Interviewee: Brenda Jenkins
Interviewer: Milagros Montenegro
Date of Interview: July 30, 2018
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcriber: Milagros Montenegro

Abstract: Brenda Jenkins was born in Worcester, Massachusetts and currently works as the Health and Wellness Coordinator at the YMCA. This interview follows the professional and personal story of Brenda Jenkins cofounder of Mosaic Cultural Complex and Massachusetts Women of Color Coalition (MWOC). Ms. Jenkins details her upbringing growing up in Worcester's diverse neighborhoods. Ms. Jenkins describes what it meant to grow up in vibrant African American community, brimming with black-owned businesses and social activism. Ms. Jenkins describes the discrimination and injustices she faced as an activist and business owner due to her race and gender. Throughout the interview, she explains the struggles faced by those standing up for those in the minority, whether it be due to gender, race, or socio-economic background.

Milagros Montenegro (MM): My first question to you is if you can verify for the tape, can you give me your full name?

Brenda Jenkins (BJ): First name Brenda, last name Jenkins.

MM: And this is the 30th of July 2018. And can we start with a little bit of your background? Where did you grow up? Parents?

BJ: Sure, growing up, so let me go as far back as I can remember. Moved to the East Side, so that is Eastern Ave, Plumley Village—this is before Plumley was even built. So it was an area of just immigrants, Black, Latino families going back. I was probably just a little kid, lived there along Clayton, moved from there, my father was in the service, so we were able to move to Great Brook Valley. I'm going back, probably the fifties, fifty-nine, sixty in Great Brook Valley where my mother raised, eight children, six girls, two boys, and my dad, he was one of the kids. Went to the schools, Burncoat, Saint Nicholas, those elementary, high school there. We stayed in Great Brook Valley until 1972. My mother died August 12, 1972 unexpectedly—went in for a full hysterectomy ended up getting a blood clot. Back then those surgeries were major surgeries, today they are very common and so left eight children and dad was not ready to raise children. So, my mom came from a family of I believe twelve siblings and they lived all over the states. From New Jersey, New York, to Boston to Rhode Island, to Philly, to different, we were split up. I ended up going to Boston, which was a journey of experience, because you know when you are young and are dealing with grief, well you don't know you are dealing with grief. When you have a loss like that and that impacts you and impact is not just because it was a mother. Our mother was one of those active parents being one out of two families that were probably the only ones at the time in Great Brook Valley black and going to PTA meetings and not having the

diversity of different ethnic groups there with you and she was just an aggressive bull parent who was just there for her children and you know made sure her children fit right in where they needed when it came to their education and stuff. Because interestingly when I think back about her is that in your environment, that's where a lot of culture and ethnicity comes in to and one of the things my mother did very well [was] we didn't know anything about racial slurs. As you know today there are different racial slurs with many different groups and when we would encounter a racial slur we did not know what we were being encountered with and only cause another family would say, "Oh you need to say something, you need to do something, they just called you guys such and such." And we went home and told our mother and our mother said, "No you don't do anything, no fighting back." And so, but also what I liked about my mom was that she was one of those parents that believe in advocating not just for her children, but all children and she was one of the mothers that didn't get credit for the starting the Great Brook Valley Health Center. There was a handful of mothers that worked in addressing the needs of families that needed services at that time and because she would have to take, we would have to take the buses or a cab to even come into the City of Worcester to go to Memorial [Hospital] for all our medical care but she was one doing advocate behind the scenes and her advocacy not only behind the scene for providing medical services for not just her family, but other families. But exposing us culturally as children to get into dancing, singing, tap, she made us do and it was the best thing ever because it really engaged in how we really enjoyed our childhood and it was great enjoying our childhood cause when other cousins of us that were living in different parts of the city would have best friends their might have been black, ours were white. You know so when I think about her exposure to all of that, not saying that we did not have any challenges or anything coming up, but I just think that we came from a family of organizing activism, because even as a young child we come from a family of entrepreneurship because my mother's family come from a really well known musical family here in Worcester, the Price family. She had her aunts who had….

[break in interview]

BJ: ….entrepreneurship. They had their own businesses, their own stores, their own markets, their hair shops you know.

MM: Here in Worcester?

BJ: Yes, yes, yes. Even on my dad's side, you know because his father probably had one of the first black barber shops here in the city of Worcester, so they knew what it was [in the world of] entrepreneurship. You know, they were all about encouraging getting good education and even though we were rebellious, some of us were, because we had an older sibling that was an athlete, our oldest brother, and they set the precedent of what we should follow after, what education, what college and that whole thing. You know, pressure. But I think one of the foundations of also my mom taught was the importance of family, of loving family, engaging conversation, being supportive, having conversation regarding the world, what is happening. It

was at that time and era that I was coming up, President [John F.] Kennedy, MLK [Martin Luther King] was organizing, advocating for the garbage union down there for the march and stuff. So I came up in an era of activism and you know as a young teen, we had mentors in our family. I had aunt, great aunts that were organizing in the black community and creating arts for entertainment for people that were gifted whether it be through music, whether it be through writing, whether it be through rallying for advocacy for injustice in education in the city of Worcester. I had a cousin Betty Price, who I believe was the first Black school committee member here in Worcester. And then I had a cousin who had a father was the first [?], so I come from a family of organizing activism, and come from those standing up for those that didn't have a voice. But always had a radical perspective when you were young, the radical perspective, the whole thing but was doing right. Used to even, some of our organizing activism, we used to meet down at the YWCA in Worcester. It was interesting when I think back about some of thing we had did and I just [did not] understand the impact it would have years later that it did.

But one thing that you do realize as an activist organizer, knowing now what I was doing back then, the power of a person of color's voice, is not the same power as your white friend's voice. You know, and I didn't know it was sad then, but I know that it is sad now. But to see allies even when we were young besides you, advocating for you, you know was powerful. That gives you a little background on me. And then I just think that coming up in Worcester, one of things that we always fought for [was] the inequity of not having, always for pay wages even when we were making seven dollars back an hour, we wanted ten. Back then—oh my god, you make me think. Even when we talk about pay wages, today when the inequities of the, it's not fear when it comes to women and men, we were fighting for that a long time ago, as women of color. And then we even organized, a group of local network of black women, it was women that were activist organizers, that were either stressed out because systemically [they] were working in institutions that were not giving them a fair share of wages, of professional career path, of promotions, on top of having a family and stress, so there was no way for women of color to be able to filter. So, creating this indigenous circle to provide women a safe place where they were able to not only talk about it but talk about the trauma that had impacted them and addressing some of the things that they would carry with them, that they were unable to filter and so it would be able to create an environment where they were able to filter but also to be able to be progressive and still move on. But being able to put that emotion in a place that did not prevent you from organizing activism or taking any type of responsibility and leadership in the community that we were fighting for. And so, those were exciting times for me and they were different times because I had a lot of energy. So, to be able to—because activism and organizing had it's different function. Whether those that would create the rally, they were those that would create the action plan and you know, they were those that actually did the decimation of making sure that branding, making sure you know where we need to go into. So, having those access and having the different types of people have us move some of our agenda forward and in my activism and organizing in my young day, I have very radical and people would hate to see me coming and as well as Maritza, I don't know if she told you this. They would hate to see us coming. The municipality, the government, and so the reasons they would have those closed meeting with us

because they would rather have us behind closed doors, to see if there was a [?] to negotiate some of the issues that we were addressing versus having us out in the City Hall, bull rallying two hundred people and talking about this and understanding what the power of organizing is and back then getting people to understand the power of your vote and the power of your voice. And it had nothing to do with party at that time, whether you were Republican, Democrat, Independent, Progressive, or Social, whatever, it was about understanding the power you had as a collective body, to be able to change policy and create legislation in areas that would impact our communities, our families with that change. I'll stop there take a breath.

MM: Kind of go back a little bit, can we talk a little bit about the neighborhoods you lived in? Were you born in Worcester?

BJ: Yes.

MM: Okay, so can we talk a little bit about, you mentioned Great Brook Valley...[currently] very Latino community there... based on when you grew up there what are some changes that you see?

BJ: Well, looking at Great Brook Valley when I was there, it was a free-spirited environment, where you could leave your doors unlocked, where you could go camping in front of your yard. Where you had the ability to go down to the Lincoln Neighborhood Center, you had the ability to—we had a baseball field, we had block parties, we had all those things, which was great, you know? So when I look at it today, [it's] become more of a controlled concentration camp to me to some point. Because it was stereotyped not because it's Latino, it's probably 90% Latino living out there right now. But the stereotypes that they have put on people, the profiling that they but on Latino communities. Drug dealing, gang affiliations, just illegal activities coming through, and not understanding culture. Not understanding culture, that if you have your abuela that is raising her grandchildren, that whether they are doing illegal activity [and] she doesn't know about it but she is a grandmother that has to have a roof over her head to feed her children but yet if her grandchildren get arrested, she loses her housing. Culturally, they did not understand environmentally, that were some of the things people missed. So, the grandmother suffers because the grandchild, instead of putting the restrictions on the grandchild or getting some type of wrap around services to provide for that grandmother that may know nothing about our resources. Because culturally that is all she knows, you know, to cook, to clean, to do what she does and so some of those bother me today when I look at how I was raised versus were it is at and to tell people and I understand that it has to be a smoke free environment but where is the—it's almost like we don't have the First Amendment Right of what we chose to do, as long as it's legal within our home or in our environment. You know, so I get really concerned when I look at, even though they have some coded words, and coded system templates based on trying to people off a system that oppressed them, that keeps generations of family and of development that they say is negative. Well you know, something? Did you go in and do an internal assessment and ask them that? Or what their needs were before you said what they were going to

do? And so those are the kind that bother me when I look at the before and now are very different and the racial tones? I mean are very heavy now, they were heavy back then but when you're a child you are not thinking that way, because you are focusing on what you are doing and what you are trying to achieve. Yes they were inequities, yes we had to fight, you know to get our equal rights, but it is even really more it just really is today and when I look at the before and now, I liked how I grew up, I didn't have that same stress level, or I was unaware of it as a child, maybe not mature enough to have that third eye, that lens. But today when I see it, I don't even drive through it.

MM: Can you tell me a little bit more about your family? You mentioned that your mother's side of the family had businesses here in Worcester? Black-owned businesses, can you tell me a little bit more about that?

SG: Yup, so my mom, it's so interesting, my mom—my aunt Lucille—had owned her own hair shop and she was the only black hair shop that I knew of on the east side that we would go to her and her husband owned a barber shop, so they were besides one another. What I do know is this, I remember that before my mom died, my mom also had a natural gift of hair and her aunt was trying to get her to come in to her business because there was talk of retirement and leaving it to my mother but my mother died so it didn't happen. But her shop ended up staying even to this day, Creamie's Barber Shop, even to this day it still exists. I don't know if she is still in Plumley or no,t I can't answer that question, but when I look at my mom's family, my mom had sisters at the time it was Dr. Goldsberry, who was the only black doctor in our neighborhood come up as kids on the east side and my aunt, she an Ms. Rite were probably the first black lab technicians in this office. So, there was encouragement to always see something positive and then we had. My mother's older sister really got into her religion, as a Jehovah's witnesses and that was the direction she went into and then [my mother's] brother, her second oldest brother, had a very successful business, an insurance business in Boston and did very well in his business. She had brothers that were in construction and she had, I'm trying to think and then those they all got married. They were all traditionally married to husbands, homemakers, they had that balance of that too, but they all ended up going to college and careers and had good jobs.

MM: How about your father's side of the family?

BJ: My father's side of the family so, I remember my grandfather owning his barber shop on the west side, I vaguely remember being in it, I just vaguely know that he did own it. They were very active, my grandmother, I'm trying to remember, he owned a barber shop, my grandmother lived in church and they were also trying to get things for the black community and back then, I'm going to go back a little bit.

MM: Yeah.

BJ: Coming up as a kid, when I talk about the East Side going from East Side to GBV [Great Brook Valley], also you had things like [?] those were private clubs, the house on Mill Street, like the Black House Lodge where they would have a lot of beauty pageants in our community, Christmas holiday celebrations, educational scholarships for families. There were businesses in the neighborhoods that were also supporting, as well and then you had [?] who was supporting Cousin Betty Price who owned Prospect's House we had our Black Drummer Corps, who would win competitions across the state. So, there were things that and they had a lot of talent shows and there were different things on both sides of my—my mom's family, I think, more on my mom's family that I had more engagement than I did on my dad's side. I've seen a lot in their families and even seeing them organizing when they were talking about tearing the neighborhood down, there was a lot of organizing activism in that piece of it too. They were trying to put in affordable housing and people were—and the houses that they were living in they definitely needed to be torn down, but I just said there was a unity, I believe in the neighborhood they just didn't want broken. And most people saw—they call it the Black neighborhood but it wasn't the Black neighborhood because it was White immigrant poor folks there as well.

MM: It was like a little community?

BJ: Yes.

MM: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

BJ: As much as I can remember because I was very little.

MM: Yeah.

BJ: So, those were where you would see a lot of the entrepreneur businesses that I talked about. My aunt and uncle, you had the restaurants there, you had the candy store there, you had farmer's outlet which was a market down there on Summer Street. It was a whole community of being able to get what you needed to survive for the families that were living in those neighborhoods at that time. Yeah the [rag man?] would come around, so these were stories that were told to me, so I can only remember so much because I was like I said probably one, two?

MM: Okay

BJ: So, I am sharing what has been shared down to me in storytelling and stuff.

MM: So, you said that your siblings and yourself were split up after your mom passed away and you moved to Boston?

BJ: Yes.

MM: How old were you when that happened?

BJ: Seventeen.

MM: So that means you had gone through elementary school, middle school and high school, here in Worcester or … ?

BJ: I did, I did, and I stopped after Worcester I went to Boston and I actually, I guess my aunts and them knew I was going to be going through something because they didn't really push me to do anything. Beause for a whole year they kept going, "Honey, we are going to put you in counseling," and I'm like, "Counseling? What is that?" And actually, my uncle got me a job at Provincial and I was working over there for about three or four years. Then I met someone, probably two years later and got pregnant! [laughs] You know and ended up staying in Boston. I think I came back when Bobby was three, back to Worcester.

MM: Bobby is your son?

BJ: Bobby is my son and then I wanted to see what Worcester was doing and checked in on Maritza and everybody and see what they were doing and there was a lot of development going on in the city of Worcester particularly back here off of Maria Ave. There was a developer that had undeveloped property, a lot of it, and he was getting federal money and one of my mentors, Lynn Simon, who really showed me how to organize, [she said,] "You want to organize? I'll show you how to organize." And I was like, "What are we doing? What do you mean by that?" [She said] ,"We are going to Boston and reporting him." [And I said] "Oh my god, we are?!" So that was one of my first real experience, understanding how policies and legislation, when people have federal money and was going to Boston and report the… money he was getting [which was going undeveloped] and come to find out Lynn only threatened to do that. We had a sit down with this developer and he was sharing to us what some of his issues where, his timeline, what he was going to do, and we were saying to him, "That's great but we are watching you. So, we are going to be organizing against you if you don't start developing on these properties." And then he shared about [because] we asked questions about who was going to be there, what was going to be the cost of the rent, was it going to be market rent? Is it going to be thirty percent of people's housing? All those things. So those were thing we made sure he kept his commitment for and he did, he did.

MM: Go back again a little bit. Can you tell me a little bit about your schooling here in Worcester?

BJ: How far back?

MM: As far back as you remember.

BJ: Middle school, high school, left after high school. Came back did Quinsigamond [Community College], did I think two years of liberal arts, decided I didn't want to do any more school, then I said I was going to do some online schooling. Did some online schooling, said, "I'm done." Wasn't going to do that, then I worked locally for a law firm, started as a receptionist ended up getting some experiences doing a little bit of paralegal work. Was thinking at the time, Suffolk University was trying to recruit people of color, they were coming to talk to me to see if I wanted to go. I made the decision I didn't want to be an attorney. Said to my husband, I said, "I'm quitting my job, I'm stressed," and so he said, "You going to volunteer anywhere?" And I said, "Yes, I am going to volunteer. I am going to go to the Y and I am going to volunteer." So I came to the Y and that's almost thirty years ago, I came to volunteer and help them in the fundraising and their support campaign and working with some of the kids at Lake Side here and YMCA had a program at school at Boston and Springfield College, [I] went and got some credit there, ended up becoming an employee. Took my first job as I don't remember what it was with the Lake Side kids doing some Peer Education on HIV and AIDs and working with young children that had families affected by this disease that were living with parents with this and became an educator and went and got some certifications in health and wellness, health and fitness and I came in with a network of a lot of organizing and networking. I ended up running probably for about ten years the Men's Health Program for men of color for prostate cancer and stuff and I was almost like providing for men that were either coming in from prison systems or coming from lifestyle of the environment of the street and so I actually created a curriculum of providing indigenous models or peer circle for them as well as getting their mentors and coaches for the ability to be able to sustain [....] so they wouldn't go back to incarceration.

MM: I want to go back to that but first I want to ask you, I actually went to Burncoat as well and I'm just wondering, and I went through schooling here in Worcester too. So, I'm just wondering how your experiences were there.

BJ: So, in Burncoat, I went there Burncoat Junior and Senior High and you know when I think back to being in that environment, because Burncoat was a brand-new school when we were in there and it had its challenges. And being in there with thousands of kids and there is probably a handful of people of color there. But it didn't prevent us from learning or getting educated but you had those—there was always somebody that was very ignorant or rude and some not so nice things—may have made a racial slur or something. When I think back, the system didn't address it, we had to address it and sometimes that consists of fighting. Not my having a physical fight but it did consist of either verbal or it could have been physical for some but other than that we had a lot of good friends, but I will tell you this we have reunions from Burncoat when we were there, one I believe coming up in November. I don't know what number this is but it's, you know that said a lot, people remember you no matter your ethnicity or your race is, you talk about the good times that you had engage in whether it be some type of artsy or some type of activity or some type of school dance. And we did go to the school dances that was another interesting thing. Here we were going to a school dance where all the white kids, dancing to the white

bands, we had a blast, you know what I mean. But I mean we always go back to our environment, where it was comfortable for us, it was okay.

MM: Yeah and to go back a little bit before we delve into the professional, you said you had a son, Bobby, and you married as well, and you tell me a little bit about that.

BJ: So, I had Bobby at let me think, I think I was twenty years old when I had Bobby, I was not prepared for a child, not knowing what motherhood was like, because my mother died at an age when she was just telling us about being a lady and the etiquettes. We had to walk with books on our head, we oh yeah, we had to through all of that. And so, she was very old school but etiquette it was old, it was great. So yeah, I had a son Bobby, I got pregnant and was with his father for few years, but I missed my family, [that] was the reason I came back. I really missed my family and I ended up marrying my childhood sweetheart that I liked at 14 years old and we have been together for forty-five years. Forty-five years and five kids later.

MM: How are your kids, are they close in age?

BJ: I got to remember, Bobby is forty-three, so it's on your paper, they range from forty-three to twenty-eight.

MM: Oh wow, that a huge range.

BJ: That's a huge range.

MM: Are they close together, as in friends or?

BJ: I will be honest, they are close, they are all different.

MM: Yeah, of course.

BJ: They are very, very, very different from, they are totally different, oh my god. I think about it, they all have different personalities, I mean Bobby is probably intellectually a genius and I should have had that kid tested, I should have known when he was in the ninth grade and they wanted to put him in the 11th and I didn't, but when you are a new parent you don't know how to advocate for your child and understanding the educational system, but everything happens for a reason. But [he's a] very smart young man, currently living with me because my husband had two strokes, so he is helping me with his dad, so I am able to work. And I have—our youngest daughter—I am raising our six-year-old granddaughter, she is right now not functional to raise her daughter and I have my oldest daughter who is doing wonderful. You know Ms. Fitness and she has two beautiful children, this little boy and this little girl and she is with their dad of over ten years and doing well and she is looking into going back to work, now that he [grandson] is going to be two in December. She will go back, and she will do [?], something like that and

then my youngest son, lazy but he is a smart young man odd jobs here and there and then I have my stepson has his own business doing very well, very successful doing very well.

MM: To go back, let me ask you, all your kids did they all go through schooling here in Worcester?

BJ: Yes, all of them went through the Worcester Public School system, all of them graduated from high school and some of them had college. As a matter of fact, all did, oh no except for my youngest boy, he didn't. He said, "I'm done." He was a labor kid and so yes they did, I think the challenge for my oldest was intellectually as a young mother I did not know his boredom which came from him, his work not being a challenge for him and then my oldest daughter it was challenging for her and then youngest one had an IEP (Individualized Learning Program), so it worked out for her and I think my stepson just went through school. They all did pretty well in school but I will say this my youngest son, it seemed like I was always up at that school for an issue but it was his affiliations and what was so sad about it, there was an altercation in the hallway and the teacher fell and I guess a lot of students fell on her and they said all the kids pushed her, so we had to go and fight the system and had to get some advocacy, had to go through two hearings and plus at the time they were not advocating for families at the time. So of course, they had to support the teacher and you know put him in alternative school in 11th grade. He hated it and he resented it because kids were profiling at that time. So there was mistake that was made, so they were profiling him and profiling other kids and so that follows them.

MM: What was that like ten years ago? If he is twenty-eight now?

BJ: No, my daughter is twenty-eight, he is thirty-eight and so that just put a bad taste in his mouth and he is an introvert, so he is not the type to say anything so the advocacy would have to come from his mother having an network we need to provide to fight to address the system and I knew the system was not going to and I knew the system was not going to give us the verdict we want. I knew where the verdict was going but I was trying to make an example to show the importance of why you have to use the system whether it goes for you or not to let them know you have the ability and the intellect and the knowhow and the aggressiveness to not let anyone walk all over you, to prove your innocence, so it's a principle, so those are the things I dealt with my son.

MM: So to back to the network, activists within Worcester.

BJ: With the Local [?], which one?

MM: Anyone.

BJ: Well, with Maritza and all of us, I mean there were things in the community that was happening, when you look at neighborhood spaces, open spaces, looking at environment, looking

at some of the areas in Main South where we lived at. We could see the differences in Shrewsbury Street versus Webster Square and Newton Square, you just see the differences of sources that were providing into those businesses, into those spaces and weren't getting those same advocacy in those spaces, so we were fighting for things like that. Talking about, also fighting for opportunities in the municipality that people of color were not sitting at. Meeting with the city manager and actually having an intentional impact on how we create a strategic plan of getting, recruiting people of color to be in some of those seats that were very influential and were very powerful. Because there was a lot of nepotism going on in the municipality, giving this friend, or this cousin, this son and we were not having the opportunity to get on the mon. So we knew we had to position ourselves so those are some of the things that in their archives that we advocated and that we fought for and Chief Diversity Officer, the whole Youth Director for the City, those are things that we fought for, you know?

MM: The offices themselves?

BJ: Yeah, we fought for those.

MM: The creation of them?

BJ: Yeah, we fought for those things.

MM: The Youth Opportunities Office that exists right now that's from you?

BJ: We fought for all that stuff.

MM: Can you tell me a little bit about that? How that came to be?

BJ: How it came to be is because we were not, because when we looked at some of the youth programming that was happening around the city, I mean there was not—you had agencies that were servicing a diversity of students, of youth but didn't have people that looked like them. You know, so everyone that you looked at, just did not look like. And not only that we are talking about people coming in at the time from different countries and you were treating all people of color the same and you can't do that. So, there were people coming in from [war torn] countries, you know El Salvador, certain parts of Africa and you are treating… So, these are some of the things we got to look at even under some of these programing and the way they do things. But we needed advocacy at municipality level and so we worked with, it was Maritza, it was a people of color group. It had faith-based organizations, activists' organizers, just different people that came to the table and how we look at talking about getting the enrichment in our neighborhood and getting our kids what students at Newton Square get or what Shrewsbury gets. How do we get that? So, we are still fighting.

MM: Do you mind me asking you how you and Maritza met?

BJ: Oh my god, probably just, probably at a rally or something, I don't remember. It was thirty over thirty years ago.

MM: Wow.

BJ: Yeah, she is one of my closest friends and we did—I think some of things we did together, gotten bills changed and I think about how we used to meet here at the YMCA and it was about addressing those same issues that I talked about when we got into another group years later people of color, when we already did the ground work for this. I will also tell you this, we were one of the very first groups to do a health assessment in the city of Worcester and they would not let us recognize, the assessment we did in the city of Worcester.

MM: What kind of assessment? What were you looking at?

BJ: We were looking at some of the assessments of what families needed in Worcester, whether it was a health need, just what were some of the needs, some of the services that families needed and we had a partnership with Henry Lee Willis Center and I'm trying to think, I think it was healthcare for all out of Boston, which was comprised of probably many different activist and organizers in that group and so we had, what we did, we got a small grant and they had liaison from Health Care for all that was doing the funding for the assessment and what we had to do, we had the whole community form around us so we could listen, to what the community needs were. We also had a partnership with the Department of Public Health as well, but they will tell you they have no recollection or memory of it, it's in their archives.

MM: That's crazy.

BJ: That's crazy.

MM: When was this?

BJ: Fifteen years?

MM: Oh wow, 15 years?

BK: So, when they were doing, yes 15 years ago. Fifteen years, yeah, I have to ask Maritza.

MM: So what, 2003? Am I doing the math right?

BJ: Yeah, maybe 15 years ago.

MM: That's crazy.

BJ: It's crazy and I'll tell you this also, there was a an influx of violence in the city of Worcester and Congressman [Jim] McGovern called a citywide meeting at Saint Peter's Church and we went to that church for that meeting because we knew, we knew where the violence was coming from in our communities and so what came out of that meeting was two things, the Hector Reyes House, Mattie Castiel [?] relationship with Hector Reyes, god bless him, he is not here today and then Youth Violence Coalition.

MM: Can you tell me a little bit more about the House, I don't know much about it.

BJ: I would rather have Mattie tell you about the Hector Reyes House, I'll give you Mattie's number.

MM: Sure

BJ: So, you can contact her. I hope she gives you the right information because some people forget and so because we helped her too but people forget when they get established, when they get acclimated, become part of the institution, I think you know that. And so under the Youth Violence piece, so Congressman McGovern wanted to find a way to curb violence so he called every youth agency in the city and he also called us because we were doing grassroots work at that time and we had Mosaic [Cultural Complex], we just had many organizations around the table and I was representing Mosaic at the time because I was the co-founder chief executive officer at the time at the time of that and I was actually working with that population that was impacting our community whether they were victims or they were [?] and so we had to sit down. So, there was a decision that we came to at the time at this large meeting and he said, "Listen we need to do something [about] this issue of violence." And so there was an opportunity for some funding statewide but in order to go for some funding you needed to have a coalition that was established, I believe three years, which I believe at that time Youth Net was the name, it is Youth Connect today but that the time it was called Youth Net before there was a transition of change and so we kept together with all the executive directors that were representing those organizations that were comprised of Youth Net and as organized activists we came together to figure out how we were going to do this. And when I tell you the disrespect that was given to us, "Who do you people think you are? Who do you know? What are you going to do?" You know, and we ended up somehow comprising, agreeing to sign off on it with the stipulation that we would get funding to start our youth violence coalition and what happened from that time, is like the profiling and the stereotypes because of who we were and who we were advocating for. It just always had such a like a black cloud over us because the populations we were working with and but it didn't stop us or prevent us from doing the work we needed with that population and we showed we had the ability not only to create pathways, but create sustainability, but also create trust where we also had the ability to show that none of our guys were bad , you know because we were doing with perpetuators, you know that were probably looking at open cases and had criminalizations, we had to go and advocate in court with them, these were people, young men at the time that were willing to change their lives and they had no one to give them a

glimmer of encouragement or hope and all of a sudden here comes this organization names Mosque that is going to give them not only encouragement or hope but show them that they had the ability to reunite with their family to address some of their PTSD, be able to go out there with their peers and talk about that there is this organization that will give us a path way to freedom of coming out of a lifestyle of violence and you know it has been an uphill battle ever since.

MM: When I got your name [to do this interview] I Googled you because I needed to figure out...

BJ: Mosaic, yeah.

MM: That was the first thing that came up and I had never heard anything about it and every article, and I didn't even click on them but every article, they were negative and I was kind of confused about, from a third person perspective who knew nothing about you, the first thing I Google and every article has a negative connotation to it, at least the title, you get this image of you and that's, obviously we are in a cycle now where catchy titles click people but I just want to hear your perspective, because it was your company, you are the co-founder, so if you could [provide] a little bit of back story about that and maybe how it came to be this thing where people Google your name and that's the first thing that comes up and it's negative for whatever reason that might be.

BJ: Well, I think that it all started with the Youth Violence Forum, I'm telling you this is where it started from and so what happened when we finally did get that money in, and then they had to create a template of pathways for that, for those young people to go into a track. You know we didn't do our stuff in a Western traditional way, we did it in an indigenous way, where we were meeting people where they are at but understanding the challenges that we face dealing with that type of environment and that type of individual. We had a lot of work on our hands but we were willing to out in the community to do it with some of the mentors and coaches that were willing to take on some of these gentlemen's lifestyles. So what happened when we did get the money, McGovern called me and said, "Brenda, I need one of your young people to be part of the press conference." And I said, "What is it going to be?" He said, "Lieutenant Governor all the officials," and I said, "Fine, now I just want to remind you, you know, the type of individual that we are dealing with, they want to do a transition." And they said, "Yeah." So, we give them Tyron and so when Tyron went to the press conference and I said to him, we prepped him, I said, "Listen, Gang Task Force is going to go in there, you are working to change your life, are you going to be able to handle that, the pressure?" He said, "Yes, I can." We go in, their Gang Task Force was not happy seeing this young man, this individual. We get a call that night after the press conference that there was an article coming out with all of Tyron's history, of who he was and how they were trying to convict him [as] a career criminal and all this and so Congressman McGovern, I remember him saying to us, "If you had to do it all over again, would you give me the same person?" And Keisha said, "Yes we would," because she was representing Black Legacy and we just weren't going to change and the article came out the next day and you

Google it and it's so bad but my point with sharing this history with you, this kid not only changed his life, got custody of his daughter, ended up going to school and graduating, working to this day. He never looked back is my point, he never looked back. So the infrastructure that we create, is not the infrastructure of a YMCA or the infrastructure of a Boys and Girls Club or an infrastructure of a YWCA, it was an infrastructure of orienting our community into a place where they knew they could thrive in and survive in and be successful at and so that was the beginning of things to come. Then I had a business partner, Marie Boom, and I'll give you her number too, you should speak to her too and so who was a genius of writing, creating pathways of what we needed for this population and so we had an opportunity after training these populations, training them in areas of basic needs of, from dressing, from coming to work on time. Just being in the peace circle and being able to participate. And participation does not always have to be engaged, if someone does not want to be engaged in something they did not have too, you know but their presence was being there. So we actually had the ability to show the change and then we got some money from the state, it was a men of color grant and the men of color grant was about educating men, men of color on prostate cancer. We actually sent them to a community health worker training where they got certified as CHW's that to be able to do this work and under CHW they came with a lot of, I don't remember off the top of my head a lot of curriculum that they had to adjust and they were part of the statewide, CHW's would go to the meetings be part of the conferences and they were impressive because you didn't have men, men of color, Latino and Black men that was speaking to where they were coming from and showing the transition that they made, you know based upon the environment that they were coming from and so we had the ability to really provide feedback based upon their journey and the work that we did and so we just got this grant. There was a grant opportunity that was coming through the City of Worcester and I don't remember the name of the grant, you have to ask Maritza and as non-profit organization, you know we were small grass roots, we were really what you call the underground rail grass root1 organization doing that real authentic work and so we had the opportunity to go for the grant and we part of a ten partnership, I think it was about eight to ten million dollars, the city got and so Worcester, so Mosaic got a substantial amount of that money and we didn't know it bothered people that we got that money, but as we were attending the meetings these infrastructure meetings, they thought we were just an outreach, just an outreach component, they didn't know we were a full flesh organization, on our website why would you not look at our website and see? But because of our uniqueness and the work that we did is the reason that we got that grant, whether they want to recognize it or not, we do recognize that. And so, I don't know how Turtle Boy got involved, there was something and at the time we were organizing about the things that were happening in the school system.

MM: Can I cut you off for a second, can you explain what Turtle Boy is? I am from Worcester and I know but someone listening to this might not.

BJ: I don't know how to describe him.

MM: It's like a website, right?

BJ: Yeah, he is—in my—well let me just share the story and then I'll describe him that way. And so we were also organizing around education about the suspension of black and brown folks and so we were meeting at the time with Superintendent Bloom, who happened to be black right? And so, she had some concerns, particularly North [High School] was one of the schools she was looking at and she had some concerns about this blogger [Turtle Boy] that seemed to have an influence on her educators and so the concerns that she had was, because you have educators teaching our kids of color but supporting this white racist blogger, okay? So, what happened, we just wanted to be able to support and making sure that the kids get the best education they can [and we wanted to know if] this is a federal violation of educators supporting a blogger. So. we had a press conference at the YWCA and it was me, Keisha, there was five or six of us with some parents, I never mentioned his name. All I said was that we could not have our educators teaching in our public-school systems to our kids and supporting a blogger that is being very negative. So, what happened? He dug up everything about Brenda Jenkins, he dug up everything about Mosaic and that's where all that started from.

MM: That's crazy.

BJ: That's crazy and then it got to the point where he was following, he trolled all our staff. We never hid who our population, who we worked with, we never did that and he just trolled all their Facebook pages and just said that one of our staff was at the time working at the radio station, "He is double dipping, blah, blah, blah." And then he got into the head of certain city councilors, "There should be an audit, blah, blah, blah," There was an audit, only came back that the audit, we needed some bookkeeping, some things that we just need to keep in place, then they weren't satisfied, then the city manager had Attorney General Maura Healey audit us and the blessing to that was, she not only audited us one year, she audited us four years and it came back that the findings were the same.

MM: And did this all happen in the last couple of years?

BJ: Yeah.

MM: So, it's basically the same city council members that are there right now, more or less?

BJ: We had support at the time from Joe O'Brien, who I love, Sarai Rivera was on it at the time, Rick Rushton was on it at the time, so we had three supporters. Konnie Lukes was not a supporter of us or Mosaic at all. I mean there was defamation of our character, particularly me because I was the founder and CEO. So, I would get calls from Boston [saying], "You are on a radio showing [and they are saying] that you stole half a million dollars]" and I am laughing wow. And AM radio here [I'm] laughing, laughing. So that comes up first, but you go look all of our work, we have done some serious work, we have done some serious publishing and research work.

MM: Can you tell me about that?

[Break in interview]

BJ: We are still fighting for money that the city owes us, two years later. So my activism, organizing work really came in with some Mosaic, it all came together because by that time, I think I was well polished when it came to, so there are differences between activism and organizing and networking and so I think that at that time I was no longer emotionally reactive and I had the ability to use the intellect and the resources that I built to advocate for some of the injustices that were happening to us even during that whole Turtle Boy issue. Because I wouldn't go public back and forth because I had a board of directors I had to answer too, so people were wondering, "Why [isn't] she coming out?" Because I couldn't. I had a board. I ended up having to hire a law firm to do what we do, and I just couldn't do it and some of the organizers were like, "Brenda why aren't you..." And I said, "No, I have the board, I have lawyers on my board, the board has to make decisions, they are going to send out a statement, it had to come from the board chair. I just can't come out there like tha.t" I was really restricted but it was the best thing that happened, the best thing that happened at that time for me. But I will tell you this Milagros, when you think about every time you turn around, your name is in the paper or the radio, [I have people] calling me from Boston, [saying] "What are you doing in the radio station, girl you got money?" No, I don't. Social media and it was just embarrassing, it was just really, really embarrassing, you know? But you know what was great at the time Mosaic was going through that? Some of the organizers, we had the building over there at 41 Piedmont, they went over there with a casket, when they were trying to sell the building we were in and it was powerful how the organizers came out and supported us. It was powerful just to see the power of a community come out even when we had to go in front of city hall councilors, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it, I just said, "Am I seeing this?" I just couldn't believe it, I could not believe it.

MM: I kind of want to talk a little bit about, first is Mosaic is still running?

BJ: Mosaic is still running. We are not doing any programing right now. We are going to start our peace circles the end of August. But I stay in the loop with some of the organizing coalitions that are doing some work locally and state level and I just make sure that Mosaic's name is on a lot of that collective work that is happening in the city. I am quite sure that a lot of people think that Mosaic went away but Mosaic is not going away. It's not going to, so there is definitely a need for the work of Mosaic and it's clearly [?] certain people of the municipality have been sending people to me recently to ask about feedback, “You can go talk to Brenda Jenkins about getting some feedback on Youth Violence, blah, blah, blah.” I'm not giving it to them.

MM: That's the next thing I was going to ask you in a way, can you tell me a little bit about how receptive, I guess you answered this question in a way but how respective city government has

been over the last years over activism? How open they are to change and based on the things you have told me they are kind of touch and go in a way.

BJ: You know they always have their checks and balances. Based upon any type of funding that they get, that they exceed what their outcome is. You know, however when you still see influxes of things happening and you don't have handle on that and you are still trying to find a way of curtailing and really getting a collective way of how to control this and you are coming to me and others for some feedback to bring back to the table with different people, no. And so when you are using institutions to talk about something in our community and still you won't come and have that conversation with me, I'm okay with that you got, they got to do what they got to do and I have to do what I got to do and one thing that I've learned it's, we are all going to have our, we all have a different lens in how we work and how we do things. But I think collectively we all have to come together and figure this out, but I think there is not a level of respect because I think that because we have been profiled. I think that Mosaic has been profiled and you know sometimes people's perceptions is there reality. And so, no one really has come to have that conversation, at all. You know what I am saying? Not the Department of Public Health, none of them, none of them have. The only thing they think of [is] what they don't want to pay us or what we didn't do or look for all the things we did wrong and not what we did right. So, you know, I sleep at night. But they will find their tokenism, they will find their tokenism to sit at those tables but not going to find the remedy that you need to sustain and it's just that, I think you always have to work with people, you can agree to disagree. But there is a level of respect coming to the table will we have an outcome of what we all want, the end result is, whether you eradicate homelessness, whether you eradicate violence, we all have that same outcome that we want to achieve and I think, they don't like being uncomfortable in a place where working with people that really step over the edge. I follow the trends across the country and I don't think our, I think we all have to be at the table, but I don't think our Youth Violence Program should be police led. I don't think they should be police led, I think the police have, do they have a role? Of course, they have a role. Should it be police led? No, it should not be. That's my opinion.

MM: I wanted to ask you a little bit about, you said you were the founder of Mosaic?

BJ: Yes.

MM: And also, the CEO, right?

BJ: Yes.

MM: How is leadership and being a female. How is that, is that ever …?

BJ: Well, I think, yeah, so just to give you an example, so me being a co-founder and CEO of Mosaic Cultural Complex, if you look at a white organization, I don't get the same respect that they would give someone that would be in their perception a reputable organization that people

recognize through municipalities. So you had two black women that were co-founders of this organization, one a heterosexual and the other one a gay women, so we had a target on our back because of who we were. There was definitely inequities about not showing [us a] level of respect, until we opened our mouths to show not only that we have the credentials but the articulation, the intellect to be at where we were sitting, we earned it, to sit here. So definitely a difference in the infrastructure, when it comes to seeing the level of peer to peer, they didn't show it to us.

MM: Do you think it had a lot to do with the ways you and the company were attacked because of you being a black female?

BJ: Well, up until that time, we were dealing with some of that profiling, being female, you know, Ed Augustus or they would call Tim Garvin, they wouldn't give me the same respect they gave him, definitely different. So United Way, Tim Garvin, Brenda Jenkins, Mosaic Cultural Complex, you know looking at the ability to do A, B, and C, no. What they, all they look for was fault, and instead of—and I was new to running my own business and if you had the power and the tools to help me in areas that had a deficit, why would you not help me? So, now they do help people [laughs]. And it's just, it's just amazing, it's just sad, it was just sad how we were treated and how we were judged as women and judged as "Who are these two women? Coming in here with this little outreach program?" We were a full fleshed organization and it's just, I don't know.

MM: Can we talk a little bit about the great work you have done with the organization?

BJ: You know I was looking for [Ms. Jenkins looks for documents to give to the project]. Because we did some work with UMass on a cutting-edge teaching sensitivity to investigators and personal.

MM: Anything you can't find now I can always come back later and grab it from you too. Another question that I did want to ask you is, where do you see Worcester heading?

BJ: In what capacity?

MM: I think in a social activism capacity? I think I asked this question, but maybe I am looking at it from a wider perspective, we can look at it from a social activism perspective, the city being a little more responsive?

BJ: Well one of the things I've got to say about Worcester that I love, is that I think that we are one of the progressive social activism communities. I love the fact of how we are getting our young people so engaged and training them out for this work. That is what we need, and I just think that the concern that I have is [that] Worcester is known for when someone is raising some great awareness and showing some of the deficits of the city all of the sudden they want to pull

that person in, let's get that person, let's quiet them up. But what is happening that I noticed is that they can't do that with the young people. So, I am looking for young people to really—not looking, I see that young people are really taking responsibility and organizing and activism and holding these types of institutions accountable. So, I am happy to see that and I am happy to see those that are sharing the torch, not just passing it, but sharing that torch, coaching and mentoring and really educating them. The whole process, because when you look at, when I think back to the Civil Rights Movement, they had the template of training people even when they were whole, even they were interrogated, I mean they positioned, they really prepped and prepared them. Even when you look at some of these groups that were on some of the most wanted federal lists like whether it be the Black Panthers, whether it be the [?], when you look at those groups, they did not start out violent, they started out caring of a deficit that was needed for caring for a family. When you look at the free breakfast programs that are happening in schools, we know where that comes from, but because of how they were profiling, labeled, under federal FBI, this is what happens. All that connotation that you see, this is what they do well, this is what they do well to us. I am just excited that Worcester is actually grooming some of these young activists up and preparing them to do [the work] and they are doing the work, they are out there. I see them doing this work and I am just very proud of some of these young people that are out there, that are standing, they are really standing. Worcester, you know.

MM: [How did you come into this position?]

BJ: Right and so, I mean being at the Y, their books it is 25 years but my social security I have been here 27 going on 28 years. So, I have had four, probably four, five positions in this organization. The current position now is Health and Wellness Community Coordinator and so I oversee a lot of the wellness programs like the medical hypertension clinic coming in, bringing in all the holistic clinics that will be widened. That is all my responsibility. Creating that triage services not only for our member base but for our community base as well.

MM: How do you combine, or do you find your activism, do you see them coinciding?

BJ: No, one of the things that I learned [is] that I keep my work separate from here. This is a traditional organization, when you are doing the Y you are doing the Y. But there are times where I have to use my network based upon what I have tried to create or what I am trying to do. I do use that network to brand what I am trying to do, the outcomes or whatever decisions I am trying to make, whether it be triage clinic, whether it be a holistic health fair, whether it be whatever. I keep it separate because this institution as progressive [and it has] come a long way but they have a very long way to go as well too. They have diversity and inclusion that they work on across the association based upon the needs of their employees, about talking about fair wages, employment opportunities, you know every organization has a succession plan, nine part out of ten people of color are not part of the succession plan. So, I do know that now they have conferences and webinars where people have the ability to get [???] and actually achieve some professional growth development, so that's good.

MM: One of my final questions is more asking you, is there anything we haven't discussed that you think we should discuss.

BJ: I want to give you more information on Mosaic and I want to give you some information on the research project that I have. Because that was some very powerful work that we did and we, like I said it was the first piece that we got published that we were very excited about and I just want to make sure I hand you the right information.

[Break in interview]

BJ: We were part of CHEIR and that's another thing, CHEIR was the Center for Health Equity and Intervention Research, that we were part of. We were partnered with Dr. [?] who was the—I forget his position. He was trying to—guy is a genius. [Finds document] I am going to read it to you.

MM: Do you mind if I take a copy?

BJ: You can take this and get it back to me.

MM: Of course.

BJ: So this whole piece was about supporting minority health, so CHEIR was integrating into so many things. They wanted to develop intervention too such as story telling that were tailored by deep spectrums of, deep culture structure as well linguistic and literacy characteristics and then they wanted to focus on strategies that would leverage the spectrum that would make available to patients that would not require physician intervention and then they wanted to engage certain populations in settings that were served by working at different levels such as the clinic level, community, and they wanted to bring innovation by infusing education and by directional academic community learning that's what we came, came in through our activities. Of course, the whole administration piece. But that's the description of work that we did. And I'll tell you that there was a lot of work, a lot of work, great money [laughs]. those institutions will always say they are broke but boy when they pay they pay well. And we used our community health workers to be part of developing some of the checklist for looking at some of the—when they are creating the checklist for the assistance, for the students that were going into research. I am going to find you a better document then the one that I have. And some of that research, I will tell you that doing that research with those institutions and those research assistances was very challenging for them because you are looking at, because the things that we wanted to do is working with research assistances, here they were developing tool, you know for communities of color and not have conversations with them. How do you do that? So, the problem is that we had to train the research assistant and we had to create checklists that were culturally quarantined to them...

[Break in interview]

So, if I had the opportunity to do Mosaic full time, god bless me with financial freedom to do Mosaic full time, that's what I would do. Because no matter whatever negative connotation that you read about them, it does not stop what we did and the impact that we have had to the point that the state that oversees the youth violence template called four months ago. They were actually reactivating some funding and they wanted Mosaic to really do the lead, but we had our fiscal conduit under this grant but anyways. People think they can do it themselves then go do it yourself right? It didn't work out that way. I am going to have to get you some information for you.

MM: I can come after [to grab the documents].

BJ: You can come after?

MM: Yeah.

BJ: Okay, I am going to get you the right information about that and Mosaic.

MM: Sounds good. Anything else you want to talk about that we haven't?

BJ: I just don't know, sometimes I want to talk but I feel like I am all over the place.

MM: Oh, no. I am like that too.

BJ: My god, but I will say this, when it came to Mosaic that was the calling God gave us to do and I always said I will never compromise my calling for money ever again, ever, ever, ever, again. Because there are just some times when you think you ready, that's not what God wanted you to be and so the work we were doing and the impact that we have. And I still have relationship with all those people. Matter of fact, before you came in I had a clinical person come in and say, "Brenda we really need some help can you help us?" And I gave them what I could give them and they said, "We miss you, you being out here." My thing is this, I don't want to sound like I am beating up a system or betting up white people, I just think they have had privilege and power for so long and it hasn't been shared with women of color and I just think that it's time that they share that power.

I am a founding member of what you call Massachusetts Women of Color Coalition across the state and I chair the Health and Wellness platform of that and the purpose of that organization being started not that we were able, we wanted to keep an infrastructure based on us controlling the narrative of some of the issues we wanted to address. And so to do that we knew that we wanted to actually get—whether it be health and wellness, whether it be education, whether it is I think it is justice, economic empowerment, there were five of them I can't think of the fifth one, but there was a reason why we want to—oh and politics—and so we are a non-bipartisan organization and we have been doing some big things across the state and don't tell us what we

can and cannot do. We now the power we have, we know the influence, we have close to 2,000 women across the state, we have region meetings, we have statewide meetings and so it's all good.

[Break in Interview]

So when I look at and so two things, MWOC and Mosaic would be two organizations that I would love to do full time, if it is in God's will to do that, because of finally being in an environment of likeminded women who are in these institutions and looking at the different generations of women coming together and being able to create a paradigm shift that will make change for women of color. And that's power to me. That's powerful to me and being able to not only share but pass that on to my youngest, whether it be my daughter or my granddaughters. Because to understand and prepare them for a world that is not nice, that you will be judged by the color of your skin and not by the content of your character. Even though Martin's speech was powerful, we are being judged even more so, we have regressed and gone backwards. Even in Worcester you can feel the Trumpsters, they just, the calling of names and just the aggressiveness and it's just very different and it's scary, it's very scary. We are trying to protect rights and laws, like Roe v. Wade and these types of things and we have to stand up and fight, I have to stand up fight and I do it with faith because I believe so much in God, and I just truly believe that my work has been God led, spirit led and do I get up in my emotions and my flesh of the will? Of course, I do. Do I go home and carry this? Of course, I do, sometimes, But, when you go home, and you put in not only a forty-hour work week or eight or twelve day. To do able to go home and why can't we be able to go to work one day and I say this once in a while and just do our jobs and not think about a person's color and what they look like? But [maybe] that's unrealistic but I get it, I get it, but my point is I would like to have peace, I would like to have peace. So how do we even take our women of color, because we have our own demons of hurting each other, whether it be dark versus light, or whether it be American or whatever but we need to come together and just create a cohesiveness of just authentic love and unity, but also show power and that's important to me.

MM: I think that a good place to end it, that's amazing.

BJ: Thank you.