

Interviewee: Stacey Luster
Interviewers: Tatiana Martinez and Emily
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Overseen by: Prof. Christian Williams, Assumption University

Abstract: Stacey Luster is a third generation Worcesterite. During her formative years she lived in Great Brook Valley, Plumley Village, and Washington Heights. She graduated from South High School at the age of 16. She attended St. John's University in New York and completed her degree in Government and Administration. In addition, she graduated from Boston University School of Law. In 1991 she was elected to the Worcester City Council, the first elected black woman to serve in that capacity. She has also served as Affirmative Action Officer for the Worcester Public School System, Assistant to the President of Quinsigamond Community College, and Director of Human Resources for the Worcester Public School System. She helped to create the Worcester Future Teachers Academy. Stacey later was employed as Assistant Vice President for Human Resources and Payroll and Equal Opportunity at Worcester State University. She is currently General Counsel for that institution. In this interview Stacey stresses the importance of family, faith, hard work, and the various mentors who impacted her life. She talks about the challenges and joys of growing up in Worcester and the financial difficulties she faced while pursuing her undergraduate and graduate degrees. She elaborates on how important it is for women to reach out to other women and offer them encouragement and positive feedback.

TM: Thank you, can you hear us okay?

SL: Perfectly.

TM: Okay awesome. So, well thank you so much for taking time out of your day to meet with us today. We're really excited about doing this project with you and getting the chance to practice our interviewing skills with you.

SL: Okay.

TM: Yeah, so before we get started, we just wanted to get your consent if it's okay if we record this interview, just so we can have all this information with us and so we don't miss anything.

SL: Sure. Perfect.

E: Cool.

TM: So, we'll just start by just like learning a little bit about you, just like your background like your family history, just more about you so just, so we can get a feel for it. But before we start, we will tell you a little bit about ourselves.

TM: So, I'm Tatiana and this is Emily. We're both juniors here at Assumption University, majoring in Human Services and Rehab Studies, and yeah, I don't know if you want to say anything else.

E: Yeah, so we are, we just are trying to practice our interviewing skills. We want to get to know you and like how you've like impacted the community and just like your story, so yeah. We're looking forward to getting to know you a little bit better.

SL: Okay, so I did submit that bio that you asked ---that you sent over, but basically my story is that even though technically you'll see I was born in Boston, I'm really a third generation Worcesterite. My mother was born here, my grandmother was born here, and I was educated here. I graduated from South High Community School. I grew up a poor kid in the projects, so I lived in Great Brook Valley and Plumley Village and Washington Heights. I graduated South High [School] at 16 and went to St. John's University in New York, and I completed my degree in Government and Public Administration. I then came back to Massachusetts to attend Boston University School of Law. In that, I had twin sons who attended the public schools here as well. I, later 1991-ish, I was elected to the Worcester City Council. I was the, still unfortunately, the only black woman to have been elected to the to the Worcester City Council and there hadn't been a non- white person elected in 16 years prior to my election. I was actively involved in the community and that's why people said, "You should run." How I think I first came on the scene of the community, or came to the attention of people in the community, was that I had thought about running for school committee and I went to talk to the former superintendent who became a mentor of mine, John Durkin, and his deputy superintendent was my elementary school principal at Clark Street School, Mr. Friend. And so, he, they were very generous to me in their time, but the bottom line is they kind of steered me towards working with them instead of running for public office at that time. So, I became the Affirmative Action Officer for the

Worcester Public Schools. And actually, even before that, Superintendent Durkin asked me if I would serve as a volunteer on the Strategic Planning Committee. So, then he got a chance to see how I interacted in that kind of a setting. And then shortly after that he asked me to become the District Affirmative Action Officer. I did that for, I don't know, about five years before I left and went to Quinsigamond Community College to become the Assistant to the President and do similar work for them in terms of, you know, trying to help them to diversify their staff and to create programming that would help make diverse students feel welcome at Quinsigamond Community College. So, I did that for a few years before returning to the Worcester Public Schools as their Director of Human Resources. I did that for like 15 years and created, along with a gentleman who helped to recruit me, George Munoz, we launched the Worcester Future Teachers Academy to create this pipeline for students in the Worcester community to become educators that still exists in partnership with Worcester State University. So, I stayed at Worcester State and really not Worcester State, Worcester Public Schools and loved it until I had the opportunity to come over to Worcester State [University] as the Assistant Vice President for Human Resources and Payroll and Equal Opportunity. And I've been here ---this is my 8th year. But about two years ago, two to three years ago, I switched positions and became the General Counsel for the university. So that's my like professional educational career introduction.

E: Alrighty thank you.

TM: Yeah, so would you say that you're like or like do you want to talk about like your relationship with your parents? Have they been super supportive throughout your journey within the education system?

SL: Well, both my parents have passed away.

TM: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

SL: Yeah, thank you, but yes you know my parents...It was an expectation that, you know, you would go to college and go to graduate school. That was just an expectation. And yes, they were supportive, although they couldn't be supportive financially because they really didn't have money, they were supportive in every other way. As I tell kids in Worcester...You know most of the kids don't have money either, and I let them know that so you can still do all this without money, but you'll probably have to work to eat. If you don't work, you probably can't eat. So that's what I did. I went and had financial aid and I worked to eat and I took student loans and all that good stuff. So yeah, they were very supportive emotionally and expectations, but obviously not financially.

E: Yeah, alright. And what about like your childhood and growing up? What was life like back then? Was it fun?

SL: You know, I grew up at elementary school at Clark Street School before Clark Street was desegregated. It was basically the Great Brook Valley school when I went there, and so that meant that it was pretty much all growing up mostly like you know people, but I loved it. Then we moved from Great Brook Valley, and I cried because it was a community. It was, it was my home, and it was, you know, it was lovely I really enjoyed my time growing up in the Valley. So yeah, I had a wonderful childhood, but very different than the childhood that my children have in that...My mother, my parents divorced and so I was raised by my single mother. And, you know, I was a latchkey kid, so that meant I had to get myself off to school and come home myself and figure it out. And that was my goal and as I got older there were things that I wanted to go to and that I wanted to do. I had to figure out how to get myself there. My mother didn't do carpooling and stuff like that. That just wasn't a thing and so now kids basically get rides everywhere and it just wasn't how it was.

TM: Would you say that regardless of your parents having that divorce, did you still have a good relationship with both parents?

SL: Oh, absolutely. I consider myself a daddy's girl, even though he wasn't actually right there, yeah. So yeah 100%.

TM: What kind of like impact like the divorce impact you like mentally at all?

SL: That was my normal. I think that as a child of divorce, kids...I think probably the downside is that I probably manipulated them with that, like I would get from one or the other one would, yeah. I would yeah. So, a little bit of manipulation happened in the early days. By the time I was a teenager they were, they were way over that.

TM: Hmm yeah, I'm sure. So, you've said you've lived here like pretty much like your entire life, you're the third generation Worcester. I don't remember the correct term that you used. What were the challenges like growing up like in Worcester that you like witness and then you see like those challenges still present now or have you seen those challenges kind of like resolved over time?

SL: So, the term is Worcesterite, Worcesterite, that's what it is from Worcester.

E: Okay.

SL: And to the challenges, some challenges I think have stayed the same, and others have deteriorated and become more of a problem. I'll say one from each category. So, one thing that I see that has improved, to start with the good thing, is when I was a kid growing up in Great Brook Valley there were not services. The Valley now has a health center. They have stores. We didn't have stores and so people would sell things out of their house, or they would be like a store bus, they would call it, that would come. And it was just extremely overpriced. And that was how you could buy things, if you didn't have transportation. And people --- it just was very, very under resourced. I think it has come a long way since then. I give a lot of credit to former Mayor Ray Mariano for improving the physical appearance of the Valley and putting the stairwells on the exterior. So, things like that have made a big difference, so kudos to that. I think one area that's no secret that has deteriorated is drug addiction in the community. It's just developed, it's prevalent, and it's very sad and discouraged to see when I look at people that are obviously sick from drug abuse. I'm that type of a people watcher that when I watch people, I always make up what I think this story could be. And when I see people I believe that appear to be sick from drugs, I can see that when they were little kids, they were, you know, sweet little kids, beautiful little kids. Their families had the same hopes and dreams for them, and they could have been anything, just like anybody else. Somehow this happened to them, and I just find that very sad and I wish that we could do more to help restore people to their potential. And in terms of something that I think has remained the same, is that I think it's just a very livable city. I think it's an affordable city. I think there are a lot of ---- and so even though we are an urban location with all the problems that go along with that, I think that there are the resources in our community that can positively impact the problems. So, when I see those folks that I know that with proper supported intervention, they have, they still have a chance, and we shouldn't give up. I think, I think we can do it but we just ---we've got 87 different organizations doing their own thing. It's not, not cohesive enough probably to make the impact that we would like.

E: That's well put. So, kind of going off that, do you think there's a kind of women's experience, something like have different experiences in Worcester then like men like a different face different challenges?

SL: Yes, yes definitely. I have become more aware of it in my later years. I really didn't notice it when I was your age because the first thing that I was impacted by was my race. That's what and it's still the first thing that I'm impacted by, but my gender is also an impact. And so, yes. I think we are more females than men, and we're often trivialized in things that we say. Our words are undervalued. So, a very common thing is to be in a meeting, so in your case in classrooms, and to have a young woman make a comment and she doesn't get a lot of feedback. And then a male

says the exact same thing that is like, “Oh my goodness that's it. You really hit it.” That's a real thing and women do it to each other. I think Hillary Clinton's not being elected is a perfect example of that. We hold each other to a standard that's unattainable. We not only have to be brilliant, but we have to dress well, stuff like that. You know our voices have to be a certain way because the tone of our voice can annoy people and all that foolishness. So yeah, it's definitely still a man's world, yeah. But we're not going to accept that, we're going to continue to try to make sure that we are taken seriously and given our seats at the table. Look, I think we have to work on more as women is lifting each other up I don't think there's enough of that as women.

E: Yeah.

TM: Yeah, of course. I definitely agree with that and how we as women have to just support each other. In a way like when you went off to elementary school or even like talking about college...How many female teachers... don't know like were more men in your education?

SL: Well generally speaking in at least in public schools, it's like 90% of the teachers are women, 90% of the teachers are white women. So, you know, it's not until you get into the secondary schools where you start having male teachers but usually the STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] fields, and so it's very stereotypical and it hasn't changed that much in that regard.

TM: Did you have like any teachers of color at all or were just like a limited?

SL: Not many. Yep, not many. Like maybe one in my whole K to 12, maybe one?

TM: Wow.

E: That's crazy.

TM: And that's honestly like kind of shocking to me because I feel like Worcester's a very like diverse like city and like you would see more people of color here rather like compared to just like white women. So, that's actually kind of surprising that there wasn't like a lot of like women of color or like people in the education.

SL: And there still aren't. And there still aren't. You see people in the classrooms I mean in schools, but often, you know, they, they're working in the cafeteria, more instructional assistants than classroom teachers, that the higher the level the less diversity.

TM: Yeah, yeah, it's tough, yeah. So, I know like you kind of talked about how your parents didn't because of your situation, like they couldn't provide you financially a lot with college and stuff. Like what other challenges did you face with college besides financial problems?

SL: I chose a college that didn't have residence halls. At the time St. John's didn't have residence halls.

E: That's so interesting.

SL: I was living with my sister, and that worked out well for about a year. But then I ended up having to get an apartment with roommates and had to travel a long way to do that because that's what we could afford and couldn't afford to be close to the college. That was a challenge. And so, then I was working for, you know, for my transportation as well, and I spent a lot of time in the commute. You know New York is huge.

E: Umm yeah. What like... did you have any like support networks or like mentors at all that were helping you during this time?

SL: You know, I don't know that. I can't even really say why, but I knew I did not want my parents. My parents were not really... I did not let them know the struggles. My goal was to always show them all the positives, so I didn't really confide in them. But my brother lived in the Bronx, and so he was my kind of safety net. And I had a good friend and I still have her. I could go to her house. She lived with her mother, and so that was nice. And I have a niece also that lived in in Queens, so I could go in and visit her. So, yeah, I had friends and family that were close enough to give me support because I definitely did not want to bother the people back here in Worcester.

E: Haha, I see. Um alrighty, so I kind of want to go get into like your career and like your career path and all that. Can you remember your first job or like what you did during school when you were working? How did you get, how did you start off?

SL: So, my very first job, I have to admit, that I said I was 18 when I was 14.

E: Wow!

SL: At what is now Macy's... I sold perfume, okay? It was at the time, it was Jordan Marsh. And so, my father took me to get my first pair of pumps. And I had my pumps and I just, you know, I looked 18. Oh wow, I got this job, and it was lovely, hmm.

E: What kind of stuff did you have to do?

SL: Just sell perfume.

E: Just kind of talk to customers?

TM: How long ago did you work there for?

SL: About a year. Yeah, about a year. Then in between that, I don't know how that was like a really good job. I didn't stay there, I ended up also working at Burger King and Honey Farms.

E: Okay.

SL: Oh, and I also worked at what we called the rag factory. That was a terrible job. Where? It's the factory down on Southbridge Street.

E: Okay.

SL: Materials, clothes, and stuff would come on this belt that you would have a job to sort out the different fabrics. Like if you were in charge of the card, you have to take all the cotton off. But it was so dusty in that place that when you left and blew your nose, there would be dust in it. I mean they should not have allowed children to be there and there were people that were there. Women would be there, that was their full-time job, their full-time source of income and they were there 40 hours a week. We were there, you know 10 or 15 hours a week, and it was it was a terrible job, yeah.

E: How old were you when you did the rag factory?

SL: I don't know what to say because like I said I left at 16, so I was always underage.

E: Okay, and no one like really cared no one asked?

SL: Nope.

E: Alright alrighty. And then in college did you ever have a job?

SL: Oh yeah, like I said I had to work to eat. I had my work study job which is very minimal. Hmm and then I also worked at Marshalls. I worked at another clothing boutique, I forgot what it was called, but I worked in retail.

TM: How was balancing going to school and like then having like almost like three jobs it sounds like. How was that?

SL: It really wasn't hard to me.

E: Okay.

SL: The biggest thing to me was the commute. If I only didn't have the commute, if I only didn't have to take buses, it would have been easier. Hmm I think that made it, that's the part that made it hard especially in the winter. Yeah, especially in the winter.

TM: Yeah.

E: I can imagine, yeah. So, then how do you think and what really I guess pushed you to get into like more like helping others and like, like the school and diversity in the school like how did you get there?

SL: I believe in divine intervention, so I believe that the Holy Spirit guided my path because it wasn't the path that I set out to. You know, growing up the first thing you want is money and so that's what you're thinking about. And so, I was planning to be in different real estate which would have been much more lucrative than the work that I do now. But after having everything, in my opinion, go my way, I graduated law school. And then I failed the bar exam so that changed my course. That's how I ended up getting into working for the public school system. After failing, it was so debilitating to me that I couldn't even get myself to take it again. Yeah, and so I worked there a few years before I even took the test again. Then I passed it, but by that point I had already been guided towards employment discrimination and civil rights workers. Yeah so, I knew that that's what I was supposed to do.

TM: Do you like think about like what if you had passed the bar exam like the first time around and had gone into that lawyer path, you kind of think about how differently your life could have been?

SL: It definitely could have been different, but I think this is what I was supposed to do. Yeah, so no regrets.

E: No regrets, that's a good way to live. And so, you mentioned you really are passionate about civil rights and helping others. What are some ways, actual like work, that you've been involved in the community?

SL: Well, I do so much volunteer work. And like I said, how I first even got into it was by volunteering and so that's something that I think everybody can do. You know what I'm thinking? I said you know everybody can be great because everybody is concerned. And so, there's like a zillion opportunities to serve your community in this point. Now I have to decide which things I'm going to do, she can't do everything. And so, let's see what's--- like I said that was kind of job related, I'll tell you something current because it's kind of hard to think back of all the, yeah...

EM: Yeah, no.

SL: Let me start with something in the past, so I was on the board of this organization called The Flood which was trying to create unity in our community. And this organization merged with the local chapter of the National Conference for Christians and Jews. I was asked to become the president of this combined group and I was in my 20's and the people were primarily white people. They really helped mentor me, they put me into the position. Like why they picked me to be president because I was a black woman, they wouldn't have black woman leaders in our community. They thought I could do it and they helped me, and they were very, like I said, very much mentoring. One gentleman, he's now deceased all my people like that are starting to die, like Dr. Durkin died. This person was Bill Densmore. He also passed away. You know simple things besides helping me to get into these positions, you know, your inner room actually was your college. Where do you go, Assumption right?

TM: Yes.

E: Mhm.

SL: It was at your college at Assumption. In the --- what is that big room the French, French... something French. What's that big building?

TM: Oh, is it the first building you see when like you come onto campus?

SL: Yeah.

SL: La Maison, yeah! So, we're in there, we're having a breakfast meeting. People are all talking and networking, and it's loud and it's time for me to speak. And there's no microphone. For whatever reason, no microphone. And it's time for me to get the program started. And I'm like, I don't know what to do. And Bill Densmore told me, flick the lights, simple thing like that.

E and TM: Mhm.

SL: Flick the lights. And you need people to give you those little cues, you know, to help you to just make things that you are confused about, how to handle. Just make it very simple. And it's like that. You know, nowadays, it seems like everybody's copying kindergarten where they start saying, "Raise your hand or clap three times." But back then, that's not what people did. And I think for me, it was much more elegant to just flip the lights. And so that was the volunteer work that I was doing that led to me being, I'll say, recruited to run for public office. And that really did make a big difference. And right now, one of the things that I'm involved in that I'm very proud of is I am the past president of Mechanics Hall. Are you familiar with Mechanics?

E: Oh, yeah.

TM: Yes.

SL: So, I'm the past President. Right. And as the President, and still now a member of the board, I am working on a portrait project which will put black and indigenous people's portraits in the Great Hall for the first time. Because up until 20 years ago, it was all white men. Twenty years ago, we added five white women, and in January, we will add three black and indigenous people. And that's huge to me, because as a kid who grew up here, I almost had the impression that there wasn't anybody other than white men in the 19th century. That's what it sounds like. And so now it's going to give a more accurate picture of who actually was here.

TM: Yeah, no, that's amazing. I've been in Mechanics Hall personally because I was in choral, and we had, like, a concert, and we had that as a rehearsal space, I believe it was, and I remember those pictures, and I remember not even seeing any person of color. I think it was mostly males at the time that I only saw.

SL: Yes, yes! It's still mostly males.

TM: Yeah.

SL: But at least now, since 20 years ago, there've been five women, and now we're going to have two more women, and wait a minute. Two more men and one black woman. The woman is indigenous and black.

E: Okay.

SL: So, yeah, it's going to be good for kids, too. When they come, they can feel like their ancestors also contributed to America, which they did.

TM: Yeah. No, that's amazing. And I'm really happy to hear about that. It's such like a milestone, I feel like, especially in the time that we're living right now, where we struggle sometimes with being diverse and listening to other people instead of just white males. So, I think that's amazing, and I'm really happy to hear about that. And congratulations on that great milestone.

SL: Thank you! I want to see you at the ball!

TM: [Laughs.]

SL: You're a sophomore, so you should still be here.

E and TM: [Laugh.]

TM: No, that's amazing. Do you try to get your children involved in your volunteer work or anything like, similar?

SL: They had no choice, right?

E and TM: [Laugh.]

TM SL: Because they had to go with me to everything.

E and TM: Yeah.

SL: They don't actually do the work, but they go to things, and they love lectures and they that kind of thing. Now I'm at the stage where I'm raising grandchildren, and so I take them to things, and they like to go as well. They really like to go. They said, "We need to go to things like this so that we know how to do it."

E: Oh.

SL: So, you can come.

E: That's so cute. Are you close with your grandchildren? Do you see them a lot?

SL: I raise them.

E: Oh, Okay.

SL: So, yeah. I see them all the time. Take them to school every morning.

E: That is so cute. All right. And now, based on what you've experienced and your life experiences, what advice would you give to women today and to the future generations of like the community and just, like, women in general?

SL: So, I think the biggest thing I've already said is just to lift each other up.

E: Yes.

SL: Make each other highlight each other's accomplishments and treat each other as our potential, not our shortcomings, to really build each other up. We have, we just don't have that in our culture as women. We just don't--- we act like men know everything, and that's why we don't even vote for each other. So that's, to me, the biggest thing to realize, because I think that has something to do with our own insecurities about ourselves as women, because why can't we see women as the smartest ones in the room? I think it's because we don't see ourselves as the smartest ones in the room. So, I think that is transposed onto the people that really are the smartest ones in the room. And so that's my biggest advice, to really lift each other up.

E: That's great.

TM: Yeah. How would you define success in your life?

SL: That definition has definitely evolved. So, as I said, growing up, I would have been all materialistic when I was your age, whereas now it's more about how much of a difference are you making in your community. Is your family healthy and happy? Do you have time, do you make time for your family, things like that. It's much more basic things than it was when I was your age.

TM: Yeah. Just out of curiosity, living here in Worcester like all your life, have you experienced any major historical events that have impacted you in Worcester?

SL: In Worcester? Historical events? Yeah, besides being a historical event myself...

E and TM: [Laugh.]

SL: Besides that, I think the things that have impacted me the most that I can think of --- it's interesting they both relate to public safety. When I was living in the Valley, the Worcester Housing Authority at that time had their own police force out there that were not the city police. They were the Great Brook Valley Police. And one of the Great Brook Valley police killed a Hispanic man. And there were riots over that. And we relied on public transportation and the buses wouldn't come into the Valley. So, you had to walk all the way through the Valley to get to Lincoln Street in order to get a bus to do anything. So, it was like we were shut off from the rest of the world. Shut off transportation, that's a huge thing. And so, you can imagine sick people, old people, little children, that was like, oh, my goodness, that was really crazy. So, that was the first thing. Then the second thing was, as an adult, when I was on the city council, I was out driving someplace, and I was coming from the Grafton Hill area, which is where I lived at the time. And I saw the warehouse on fire. And it was so --- I'd never seen a fire like that, that it made me immediately pray and say, "Dear God, please don't let anybody be hurt." And that's where the five firefighters were killed and they were trying to save people. And that was life-changing to me—always thought of firefighter job. I didn't realize how dangerous it was. I didn't realize how often they die trying to save other people. So yeah, I'll never forget those. And of course, nobody ever forgets 911, but that wasn't just Worcester.

TM: Yeah, that's true.

E: Yeah. How about where do you think you were growing up? Or even now, like, when you're not at home, where do you usually spend your time?

SL: Hm. I love to eat, so I spend a lot of time at church. I love church.

E: Okay.

SL: Sometimes I go to two different churches. I really love church, something special, I should say. My great-great-grandmother founded a Pentecostal church. I'm Catholic, but my great-great-grandmother founded a Pentecostal church that still exists. And this is the 100th anniversary of the church.

E: Wow.

SL: And it's the first black church in Worcester.

TM: Wow.

SL: I've been heavily involved in trying to make sure that that legacy is secure, because for whatever reason, it seems like people don't go to church as much as they used to. And this is a small church, and so when you go, it doesn't seem like it used to when I was a little kid.

E: Yeah.

SL: But my Catholic church is thriving, St. Peter's. It's thriving. It's always packed. Monsignor is doing something, I don't know. So, I spend a lot of time there. When I'm not there, I'm probably at a restaurant. I love brunch, so I do a lot of brunch. Even on the weekdays, you can do brunch now.

E: Yeah!

SL: I think this week two times I went to Altia. I love it. The place is good.

TM: Are you actively involved in church? Do you like participate in the services?

SL: Yeah, I have to admit, not as active as I was. I am a eucharistic minister for St.Peter's,

but since COVID I haven't done it. And one of my parishioners, young girl, asked me to be her I'll say her godmother when she has her confirmation, so I'm really looking forward to that as well.

E: That's great.

SL: And I like to travel, so I do like to leave Worcester. When you're someone like me, every place you go, people know you that you don't even know.

E: Yeah.

SL: You know what I mean? It's always like you're kind of ---you can't just slouch. People have an expectation of how you will look and what you will say, and so I do like to get away so I can just be just me.

E: Yeah, well that's really important. Yeah.

TM: Do you go with your whole family to mass or is it like something like you do by yourself?

SL: Me and my girlfriend go.

TM: Oh, okay.

SL: Yeah. I used to go with the whole family, but now, like I said, nobody wants to go to mass anymore, and so yeah, me and my girlfriend go every Sunday.

E: That's a good tradition to have.

TM: Yeah. Do you have any hobbies or just like, any activities you just like to do, like, by yourself?

SL: I like to watch cooking shows. That's my fun thing, is to watch cooking shows.

TM: Do you have a favorite cooking show?

SL: The Barefoot Contessa.

E: Oh, I would watch that with my dad.

SL: In a Garden, I love In a Garden.

E: That's so fun. All righty.

SL: When I was a little girl, I used to pretend I was Julia Child, and I would cook and I would do her accent and everything because she was the only show at the time. Now it's hard to believe there's a whole channel. There's like a few channels.

TM: Yeah, there are a few channels. Yeah. There's like, shows, like, on Netflix, like baking shows, cooking shows, like, all this and that.

SL: Yeah.

E: That's so funny. Do you feel like you have brought cooking into your household? Are there any major things you would teach your kids and to your grandkids? Is there anything you practice what you preach?

SL: I'm the one that hosts everybody when there's an event, and that wasn't always the case. We used to go to my grandmother's and then my aunt's house, but we get older, and then it's time to pass the torch. So now the torch has been passed. And my youngest granddaughter, Asia, she loves to cook, and so she always will ask me how to make things. And I have, like, an open kind of a kitchen, so she's always right there with me, and I can now have her make things. I can say, "Okay, you make the this, and we'll cook together," and she can make something.

E: Yeah, that's really sweet.

SL: But I cook whatever. I don't have any particular thing. I'm not a baker, though. Yeah, but I just like to cook.

E: Nice.

TM: Do you have something? Like what's your favorite thing to cook?

SL: That's what I mean. I don't really have a favorite.

TM: Oh, okay.

SL: It depends on what's available.

E and TM: Oh, okay.

SL: It depends upon what ingredients are fresh. That's one thing I learned from the cooking shows, decide based upon what looks good that day. Then you go in there, but it tends to be kind of Italian, like Northern Italian, kind of with lots of vegetables. I don't fry things, but I make sauces and I roast vegetables and things like that. I try to try to make things healthy. And I also cook a lot. So, on a Sunday, I'll probably cook, like, three different things, and then I freeze and I put it so that I can come home from work, because I work all the time and I can have a good meal ready to go.

E: What about your husband? How old were you guys when you met? Want to take us through that a little bit?

SL: Okay. So, I was married twice. My older children, their father's passed away.

E: Okay.

SL: And my husband Charles and I, we just celebrated our 25th anniversary.

E: Congratulations.

SL: Thank you.

E: That's so exciting.

SL: Yeah, we just celebrated our 25th anniversary.

E: Okay.

SL: And we were just saying how thank goodness they say there's a season for everything. And so good thing that was the season, because today in Worcester, we wouldn't have an opportunity to meet because the place that we met, it's no longer there. It's like an electrical station or something. We called it the Black Elks, like Elks Bar and stuff like that. But it was the black one on Chandler Street.

E: Okay.

SL: And it was, like, very much neighborhood like, you knew everybody. So, I could go in there as a single woman, and I wouldn't be like, everybody would know me. I would know everybody --- a Cheers kind of thing. They were having a soul food dinner dance, and so I went down there and was with the people that I grew up with, and they were cooking because they did the cooking in the back. And that's where I met him. He came in with his friends, and we had our first date the next day.

E: Oh, wow.

SL: Yeah, we had our first date the next day, and we were married a year later.

TM: Oh, wow.

E: That is so sweet.

TM: What does he do for work?

SL: At the time, he was working for Verizon. And that was the funny thing about it. I had seen him in his Verizon truck, and he was literally trying to pick me up in his truck. Like, I'm in my car and he's in his truck, and I could see him, like, looking at me, and I'm trying not to look, but I could see him looking. And when the light changed, I sped off really fast. And then I see him coming to the Elks, and I was like and you're like...

E: That's so funny.

SL: But he did not know I was that woman until he walked me to my car.

E: And he was like, oh, my gosh, I literally saw you the other day!

SL: Which let me know like, he was, like, chasing women at that stage in life because I thought he knew he was trying to talk to the same woman, but he did not know.

E: Yeah. That's so funny.

TM: That is funny. I know, you said your two oldest children, their dad passed away. Do they have a good relationship with your current husband?

SL: Yeah.

E: Yeah, that's good. That's good. What else do we have for you? What about your experiences with, like, health issues? Do you feel there have been any health issues that have impacted your life or your family?

SL: Well, short answer is yes. I lost both my parents in the same year, even though they had a huge age difference. My mother had diabetes from the time I was born. I think she got it as gestational diabetes. And my father, he lived to be old, but he just died, really of old age, in my opinion.

E: Yeah.

SL: But my mother, she was plagued with everything. And so, I think both my parents no, not my mother, but my father had high blood pressure, and it's like almost everybody in my family has high blood pressure, which seems to be something that disproportionately plagues African Americans. And now I have high blood pressure.

E: Yeah. Okay.

SL: And so, I think about our lifestyles and diets, maybe, and things like that.

E: Okay, I see

TM: How were your experiences with healthcare? Were you able to access it easily or not so much?

SL: Well, I definitely am very well aware of the disparities in health care because of my education and positions. I recognize the privilege that I have, and so people treat me better than average.

E: Okay.

SL: But I've seen how my son and the mother of his children, how they were treated when trying to get care for their children, and then so much so that I took over. I was like, no, this is not how this is going to be, because they treat average black and brown people like they're not

worthy of the care and the services and undertreat and underserve and disrespect and just unacceptable.

TM: Yeah, yeah, for sure. How was your experience during the COVID-19 pandemic? Did you experience any serious health complications within your family at all?

SL: No, thank God. We were very cautious, as were a lot of people in the black community, because people were afraid of the vaccine because they thought maybe they were going to be poisoned, like the Tuskegee experiment. So, a lot of people were afraid of it. Those who were convinced to do it, they still were afraid that if they got sick, they would die. So, people have been like, we were cautious, and our community was cautious. And so, everybody in my house has had it at least once, except for me.

E: Oh.

TM: Okay. Wow.

SL: I don't know how I escaped because I took care of everybody when they had it, so I don't know how I escaped. And everybody in my house is fully vaccinated and they still got it.

TM: Yeah, it's such a weird thing. Yeah, it's such a weird thing.

E: It's such a weird thing.

TM: Yeah, it's such a weird thing. I had it for the first time last year, and I was double-vaxxed at the time, and it's just so weird.

SL: Yeah. It's hard to understand.

TM: How was your experiences with working during the pandemic? Once we were able to, once things were opening back up again, how was your experience with that?

SL: It was a ghost town because I came back to work when a lot of people didn't.

E: Mhm.

SL: And so it was really weird to be here without anybody else here, and it was weird to work at home. When I had my grandkids, all working in different parts of the house and my husband working in a different part of the house, everybody's working. It was definitely eerie. But I do know that I'm a people person, and so I like being on the campus and I like having meetings in person, although they are less efficient. There's no doubt about it. I can do twice as many meetings if I do it via Zoom than if I don't. Is that a good thing? I don't know, but it feels like the productivity is higher with remote meetings than in-person meetings. There's no travel time. But speaking of which, I do have another meeting, so how much longer? Because now we are back to back.

TM: Yeah, no, I mean, if you need to go, we can totally end the meeting right here. Up to you.

SL: Do you have anything else that you wanted to ask that you didn't get to?

TM: No, honestly, I think we've hit a lot of good points. Like, I like, I definitely, like, enjoyed, like, hearing, like, your experiences, and yeah.

E: Yeah, no, I think we got most of what we were looking for. We got a lot about your beliefs and your experiences and just yeah, we got a lot of good stuff, so thank you so much.

SL: Good.

E: Yeah.

SL: Good. I'll tell you a funny fact that hardly anybody knows about me, and it's embarrassing, but what the heck? I'm doing this.

E and TM: [Laugh.] Yeah.

SL: I might as well tell you. Do you know where Plumley Village is?

E and TM: No, I do not know.

SL: You know where Great Brook Valley is?

TM: Well, I don't, I don't know if you do.

E: No.

SL: So, you guys are living in Worcester, and you're doing historical interviews that you don't know the city?

TM: No, apparently not. No.

SL: Well, I guess I'm not going to even share my story. I'm just going to give you a piece of advice. You got to go and check out the city.

E: We will. No, we'll check it out.

SL: You've got to have context.

E: Okay.

SL: To really be able to even understand what people are telling you.

E and TM: Yeah.

SL: Great Brook Valley is the second-largest housing project in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

E: Okay.

SL: Got to go check that.

E: All right.

SL: And Plumley Village, it's probably not noteworthy for being large, but Plumley Village has a historical context of that it used to be a black homeowner community, and it was, I will say, taken by eminent domain. When 290 [Interstate 290] was built right through the black neighborhood and replaced those houses and black businesses and homes were in with a housing project. So, it has a very difficult path, which you can check out online because State Mutual, now Hanover Insurance, was the developer. There's a lot of materials available on that.

TM: Oh, wow.

SL: So, it's important to know the context.

TM: Yeah, I definitely have to go explore the city a little bit more.

SL: Definitely. That would be a good bus tour thing. We did that once at Worcester State as the way to start off the academic year. We had a couple of our urban studies professors go around, and we went to a few things, and they told things, and it helped people to understand the community.

TM: Yeah, that's a good idea. We don't really have something like that here, but that's, like, something interesting.

SL: You could do it, though. You could make it happen.

TM: Oh, yeah, we could make it happen. (Laughs) Yeah. If there's a will, there's a way, so...

SL: That's right. And if you make it happen, invite me. I'll help.

TM: Oh, definitely. You'll be the first person on the list.

SL: Okay. Wonderful. Well, so nice to meet you.

TM: It was nice to meet you, too. Thank you so much.

E: Thank you so much.

SL: Thank you.

TM: Have a good one.

SL: Thank you.

E and TM: Bye.