

Interviewee: Catherine Samko
Interviewers: Sydney LaQue and Skylar Wolfe
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Transcriber: Sydney LaQue
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Abstract: Catherine Lacouture Samko was born in 1952 in Framingham, Massachusetts. She grew up in Marlborough surrounded by family and then eventually made her home in Worcester, never moving outside of her home state. She graduated from Stonehill College in 1974 and received her Master's Degree in Psychology and Guidance at Assumption College in 1976. She began work as a clinician at Westborough State Hospital right out of school. Her mother had also worked at Westborough State Hospital. Cathy then spent the rest of her career in administration in several state psychiatric hospitals for the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health. Cathy was married to her late husband, Phil, for 38 years. He was an office manager for a moving company, and later a food distributor. They raised their daughter, Bernadette, together. Cathy told us in our interview that she, and her beyond- supportive husband, split not only the housework, but also the work of raising a child. Cathy is an active member of the WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] program of Assumption University and the Worcester Art Museum. She enjoys reading, traveling and going to all kinds of museums. Cathy wants other generations of women to know that to live your best life, you should never live with regrets. You should find a job that you love, find hobbies that you love, and surround yourself with good friends and family.

SL: What is your full name including both maiden and married?

CS: Catherine Lacouture Samko.

SL: Okay, where were you born?

CS: Framingham, Mass.

SL: And when was that?

CS: December 7, 1952

SL: Have you ever been married?

CS: Yes.

SL: What was your significant other's name?

CS: Phil.

SL: Did you have children?

CS: Yes

SL: How many?

CS: One.

SL: What's their name?

CS: Bernadette or Bern.

SW: That's pretty.

SL: Yeah, it is. How long were you and your husband married for?

CS: (long pause thinking) Um, 38 years.

SL: Oh, wow.

SW: Very nice.

SL: Do you have any grandchildren?

CS: Nope.

SL: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with or your family background?

CS: My family background is, on my father's side, French Canadian, and on my mother's side, Irish and Italian.

SW: Wow, very cool. That's a wide range. I don't think I've ever heard of that before. That's very cool.

SL: What was your relationship like with your parents?

CS: It was good. My mother is still alive. She will be 98 in November.

SW and SL: Oh, wow!

SW: Good for her! That's awesome.

SW: What about your father?

CS: He passed away when I was, when I was 28, I believe.

SW and SL: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

SL: How's your mom doing? Good?

CS: She's in good shape. She still lives in her house by herself.

SW: Ah, very good!

CS: She has some help. She--- physically has arthritis, so she's in pain a lot. But mentally she does very well.

SL: Wow, that's great, good for her

CS: I even told her I was doing this. She was very excited that I was doing this.

SW: Very cool, very cool. I'm a CNA [Certified Nursing Assistant]. I've been working at a nursing home for about two years now and I love my residents to death. They're so wonderful and I...It's hard because you feel really bad because they want to go home. And I work in the dementia unit, so they really aren't sure what's going on. So, I just try to provide the best life I can there for them and make them as comfortable as I can.

CS: My mother was a psychiatric nurse for a long time. And she understands a lot of stuff still which is really interesting.

SW: Yeah, yeah that's very good for her.

CS: She took part in the...It's a Harvard Nurses Study, for years and years and years. They would send her a questionnaire every year and would fill it out, so yeah.

SW and SL: Wow, good for her, that's awesome.

SL: Do you have any other family members that live in the area?

CS: I have a brother who lives in Marlborough.

SL: How old is he?

CS: He just turned 70.

SL: And what is his name?

CS: Joe.

SW: Are you guys close?

CS: Oh yeah.

SW: That's good. Did we already ask where you grew up? Oh Framingham, Framingham?

CS: No, no you asked me where I was born, I grew up in Marlborough.

SW: You live in Marlborough?

CS: No, I grew up in Marlborough.

SW: You grew up in Marlborough! Okay and you live in Framingham?

CS: (laughing) I was born in Framingham, I never lived there.

SW: Okay, born in Framingham, grew up in Marlborough and now where do you currently live?

CS: In Worcester.

SW: In Worcester, okay. Got that sorry.

CS: It's okay!

SW: What was your neighborhood like when you were growing up?

CS: It was suburban, very family oriented. I had an aunt and uncle and cousins that lived next door on one side, and cousins that lived on the other side. And the girls that I hung out with, one lived across the street, one lived across a little bit down, and they were cousins.

SW: Oh, wow.

CS: So, it was very tight knit.

SW: That's nice, that's always good. I would much prefer small town suburban, I'd much rather live there.

CS: And my mom still lives in the house that I grew up in.

SL: Wow, do the cousins still live around there?

CS: One cousin still lives next door. So, she's my --- I have like 40 first cousins on my mother's side.

SL: Oh my gosh, I get that, my mom was a family of six, so there's so many cousins in my family.

CS: So, the cousin that lives next door to my mother is my eldest cousin, and I think she just turned 84. And I'm close with her.

SW: There you go! That's very good...

SL: Where did you attend school?

CS: Where did I what?

SL: Attend school? Like primary school, middle school, high school.

CS: I went to St. Mary's School in Marlborough and I went to St. A's Academy for high school.

SL: And what year did you graduate?

CS: I graduated from high school in 1970.

SW: Very nice! What about college?

CS: I went to Stonehill College and graduated in 1974, then I got a master's degree from Assumption College in 1976. Then I worked for a while and then went to Clark and got an MBA [Master's in Business Administration] in 2000.

SW: That's awesome. What's your area of expertise?

CS: I worked for the Department of Mental Health in Massachusetts for my entire career in state psychiatric hospitals.

SW: Very cool, did you like it?

CS: Yeah, yeah I did. I did do some clinical work in my early days and then I went into administration.

SW: Okay, there you go.

SL: Going back to education, what were some challenges that you faced in school?

CS: In grammar school, high school, college?

SL: High school and college, as a woman.

CS: Well, my high school was an all-girl school, and it was really small. There were only 33 girls in my graduating class.

SL: Oh wow, oh my gosh that's very small.

CS: So, I don't think I was really well prepared for college. And when I got to college, I think it was...The work was a challenge. It was also the '70's, so there was a lot of partying and things like that.

SW: How big was Stonehill when you went?

CS: Fifteen hundred, I don't remember, I think under 2,000.

SW: Wow, because I think Assumption is about 2,200 now and I'm like comfortable with this size of school because I don't like big huge schools. I'm not a huge school person. So, Assumption was a pretty good size to me, and the same as my high school, actually. I went to Wachusett [Regional High School] which was a huge high school. So, coming here and yeah...

CS: Yeah, going from a very sheltered Catholic high school to college, and living away at college was crazy.

SL: What made you choose Stonehill?

CS: I wanted a small college, and I got in.

SW: Well, did you want to do coed?

CS: Yup, I wanted to do coed.

SW: I would think going to an all-girl school for a couple years, yeah you might want to figure out the differences and see between that and college. So, when you went, was there...How different was it from, you said St. Mary's?

CS: That was my primary school, St. A's was my high school.

SW: Oh, so how different was it from going to a coed from a...

CS: Oh, it was very different, very different. It was also at a time when, the first year I was at Stonehill I lived at the dorm, and they had what you call parietals. And that meant you could have boys visit, but you couldn't have them visit in your room. Then by the end of my freshman year going into my sophomore year, there were coed dorms.

SK and SL: Oh wow, that's crazy.

CS: So, there was this huge cultural shift while I was at college. So, I think that part of it was having gone to an all-girls Catholic high school, but I think also there was this whole cultural shift of the late '60's and '70's and '80's that changed everything.

SW: Yeah, I feel like that would've been a really big shock.

SW: So, what was your first job when you got out?

CS: When I got out of school?

SW: Yes, college,

CS: I substitute taught for a while, while I was looking for a job, because I wanted to be a teacher or guidance counselor. But there wasn't any---there were no jobs available. So, I ended up working at Westborough State Hospital as a clinician there.

SW: Yeah okay. How about, what was your first job ever?

CS: In a supermarket.

SW: In a supermarket? Like cashier?

CS: Yup!

SW: Yeah, I feel like that's a lot for kids nowadays still. I've never worked in a grocery store, I've just worked for my dad and I picked up the CNA, so I've been doing that for a while.

SL: Yeah, also waitressing.

CS: Oh, I could never do that.

SL: Yeah, it's a lot.

SW: Me either, oh gosh. So, what made you want to go into the field of work?

CS: Well, I took the job because there wasn't another job around and my mom was working at the state hospital, and it wasn't unusual to work with family members that work there. So, once I went there, I decided that I loved it. My Master's Degree was in Psychology and Guidance.

SW: So, how did you balance your work and home life?

CS: Well, I actually had a very supportive husband. We got pregnant after being married for 10 years. And after Bern was born, he worked in the evenings, and I worked during the day until she started going to pre-school. And my mom took her one day a week, and so that's how we did that. Then when she was in school, we divided a lot of the stuff. Like I probably did the more traditional things like the cooking and the cleaning.

SL: But that's good, that you still were able to split that.

CS: Yeah, he had a very good relationship with our daughter and did a lot of picking her up and dropping her off at school.

SW: That's nice. Did we ask what he did for work?

CS: No.

SW: What was his occupation?

CS: He was an office manager for a moving company, and then for a guy that sold food to restaurants. But on the side, he refereed football, baseball, girls' basketball, stuff like that and timed games at Holy Cross.

SL: How did you two meet?

CS: So, one of my friends that lived in my neighborhood was getting married and she decided that she wanted the girls that she hung out with, when she was a little girl, to be her bridesmaids. So, I was in her wedding party and my husband was the roommate of the groom.

SW: Aw, very cool.

CS: So, we met at the coed shower before the wedding, and that's what happened.

SW: I love hearing stories like that where people meet at weddings because that's like the best place to meet people. That's where everyone's friends come and family and they have dates.

SL: So, we'll go into a topic where it sometimes gets controversial with people. So, if you don't want to answer a question, that's fine. Just tell us.

SW: Do you consider yourself active politically?

CS: Yes.

SW: Have you been involved in volunteer community work?

CS: It depends on how you want to define that.

SW: What about, like today we have Why Me for the Cancer House?

CS: No, I do stuff with WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] and I'm on their council. So, I guess that would be volunteer work. I also have a scholarship in my husband's name for a baseball player every year. So, every year we have a fundraiser for that, which is coming up a week from Sunday. So, we give a scholarship to a Legend baseball player in the area because when he was still alive, he was involved in the Legend Baseball Program. So, I guess that's volunteer work.

SL: What role has religion played in your life?

CS: Well as a kid, I was religious into college and then I am no longer religious.

SW: That's like me, when I was little, my dad's a religious person. I would say we were Christian and we'd go to church every week. Then as I got older and making my own decisions, I didn't feel as religious as maybe I did when I was little. I don't think that affected my college decision. I don't think I'm atheist, I think there's somebody up there.

CS: I mean I think that you can be a good person and not be religious.

SW: Yeah, definitely. I know you said your mom is doing well and she still lives at home and her mental state is very good. Have you or anyone else had any other health issues that might've affected your home life?

CS: So, when I was 11, I had scoliosis and had back surgery. So, I was in the Massachusetts Hospital School for 11 months.

SW: Oh wow. I worked there. I worked at the barn and did that riding program.

CS: They didn't have that when I was there.

SW: Yeah, it changed a lot, yeah but it used to be the Mass Hospital School, but they changed it to the Pappas Rehab [Pappas Rehabilitation Hospital for Children].

CS: Yeah, most people don't even know what it is when I mention it. So, yeah, I had back surgery there and I spent almost a year there. I think that affected my life and the other thing that I think that happened to me was there were kids there who were so debilitated, and so, yeah. It was just very very sad how sick some of them, physically deformed they were. I was getting out and I looked like a regular person, and I could be able to leave. So, I think that affected my life and probably in the end did too.

SW: Were there any long term affects for you or were you able to function?

CS: I mean I still had back issues.

SW: Yeah, but nothing major long term?

CS: I think that I had a hip replacement in 2015 and my back caused the arthritis in my hip, so... But for the most part I was able to get married and have a child and live my life.

SW: So, kind of just stemming off of what we were just talking about with your back surgery, so it was about a year. How were you able to get through that or what thoughts kept you going?

CS: That I was getting out, and also that I wasn't in the same situation as the other kids that were in there. My family was very supportive, and they came to see me probably every week.

SW: Yeah, that's good, I feel like that definitely would've helped a lot. How would you define success in your life and has that definition changed over time?

CS: (laughing) That's a hard one.

SW: That is a tricky one.

CS: I think success is being happy in your life and having a purpose to your life. Having good family relationships, that's probably what I think success is. When I was younger, I probably thought it was more about career, money, stuff like that.

SW: Yeah, I was going to ask how much that has changed from when you were younger to now. I think that's what most people are like. When you're young you want a nice job and money and to have nice things, but you don't really think about the actual purpose for success besides money.

CS: And if I wanted money, I probably wouldn't have worked for the Department of Mental Health.

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

CS: Another tough one!

SL: Ha ha, I know these last few are pretty hard.

CS: Like that's so broad. But I think that...

SW: Well, let me put it as...

CS: Well, I'm trying to think what advice I would give my daughter.

SL: Yeah, that's a good way to put it.

CS: She's 32 so, I think that you should find something that you like to do so that when you're working you have something you enjoy and that you like. To have things outside of work that fulfill you. To try and find a partner that is supportive. To have friends and good relationships with your family.

SW: That pretty much sums it up very well. But, yeah, these questions are a little tricky, I'll see if we can give you an easy one.

SL: Were there any historical events in Worcester that occurred during your time here?

SW: Either in Worcester now or when you went to Assumption. Like...

CS: The Blizzard of '78?

SW: Yeah, something like 9/11 that affected a lot, but not to that extreme.

CS: Yeah, so the first thing that jumps to my head is the Blizzard of '78 because I had been working in Westborough and had to drive home to Worcester in it. But I made it home. I had been married just a little over a year and we were stuck in the house for days and days and days. The other thing was the fire that killed the firemen, the warehouse fire.

SW: That's right, the one in Worcester.

CS: I'm trying to think what year

SW: I know there was a plaque out front, there was like 5 or 6 of them or something like that.

CS: Yeah, I was here and I remember the whole city kind of just stopped. There was nothing going on, it was really sad. I think it was early December.

SW: Do you remember what year it was?

CS: I'm trying to think so my daughter was, I think a sophomore in high school. So, she was born in 1987. So, when you're a sophomore, you're like 15, so maybe 2001.

SW: I think it's on the plaque outside the fire station, but I can't quite remember. I think it was a couple years after I was born. So, yeah, I don't know, I was a youngster. And for 9/11, I was maybe three.

CS: What year was it again?

SW: 2001.

CS: So. I think it was before that or maybe it wasn't. Oh, God, isn't that embarrassing?

SL: Oh no I mean that's a while ago, and so much has happened.

SW: Yeah, it was a long time ago. So, here's an easy one. What was your favorite musical group or song when you were growing up?

CS: Probably the Beatles.

SW: Yeah, they're good. I like them. I listen to some of their songs, too.

SL: How were, so this is kind of going back to education, but when you were in high school how were the girls treated when you were in high school? I know it was all- girls, but did you hear anything that happened outside, like outside of school, that could've happened or inside of school?

CS: Well, it was an interesting school because it was half boarding school. So, we had a number of girls from Haiti because the nuns had a mission down there. And that was really interesting because that was like my first exposure to a different culture and I kind of grew up in a sheltered neighborhood. There were very few minorities in Marlborough around us at the time, so that was interesting. There were other girls that were boarders that their parents had sent them because their parents thought they should go to a convent. (laughing)

SW: Yeah, that definitely might have affected them a bit. Were you in any clubs or extracurricular activities?

CS: Yeah, um, what was I in? I was a cheerleader, which was kind of bizarre because it was an all-girls school. I was in the Math Club. And, again because it was so small, there wasn't a lot of stuff.

SW: That makes sense. How was your education different from your parents? Were you ever able to talk about that?

CS: Well, neither of my parents went to college. My mother went to nursing school at Westborough State Hospital, so it was kind of going to college, but not really. Most of the hospitals had nursing schools within them. And my father didn't go to college, so that's a big difference. They both went to public schools.

SW: Was college always in the scope of view for you?

CS: Yes.

SW: Were your parents pushing you towards college?

CS: They didn't always push it, but they expected it. So, my brother went to college and he dropped out and I finished. Out of my 40 cousins I was the first one to get a master's degree.

SL: That's so cool. Were there any areas in the city that you liked to spend a lot of time or go and visit?

CS: Now?

SL: Now yeah.

SW: Or when you were younger too.

CS: Well, growing up in Marlborough, there wasn't really a lot. But we used to play outside a lot.

SW: Did you and your family go on vacations or trips or stuff like that?

CS: When I was a kid, we had a cottage in Marshfield. So, we used to go down there all the time.

SW: What about when your daughter was growing up, did you go places as well?

CS: When she was young, we went to like Hampton, Old Orchard and that kind of thing.

SW: Oh, cool my best friend did a lot of trips to Old Orchard Beach when she was younger.

SL: Do you have any hobbies or do any regular leisure activities that take you outside of your home?

CS: I read a lot. I belong to a book club, actually two. I like going to museums and that kind of thing, and I enjoy a bit of travelling.

SW: So, when you say you like museums, does that mean you've been to the Worcester Museum or Boston Museum?

CS: I belong to the Worcester Art Museum. I've been to the Gardner Museum. I'm going to the Fitchburg Museum.

SL: What's the farthest museum you've been to? Farthest from here, I'd say?

CS: In Germany!

SW: What kind of museum was that?

CS: It was an art museum. We went to several while we were there actually. My daughter studied in Germany for a year, and I went with my brother.

SL: That's very cool. Going back to childhood, compared to your friends, how was being raised different from them? Or was there a difference at all?

CS: I mean it was a very similar because of where we lived and the times.

SW: Like were their parents stricter or more lenient?

CS: I don't remember them being very different from my friends' families.

SW: So, we'll wrap up with how do you feel about the choices you've made in your life? And do you have any regrets?

CS: I probably have not always made the best choices, but I think that anything that I have done has made me into who I am today.

SL: Is there anything else you'd want to say about yourself that's important that maybe we didn't get to today?

CS: I could talk about the relationship with my parents. It was often that moms didn't work full time, but since mine was a nurse, she was gone more often than other moms. And my father was very supportive of my mother and of our family.