

Interviewee: Susan Mailman

Interviewers: Jonathan McDonald and Alyssa Szymkowicz

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ABSTRACT: Susan Coghlin was born in Shrewsbury Massachusetts in 1962 and attended Shrewsbury High. She then moved to Worcester at the age of 18 and took evening courses at various Worcester colleges. She completed her MBA at Northeastern University. Susan took on the family business of electrical contracting at Coghlin Electrical in 1985 and become the owner in 2003. In this interview Susan discusses the growing challenges in Worcester and why she believes Worcester to be the wonderful and thriving community that it is. She discusses the challenges she faced as a woman business owner in Worcester and her various supportive peers that helped her along the way. Susan gives inspiration to the younger population while focusing on younger women especially and the challenges they face for their voices to be heard and recognized. She discusses the different community projects she is a part of and the projects Coghlin Electric is involved in. She is an ambitious woman full of passion and inspiration that transfers to her peers and corporation.

AS: What is your name?

SM: Susan Coghlin Mailman.

AS: Thank you, and when were you born?

SM: July of 1962.

AS: Thank you, have you ever married?

SM: Yes.

AS: What is the name of your husband?

SM: I've been married twice. My current husband's name is Jim Chapdelaine (C-H-A-P-D-E-L-A-I-N)

JM: How many years have you guys been together?

SM: We got married in 2010, do you know any Chapdelains?

JM: No I do not.

AS: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

SM: Well I'm Irish, German lots of Irish heritage in the family.

AS: Tell me about your parents.

SM: So I'm adopted. I should tell you that my dad was Ted Coghlin and he and his brother Jim ran this business together for their lifetimes for 30-40 years and I came to work for the business in '85 and interesting enough we had multiple businesses and my dad and uncle split the businesses in the year 2000. So my dad was the older brother and I have three brothers and sisters, but nobody else was in the business so I took ownership of the business in 2003. My mother is Maureen Coghlin and she is little spitfire. We call her the energizer bunny and she is involved in the community. She went to Anna Maria [College] and she is huge alumna. She ran their bake sale for about 400 hundred years and I swear she thought that is where they made their most money. So that's my mom and dad.

AS: Where have you lived in your life?

SM: So, I grew up in Shrewsbury and moved to Worcester when I was 18 and lived here for 28 years. When I met my second husband I moved to Northborough for a brief six-year stint and now we have been back to Worcester for, I don't know, three years I guess.

AS: It's good to be back

SM: Lots of Worcester, lots of Worcester, that was the deal when we got married the second time it's like were coming back to Worcester...he has four kids and his youngest son was just—we needed to get him out of high school because Jim's first wife had died, and he actually went to Assabet [Valley Technical High School] . He didn't go to Algonquin [Regional High School].

JM: Yeah.

SM: I was proud of him that he went to Assabet.

AS: What neighborhood did you live in Worcester and what was the neighborhood like Generally?

SM: I lived in a couple neighborhoods in Worcester. I lived over near St. Vincent Hospital on Dillon Street for my first marriage. It was a residential ranch house neighborhood. We used to walk up to the store, you could get the bus at the corner, you know, random Worcester neighborhood, working-class neighborhood. Now I live on Holden Street in Worcester. Jim and I found this cool little house with a big front porch and we loved it so we checked it out and behold it was also on Indian Lake. We feel like King Tut and Queen Tut because we live on Indian Lake in Worcester. So it's cool.

JM: I use to live near that area kind of.

SM: Did you?

JM: Yeah, near Greendale Mall.

SM: I had an apartment on Hastings Ave. for a while which is near the pizza shops and Boardman Street, It's a good neighborhood and easy to get on 290.

AS: Do other family members live in Worcester with you ?

SM: So I have a ton of relatives. Obviously this family business has been in Worcester since 1985 so I have cousins and aunts and uncles. My mom still lives in Shrewsbury, my husband's kids—there are four of them, and they are in Colorado and Seattle and Northborough, and one at UNH.

AS: What challenges do you think the city still faces and what would you change about the city?

SM: I think we are geographically just perfectly slotted. I think that we have been perfectly situated for many many many years and that the rest of the world is just catching up to us. And I think that one of the things that I don't really worry about is the whole gentrification thing. It is interesting and worthy of paying attention to, we are going to build a ball park and there's a lot of working class neighborhoods down there and are we going to lose those? And I hope that we don't because I think one of the beauties of Worcester is the working class roots that we have here. I get very involved with the schools. I am a general chair adviser of Worcester Technical High School and my dad was general chair adviser for like forty years for the school. I believe in technical education and I believe in hands-on stuff and I'm also chairing the board at Quinsigamond [Community College]. I think that our system of 25,000 students, I think we have to push forward. The school committee just approved a strategic plan. I think we need to move forward with building the best possible urban system that we can. I think that's a massive job and I think it's going to take business to be involved and higher ed. and your institution and new students frankly helping in a million different ways. I think that is the challenge that I see in front of us as this public school system and understanding that gateway cities are very much underfunded and when you look at the vocational world there's a lot of schools that get a lot of money and they're regional vocational schools. And in Worcester our school does not get all those funds because the money goes downtown so the fact that Worcester Tech is so successful is actually even more amazing because it doesn't get as much money as Assabet gets for equipment and stuff like that.

AS: Thank you. What changes have you seen in Worcester over time?

SM: I think the most exciting change in the past 5-10 years and more so every single year is young people like yourselves saying we think this city is cool. We would consider staying here, we would work here and raise families here. I serve on a lot of boards and I do a lot of things because not a lot of women own businesses in the city or good-sized women-owned businesses. There's a ton of women-owned business, but my business is large enough that I get asked to do a lot of things and I'm happy to do it because this older woman Lois Green told me one day, "If they ask you, Sue, you must say yes because you're sitting in a certain role." So ask me the question again did I answer it ?

AS: Yes, so what changes have you seen in Worcester over time?

SM: Yeah so engagement of young people I'd say is the most exciting thing that I think is going on.

AS: Perfect. What distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

SM: I think that it is where we are located. I think we can easily reach Boston, we can reach the beach, we can reach the Berkshires, we can easily reach Providence and all the major cities. New York is a three-hour drive, big deal. I think our geography is a treasured aspect and to have a business in this city—so I'm a union electrical contractor. We do big construction so we built—we just worked on both casinos, one in Springfield and a casino in Everett, so the fact that we are in Worcester means we can do projects all over. Which means our competitors aren't always the same old Boston companies. They can be Springfield companies and so we get to mix it up a little bit because we are from here.

AS: What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

SM: Since I am a female business owner I get asked to do a lot of things. I think that often times you are filling a slot. I think that as we engage, as different demographics get added to different tables, it is up to us to really engage with groups so their voices are heard. Since I have been doing it for a long time now, I feel that my role is to make sure younger people who are coming along and sitting at a table with a lot of old white men, that we give their voices a chance to speak and to be heard because that's the future.

AS: Where did you attend school?

SM: I went to Shrewsbury High School and I graduated from Shrewsbury and then I did the... I went to work. I worked at a dry cleaners and then I went to work for a bank and then I came to work for the family business in '85. I did five years at a bank as a head teller before that. I started doing night school at Worcester State [College], Quinsigamond, Assumption [College] and I guess that was probably the late 80s. I did many years of night school and did three quarters way through my undergraduate [degree] and learned about a program at Northeastern [University] that was an Executive MBA and if you took the GMATs and did well enough and you can show that you had ten years of management experience you could do the program. So I never got my undergrad completed but I did the MBA program at Northeastern and it was really cool because I was 39 so you're with people that want to be there.

JM: My mother went to that school for nursing.

SM: Really? Only thing is that Boston is a sh*t ride no matter what you do and is even worse today.

AS: What support networks have been important to you?

SM: Oh gosh, I mentioned Lois Green. That was a woman from Worcester that passed away a

couple years ago, but she was an interim executive director of United Way of Central Mass. And I was on that board at the time she came in as an interim director and she asked me to chair the board at United Way in '90-something. I asked, "Why are you asking me to chair the board?" She said, "Because you engage, you look people in the eye, you're asking questions, you're involved," and so she has been and was a tremendous mentor. She's the one that told me if they ask you, you have to say yes and I also should say that my son died in 2007. He was 21 years old and he took his life. And it was shocking, like how did this happen? And Lois Green called me a number of weeks after Jeff died and she said, "Here is what I'm going to tell you. Everybody is going to tell you to take care of yourself and blah blah blah. I agree with that, but I'm also going to tell you, you got to put your tough girl stuff on and go get the job done because that is what it's about." And she was right. I always felt that when my son died, that it's so difficult to accept that reality, but when life—we are here for a very short time, to get sh*t done, and that is the game. So, I had a lot of great people around me that were—you know, it was my lesson in running this company that being female you think you need to know everything that is going on, but your reality is that when something like that happens you have to understand you need to rely on other people and they were awesome and actually helped me be a better leader and community partner over the years. I don't know if I answered that question.

JM: Yes.

AS: Yeah, you did.

AS: What has this work meant to you?

SM: What has what work meant?

AS: So, basically, being a business owner of your family's business...

SM: I feel that our businesses hire very skilled people. And they're skilled with their hands, and they build something, and it is a tremendous asset. So, you know, family-owned businesses in a city like this are really important. We've lost a lot of big companies, and public companies, but the fabric, really, of this city has always been the family-owned businesses. And I think that all businesses take their turns being big or small, or going wherever their going to go. Construction is the business where you've got a ton of work, or you've got no work, or it's all over the place so it's challenging, and as I said to you before, I think that I'm really fortunate to be in this place, to be asked to do a lot of things. I'm politically involved. I believe that women in particular have got to engage politically, or we will continue to watch what we're watching now and the stopping of rights and of voices, et cetera.

AS: Absolutely.

SM: That will continue to happen, so I feel a great responsibility to take my role in this community seriously and to work with other young people, men and women, because you guys are where it's at.

AS: Thank you, I appreciate it. What are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework and childcare? Do you share it with anyone?

SM: So, my first marriage, he was—Bruce was a great guy, but it was kind of a traditional set-up, right? And I think in my second marriage and my job too—in my first marriage it was not what my job is now, right? I was just working in the company, I was working in a bank, I wasn't running the company. But now I am in my second marriage, and Jim is tremendous. He takes care of dinner during the week, I take care of dinner on the weekends. He in every way engages in the running of our household, and we have a good gig. It's nice to be our age, I'm 56 and he's 60 and we kind of do what we want to do. I dragged him to the [Representative Jim] McGovern debate the other night—but I don't drag him, he wants to come, he holds signs and it's fun.

AS: That's awesome!

JM: Where was that?

SM: At Mechanics Hall.

JM: Oh, okay.

AS: That's a beautiful hall, I love it.

SM: Yes, and McGovern; we were very fortunate to have him. He's a hardworking, no bullshit congressman that is about the working people.

AS: That's perfect, that sounds great. How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, and roles in your life?

SM: Well, I think going back to what I said about my son's death, I think that you learn going through strife that it takes a village. And you know, we've got great people that work at my company, and we do really cool stuff. I love construction, I think it is so much fun to say we did this job and that job, and I work with the union to make sure we're bringing the brightest and the best apprentices we can get, we have varied goals for women, people of color, and veterans to come into the trades because their awesome jobs.

AS: What are the pros and cons of the path you have chosen? So, I mean. Being the owner of a business can't be that bad.

SM: Yeah, but it's never-ending. You're always the president of the company, so you're always—weekends, days, nights. My primary concern is for the safety of the people that work for me, and that's sometimes out of your hands. We had 500 electricians working this summer, and it's stressful. And you think about all kinds of stuff can happen. Life is a bit of a crapshoot, so you've got to cross your fingers and plow forward. To be at different tables, where I can bring that voice. You know, I'm not a banker or an insurance company. I mean I feel like the jobs we have are like real jobs. Even our office jobs: project management, and estimating, and you know, these are really concrete kind of jobs and it is definitely a male-dominated place to be.

Sometimes, you tire of the constant—you know, my personality pushes me forward, right, and makes me try to use my voice in rooms and things like that. That's just who I am. But sometimes it's exhausting to keep it up. So, that's how I'd answer that.

AS: Thank you, I definitely understand that. How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life? Are you proud of where you are today?

SM: I feel that—I think that's up to us. I think I take it in smaller chunks. Every day, we've got a choice to make it a good day. We can—I feel it's a choice to have a big loss in your life, like my son, to say, "I'm going to be a sad little Chiquita for the rest of my life," or "I'm going to plow forward and get stuff done and be grateful for what we have for today." You know? So, whether you're running a business or you're pumping gas, right, it's all the same stuff. It's still like, are we good to other people? Are we good to our family and friends, et cetera? That kind of stuff.

JM: Do you think you would do anything differently?

SM: Decisions here and there that are kind of, at the end of the day, little decisions, so, no, not really. I mean, life has unfolded and, you know, do I wish my son never died? Sure. What could I have done to change that? I think about that all of the time. But I don't know that there's an answer to that question. And I don't think I'm going to know the answer in this lifetime.

JM: Yeah, I agree.

AS: Definitely. So, this question here says do you consider yourself active politically; I'm just going to say yes. Have you been involved in volunteer or community work?

SM: Yes, a lot. Quite a bit.

AS: So, what groups did you work with or for?

SM: I told you that my community engagement started with United Way, but I've chaired the board at the YWCA, and I've chaired the board at the Chamber of Commerce. I serve on some state boards around apprenticeship and workforce development. I am chairing the board at Quinsigamond Community College right now, and I'm also chair advisory for Worcester Technical High School. And a number of things in between, before and after, but those are some ones that I think about a lot.

AS: Okay, perfect, thank you. What led you to join organizations and do volunteer work?

SM: Well, I was asked to do something. But I think the key is—and I think this is a key for young people—you've got to show up. You've got to have your face known and seen. You start going to things in this city, or you start engaging with things, and people will notice you. And somebody might say, "Do you have any time to do blah, blah, blah," and I think that you've got to say yes. Like Lois told me, you have to kind of speak up, or stand up for the stuff you want to do. I think we each have an opportunity to do it and a lot of it is on ourselves. Not so much

everybody else. I'm a big believer in: don't look around and say, "Oh, this happened to me." Don't put the chip on your shoulder, that's bullshit. Because you look around, and everybody's got stuff they've got to deal with. We all have to kind of plow forward as best as we can. There's a lot in life that we've given.

AS: Absolutely, thank you. So, I know that you're with multiple organizations; is there a main goal that you could think of that all of the organizations have towards?

SM: I think a lot of it now is about education and workforce development. I'm a big believer that not everybody needs a four-year degree, that some people are going to go the four-year degree or higher road, but that there's plenty of jobs and opportunities that are available at multiple levels. And I think that we need to find cheaper ways to offer the higher ed. experience. I'm a big fan of public education. Our public system—you guys, are exceptions, you know? You may stay—Jon is a Marlborough guy, and he might stay up in this region. And Alyssa, you were actually considering it too. So, the public system, if you go to Quinsigamond or Worcester State, chances are you are going to end up living and working where you went to school. And so, we should be engaging in the public side of education.

AS: Right, thank you. Let's see. So, we're going to move onto health. How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

SM: So, I'm a healthy gal. And I'm adopted, so my family has had heart disease, and there have been people with cancer. But I'm fortunate to have been able to have the resources to go to the doctor. I think about the many, many people in this city that may not have the resources to go get the best healthcare that they need. I think the healthcare question for all of us needs to be that we need to stop the costs stuff. It's crazy and we've got to figure out how to get the costs under control. And, you know, from central I think I'd say this too, there's so many people that have worked for me, or that I've worked with, that say, "Oh, something happened, and it's a health issue, and we must go to Boston." I say bullshit to that. We live in the Northeast, and there's plenty of great healthcare all around us. So, yeah, I think I'd say the normal health issues that have impacted my life have impacted most others' lives.

AS: Okay, thank you. So, how would you define success in your life and how has this definition changed over time?

SM: Oh, again, I go back to the simple stuff. Do you have good friends? Are you close to your family, even if they drive you insane? Or are you good to them, do you know what I mean? And, there are so many cool people in this city and people getting a lot of stuff done. I feel really fortunate to know a lot of them and hang out with them and that's how I'd answer that.

AS: Perfect, thank you. Based on your life experience, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

SM: Engage. You've got to show up and engage. We need you; we need your voices. For some reason, [President Donald] Trump got elected. But I guess I hope that the takeaway here is that we can't treat each other the way that we've been—the way that he's shown. It's bullshit. We

have got to raise the bar again. This is our country. We don't treat people, we don't treat immigrants, we don't treat the poor, we don't talk about women the way he talks about women. And if the outcome from it is that we're going to raise the bar again, as we should, I think that in many ways the racism that he's exhibited is a good reminder to all of us that racism is alive and well in the United States and in Worcester and in our area. And we have a responsibility to do better. You know, the YWCA has a mission, "Eliminating Racism and Empowering Women." I think that this current administration is really giving everybody a kick in the ass to pay attention. And it taught us more about inherent racism, inherent sexism, and inherent stuff that we all live with and employ, but those we've got to do something about.

AS: Absolutely. So, this is the last on that we have; now that we're working to tell a fuller story of the history of women than has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

SM: I love that you've asked about politics, I loved that you've asked about health. Education, I think, is key, and you know I've talked to you a lot about the public education system because that is going to impact this city in a massive way. And I guess I would say, which I hope that you've done, is to look for the unusual suspects. I don't know if anyone on your team has interviewed Dr. Maddie Castile, she's the health commissioner in Worcester.

AS: Possibly! That's likely.

SM: She's awesome. Linda Cavaoli runs the YWCA, she's been a female leader in this city forever, and she's likely been interviewed. And maybe it would be kind of interesting to speak to young women. I also try to find young women who are working in family businesses, like maybe the next generation of leaders. It would be interesting to find some of those younger women. There's a woman, Naomi Sleeper, who works for Imperial Distributors, a family-owned business. It might be interesting to talk to somebody like that, and then talk to them twenty or so years later.

AS: That's a great idea. All right, thank you very much. Were there any questions that you had for us?

SM: Nope, I think that's about it.