

Interviewee: Gizel Hampton
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Date: October 27, 2018
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Abstract: Rev. Dr. Gizel Hampton was born in 1972 in Antigua. In 1983, she left Antigua and came to live in Worcester. Gizel is the associate pastor at St. John's Baptist Church in Worcester and also a social worker for The Massachusetts Department of Children and Families. Gizel's favorite part of Worcester is all the opportunities and history that are unknown to many. Gizel associates with a Western Caribbean background, but considers herself an American. She traveled to the United States at the young age of 11 and has been here ever since. The drastic changes throughout her life have shaped her into the strong and independent person she is today. Her sense of religion has guided her throughout the most difficult times in her life, such as when she gave birth to her daughter at 15 years old. Gizel demonstrates what it is to be a role model for women within society. She wants women to always remember, "Ladies you matter, matter, matter. You are valuable and don't let anyone determine your worth."

AB: Today I have Reverend Gizel Hampton, here at Assumption College it is October 27th and do we have the permission to record your oral history?

GH: Yes.

AB: Okay, so well start out, what is your full name, including both maiden and or married if applicable?

GH: Gizel Ann Marie Spencer is my maiden name Hampton is my married name.

AB: And where were you born?

GH: Antigua, in the West Indies.

JM: Have you ever been married?

GH: Yes.

JM: And what is the name of your husband?

GH: Sheldon Hampton.

JM: And do you have children?

GH: Yes I have two.

JM: And do you have any grandchildren?

GH: I have one!

AB: OOO [laughs].

AB: Well you can just tell us about your children's names and then you can start there so.

GH: The names of my children?

AB: What are your children's names?

GH: So my oldest child is Tameika and my son is Sheldon, the second.

AB: I was gonna say is he a junior?

GH: He's a second.

AB: What is your grandchild's name?

GH: Kelsey, [laughs] Kelsey.

AB: How old is she?

GH: Kelsey is five.

AB: Awh.

GH: Yeah.

AB: Does she come from your son or daughter?

GH: My daughter.

AB: Okay. What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with family background?

GH: Antiguan, Caribbean is what most people know it as instead of the West Indies. You say the West Indies where's that, but they know the Caribbean so.

JM: Could you tell us about your parents?

GH: So my parents are, well what would you like to know specifically?

AB: You can start off by telling us their names?

GH: Their names okay, so my mother's name is Valdine Pyatt and my father name is Stanley Anthony and they were born and raised in Antigua, which again is where I come from. They currently live in the states. They were never married and I'm the only child between the two of them. My mother is feisty as ever.

JM and AB: [Laughs]

GH: [Laughs] I get a little bit from that from her. My father is more quiet and shy, but I have a relationship with the both of them. I didn't grow up with my parents. I was raised by my maternal grandparents, my mother left to go to Puerto Rico to work when I was two months old and my father left when I was two years old to come to the U.S. So I met my mother actually when I came here to the U.S. at eleven and I met my father when I was sixteen.

JM: Wow.

AB: So obviously didn't necessarily grow up in Worcester, but when did you come to Worcester, or the States?

GH: 1983, I was eleven.

AB: And that's when you came to the states?

GH: Yes.

JM: Did you come alone or?

GH: I came with a brother, and we thought we were coming for a visit, but my mother ended up keeping us [laughs].

AB: Wow.

GH: So been here since.

AB: And you've been in Worcester since?

GH: Yes.

AB: What neighborhood did you start grow—or well come to?

GH: Actually my mother was living in Great Brook Valley apartments.

AB: Oh really?

GH: We stayed there, for about a year and then we moved out to Main South, and so much has changed since then. [laughs]

AB: Yeah, that's not a good area.

GH: Yeah, no it's terrible. I drive through and think what has happened to this neighborhood?

AB: Well the next question, what was the neighborhood generally like back then?

GH: Back then it was pretty cool, you know, a lot of people had moved out from different projects and it was sort of the place to be, new homes, and it was pretty cool.

AB: It's probably all the same now.

GH: Yeah everything.

AB: Hasn't changed.

GH: No.

JM: So where do you live in the city now?

GH: Right now I live I guess in Greendale area, so off of Harrison Street.

JM: For how many years?

GH: Ten years.

JM: Oh okay.

GH: Previously I was over on Grafton street for about fifteen years.

AB: Okay, so you've lived around the city- you've been to multiple areas.

GH: Multiple places.

JM: So you know the city pretty well.

GH: Yes [laughs].

AB: Do you have other family members that live in the same area?

GH: Yes my mother and my maternal siblings all live in Worcester.

AB: Oh okay.

GH: And obviously my husband's siblings, he was born here in Worcester.

AB: Okay, so you still keep in touch with like your whole side of your mom's family.

JM: And do you keep in touch with your father's side at all or?

GH: I do, they live in New Jersey so I don't get to see them as often, but we connect usually by phone or whenever we get a chance we make time to meet.

JM: Right.

GH: So.

AB: Alright so we'll go into some city stuff. What challenges do you think this city still faces or is facing now, what would you change about living in the city, or being here?

GH: What would I change? The transportation system, even though I don't use it, I hear a lot of hardships and I know folks who have a difficult time navigating throughout the city. So I think that's one thing. Certainly when it comes to women, you know there is a lot going on, pay raise and the disparities between men and women, that kind of thing. You know I would like to see change. Just more opportunities for women in general, you know in management.

AB: Have you've seen any changes since started- like came here though?

GH: I have, I think for me I wasn't so much involved with a lot of that stuff because I had some difficulties navigating. So I did a lot of volunteer work and that's kind of how I learned about some of the issues were going on, I wasn't active in some of it. I know more now but back then I wasn't aware of some of the issues.

AB: What do you think some of the distinct characteristics of Worcester are?

GH: The colleges for one. I think Worcester is known for that. The technology, Goddard, [UMass Memorial Hospital]. For me I think learning so many things were started in Worcester and I don't think people really know about all the gems of Worcester. So even myself I'm still every year finding out something else that's happening in Worcester so I think there's a rich history here that people just aren't aware of.

JM: Alright, so were going to move on to education now, so where did you attend school?

GH: So when I first came here I attended Lincoln Street School and then I went to Sullivan Middle School and then I graduated from South High School, but in between there [laughs] I also attended the SAM's program and the teen parenting program at Burncoat because I ended up having my daughter while I was in high school.

AB: Oh, so what was that program? Do they still have it? Is that still a thing?

GH: Teen care still exists, it's in South and Burncoat so it's a program where young girls who have babies are able to go to school and they provide daycare while you're in school.

JM: Oh okay.

GH: So that was a part of that transition for me.

AB: Cool, did you go to school when you weren't in the States?

GH: Yes.

AB: You did?

GH: Yes.

AB: Okay.

GH: I went to an Adventure School; it was a private school.

JM: And did you go to college and graduate?

GH: I did, I did, I did. I went to—well let me tell you the backstory on that real quick.

JM and AB: [Laughs]

GH: [Laughs] So like I said before I had my daughter and...

AB: How old were you when you had your daughter?

GH: I had her at fifteen and I had enrolled in a college that I won't name the name [laughs] and at that time I was still going through the immigration process to become a citizen and I was in that school for about a year. And then I got a call from the business office that they needed to see me so the professor came to the class and was like. "They need to see you," and I went to the office and they told me I had to leave because my immigration status wasn't happening fast enough and they were concerned how they were going to be paid and all this other stuff and that was the end of it. So, I ended school. I didn't go back again until it was 1997. I started taking night classes at Worcester State.

AB: So did you go to college or start to right after your graduation?

GH: Right after I graduated, I graduated in 1989 and I started and so 1990 is when I had to stop and it was devastating because I always believed in education and I thought, "How is this going to work? I don't have my immigration status all together yet." It was 1997 when I started taking classes at night because I was determined, "I'm going to get my education! Whatever it takes." [Laughs] Eventually in 1999 I went back full time and I got my bachelor's.

AB: At Worcester State?

GH: At Worcester State.

AB: And now you have your ...?

GH: I have a PhD now! Oh my goodness! [laughs]

JM: Congratulations!

AB: Now you're a Reverend and a Doctor

GH: Yes, yes, can you imagine, I'm still pinching myself it's happening. I had an opportunity was it 2016 I believe and I was sort of complacent with my work. I know I wanted more and the opportunity came up and I enrolled actually initially to get my master's and then when I met with the president of the school he said, "Why don't you just get a dual degree?" and I didn't even think of it. I didn't know I could possibly do it and so I did and here we are. [laughs]

AB: And you got that at Worcester State as well?

GH: No that was at Isaiah University of the Holy Ghost in Orlando, Florida. We did classes during the day on Saturdays and the rest online.

AB: Cool.

GH: While I was working full time, I must say [laughs]

AB: Oh my gosh.

GH: So I was balancing.

AB: Were you living in Worcester still?

GH: Yes, this was just two years ago yeah three years ago.

AB: Wow. That's crazy.

GH: Yeah.

AB: What support networks and mentoring have been important to you especially through your education?

GH: Well I have to say, I had some great mentors. I didn't always listen to them because I thought I knew what my plan was and what I wanted to do. I actually was in high school and got an opportunity to participate in the Upward Bound program which is at Worcester State and I started getting some mentoring from Syd Buxton and Marcella Jennings. They were the ones who were leading the Upward Bound AID program and so I had shared a little bit about my story with them so I started meeting with them to develop navigating where I wanted to go. Because I wanted to be a lot of things at the time [laughs]. And I finally thought I wanted to be a doctor and they would challenge me. From there when I finally went back to school, I initially went back because I thought I wanted to be a physician, I wanted to be a pediatrician. I thought if I can make people well they will make better decisions and live great lives and obviously that wasn't the case because as I was going through the process I realized it wasn't for me. So I knew my direction was more mental health and things like that so that's how I ended up. I graduated with a major in psychology, minor in chemistry, and then the Women's Studies certificate.

AB: Cool, we'll go into work. So, what was your first job?

GH: So, my very first job, was a babysitter [laughs]. I think I babysit for all my mother's friends and even kids that were my age because they kept saying, "You're so mature, you're so mature." I'm like, "Okay great."

JM and AB: [laughs]

GH: Everybody's babysitter. that was my first official job and then I did some house cleaning from there because at that time I wasn't eligible to work in the US yet. I still did not have a work permit so when I finally was able to get that it was in 1991. So the whole time after I had my daughter up until I got the work permit I would do cleaning, babysitting and volunteer work because I needed to get her in daycare, and that was the only way I was going to be able to do it, was to volunteer. I did a lot even with teen care and some of the other programs that they had connected me with is how I was able to get through.

AB: Wow, what do you do now?

GH: So right now, I'm a social worker and also an associate pastor at my church so keeps me busy [laughs].

AB: So, is there like a social work like an agency that you work with?

GH: Yep I work for DCF, Department of Children and Families for the state of Massachusetts just protecting children from neglect and abuse and that kind of thing so.

AB: And that's what you went to school for, and that's what your degrees are in?

GH: So my master's is well both masters and PhD is in Community Ministry with the focus on Social Work and Professional Leadership.

JM: So what has this work meant to you?

GH: It's almost like I've come full circle because I look at the families that I work with, and the people that I'm involved with, and the church, and just throughout the community and I was once that person. I think that's what really led me to subconsciously to wanting to help people that was like myself. One of the things I didn't mention was that after I graduated high school, I actually became homeless because my mother said, "Okay you graduated, too many mouths to feed, got to go." [laughs]. So here I was at seventeen, which is when I graduated, trying to navigate with a two-year old, don't have a work I.D. I really just had to volunteer and the folks at teen care really really helped support me in that and connected me to agencies. I was in there doing dictation, filing, whatever it was to make sure my child had child care. It was tough but I look at what I do now, you know we're not really conscious sometimes of the people around us. We see people and we make assumptions but we don't know what people's lives have been and so for me it's really wanting to make sure that those people, people looked at as less than or whatever it is, I'm going back to help those folks.

AB: So they have the ability.

GH: Absolutely, and again I see myself in them, I see homeless people I see different things and I try to educate folks even at church. I host workshops and different things so that people can really learn. Like you may have it together, but let's give back so that's what Jesus would do. [Laughs]

AB: [Laughs] Definitely what Jesus would do. Oh my gosh, how have you balanced different priorities in your life responsibilities roles, and interests in your own life?

GH: Oh my goodness, I think early on we spent—my husband and I because he's been—I mean I couldn't have done any of this really from where we started until now without him and I really focused on the kids, like what the kids needed, their extracurricular activities and that kind of thing. Once they got to a certain age I focused more on myself and started more community work and I think back now and I wonder how did we do that because one kid goes here another is going there and we're involved in different things. Even my husband, he's involved with the community and church and so we kind of just try to do one thing at a time so that we're not all over the place. I learned early on I'm not superwoman even though I wanted to be [Laughs].

AB: [Laughs] We didn't ask you when did you and your husband meet?

GH: Oh, my husband and I met actually at Worcester State through the Upward Bound program he was one of the RAs [resident advisors] [laughs].

JM and AB: Laughs

GH: Nothing was happening I swear [laughs]. We became friends [laughs].

AB: So you've been together for a while?

GH: Yes, yes, yes actually 27 years this year we've been married.

AB and JM: Wow.

GH: Yeah [laughs].

AB: Funny. How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life and do you have any regrets?

GH: The choice. I used to regret getting pregnant because I had my “never list.” You know, the things I wanted to do and never wanted to be and that was one of them because I had witnessed growing up young girls when they got pregnant got sent away or they had to stop going to school. I was really petrified I was going to lose my education and when I learned I was pregnant for me abortion wasn't an option and I was contemplating what's going to happen. Is

my mother going to send me back to Antigua? It was just this dilemma and when she allowed me to stay, thank God she allowed me to stay, I was able to—like I said, do all those volunteer work and different things I was exposed to kept me going. Once I knew education was still possible, I can still get what I want, that was really a driving force, and obviously my faith. I mean that day one trust that God—your word is this, now I’m in this dilemma, so how are you[laughs].

JM and AB: [Laughs]

GH: If you did it for all those other people, and here I am and I didn’t plan to do this, so you know that sort of thing. But I don’t regret it now because I’ve learned everything and I really count it as a blessing because had I not got pregnant how would my life had changed? And I see other people that I grew up with, I even saw my siblings and I’m glad. I tell my daughter she was my life savior because I think there was so much happening around me and to me that it was almost that blessing that got me out. So I don’t have regrets. I think that everything I’ve been through has shaped me to be who I am now so I’m grateful. The pain, the joys, everything. I can’t complain about anything really. I have a great family, I have great people that love, and support me so no regrets.

JM: So what role has religion played in your life?

GH: Everything. [Laughs]. I grew up—my grandparents rather grew up Seven Adventists and so I went to church early on. I was a part of what they call Pathfinders club and you know I loved it and that’s where I got my foundation in religion and to this day I remember the teachers who were there that inspired me. The funny thing about it is when you’re younger you call your elders by their last name and it was so funny it was probably about ten years ago I went back home to Antigua and they were talking about this woman. They kept calling her Violet and I said who in the world is Violet [laughs] and then they said, “Oh, teacher Violet,” and I said I didn’t even know that was her name because out of respect you never call a person by their first name. She was one of the ones that I loved going—call it Sabbath school instead of Sunday school—she was just so excited about the Word and it got me excited about the Word. I actually when I came here and through the mist I was going through was asked to teach, when I was thirteen, the junior classes and the younger classes. I was mad at first because I wanted to hang out with the teenagers, and why am I teaching class and so forth, but it’s all worked out because now here I am. You know, the calling was there. So, I’ve been licensed now since 2010. I teach, I used to do speaking for women’s ministries and things like that, and then I finally got the call. So here we are, but I hold on to my faith because I believe through everything I have endured God was right there guiding me and protecting me through it all and I couldn’t have done it had I not had that. Even the people—I look back now and there were people there helping me and guiding me that I didn’t even know because I was such a mess in my thing trying to just survive. I don’t think I would have made it this far had it not been for that.

AB: You mentioned community work and volunteer work. Where are some of the places that you volunteer now?

GH: So right now I volunteer at the United Way. They have the Dollar for Scholar for young girls. So you teach middle school girls about finances, and that was important to me because that was something I didn't have and looking at making sure these girls understand how to spend money, how to independent, and all of that. I've been doing that for a number of years. I took off this year and last year. I'm still involved in different things because of this school I was in. Then there's the YWCA, domestic violence issues trying to support them. Right now I'm on the Massachusetts Women of Color Coalition and they are targeting specifically women of African descent or African diaspora really just trying to bridge the gap for all the disparities that they're facing. I've been on just a couple of different things, but again I did a lot of volunteer early on as well and that's kind of how I knew about these different organizations so.

AB: We will go on to health. How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

GH: I think I've been pretty healthy. I don't think I've had anything major happening but I've had some relatives that passed for cancer, I've had loved ones who are dealing with Alzheimer's which that's been especially—right now my mom has early dementia so that's really something right now. To see a brilliant woman an I'm in that has had a huge impact, but I would say most of the family has been healthy. We do have history of hemophilia in the family and most of them are pretty healthy considering.

AB: Have you've had any experience like accessing affordable healthcare or family members having that issue?

GH: I think years ago I did. I mean my husband, through his work I was able to get insurance so not me personally, but I know other relatives who don't have the means to access it and that's one of the reasons why I'm on this board because I want to make sure that healthcare is available for people who really need it and regardless of your income you have to live, you have to be able to survive and you can't do that if you're not well.

AB: Are you responsible for your mom's health?

GH: I'm actually not her proxy but I'm pretty involved [laughs].

JM and AB: [Laughs]

GH: You would think I am but I'm not. My sister is a proxy but they do rely on me quite a bit and I don't have a problem doing it. I think for me, so busy doing different things it was easier for her because she has more availability. But I do get in there and ask the questions and making

sure, “Listen, we’re here, she's not just a person just existing in here, you need to provide your services that you say you’re going to provide, you’re getting paid.” [Laughs]

AB: A lot of money

GH: A whole lot of money, and that’s my momma [laughs].

JM: [Laughs] So are you responsible for anyone else's health besides your own?

GH: Not right now, my children are grown so just my husband. And he’s in great shape, he does an excellent job taking care of himself, so just me, got to make sure I get to that gym [laughs].

AB: How do you get through tough times besides having religion behind you, what kind of thoughts keep you going?

GH: Well it has to be religion, because that’s—I’m such a believer in it and I’ve seen it work in my life. But also music is something that keeps me going. You always get these questions about if you were stuck on an island who would you bring? I don’t want to bring anybody, I want to bring my music. [Laughs]. Because really music does something for me that no one else does. I think just having—I also sing at the church and used to sing with community choirs in the past, but that's sort of what sustains me from having a bad day. I get in the car and sing or pull up some scripture something like that, call my husband and vent, so trying to take it easy on him lately [laughs].

AB: He's your backbone.

GH: He's my backbone so I vent to him a lot, yeah that's it.

AB: How do you define success in your life? Has this definition changed overtime?

GH: Success, it’s changed over time because I think early on I was told you’ve got to get a job, you’ve got to do this and all these different things to make you successful, make a lot of money. And as I learned and looked back at my life, for me my success is my children. When I look at them and see they never got in trouble, not drinking, not doing drugs, none of those things. Responsible human beings that I genuinely enjoy being with and so for me just feeling like God gave me these two human beings for me to take care of and when I see them I get a greater joy and that to me is my success. Everything I’ve been through, especially with my daughter, I sometimes I think “How did you do that?” And she’ll even ask me, we were so young but again I know God’s hand was through it all so that’s what I define success as. That family, that looking back and seeing, okay despite all your struggles now you’re here, because the money may come the money may not come, but at the end of the day I have these children, and they’re always going to be my kids.

JM: So based on your life experience what advice would you give to women today and future generations?

GH: Oh my goodness. Ladies you matter, matter, matter. You are valuable and don't let anyone determine your worth. Learn to love yourself, learn to forgive yourself and forgive others. There's so many things I can say. I've gotten a lot of great advice, but I think that for me, once we realize how valuable we probably make different decisions. And don't let people dictate what we do and make choices for us that we necessarily want. And if you don't know Jesus get to know him, because I know him real well [laughs].

AB: Now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women that has been recorded in the past what should we be sure to indicate?

GH: In this history?

AB: Yes.

GH: That it doesn't matter how many lemons life gives you, you don't just have to make lemonade, you can make a pie, you can make candy, you can make a whole bunch of stuff. Don't just settle and like I said I'm grateful. I look at it as we go through seasons in life, learn from the past and pay attention, try to be as present as possible because life moves quick and all the "I wish I should've done, or the list of could've, would've, should've, just do it. My husband and I travel quite a bite and don't wait. You only have one life so take advantage of all of it regardless of what anyone thinks do what makes you happy.

AB: Is there anyone else you suggest we talk to?

GH: Oh I can give you a list [laughs].

AB: Alright we will have you write it down.

GH: Fabulous women out there and I have to say I've been grateful. I've actually been taking the time and write down a lot of the women who've been on my journey who helped me. I ran into one of them two months ago and Mary Johnson she was the house manager for the shelter I was in and you always think about people and when I realized how much was put into that because I had no idea. I mean I could have never done any of this. I couldn't work, I couldn't do anything and people like that I really want to honor in some way. So that's the latest project I'm working on, figuring out how to get all these women together. I mean I've said thank you to them. But I think just to honor those people in your life who have really done so much for you, and support you, you just don't forget those people.

AB: You definitely need to write a book.

GH: I do [laughs], thank you I will have you edit it.

AB: Is there anything else that we did not ask that you would like to share?

GH: No, I think this was good. Thank you for having me. I hope this will help someone let them know there's no impossibilities in life, it's only what we limit ourselves to, so thank you.

AB: Thank you.