to still operate wholesale, which is deliveries to all of our restaurant partners and schools and breweries and so forth out of that location, as well as now be an area where the average consumer could walk in and get - have access to the same ingredients that I'd been delivering to chefs for the last nine years. And that was the evolution of those two things. And then I guess I should probably mention that that happened three weeks before the pandemic shut down.

HP: I was going to ask, how did the pandemic affect that business?

LC: It was not awesome, not awesome.

HP: Yeah.

LC: Yeah. It was, I was-although what I've gone through in the last probably year and a half is a lot harder, even hard to believe, than what I went through during the pandemic. The pandemic itself, I had to follow the same guidelines as big box grocery stores because there was, there was, there was no rhyme or reason to things, but was like, this is the new mandate. You now need this, and I was like, I don't even use that. Like, I don't even know where I would find this thing, you know, and, and put it - I mean, the space itself was small. We're talking like 1000 ft. I mean, the 800 ft in the back of the house was all refrigeration for a wholesale and a small, you know, small kitchen space and whatnot, but for consumers to walk around. And I was like, is it really necessary to draw lines on the floor for where people - directions where people should go? But hey, all right, we'll do that too. So, it was just really it was hard. It was really hard. I had no staff because all of my staff at that time was mostly mothers or needed working hours or so forth. And, and because we didn't know anything about the pandemic at that time, right. We didn't know, we thought it was contagious through like, like touch. Right, so the-if you can remember back in the day when people - if this was before we wore masks, before we went through that entire experience, we thought you literally could get it by if you touched a pen. And then I touched that pen, I now got it. So that mindset of it being I mean, it was crazy. It was crazy. The things that you, that we went through. But I also didn't realize to the extent of what we went through because my grand opening and ribbon cutting was scheduled for March 17th, which is the day that Governor Baker implemented the stay-at-home mandate.

HP: Oh my gosh.

LC: And so I had the foresight five days earlier that Thursday, prior to that day, to be conversing with people from not only City Hall, but the Chamber and so forth, all the dignitaries that were supposed to be involved in this multi-chamber ribbon cutting event for the first grocery store in downtown. You know what? Maybe we should postpone this. I think that's probably wise because at that point no one knew what we were headed for. Right. And that's what, that's what transpired in that experience. And then I remember on March 17th, walking across the street to unlock the door, and I was the only person there because I had told all of my staff, do not come here. Do not go anywhere. I don't even know what to tell you, but just be safe, we'll be in touch. And I remember standing in the middle of Main Street, for about, I would say it was a good, solid five or six minutes that I stood there.

LC: There was not a single car, there was not a single person. It was the most eerie feeling I've ever experienced. It was literally like being on a set that was supposed to be for a horror movie.

HP: Ghost Town.

LC: Yeah. Yes. And I was like this, and I just started bawling. I thought, what I just opened, what's going to happen? Like, Holy cow, this is awful. And then I started thinking, oh wow, what is going to happen to all of my industry friends, all of these people, all these chefs, all of these servers, these bartenders, people that I've known for years that are in this field. And what ended up happening is over the course of multiple months, my space became, my store became a place

where people came one to feel like they could talk to somebody. And it became more than just a grocery store. It became that place. Not only people had access to food and essentials like toilet paper, which that is a weird thing, right?

SG: [laughs]

LC: But also, the fact that they had access to human interaction. And again, this was all before masks, right. So I remember at one point there was probably ten industry people that were all in the store at the same time. And I was like, and they all generally knew who each other like, or just came because they didn't know what else to do.

LC: And it was a very weird thing. And yet I was very much aware of the fact that I was like, this is the sole point of my store, is to be a community place, not only for access of food, but networking and relationships, because it's always been that way all of these years. And now there's a physical place to invite the general consumer into my, my location. However, I had to stop doing wholesale at that point. Restaurants were closed. They were doing takeout, if they were doing takeout, and they certainly were not using - focused on using local ingredients for special menus or anything at that point. At this point, you're in survival mode. Just make sure that you can keep the doors not open. You know, because they weren't you know, you couldn't have people in your restaurant and all this stuff. So, at this point, I decided to stop doing wholesale altogether. My truck just sat for - refrigerated truck set for months knowing we couldn't use it, and then I started calling farmers and having them - how do I still get your product? How do I backhaul? And then the network of farmers that rose out of that. I had my dairy farmer back-hauling English muffins for me and just like the craziest things that happened during that time period. And that was the true testament of like, it wasn't - I was not aware of the fact of what was happening on a global scale where Big Y or Price Chopper or whatever had nothing on their shelves because I'm, I'm fielding phone calls, being the only person in here in the store. People are like, "Do you have onions?" And I'm like, "Yeah." And, "Do you have toilet paper?" And I'm like, "Yes," "Do you have flour? And I'm like, "Like fresh cut flowers or do you need like baking flour?" And they're like, "Baking flour," I'm like "Yes. And I also have fresh cut flowers too." And they're like, "I'll be right there." I'm like, why? And I was getting these phone calls. I had no idea that was what was happening outside, because all I was doing was just keep my business alive and myself alive, right. So that ultimately led to people discovering me. And then we launched the online ordering platform, which was an absolute disaster. Absolute nightmare. Didn't register well with our inventory that was currently in the store and then but once it happened, the tickets just poured out of the machine and then we were like, literally with the ticket walking around being like, okay, and two pounds of onions and then three pounds of carrots. It was awful, awful. And then and the refunds that we had to constantly do because, oh my God, we no, we never put any of the refrigerated items in their box. And at 5:00, the line down Main Street for people to pull up to pick up their curbside food, it was I don't wish that experience on anybody and anybody that went through that experience with me.

LC: Man, good for you. Like, good for you for sticking through it because it was awful. And it was and it was just me for that for the first ten days until I called the chef and I said, “Listen, I know you do not have a job right now.” And he was like, “Yeah, it's like a weird position.” I was like, “Dude, we will talk about that later. I need you to help me.” And he was like, “What do you need?” I was like, “Come to the store in the morning, meet me here at nine a.m. it is a disaster.” And he was like “No sweat, I'll come and help you.” And that's what happened. He worked for me for, for three months to get me through that launch. Myself, him and one other, one other person and that's how he made it through the beginning stages of three months of the pandemic. And, and I still had two restaurants that bought from me wholesale and picked up their order every week and the rest. And then because that did not matter to them, they were like, we - you can't get this like distributors. Oh my God, the food system was falling apart. But local food, yeah because when you need something and you have a relationship with somebody, you just call them and they answer the phone.

LC: It's amazing how that works. You don't have to go through this long list of people and, you know, constantly for press - press one for so and so, you know, you just get a person on the phone and it worked out. So, I decided to relaunch once things like I forget how it worked, like there was different phases of who could reopen during the pandemic, and I decided to relaunch in the summer of that year to try and relaunch wholesale. And it was awful, like it was just I went, I, you know, I ended up having a person that was a driver. She was committed, she was awesome, she was picking up all of our farm products. She's bringing, doing deliveries, whatever. She was amazing. The next woman, the next two women. Interesting, they're all women. But they're all they all were amazing, amazing employees, had great, great experience. And then finally in 2021, I said, that's it, no more wholesale. I said, we're just going to stop the bleeding, at this point, the restaurant industry is an absolute disaster. This fine dining experience or that people are looking for is a thing of the past and that's not going to continue to happen anymore. And then in 2023, which was last year. In March, I announced the closure of Maker to Main on Main Street, temporarily, because we were going to move to the new location at 162 Harding Street and still be called Maker to Main.

LC: Because it's not about Main Street, it's about mainstream. I had to tell the press that numerous times. The - and I said, we're going to temporarily close, we're going to be closed for a couple of months because we're going to build out a space that's two times the size or two and a half times the size, and include a commercial kitchen so that we can finally offer prepared foods, which is something that was very important to everybody. And that will reintroduce more products and so forth. And exactly six months to the day, closed on March 22nd in 2023 on Main Street, and then on September 22nd, 2023, I opened on Harding Street. And it was awful, it was so hard, it was so hard. So much time had gone by between the time that I closed, the time that I reopened that I had, it did not occur to me that I was essentially starting another business all over again versus just temporarily closing because people forgot about us. And although I solved all the problems, had a parking lot, which I'm sure in Worcester, you know, is not, that is a sore subject. Had plenty of parking, first floor, handicap accessibility, which I had previously, and then I had a lot of individuals that that I was very meticulous about making sure that our space

was ADA compliant and always because we had such a huge amount of individuals that shopped with us that, that required that.

LC: So, I was very mindful in the construction process about that. The - and then we opened with the kitchen. We launched, we had lunch, we did all these prepared meals so forth, to the point where my other half, who was the chef and culinary expertise behind all of it, was like, "For the love of God, people just keep buying all of the prepared meals, and that's all I can do is just make prepared meals." And I was like, "I'm not seeing the problem here." And - but it didn't, it was - it cost so much more than I had anticipated. The construction process took almost four times the length of what I thought it was going to, and the delays of getting those things for construction were significantly worse than I had anticipated after this pandemic experience. And so, on January 27th of this year, I closed the doors finally for, for good, to Maker to Main. And that was hard, really hard. So here now I sit here thinking, man now what do I do with my life? I've been an entrepreneur and a business owner for 12 years, and I've been solely working on making local food accessible in addition to all of these other things. But now I'm at a different crossroads, I would say, in my life. And so I'm guessing I either tell you about what the crossroads is, or you ask me another question and we'll get to that.

HP: This question kind of relates to what you just said. How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life, and do you have any regrets?

LC: Oof! No, I don't really have any regrets. I don't. I mean, I probably did some stupid things when I was a teenager or in college. That probably not the best decisions, but that might be the only regret that I have. But I generally feel that although being a type A, controlling, OCD personality, I don't really regret even the hardships that I have gone through. I'm a firm believer that those hardships build character, and you have to experience those things in order to grow. And my - as I have said, whether we want to call it that, my business failed or whatever, even though that's how I refer to it, like I refer to it as my business failing, I am reminded frequently that it did not fail, and in fact, it just was too soon for Worcester. And that had I been like a year and a half later, that my business would still be open and vibrant and so forth, especially with the amount of residential units that are coming on board in the Canal District and how things are continuing to modify and change and grow in the landscape is changing in the city and so forth. All of those things sound great, but when you - when it boils down to it, the fact of the matter is a specialty grocery store and the margins that you have to survive are so minimal. And our inflation is so out of whack, coupled with the cost of goods and labor costs, that margin is even far and far is so, so small.

LC: And so perhaps it's not possible to do that kind of, that kind of mission, unless you can do it in a way that you have so much buying power. Because essentially, as a lot of people like to say, I was like a Whole Foods for the area. I was a small what Whole Foods used to be a million years ago when they were originally called Bread and Circus, a million years before they got bought out by Amazon, when they were - when they were just a couple from California. And that started this little business and then grew it into this other business, then sold it to Jeff Bezos.

They - that Whole Foods and, and myself, Maker to Main, might have been buying product at the - or selling product at the same price to the consumer. Certainly, I was not buying it at the same price because I don't have - didn't have the ability to buy - that buying power that they could have - that they had. So ultimately is that a scenario for small businesses, like, do I think that - I don't know. I think that I'm still conflicted of whether that of my business potentially could make it or diversify enough in a way that it might be possible. I mean, certainly co-ops exist, right? That's a whole other process and nonprofit experience. But as a for-profit entity, and I think only in time I will begin to recognize whether that would ever be fruitful, no pun intended. But I also think that I don't, I don't have any regrets about it.

LC: And I think to myself, why would I have gone through six agonizing months to close a business, construct and build out a new business, only to then four months later, completely close it again? That's insane. That's absolute like craziness. But I think there's a couple reasons. One, the area I genuinely believe, really, truly needs a grocery store there, and perhaps my crazy ambition to pioneer a path to make that happen will inspire somebody else to do it and then make it happen and be successful at it. And two, I would say relationships because the people that not only that I hired to be part of my team there, are coincidentally all in this situation of like re-finding themselves, similar in age, similar in life lessons and goals and, and just kind of teetering through life right now trying to figure out what direction they should be heading in. And so, as a result, I am making it my personal mission to help them all individually feel like they can be successful in their next steps. And I wouldn't have been able to have that opportunity had I not gone through four months of agony with this location. And also, I think that provides opportunities for other aspects, not only of my life personally, but things that are starting to present themselves when - within the city and other, other things. I don't know if I can really elaborate on that at this point, but...Okay, maybe we'll read about that in the news someday.

MC: I was also wondering, like what initially like, got you passionate about, like local food, because I know you said before you even started the business, like that was something that you, like valued.

LC: Yeah. So, I love to eat, like, I just am - I love to eat, but I remember being - very funny in the early days of me starting Lettuce Be Local because my parents would often, like people would ask her, farmers would ask her, and chefs would ask her like, "Oh, so Lynn, go to school for - for like culinary. Or she went to school for farming." And my parents were like, "no, no." And in fact, and my mom, who would be like, "No. In fact, she didn't even know how to boil water when she was in college, you know?" And I'm like, all right, that's cool. But I think just the I felt like I, I when I left teaching dance and I left that my, the studio that I was involved in when I was, I was a kid, I was in, you know, I was a young adult. I was - started - left college and was working and no longer could afford to also work and then drive an hour and a half to the dance studio for like, a, you know, a couple hours and so forth. When I left the dance studio officially, there was a big void in my life because not only did that scenario provide me with the satisfaction of like you know, the high that you get from performing in that experience and being involved with that. I knew that I was having a direct, positive impact on the students in my class

and all of my classes, and that was, I was aware of that, and I was very much that was very important to me.

LC: And so, I felt like not only do I not have the opportunity to relieve stress anymore through dance by like me going through routines and creating choreography for that experience. So, I need to find an outlet of some sense. And that's why I started to gravitate, gravitate towards gardening. And I was just living this little apartment that was like 400 square feet, not even. It was like an old two car garage that was converted. Coincidentally, it was in my future father-in-law's house. That and that's essentially how I met my husband or ex-husband, I should say. You know, things happen in weird ways. But yeah, this guy, just his son just kept showing up, and then he never left. But then ultimately - and I just had these few pots of, like, herbs and garden and, and just, like, was gardening out of little pots because that's what I had when I had my first little apartment by myself outside of college. And I really enjoyed it and then I would just start reading about it, and then I just took an interest in, like, learning about it. And it didn't occur to me I was working at the time I was living in Dudley, and I was working for the Beechwood Hotel as their director of sales and catering, well I was assistant director, I think I was hired in, like, within a week, I became director of sales and then director of sales and catering.

LC: And then I was there for five years, and I and I started to get really interested in gardening, and then I realized, well, wait, I bet you there's other people that are better at this than I am. So, I started to go to farmers markets and started meeting and talking to people and listening and hearing what farmers had to say. And that's when I met my favorite farmer, who all - I will deny to any other farmer that I have a favorite farmer. But that there's no doubt, I mean, I love her so much, like, like I said, she's like a grandmother to me. And just started listening to her, she's been a farmer her whole life. Her, her, her father owned a dairy farm, like every farmer in this, in this area. You know, every, every farm was, was a dairy farmer. And yeah, it was, it was just an interesting, an interesting conversation with her and just learned a lot about it. And then I started to, shortly thereafter, at the hotel we were going to launch to create this new farm to table experience restaurant, which didn't really exist in Worcester. Certainly, Armsby Abbey was on the forefront of making that happen as was Cedar Street Restaurant, which coincidentally was in Sturbridge and coincidentally, my other half owned that restaurant at this - at that time, unbeknownst to me. And then I just thought, well, this doesn't exist. And I see all the problems that happen. So put two and two together.

MC: Yeah.

LC: Fix it. Yeah. There's a broken problem.

SG: Do you still like to garden?

LC: Yeah, sure, sure. I - you know, I think I might again now that I'm not working 90 hours a week, although I know there's a lot of things that are being thrown at me right now that look like really great volunteer opportunities. Although, the conversation I just left before I got here, she

was like, “Don't do that. Don't do that. Do not sign up for every single possible thing to volunteer.” And I was like, “Oh, it might be too late.” But yeah, so I think I probably will do it again. Yeah, once I have time, sure, yeah.

HP: Have you been involved in any volunteer or community work like before or...

LC: Yeah, like stupid amount. To the point where I think that starts young with you, right. So, when I was like in middle school, I was, you know, class president and, you know, whatnot. When I was a kid, when I was in high school, I was, you know I was you know, the head of student council. I was on a state student council, a national student council. I went to leadership conferences all over the country. I just, just, like, crazy, crazy involved in all the things. Plus, I did theater, plus, you know, and I had good grades, like, shockingly did all that. And I - when I was a kid, I was 15 years old and I got a friend to bring me to the local radio station, and I interned when I was 15. And then I produced the morning show - originally went, that's why I went to school for communications, because I was in radio at first. And so, I got - and I remember the very first day that I interned for the radio station, which was WINY, INY in Putnam [Putnam, Connecticut] and Gary O., who is the morning jockey at the time, who is now the owner, said, “so what are you looking to do here? And Lynn, introduce yourself.” And so, I leaned into the mic and I said, “I'm going to do your job.” That was my introduction. And then within a couple of years, I got the afternoon slot and I was the disc jockey for the drive at five. So, and that's, I think, having goals without - and of course being female, right. You're always coming up against the fact that like if you're confident you're perceived negatively and so forth, you get all of that. Go for it every time, go for it. Absolutely, if you believe in it, absolutely go for it.

MC: That's amazing.

HP: We can move on to a little bit of, like, politics.

LC: Oh, God. All right, all right. You asked about volunteer opportunities. I would say most recently too, I was, so, when I left you know, radio, went to college, all of those things. When I came here, I was very actively involved in the Chamber not only in the Worcester Chamber, but also in the Corridor 9, our regional chamber, Corridor 9/495 regional chamber. And I ended up chairing their young professionals group for eight years. I was part of their school to business program that they offered through the Chamber, where you're just kind of mentoring students and so forth through the school system and, and trying to help schools connect to the business community and vice versa. And then I also was on their board for four years. So that took up a lot of my time in addition. And that was all really before I launched Lettuce Be Local. But that helped me build a network, and I still did all of that while I owned my business, even though my business didn't really operate in the towns that they, they represented. It didn't matter to me because I felt like what I was doing was still vital and important to the community, even though I didn't necessarily live in that area and I didn't really work in that area. I never really looked at it

as a way to like, well, I'll build my business this way. But coincidentally, I did end up building my business because of those relationships and, and through volunteering.

HP: So, do you consider yourself active politically?

LC: Well, no, I try very - remember when I said I don't want anyone to know about my favorite farmer? Yeah, that's very political. Like, you just even-keel all the way. Everything is great. No. It's best I, I definitely try to keep myself out of that. And yeah, I try not to like have any. I don't create waves as far as that's concerned. Yeah. Especially because this is such a hot political climate right now and has been for quite a few years [laughs] Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

HP: What role has religion played in your life or if any role?

LC: Not really. No, I wouldn't say although, I would say too like to me, it doesn't matter to me. Like it just if that's what you believe, great.

HP: Are you, like, spiritual at all or just nothing?

LC: Like. Not really. No, no, I mean, I was raised my father was raised in the Catholic school. And then- but he's actually Buddhist now. And my mother is a born again Christian, but was - she started, was Protestant and then really became a born again Christian, but not really. Like she doesn't go to church or anything either. I was raised Protestant, as with my sister and yeah, my sister is, is pagan now, so I don't know. Yeah, we-it's great. And yet we're really a tight knit family. So to me, does not matter. Any of it. Yeah.

SG: So we are going to kind of take a (health??), do you guys have a time limit?

HP: No, or do you want to do these, it doesn't matter, you can pick.

SG: So you mentioned how the pandemic affected your business. Did it affect your family in any way?

LC: Oh, as far as, like, would anyone get it?

SG: Did anyone get it or...

LC: Oh, yeah, we got it all. We got it all the time. It's interestingly, I think I've had Covid probably three or four times in the course of four years. My sister coincidentally had had Covid before we knew what Covid was. And just couldn't figure out why she was so sick and kept, like, going to the E.R. over and over and over, and why she couldn't breathe and couldn't stop coughing. And we had no idea that that was the case. And then my dad, we're like, we, we joke in the family now. We're like, Dad's had Covid so many times, it's like, good Lord, we're like, Dad's had Covid for like six months straight now, you know? But my parents are, are world travelers.

They, they have - that was very important to them and their entire life. It was also important to them that they did that with us growing up. Even though my parents couldn't really afford a lot. We had no idea going on, like, little vacations that meant, like, put all the stuff in the car, we're driving down the East Coast. We had no idea that it was like we just thought, that's what people do. And so, they have always made it a point to constantly travel and whatnot. And then and they tried to do it as much as possible, within reason. A lot of their trips got rescheduled and so forth during this, especially during the beginning of the pandemic. But yeah, but luckily, no one in our immediate family has passed from, from Covid. And yeah. It's and even I mean-but Bill and I would get it frequently and be like -Oh, great. You know, and then I would be like, literally. And we wouldn't know half the time, right. This is awful. Like I just had it again like in the fall at work. And then I'm like calling him. He's not answering. I'm calling my store manager. She's not answering. And I'm like, oh my God. So, I look at the camera and the two of them are talking together and I'm like, this is not helpful. And so, and I'm just finally and I'm like, someone answer the phone. And so, and then he finally answers the phone and he's like, "What's wrong?" and I'm like, "I have Covid." And he was like, "Oh God, what? Seriously?" And I was like, I, I and I had tested for five days negative all the way and the fifth day positive. And then I was like, oh, he's like, "What do you want me to do?" And I was like, "Are you (new??)? Go get a test." And he was like, "I feel fine." I was like, "That is the dumbest answer." And he went and got test and he's like, "I'm fine. I'm negative." I'm like, "Great." But. So no, no one in my family was impacted. Although my sister, health wise had breast cancer during the pandemic, which was really hard because not only could she not get all of the Covid the vaccinations she now is battling you know, cancer and that process of being in a facility for chemo while there's a pandemic. Awful, awful time. Yeah.

SG: I can't imagine that.

LC: No.

SG: So how do you get through the tough times with your business or with anybody within your family? And then what kind of thoughts keep you going?

LC: Wow.

HP: That's a deep question.

LC: Yeah, that's what-you should have led with that. How do you get through it? Man, I don't know. I'm not, I, I would say, well, one would be a support system, right? Not only a support system of Bill is - excuse me, is a very much a solution-oriented individual who often times when I'm like, this is happening, blah, blah, blah. And he's like, great, okay, you should probably try to consider doing this, this or this. And sometimes I'm like, dude, just venting, I don't need a solution now, which is a good part of communicating. You learn the hard way in a relationship. And I'm like, I don't need help. I just need you to sit there and listen to me yell right now. I'm not yelling at you. I'm just yelling at life in general. And so, there's a very hard lesson to learn

initially, and he's been a great support system. I am also very fortunate that, as are my parents that they know literally my mom. I said, I think at one point in my life, more than one point in my life mentioned to me, she's like, oh God, please stop. Please don't share any more information with me. I realized that I - you're telling me this, but I'm your mother. Like, I don't necessarily need to -want - I don't want to know all of these things. And I'm like, tough. It's tough, you're going to sit there and listen to what I have to say.

LC: So support system is huge, but I have a lot of small business friends that- it's vital that when you own a business, it's a very, very lonely experience and you feel like although you're doing maybe doing something great or your mission is awesome, or you're just trying to survive every day, that that grind of getting through that is really, really weighing. And it can be very, very lonely how you feel that way. And it and the, the conversation I came from to this interview when I met, just met with someone, she's worked in an industry in a non-profit organization for a very, very long time. And a lot of the things that she was saying to me about some of the struggles that she's going through and that she goes through in particular, are no different than when an entrepreneur goes through. And I said to her, I go, "You - you're doing what, what we do, what crazies do. And I was like, stop doing that to yourself." I was like, "Stop," and then she was like, "I don't know, but I don't know how to do this," and I was like, "You have to let go. You - you have to trust that you've delegated to somebody and have them take ownership of it. Don't come back and try and take ownership of them and their job."

LC: And she was like, "Okay," and I said, "You're going to you're just going to dig your, your hole deeper and deeper and you will not get out of that." And, and I think that is a lot of what I'm here to do and that is probably what keeps me moving forward. Right, is those conversations that I'm allowed, that I allow myself to have to be inspired by farmers and the crazy that they go through and in the chefs and what they go through, or the small business owners and what they go through, or just the average - just being human and listening to other people's stories and allowing them to share. That motivates me in a way not to be like, well, glad my life doesn't stink as much as theirs. It's not that, it's more like there's a real human empathy to that, that it can be very empowering. And the pandemic taught us a lot about human empathy and unfortunately, we might have a case of amnesia as a culture, as a society, that how quickly we forgot some of the ways to be kind to one another. But really, it just starts with that, just starts with, just - it's really not hard. It's really not hard because everyone's going through something and you have no idea what they're going through based on what they wear on their face. Just that's what probably motivates me to move forward.

SG: Okay. So based on your life experience, what advice would you give women of today and future generations?

LC: Man, you guys are the hard questions.

SG: [laughs]

LC: What advice? Okay, well, I would say there's a couple different things, right? So, women in general, I think I hit on this a little bit earlier, is that when you show a lot of confidence you are perceived as aggressive, as a jerk, as whatever stereotype comes your way when you have a position of authority or you have confidence, right? You have skill, you have talent, anything, right? You just exist, you are a threat to people that are insecure, and really, that's all it boils down to. It's just your ability to make someone else feel less insecure. And oftentimes, just as women in general, when we hold a position of power or authority, men in general are threatened by that only because they don't know how to respond to that. And I will once again give that statement credit to Bill, my other half, because when I opened Maker to Main and I would run into all these issues with HVAC with - not as many issues with HVAC as I did with like equipment malfunctioning, not working properly and so forth. The amount of pushback that I got from contractors coming in, and there'd be a guy- Bill's like, "I'm-all right. There's a guy's on his way. He's going to come over. He'll be there at eight a.m. tomorrow." Whatever the case may be, he got - for whatever reason, Bill knew a guy, still knows a guy. For every single thing that you could possibly need in the world, he's got someone for it, and if he doesn't, he'll find out.

LC: He's like a wealth of knowledge and resource. But he's not threatened by women of authority. And he's always said he's like, "I will happily be a full-time volunteer or cat dad by you doing all the work. That'd be great. That sounds great. You want to go off to work and you can afford to do so? That'd be great." And granted, that's not his demeanor either. He would not just sit home. But with that, he, he gave me I - the lesson that I had to learn and, and continue to have to learn over and over and over again is that when I was dealing with contractors and men that were in - just would push back on me and say well, "Where's the owner?" And I'm like, "I'm the owner," and they're like, "Oh, well, who's the guy that I was talking to?" And I was like, "There's no guy, I'm the owner." And, the things and how they would speak to me, I would, I would lose my mind. And then he would lose his mind and he would flip out to the point where he would call the owner and go, "I don't know who you sent, but if I ever see this man, I will lose it. He's never to come in contact with her ever again." And, and the owner of the business would be like, "Oh my word. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." He's like, "I'm not necessarily blaming you, but I'm letting you know that this is unacceptable." And he would always come to my defense.

LC: And there are those people out there that will help you, that are guys that are not as insecure. But he is the one that told me that. I said, "Why does this keep happening to me? I am the owner. Why does this keep happening?" And he said, "Men are stupid, Lynn, men are stupid. They just don't know how. They've never had that role model in their life. They've never experienced it and when they meet a woman that knows what she's talking about or is willing to be open to learn, they don't know how to respond that way. And they oftentimes, especially if it's a woman," he said, "that's attractive. Forget it. Even more so, all off bets. All bets are off. And he said, so. Instead, they try to macho their way up and push you around." And I'm like, "This is not this is this is infuriating. But I appreciate the fact that you tell me that it's because of somebody else's insecurity that I'm now dealing with their demeanor in that way. And I said, so now as a result, I will handle that differently." And so, I think that's the thing, is that when you find yourself in a position of a difficult one, it's the most important to empathize with the other

person, because that will give you a different perspective on how to meet them halfway, and you may not have to meet them halfway ultimately, but if it feels like you're being empathetic to them, not belittling them. But if you're being empathetic to that individual in a way that you're listening, you're compassionate, they'll relax a little bit and not feel as threatened.

LC: And that's the easiest way to come to compromise or to get your point across. If you do it combatively, you won't get anywhere. And that ultimately, I think, is the biggest lesson a woman possibly can learn, because it'll always be a man's world, it'll never change. But women are powerhouses and deserve the same opportunities and the same pay and the same respect that a man does. It's just that a man is too insecure to possibly show that. And so, once again, the woman has to be the one to figure out how to settle that, to make the man feel better about that situation. It's awful. Do I foresee it getting better? No, but do I think that there's opportunities and hope for us? Yeah, because it's already proven, women are doing amazing things and in ways that in some often cases can be better than men, right? The fact that I could lift hundreds of pounds of produce and drive a refrigerated truck. That is perceived not a woman's job, and that I employed mostly women to work with me, actually all women except for the last time. Yeah, I'm just thinking about, like, I had hired one guy, which was great because he was tall. He could reach everything up high, but that's it, yeah. Women deserve equal pay and equal rights and equal opportunity. I just, I don't know that we'll ever get there, but doesn't mean that we can't keep fighting for it.

HP: All right.

MC: Yeah, yeah. Thank you so much.

LC: Yeah. You're, you're welcome [laughs].