

Interviewee: Jennifer Freed
Interviewers: Anna Murphy and Jocelyn Nguyen
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Abstract: Jennifer Freed grew up in Stow, Massachusetts and received a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Yale University. After college, Jennifer taught English learning skills in the People's Republic of China. It was there where she discovered her love of teaching which led to her teaching English as a Second Language in the United States. She is married and worked as a teacher in Boston until the oldest of her two daughters was born. Jennifer and her family moved to the Worcester area, residing in Holden, MA, when her husband got a job working at UMass Medical. Jennifer shares the personal struggles she faced when taking on the role of stay-at-home mom, but she states that she does not regret this decision. When both of her daughters started school, she was able to begin teaching again in a volunteer setting at the Worcester Refugee Assistance Program where she taught English to refugees from Myanmar for five to six years. Jennifer is also a published writer, and she shares that her writing is an important way to help her process experiences through reflective journal entries that can later be tamed into published pieces. She is a member of the Worcester County Poetry Association and winner of the 2022 Frank O'Hara Prize.

AM: An overall explanation of what we're gonna be doing – it says we are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics/community involvement. We want to focus today on experiences in your career as a writer. Thank you so much for your help with this important project! Alright.

JF: Good!

AM: Yeah, so that's the overall gist of this. So, our first part of this interview is gonna be more general, family, kind of where you grew up part of the questions. I want to note that you disclosed in your bio sheet that there's some information you would not want to disclose and that's totally fine, so if we get to a question you're uncomfortable with just feel free to say you want to skip it and we'll move on.

JF: Okay.

AM: Our first question is what is your full name including both maiden name and married name if applicable?

JF: My current name is my maiden name; I didn't see any reason to change my name so. That's my name.

AM: Fair, awesome. Thanks for sharing. When were you born?

JF: Do I have to tell you that [Laughs]?

AM: No [Laughs]!

JF: I guess I'm really wary of identity theft issues and if someone had my name and my birthdate then they could get information, and my mother has twice been a victim and so I - if it's not necessary I prefer not to say it. I mean you can guess that I'm in my 50s if that helps.

AM: That's totally fine, absolutely. No worries at all.

JF: Okay.

AM: Great, do you have any children?

JF: I have two daughters.

AM: Great! Nice! What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with?

JF: Wow, I think America is such a mixture, but I guess because my father is Jewish, I always grew up knowing I had that on his side, but in the Jewish religion if it's not your mother then you don't count as Jewish, so I think I always identified as an outsider.

AM: Oh.

JF: On my mother's side she's Italian but not the kind of Italian you see on tv. So, you know, with the big families and pasta at every meal and that stereotype. She's not, so. Yeah.

AM: Thank you for sharing. I want to note you said you felt like kind of an outsider, can you go into a little bit more about like specifics of why you felt that way?

JF: I grew up in Stowe, Massachusetts, which is a little town in - it's near Concord and Lexington and Acton, that area of Massachusetts and I think everybody I knew was Catholic or Protestant. And so, I didn't really know about that religion because my parents - when they got married it was 1959 and at that time it was unheard of or very uncommon for the religions to mix or for a Jewish person to marry in Italian person. And my parents had agreed when they married that they would not - in my mother's words, inculcate my brother or me in either religion and they would let us choose when we got old enough, but I think they were a little naive because their version of not doing that was not teaching us anything so we couldn't really choose because

we didn't know anything about anything. So, I guess when my friends would say something about communion or Sunday school, I just didn't even know what that was, I just knew they did it. And when – I don't know how old I was, I was younger than ten but maybe near ten, it was only then I realized Easter had to do with Jesus. I thought it was only about eggs and candy. So just little things like that I always knew that I didn't know what my friends were aware of and I also knew that if I said I was Jewish I could get a bad reaction. I went to a summer camp for a week and at the end of the week a little girl that was my best friend the whole time was like, "Oh I'll miss you so so much, maybe your mother can drive you to my house and we can still play together," and then she said just like naturally, "But not if you're Jewish, my mother hates Jews." So, for wherever she grew up that was a perfectly okay thing to say and so I just realized that it's not always a good thing to say that you... yeah so. And so that all—that doesn't—I think some people are still dealing with that now although it's probably a lot better. But my father grew up as a Jewish person in Worcester and he was chased around and bullied for being a Jewish person in Worcester, so you know, those things.

AM: You mentioned how your parents didn't necessarily teach you much about different religions and I'm curious to know if as you got older you kinda looked into anything or if that kind of affected your faith life in general.

JF: Yeah, as I got older I just, more of as a philosophy or more for just informational purposes to know – just to know. When I was able to look things up on my own I did, or—I had a college boyfriend, this is another weird thing so I'm in college, I have a boyfriend, he said to me at some point that he cared about me a lot, but he couldn't help it, I was going to go to hell. And I was like what? And he said, "Well yeah I mean you don't follow Jesus Christ," and I was like, "How could you even be with me if you think I'm that defiled or whatever?" And fortunately, I had a good friend in my dormitory whose father was a Lutheran minister and I asked her what her take on that comment was and she said that was absurd and she being the daughter of a Lutheran minister – at least I knew Lutherans were not judgy – but when I encountered that kind of conversation I would look things up just to understand why people were saying what they were saying. I was also in high school when somebody told me that I was responsible for Jesus' death. You know, because, well, Easter times Jews killed Jesus they claimed. All of this, you haven't heard any of that? No yeah, it's still around, its yeah. It's kind of weird, you know, we didn't go to a synagogue or a temple and there were no other Jewish people in our town so I didn't have a community of peers that I could say, "Hey are you experiencing this?" But yeah, if you look into it you'll find its still - some of the very very old ultra-right conservatives will still say things like that, I mean. Like what was that chant in South Carolina when there was the demonstration [Charlottesville, VA 2017] when [Donald] Trump was still president and there was a woman who got runover? And I think the chant, what was it, "Jews will not replace us." So, there were a lot of white supremacists walking around saying - thinking that Jews had a secret plot to replace non-jews.

AM: Wow, I'm sorry to hear that. Thank you for sharing.

JF: Look up Father Coughlin (C-O-U-G-H-L-I-N) he was a prominent preacher in, around World War II but he had millions of followers. He was I think French Canadian but then he moved to – I don't even remember which state - in this country. And he had so many followers and when I mentioned that my father was bullied, he said it was especially bad after Father Coughlin would give one of his sermons. So yeah.

JN: So, you mentioned that your father went to school in Worcester. Did you grow up in Worcester too?

JF: No, I grew up in Stow. Yeah, Stow, Massachusetts

JN: So then how did you become affiliated with Worcester?

JF: I guess because we came to live here because – we don't live there now – when my husband got a job at UMass Medical then we moved to the Worcester area, and we actually were not in Worcester we were in Holden which is just north.

JN: Then, living here or in Holden when you were like around, what challenges do you think Worcester had and have you seen any changes?

JF: I think Holden is [laughs] - I hope nobody takes offense at this- it can be very insular, and people can make comments which – so before we moved to Holden we lived in Boston, my husband and I. And I taught multi-ethnic, multi-cultural English language classes to adults and I lived in China and I taught English so I love cultural mixes and differences and I find it really interesting how different people react to similar situations and how their culture informs their reactions and when I moved to Holden I guess I just thought, “Oh Massachusetts, it'll be similar it's still the same state.” But I found that people would make more comments that seemed to imply they were not very tolerant of nonwhite people. Not everyone would say that, some people didn't but that was one thing that I didn't like. I don't know if things have improved. I took a pottery class at the Worcester JCC [Jewish Community Center] right up the street from you guys and one of the other people in the class was – she was adopted, she was African American but very sort of light skinned, and she was adopted by a Jewish family and grew up in New York. And she said that she moved to Worcester because she was in a relationship and her white boyfriend encouraged her to come to Worcester. She's also a paramedic. And she said she was astonished at the difference in how she was treated as a person, a female of color - a paramedic female of color in Worcester as compared to in New York. Her boyfriend cared about her, but he didn't know how to prepare her because he wouldn't have encountered that kind of stuff. So, I think Worcester may still have – I didn't live in Worcester, but I think race is something we all need to learn to talk about more and to recognize differences and to recognize that we may be saying things we don't even realize are coming out of our mouths. The question was what, have I noticed changes or improvements?

JN: Yeah.

JF: Well, living there 20 years, I don't know if I've noticed changes. If there were changes, they were slow. Certainly, Worcester has gotten, there's been a turnover in real estate and things are getting a little bit spiffed up but then people who lived in the lower rents are becoming homeless so I don't know if it's always well-organized, but I don't know if I can speak to that very well.

JN: Yeah, what would you change about the city if you could?

JF: Probably the things that I have already mentioned. Oh, I know, more public transportation. I think, speaking more of Holden, it's this town with a lot of woods and a lot of beauty but you can't walk anywhere because there aren't sidewalks. It's not safe there aren't enough sidewalks and so that just forces every person that's home with kids to be a minivan mom, but I do know that the amount of public transportation especially for seniors has decreased. Some other people that I was teaching were refugees and if they needed to go to a doctor's office that would be a 20-minute drive, it could take them 2 hours because they'd have to take one bus and then wait half an hour for the second bus and so on. If they missed one of the buses that was bad. It's huge in terms of pollution, environment, and taking care of people who need access to services and if you're a poor person without language skills you're probably working a minimum wage job so that means you don't have time to take a full day off to go to a standard doctor's appointment so that affects work force and employment and family economics. So, it has many tendrils reaching in all directions.

AM: Absolutely.

JN: Specifically looking at women's experiences, what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been like generally?

JF: I have no idea how to answer that because A. I didn't live in Worcester I lived in Holden, but I suppose women's experiences in Worcester are similar to women's experiences everywhere.

AM: Makes sense yeah, great. Thank you for that. We're going to move on to asking you a few questions about your career and education in general. So, we'll start off with where did you attend school?

JF: I went to Yale.

AM: Oh nice. What were the names of the programs you were a part of, like your major and like what degree you got?

JF: I got a BA in philosophy.

AM: Alright, nice. Did you attend graduate school?

JF: No.

AM: What were some challenges that you faced in your education?

JF: At the time I didn't see them as challenges. Looking back as an adult with kids – one's 20 one's 22 – which as an adult, I realized that there were things that probably nowadays would have been considered inappropriate like professors or coaches flirting with women athletes. But I think at the time it was kind of wonderful going from a small town which was not diverse to a university that was extremely diverse. So I was happy, and I liked also being able to say no I don't want to go party I have to study and everybody would be like that's cool but if you said that in my high school it would be like what's wrong with you why don't you want to get drunk, so drunk that you forget all the fun you had? So that was nice. Trying to think of challenges. I mean there was a strike in the dining hall – there were – I think it just was life, it was learning to grow up. It didn't feel awful, it just felt like this is what things are.

AM: After you finished up education, what were your options career-wise?

JF: Well as a philosophy major [laughs], people would say that philosophy majors can go to law school or any kind of grad school because if you major in philosophy, it shows that you know how to think and analyze and argue. So, I could have done those things, but I actually didn't want to. I've been in school for my whole life, and I wanted to see the world, so I took the opportunity to teach—to join a program that was inviting people to teach English language skills in the People's Republic of China. So, I did that. And I discovered that I loved it, I loved teaching. And so that's why I then, when I came back after a year I actually worked as an administrative assistant for a couple years but eventually I taught English as a Second Language in this country.

AM: Awesome, can you share a little bit about your experience in China teaching English language learning students?

JF: I was teaching colleges sophomores. They reasoned at the Chinese government, as you know, it can be closed to foreign workers because at that time too it was maybe more closed in some ways than now. So, they invited native speakers of English because there was a national English exam that required all students to have a certain level of proficiency. But this was kind of a bureaucratic decision with no understanding of language skills so they shipped us in to be native speakers, but they would only allow us to teach listening because that was on the test, but they wouldn't allow us to teach speaking because that wasn't on the test. So, that was a kind of an interesting challenge: how do you teach people to listen without teaching them to speak? We were allowed to teach writing but we weren't supposed to teach reading because reading could be taught by the native teachers- the teachers that were Chinese and they could teach so they specifically wanted us to record listening comprehension tapes and then there would be four bubbles and the students would have to answer and we got x square x saying - making up stupid three line dialogues and four questions that might or might not be correct answers so that was

interesting. It was also interesting to be in a part of China where there was no heat in winter because it was south so that they decided they didn't need to spend money on heat. I learned how bad pollution can be and how important it is to have air quality control. Cause here, where I am right now, it's cold today. The sky is blue and there are no clouds, and if you go outside, you don't start coughing. But in the winter there, and also in the winter in – I also taught in Czechoslovakia – there's a lot of burning of coal and the moment you go outside you feel a constriction it's in here. And your nose even feels like, "Oooh something's weird," and you don't want to breathe in too deeply and everything is gray. The building -if you paint your house white, it will be grey by the end of the – a year or two. So, there's a lot of particulate matter just from burning coal or wood with no regulations. What else did I learn? I learned to take things for what they were and not for what I wanted them to be. So, if you go for a year without bread [laughs], maybe you'll find something made out of rice flour and it looks kind of like bread. But you don't take it as "Oh, here's bread" and "Oh gee it doesn't taste like bread I'm disappointed" you take it as "Okay it's not good bread but its good stuff, whatever it is." Same with chocolate, or all those foods you might miss if you're not you know, having access to that kind of thing.

AM: That was great, thank you. Can you tell us a little bit more about your experiences within teaching and kind of what you got out of - maybe some stories of experiences with students that impacted you?

JF: Hmm. So, I had a different class every day, 25-30 kids in a class, which is a lot when you're trying to teach a language. Our standard style of teaching in this country is teacher says something, writes it on the board, turns around, any questions, students raise their hand, some students raise their hand all the time to show how smart they are or whatever. If we say do you, do you not understand it or do you have a question if I think I hope students really do have a question they won't be afraid to say could you please go over sin of theta and how you got this answer whatever again. In China, I would do that, and I would say any questions, and nobody would ever ask a question, and yet I knew that they didn't understand because they had these blank faces. And finally, in each class there was a person designated as the kind of liaison between the teacher and the rest of the class. And so finally my best liaison, his name was Teddy, and he already had very good English. His English name was Teddy, he chose it. So, he chose to be called Teddy and he came to me afterwards and he said that they don't raise their hands because in their culture if you raise your hand to ask a question it means that you're insulting the teacher because it means that the teacher failed to explain adequately. And they didn't want to be rude to me. Another instance which isn't directly pertaining to classroom experience but it's a similar kind of cultural thing that I wouldn't have thought of, I was with Teddy and an art professor in a museum and Teddy was acting as our interpreter and so he would explain to me what the art instructor had said. And then I would say something, and he wouldn't translate back to the art instructor because the art instructor had minimal English and at some point I said, "Well, shouldn't you tell him what I said?" and he said "I can't because he's my superior, he's a professor, he knows some English. I can't presume that he doesn't know what you're saying or that would be insulting to him. I have to wait for him to ask." And of course, the other person didn't ask. So that kind of nuance was interesting. And then other things, if students

came to visit us, they had to sign in. All the foreign teachers were in a little hostel separate from the rest of campus. And if anybody wanted to visit us, they had to sign in with the guard and therefore their names would be recorded. And so they seldom did but on occasion they did as a group, and I remember there was one time when several students came unannounced and I wasn't prepared – I had no idea that like would be five boys were gonna be knocking on my dormitory door. And am I allowed to say - it was really hot and I was wearing a thin T-shirt but I had no bra on, can I say that on tape? and I felt incredibly self-conscious because here I am with these five college boys and I'm wearing a white thin t shirt and dripping with sweat and I'm like trying to be a host or polite and I'm standing like this the whole time. It was just so hot! And then I just said, "Oh well would you like some tea?", and they said no, and I said okay and then you know we chatted some more and then they left and the next day one of them said to me, "Why are Americans so rude?" And I was like what? And of course, I'm thinking about here I am, and he said, "Well you asked if we wanted tea, and we said no, and you didn't ask again" and I was like what? So, I therefore learned that you are expected to ask three times. So, if on the third time the person doesn't say well okay then then they really don't want it. So that was a thing; we had to learn that. And then we also had to learn – it had struck us as strange that every time we were at some function and being entertained if somebody asked us do you want something, we'd say no and then they'd keep asking and finally we'd think "Well okay, they must really wanna give us more of this food that we really don't want to eat" so we'd finally say yes but we didn't know that we were following the code we were just like "Okay you're making me feel like I'm being rude," so yeah, just little things like that that you can't take for granted. Just because you're speaking the same language you can't take for granted that language means the same thing. But I think by the end of the year we were able to – I think they understood generally that everyone meant well, and everyone was patient with each other. You could tell by the fact that a student asked, "Why are Americans rude?" that – I think he was a boy – that he felt comfortable enough to do so. But on the other hand, none of them really felt comfortable being - spending too time with foreigners unless they be criticized for – I don't know – plotting something. Also, a quick thing when I went to visit their dormitories, unheated, 7-people to a room probably the size of yours, bunk beds, and the toilets were – just be glad – however dirty your toilets are, just be glad that they're not like those. Also, people can't choose their majors over there. I don't know if they can now, but they couldn't then. Yeah, so I was teaching people - it was an architecture engineering institute and there were people – there were students who said, "Well I came here because I passed the college entrance exam, and I thought I was gonna be an architect but based on my test scores I was assigned to underground tunneling or whatever." So, they were assigned based on some kind of algorithm or somebody's reasoning so once they were assigned, they were stuck in that. And then they would be assigned a job, they would not be able to choose where to work. And so, if they were assigned a job that might be that they would be hundreds of miles away from their families, so there was a lot less choice.

AM: Thank you for sharing that. Were there any support networks or mentoring that has been important or influential to you in general?

JF: Hmm, in all fields or just career fields or anything?

AM: Just anything you would like to share about your life in general.

JF: I think - I mean I don't want to sound corny, but I think my mom was a big support network and we could always speak pretty frankly. I think my husband, of course. As a writer, I think the writers' groups that I have found. It can be hard to find a compatible set of people to critique your work because you don't want the ones who are just going to say, "Oh it's nice," because that's not very helpful. You want the ones who can tell you what doesn't work without you know, being rude or being aggressive. So, I would say my writers' groups are very great.

JN: That's good. So, you mentioned that you're a writer so how did you come to do that work?

JF: How did I come to do writing?

JN: Yeah.

JF: Oh, I think I've always loved writing, and I always recorded thoughts, ideas, disappointments, whatever in a journal. This was before - I don't know, I think it's gonna be more cool to do journaling, I don't know. But back then, I just did it. It was just instinctive, and so maybe it was just a natural way for me to figure out what was going on inside my head. In terms of becoming a published writer - I mean, after I came back from China, I wrote some pieces that were published in the travel part of the Boston Globe. Just about that - or no, that was after I came back from Prague - but anyway, so I wrote a little bit of nonfiction about the places where I had taught English just because it seemed like a way for me to process my experiences overseas. I think I came to poetry - I'm a published poet now - by—I chose to stay home with my little munchkins when they were little and that was pretty grueling. There's a certain boredom there when you can only talk to little babies, and so I needed something creative to do and the poems are short. So even though it maybe takes as much work to write a short thing and make it good as it does to make a ten-page thing good, because it's short it seems - it feels like it's gonna fit into a smaller bit of time. So, I think I started really seriously doing that because I was home with kids, and I would keep being interrupted. But now I grew to like it more because I feel like poetry can do everything that other stuff does [laughs]. It can be a dramatic monologue, it can be fiction, it can be narrative, it can be -you know - personal whatever - confessions. And yet it's so spare that you're forced to really think about every word you say which goes back to me being a philosophy major. What does it mean to say "a" instead of "the." Or I mean, "Do I really wanna put that adjective in front of that word or do I not need it?" So, and that's what I like doing now too - as a - I think I told you that I transitioned from ESL to adult ed teaching, just writing skills like what makes writing good and so some of that close reading and thoughtfulness goes into teaching and asking the questions that I ask of the students that I teach.

JN: And how much does your writing mean to you?

JF: A lot! [laughs] We just moved and so for the last long while I've been packing up one house and trying to unpack into another house and that's why you possibly see piles of messiness behind me. I angled it a little bit so that you wouldn't see the beach towel folded on top of a lampshade just because that's where it got unpacked to [laughs]! So, for the last long while I haven't had time to even think creatively and that's okay. I don't feel pressure. I just have been busy. But at the same time when I need to process something whether it's a family issue, my mother suffered from a stroke four years ago and all the impact that that had on her and on the whole family I think I ended up writing about that because it was a way to help me - it was like my therapy and then taking what would be possibly a messy journal entry and taming it and shaping it into a poem that would have some meaning to someone else. It's like when you're really focused on some task, then all this swirl of anxiety all around you kind of goes away because you're just focused on this one thing and then with poetry you get a poem out of it in the end. So, when I had enough of those, I realized oh I have enough for a book, and I made my first collection. And then also just things with, you know, what my daughters have gone through. My younger daughter especially has had to deal with a lot of issues that, you know, one wouldn't want one daughter to deal with. And just to help me cope with what was happening as - I mean you're not there yet but when you - when you're - if you become a mother, it's it's very different to experience something yourself and think yeah yeah whatever it's not a big deal and then to be a mother watching your child experience it. And with all those 20 years or 20 or 30 years of age difference you know that okay right now you're telling yourself it's not a big issue but in five years or something it's gonna come back and it's gonna hurt you. And so anyway, I think I wrote those things just for myself and then sometimes I would show her and then it became a way for us to - for her to understand that I understood her and so she became less closed off. And now she's like "Mom you should write a book about me, all my friends will buy it" [Laughs]. But so, so yeah it means a lot to me but I think more for my processing of information and it's not - I tell myself not to make it a thing that's a credential, you know, because life is short and it's hard to be a creative, to make a living out of creative things, and it's hard to measure yourself off of your success at selling a book, or selling art, or selling something. And there isn't time to judge yourself. You're wasting your life if you're judging yourself based on that because there are so many super talented people who are, you know, they're not JK Rowling or they're just not gonna be massively published. So it's a yeah, I guess in summary it's important but not as a - I try to tell myself that it's not a label for my identity, it's just something that if I can - I mean obviously I want to sell the books I wrote and obviously it's a nice thing when somebody accepts your poem for publication or when you win a prize, but yeah again I try really hard to keep it balanced.

JN: Ya, so sort of going off of that in terms of you moving around and like taking care of your family, what do you think your primary responsibilities are?

JF: At this point, well my kids are 20 and 22, so I'm still daughtering my elderly parents and I'm still mothering my young adult children. So, you said at this point what do I think my family responsibilities are or all responsibilities?

JN: Ya, or in terms of everything, everything in your life.

JF: I don't know if I would use the word responsibilities – yes, okay so for my parents yes. There is no one left, my brother died of cancer so I - there's no one left to do whatever they need done. And that's both love and responsibility, I think they're intertwined. And then of course you know take care of my lawn and wash the clothes, the usual things. But I guess you don't really use the word responsibility in my own head even. I just do what needs to be done.

JN: And how do you balance like your different priorities and also like your family and your work?

JF: It's easier now that my kids are older. It was very hard when they were both in high school especially if you're not from a family that can you know - both of them wanna go in different directions but we didn't have enough money to buy them each their own car, so that means mom is still driving them around which goes back to the earlier comment on public transportation. So I guess when I decided to stay home with them when they were little part of that was realizing that I didn't want to drop them off at a daycare center, go to work, be fried mentally, have my brain fried, and then pick them up and then still have to be happy and peppy with them. I knew that as an English teacher so much of the job of being a teacher is outward energy and performance and happy and energetic and responding to other people's needs. So that kind of job as compared to maybe sitting quietly in an office I didn't think it would lend itself well to then coming home and using that kind of outward going energy to then take care of kids. And plus, I didn't wanna you know - the stress of, you know, commuting back and forth, working in Boston and then commuting to the town where we were living and what if the train was late and all of that. It just didn't seem like a reasonable thing, and I didn't think that I would be a good mother to my kids if I was in that mental frame. So I think that from that time on I started - this is going back to your question - I started realizing that I'm gonna have to give up the sort of statusy feeling of going to your college reunion and someone says, "What do you do?" and I don't say I'm a neurosurgeon or a lawyer or a doctor I just say, "I was a teacher and now I'm home with kids." And there's that thing that happens to other people's faces when you say, "I'm home with kids," they assume that your brain just doesn't exist anymore. And I think that I had to know that that was going to happen and choose it mindfully and just accept okay, that's what it's going to be. And then just going through all the years of balancing. Once I started really wanting to write in earnest it was very frustrating when okay you know, "I thought you guys would be more independent by now!" But as it turned out one of my kids is not neurotypical she's a little bit on the autistic spectrum, so she needed a little more guidance with schoolwork because of some of her issues. And then the younger one had other issues. So, it wasn't - I think maybe when I went into it, I thought okay, by the time they're in middle school, early high school I'll be able to sort of let them do their own thing and I'll be able to focus on my own thing, go back to work whatever. But it didn't work out that way. But that's okay because I tried at each step of the way to, as you said, to balance things but make conscious choices. Like given that these are the needs of these people, and these are the needs of me, and these are the needs of my parents, what am I gonna do? And a lot of times what I wanted to do, which is spend more time writing or go back and get my MFA, that's the thing that was sacrificed. But what alternative was there? There's - I mean it's -I think it tends to be the

woman who sacrifices the further education or whatever, so I never did get my MFA and I probably won't at this point but yeah. I mean part of the move that we just made was also a conscious attempt to balance other people's needs versus my husband's and mine. And now that the kids are older, we don't - we just said we're not gonna keep your childhood home it's - we wanna be where we wanna be. This is the first house we've ever been in that wasn't chosen based on educational needs or affordability so it's nice.

JN: Nice. And what do you think the pros and the cons of the path you've chosen are?

JF: Cons, are not an awful lot of money as a writer or as a teacher. You don't get a lot of status, like that college reunion thing I mentioned. Pros, I got to watch my kids grow up. Oh cons, it can be really boring being an at home mom [laughs]. It's very isolating but I always had something else that I wanted to be doing, so that was good. So that when there were moments of downtime - I mean I don't want to denigrate it, it's—I'm glad I did it but just - there were times when I really didn't wanna play pretty pretty princess for a 10th time [laughs]. But these are just some of the joys of being a parent, so yeah. And I think some of the cons too were just lack of ability to do both, to be a parent and continue working. And I did learn that if we were in France, the French system values women's education and women's careers more, and so they have - it's just pretty standard to have a local park everywhere so that not everybody has to have their own little backyard jungle gym. And to have adequate daycare and affordable daycare and it's standard for - people just say, "You'll be a better parent if you can be intellectually challenged," and so you go back to work halftime when you have little kids and then go back to work longer. But the choices that were here at the time - if the choices were barely affordable daycare of questionable quality and me staying at home, I chose to stay at home. And I didn't realize until later that there should have been another option, there should have been an option of affordable and quality daycare. So again, I don't regret that I did what I did, I do regret that our country didn't provide me the opportunity to be intellectually stimulated for all those years. On the other hand, books on tape and national public radio are wonderful things [laughs] because at least you get something pouring into your ears.

JN: Nice. And this question is sort of like the pros and the cons but how do you think you feel about the choices that you've made?

JF: Again, I think that I tried to be mindful with my choices and realistic and I tried to keep sort of going back at different crossroads. Like when both kids were finally in kindergarten then I tried to ask myself okay so now they're both in kindergarten, now what do you want to do? Are you going to stay home and treasure those four childless hours while they're at half-day kindergarten and just read a book? Or are you going to work? So, that's when I started teaching more in the Worcester area. Because when—so I had been a teacher till my older was born in the Boston area. And then when my second was on the way we moved to the Worcester area. And so, I was already home with the older one and then I was home with two kids. And then when it was around time for them both to be in - we had half day kindergarten in Holden - so that was my first crossroad like what am I gonna do when they go there? And little by little I started

putting in more volunteer work or—eventually it was paid work just so that it would fit the time that I needed it to fit so that I could be home when the kids came home from school. And how do I feel about those choices, I mean I guess I did the best I could do with the options I had. I mean that's how I would hope. Can I tell you something I regret about college?

JC: Ya, of course.

JF: So, when I was in college freshman year out of curiosity a friend of mine and I just went to the fencing club because we were just curious - what is fencing? And then apparently, they were short of women for their women's team and so they invited us to be on the women's team if we were interested. And my friend didn't, and I did. And the way that particular fencing team worked was that you practiced every day after your - so yeah it was basically the entire academic year from three to five or three to six was fencing practice. And at first, I did it cause like oh this is kind of cool and I'm making friends with the other people on the team and they're in different years of school. And I would say sometime around the end of sophomore year I was like okay, I've had enough. And yet I felt this weight of obligation because they didn't have enough women still and someone had to - the treasurer had left, and they had asked me to be the treasurer. And so, I regret that I let this sense of obligation take up two years of afternoons at college. And I could have been doing all those things that all of my classmates now remember fondly, like hanging out in dorm rooms, and having quirky conversations, and, I don't know, going to Masters - they called them Master's Teas, or, you know, meeting authors that were coming to speak at the school. And I just had this huge sense of obligation, it's my responsibility to do what I signed up for. Which was stupid, but that was sort of what the coach inculcated into us. And I think that that kind of regret is part of why I tried to be so mindful afterwards and just sort of think okay, how much of this is obligation, how much of this is free choice, what are the other options. And it's so easy especially as a woman, especially as someone who's empathetic and can feel other people's needs, it's so easy to feel like you should do more to take care of other people. And I guess I'll say that too is why even when I could see there was a need to volunteer - so, when I started teaching refugees in the Worcester community, I volunteered to teach English, and I did not volunteer to do things like be a guide or a person who deals with taking people to doctor's office or something because when you're teaching there's a beginning and an end of the class and there's a boundary. And I knew that I already had my kids to take care of and I didn't - I needed there to be that boundary and I think that that kind of awareness of that may have come from my regret about the fencing thing.

AM: Thank you. You noted before that you kind of did some volunteer work like when you had some free time when your kids were at school. So, can you talk a little bit about if you've been involved with like volunteer/ community work in general, and what that experience was like?

JF: So, there is something called the Worcester Refugee Assistance Program, WRAP for short. I don't know if it still exists, but it was created to help a lot of the people who were coming from Myanmar and were resettled in the Worcester area. And I just heard from a friend - I belonged to a book club and I heard from another member of the book club that they were looking for

refugees and at that sort of juncture of my - both kids finally being in kindergarten I thought okay, well, that at least will be a beginning and let me see how it fits in and how I like it. I think I've lost track of your question. You asked what how much - what did you ask?

AM: Yes, so just kind of talk about your volunteer experience in general like what you did.

JF: Okay, so yeah. What I did initially was teach a class of refugees which was especially challenging because they were not - they were from an oral culture not a literate culture. So the concept of even transferring sound to symbol was new. And then now here it is foreign words and foreign symbols, our letters. And the idea of - there are a lot of women in the class, but the women had grown up on farms and maybe had gone to school till they were six or till they were 10. So, the idea of okay, I've taught you this, now write it down - well first of all they might not be literate in their own language, being literate in our language was even harder, and then the idea of writing down a thing so that you can then study it was not second nature because it was not part of their experience. On the other hand, they could do things like build a house out of bamboo [laughs]. So, you know, they had a lot of skills, but they weren't skills that transferred easily to our culture. And so that was—I wish that those people who say, “Oh they've been here a year why don't they know English yet,” I wish that those people could be plucked out of their familiar territory, popped into something that's extremely strange, and see how fast they would learn. But so anyway, so that was one thing I did. I guess I learned that volunteer organizations can be extremely disorganized. But of course, that's par for the course. Yeah, I just continued to volunteer for that organization and then eventually I was paired up with one individual because he was the breadwinner for his whole family. And he wasn't sure how old he was, but he wasn't old enough—he wasn't young enough to go to high school in Worcester, but he had taught himself some English in the refugee camp—he had grown up in the refugee camp from age 6 to whatever age he was supposed to be, maybe twenty. And so, I sort of volunteered with him for maybe five or six years just one-on-one with me. And he eventually got himself a GRE and got to QCC [Quinsigamond Community College] and got a QCC degree and bought a house. So, he's made a lot of progress. He still has - is hard to understand. His speaking isn't super super easy until you know him better. But I think it was rewarding to me when he came to me later and he was like, “It's because of you that I even learned that I should save money and could buy a house.” So, because he didn't know - he didn't have - how do you know if you grew up in a refugee camp okay, I'm earning this much money as a janitor don't just spend it all, put some in some in an emergency bucket, some in a future home saving bucket, and some in a keep up with your daily needs bucket. And it's not a natural mindset so. But he did and they were used to having so little that that he I guess got good at putting a lot in the save for a house bucket and not spending too much on daily needs - learning how to buy secondhand things and things like that.

AM: That's great. What did it mean to you when he shared with you that you were someone that helped him like learn those things?

JF: Well, it made me feel happy of course [laughs]. Yeah, and I guess it made me realize that we don't always know what we're doing and that I wanted to thank people more when they did something that made a difference to me.

AM: That's great. Do you consider yourself active politically?

JF: Probably not active, I have opinions, but I'm not a member of any organized group or anything like that.

JN: And you mentioned earlier that your mother did have a stroke. What impact did that have on your family and you?

JF: Oh huge. So, a stroke – she had a cerebral hemorrhage so that's not the blood clot. A lot of times when you have a blood clot if they catch it fast enough the doctors can remove the blood clot and you can be almost back to normal. But she had a burst vessel and then the blood was just pouring out into her brain. And they said she would die, but she didn't die, but then there was this pool of blood exerting pressure in her brain. So, she did - when she finally woke up she had brain damage because of that pool of blood that was just in the middle of her brain putting pressure, killing cells. So, all the cells that were beyond the break in the vein didn't get their oxygen and then that pool of blood that took weeks to eventually – for the body to eventually disperse or eat up or digest or whatever it does, that was just sort of squishing other parts of her brain you know, there's only so much space in your skull. So, for her to go from being a very active, articulate, intelligent, creative 80 year old - you know she's the kind of 80 year old who is on a ladder grouting the shower stall. She was refinishing furniture, she was - she had an old stamp collection from her youth that you know she was reexamining it, and looking things up on the Internet, and you know she cooked, she gardened she did things like that. So, she probably had the physical and mental age of a 70 or 65 year old even though she was 80. And then after her stroke she couldn't walk, couldn't go to bathroom alone, couldn't eat, couldn't you know put food on a spoon and get it to her mouth. She can do that now. So it was a pretty severe brain injury. And the impact - my father is older and has macular degeneration which is eye problems and is very deaf. And I didn't realize the extent to which he was dependent on her until she was unable to help him. And then suddenly I'm dealing with the grief of losing my - you know- a really good friend, maybe my best friend and also having to be the grown up because my father couldn't be the grown up to make medical decisions, to get himself from one place to another, to follow up on appointments, to even hear well enough to hear what the doctors were saying about my mother. So, to be sort of that hub of a wheel and everything was sort of leaning on me. That again I think is - it's a thing that happens more often to women than to men. I've heard this saying that is older people who have a daughter live longer because it's always the daughters who end up [laughs]... And the impact on my father I mean she was his companion of 60 years, and they had their roles and then all of a sudden, the woman he thought he knew wasn't the same person. So even as her brain healed and she was able to gain skills and she she's you know she's still alive now, her personality is a little bit different so. And then just physically she couldn't get up and walk out of the room when she was annoyed at him [laughs]. So, you know it's definitely

changed the family dynamic a bit, but I think after four years she's a little more used to what she's like and what to expect of her. And I will say that with this kind of brain injury as your brain heals you get increasingly depressed because you recognize how far you have fallen and how far it may be to get back to where you think you should be at - or for my mom, oh it was awful to have to tell her, "No, you are never gonna walk again without a walker or wheelchair" because she would keep saying, "Well when I'm better," and I finally had to say this is not—for a while it was giving her hope and then I realized it was getting unhealthy because she would—she wasn't accepting reality. And I had to say this is the new reality and some of this is good, you know, that there are moments of joy right here that you're not noticing because you're keeping comparing to before so.

JN: How were you able to get through those tough times?

JF: Like I said before writing, writing the poems. Like when there was something that I just would see in the way my parents were interacting I would sort of make a verbal photograph of it or a verbal movie clip of it, so that helped. Going for walks. The tough times were I would say the first eight weeks was just nonstop all out me. And then after that making sure I carved out time to say no, and to go for a walk with no sounds you know no phone no music just silence and if there were trees then with trees.

AM: That's great thank you so much for sharing. So that final question wrapped up our interview. Is there any final thoughts or comments that you want to share?

JF: You both seem like lovely people and thank you for your kind faces on the other end of the zoom screen and good luck to you.

Talking continues between interviewee and interviewers but is not part of the official interview.