

Interviewee: Carol Seager
Interviewers: Ralitza Mondal and Brian McDougal
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Abstract: Carol Seager owned Carol Seager Associates, a geriatric case management service in Worcester, Massachusetts and also worked at the law firm Fletcher Tilton and Fidelity Financial Planning. She discusses her parents, her career development, the challenges of raising two children on her own and shares her view of women's experiences in Worcester.

BM: So we can just start with our questions. Could you just tell us your maiden name?

CS: Yes, my maiden name is Carol Semon.

RM: Could you spell it for me?

CS: S-E-M-O-N

CS: Why didn't I take it back during my divorce? You want to be Semon? [Laughs] We never take our names back [laughs].

BM: So now that we have our first question, our second question is can you tell us about your parents?

CS: What about them? Their background? What they did? What do you want to know?

BM: Anything you would like to talk to us about...maybe...

CS: My mom..

BM: Yeah, just what they did..

CS: My mother, I think she might have worked before she was married. Maybe from 1940 to 1941, something like that. I am not even sure if she did, but she never worked. My mom was a typical 1950s—I was born during the war so my mom was a typical stay-at-home mom. She was

a great cook, played cards, did some volunteer work and never even thought about going to work. My dad—we lived on Long Island, New York and my dad worked in Manhattan. So he commuted into New York every day and he was in the printing business. He was a salesman. We were middle class, not rich but surely not poor, very comfortable Long Island people. Dad worked Monday through Friday, never worked weekends, never worked nights. We were like the TV show Ozzie and Harriet. I had one sister and we never gave any trouble, we were goody two-shoes. When we grew up we weren't [laughs]. Once we left.

BM: We read a little bit about you and read that you had children. So we were wondering—or one child?

CS: Two, two.

BM: Two children, so we are just wondering what their names are and if you could tell us..

CS: David is fifty-one and he lives outside Los Angeles. He, unfortunately, is having kind of tough life. He has some mental health issues and had drug involvement. So did not have a good life. He's doing better now but probably development delayed from all the drug involvement and the mental health issues. He has two children and one lives with her mother and one just moved out and is living with a sister who is not my son's daughter. And they all kind of struggled and then I have a daughter who lives in Manhattan who's forty-nine and who's the direct opposite. [Laughs] She's forty-nine years old, vice president of a publishing company. Grove Atlantic in New York and has always had a very good job. She is working in this industry for twenty-five years. She has one child. Her husband is an attorney and they have a very nice life. So I have one rich and one poor.

BM: The opposite.

CS: Yeah, it's hard for them.

BM: Yeah. It must be hard to watch them too.

CS: Yeah and it's hard for them because one has everything and one has nothing.

RM: So tell me about your job. What did you do? What was your first job?

CS: My first job in Worcester? I had jobs in New York.

RM: Yeah, tell me about everything.

CS: Well, back in 1963 was my first job and I worked as a secretary for RCA EVP which was electronic data processing before they called them computers. It was the EVP division in Radio City which was great. It was fun. That building was beautiful and it was great fun. And then I quit that job when I got married and I worked near home in Long Island and for janitorial supply house and then we eventually moved up 1967 and I didn't work for five years. I started working in Worcester in 1972 for a senior partner at what is now Fletcher Tilton, a law firm in the city. And I always joke that he had never met a Jewish girl from New York and I surely never met a Yankee Wasp in my entire life [laughs]. But he became like my father. We became very very close and worked for him until he died. I worked for him for nine years and he luckily taught me the estate and trust business..

He knew I didn't know anything about it but he figured out—we had like a ten-minute interview and figured out I had a brain. And so he taught me the estate and trust business and as I was able to work mothers' hours as my kids went to school. I didn't earn more, I took care of his business and so by the time he died, we mainly used to send tapes. He used to record and dictate things to me from Florida or the Cape and mail them back and forth. It is very funny now [laughs], but I never had a computer in that office. So I worked there for twelve years. He unfortunately died in 1981 but I worked for his son and another lawyer there. But they also connected me to lots of the wealthy people in Worcester because he had a very large estate and trust business and I used to do all the trouble shooting. So people got elderly and got sick and needed help. I find the nursing home, they died, I closed down the house. I got very good at doing Christian funerals and luncheons at the Worcester Club. I used to fly to Florida and do people's tax returns. We used to do taxes by hand back then. It was crazy, .it was like in the dark ages [laughs] But it taught me SO much and exposed me to so many people and my kids by 1984 were getting ready to go to college and I needed to make some serious money and put them in college. I never had any alimony and child support or anything. I got thirty-four dollars when I got divorced and half of a house. So I had a big house and I sold the house. I bought a little what I called my pretend house. But I had no money and I went to work for a gentleman in town, Mike Souza, where I sold large insurance policies for estate tax purposes. Back then state exclusion was much less and wealthy people bought insurance to pay these state taxes. Now the exclusion, I mean they are probably still doing it with the craziness of the one percenters. There were still state taxes to be paid. But I sold those insurance policies and made a lot of money on commission and I was able to put my kids through college with no loans

RM: Wow.

CS: I think my daughter still had ten thousand dollar loan which I paid which was great. The minute she got done with school, I quit because I hated it. It was this macho horrible disgusting business. It was just the people, it was the macho environment. There were very few women and it was awful. It made me crazy. But because of my background, I decided there was a business out there to care for the elderly. Now it was in 1992 and I was just turning almost fifty and even my parents hadn't got sick by then. Our parents really weren't seen as people now are. Parents are either dead or sick. And I decided there was a business out there. Unfortunately I had no idea what I was talking about other than I had this idea in my head. I quit my job and spent three months from January to March of 1992 talking to anybody I could find in Central Massachusetts who knew anything about elderly. So I talked to nursing home people and vice presidents of the VNA [Visiting Nurse Association], Medicare people, Medicaid people and I just went around everyday calling people and making appointments and trying to learn what was out there and I set up a database—by that time I had a computer [laughs]. I set up a database and then I called up all the estate and trust attorneys in Worcester who all knew me because by that time I had worked for twenty years. I'd been on all kinds of boards and they knew I wasn't a crook. I handled lots and lots and lots of money for Fletcher Tilton and they knew that I was an honest human being and that's the wonderful thing about Worcester. If you are honest and have a reputation and it is small enough you can really develop. I developed a very big business. So I went and talked to all these attorneys. I still had no clue what I was going to do. At one point I thought I was going to take care of the checkbooks for rich people. Well, I would have starved to death. But what ended up happening is people needed homecare so all of sudden people were calling me for homecare and I had to find people to take care of them and luckily one of my friend's mom had died and she had this woman, Veronica, who had immigrated from Kenya and she sent her to me. From Veronica, I grew a staff of a hundred people. I never had to advertise for help. Nobody ever stole. I never had a problem because the only way I got new help is they—the good people were allowed to send me good people. I had a few white people—white women and men, but not many. The Kenyan people were educated. They were middle class Kenyans. They did not do CNA work from Kenya. They did everything, but CNA work. You know, they were bank administrators, they were teachers, they worked in colleges. They were mostly from a Kikuyu tribe which was the tribe that is now in power, but the reason they emigrated to United States and a lot went to London, Daniel Moi was in power and he was a dictator and he was very anti-Kikuyu. A lot of them, they just had to leave. Now, as they are all older now and a lot of them are going back which is great. But, I had this wonderful, wonderful crew of people who worked for me for twenty years. I had a really big business and it was all on word of mouth and luckily three years ago I sold it. So I could retire finally at seventy two. [Laughs] So that is my work history.

BM: Hmm. Impressive.

CS: Before I started work and even in the beginning before the business got so big, I did volunteer work and now I have gone back to housework and that kind of stuff.

BM: That's good. That is very impressive. Let's see what the next question is ..do you want to ask that one? Number seven.

RM: Do you want to share your experiences as a single mother?

CS: Thank goodness for Worcester! [Laughs] If I'd been in Long Island I don't know what would have happened. I don't know what would have happened, but luckily here I was working. When I got divorced and a law firm was extremely supportive. I had mother's hours before there was ever mothers' hours.

RM: Wow.

CS: I used to come and go. Sometimes I'd be there at seven in the morning but I'd leave at two thirty whenever the kids were sick. They supported me totally. Even to the point when I sold my big house and was moving into the small house, the first house hadn't sold and I needed to buy the new house and my boss took a bridge loan for me and put up the money.

RM: Wow.

BM: Wow.

CS: I mean they were amazing! And they are amazing to me to this day! I very rarely pay legal fees or house closings or anything. They've been just wonderful. But that's what's so nice, I mean about Worcester. At that time, maybe I was making—well when I got divorced I was maybe making fifteen thousand dollars a year if that. I mean eventually I was making thirty-five thousand dollars a year back before I started the business. But I could own a home, I could raise two kids, I could put food on the table. I didn't live extravagantly that was for sure, but I could really have a nice life. My kids never felt like they were poor, you know, they lived on the west side. So it was very easy. I laugh because in the beginning when I got divorced, first of all it was forty years ago and people didn't get divorced like now. So I had a really good gay friend and he used to be my escort for everything. I mean he is still my friend; I don't now need him as an escort anymore [laughs] but back then, I was active in the temple and stuff and there was bar mitzvahs. He would go with me to everything. He knew everybody so it was the perfect date.

I always laugh. So Worcester was a really easy place at least for me. I'm sure other people might have had problems I was able to survive and do most things.

RM: Did your kids go to school here?

CS: Yes, they both went to Flagg Street School. Then they went to Forest Grove. My son unfortunately ended up in McLean and literally graduated from the Arlington School which is the high school at McLean Hospital in Belmont. My daughter dropped out of Doherty [High School] at the end of her sophomore year. She hated high school and she wanted to get away from her brother I think. She wanted to get away from him out of Worcester. She went to Simon's Rock which is an early admission's college in Great Barrington that is now part of Bard College out of New York. But at the time it was a standalone. It was a very small school. Deb wasn't a genius, far from it, but there were two hundred and fifty kids there who, like Deb, just didn't like high school. They had other interests. She was kind of crunchy granola but they she has seven friends who she is very very close with and all have done fantastically. They are attorneys, they are—what do you call it? What is Ellen? She's an oceanogra..oceanonic...

BM: Oceanographer?

CS: Yeah, not exactly what she is, but something like that. Another woman is a really famous author, and now is also working for the *[New York] Times* and writes books all the time. They all just have done amazingly well. And well they all stayed friends. And it was the best thing she ever ever did. And they all stayed there. A lot of kids went there for two years and then went on. This group just hung together and they all stayed there for four years. It was fabulous.

BM: That's great.

CS: Yeah. So she was sixteen when she went to college. But it was perfect for her, but then she came, she came home. She was home for less than a year. She came home and worked a little and then went to New York. She was dying to get to New York. [Laughs].

BM: So, did you go to school? Did you go to college?

CS: I went to Skidmore for two years. Hated it. Absolutely hated it. I learned how to play bridge when I was a really young kid because my parents were really good bridge players. Played a lot of bridge. I really [laughs] pretty much flunked out. Came home, my father almost killed me. I was close to death. [Laughs]. I just, I just, oh God I hated it. And he made me go to secretarial school with the hat and gloves, in New York for one year. It was hell [laughs]. But he was right.

I told him that years later. He said, “You have to have a skill, you moron. Something could happen and you’re going to need to work!” Thank god I had a skill. To this day I can still take Gregg[shorthand] and I can type. So, he was absolutely right because otherwise I had zip. But I’m a really good bridge player. I’m an addict and I play duplicate bridge five days a week. [Laughs]. I go to tournaments all over the country.

RM: Wow.

BM: That’s fun! That’s impressive. So, you dropped out, or you left Skidmore. What support networks and/or mentors have been most important to you?

CS: Well, I have two women. Well, my boss. My boss was obviously Sumner Tilton, Sr., Tony Tilton’s father. Tony’s still an attorney in the city. A very prominent attorney. I would always tell Tony that I would never have the life I had if I hadn’t gotten that job. It was a little tiny ad on a Sunday. I woke up on a Sunday morning. I was married at the time, and said to my husband, “If I don’t go back to work your psychiatric bills are going to be enormous.” I had a two and a half year old, and a five year old, and I had had it. I was losing my mind. There was this tiny ad in the paper and I called them that Monday morning. Tuesday I went in and interviewed and I started working. And then there were two women in the city. One specifically, her name is Lois Green. She’s a Clark graduate. She was president of the United Way. She was president of UMass Memorial. She did all kinds of things.

There were a whole bunch of women, probably at least five or six of us if not more, and she was our mentor. She encouraged us to do things. When I was thinking about starting the business, she was the first person I went to talk to. She loved when it was successful. She would tell everybody it was all because of her. [Laughs] She had a huge ego, but who cared. [Laugh] She was amazing. And there were a whole mess of women, Patsy, Lois, Cathy, me, Sarah, who’s the head of geriatrics at the memorial now. I mean there are just tons of women in the city that she really helped. She mainly encouraged us. When it was not easy, being a women, and being in business. Or even being in nonprofit and not-for-profit. She helped us learn how to do board governance. All kinds of stuff. And then she and I use to go out drinking. [Laughs] S and I would get a bottle of Santa Margerita, have an appetizer, and drink a bottle. Unfortunately, she died seven or eight years ago. She had had on and off breast cancer for years. She was undergoing treatment, and we were coming in to take care of her, and her husband was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. So we ended up taking care of him and her. He died. She went into remission, but eventually, we took care of her. Which was very hard. Very sad and very hard. She was a superwoman. She wrote a book, and I’m in her book. So she was my main mentor. I can’t imagine, without sunny and without her. Then there another woman by the name of Nancy

Leavitt, who helped me with board stuff. She would get me on boards, introduce me to people, and she was really good about that.

I like to mentor women now. I like to help young women especially women who are going into business. I was more of a business person, I was never hands on. I never took care of anybody when I had my business. You wouldn't want me to take care of you. My head was around the business part of it. But it was good. I was a good manager and a good administrator.

RM: What was your degree from college? No.

CS: No. Well what I really wanted to do, it was government. I wanted to go in the foreign service. In 1961 they were not looking for women in the foreign service. Now it's nice because we have a group in the city that's been meeting for sixty years. It's called the Worcester Affairs Council. It used to be the foreign relations. I am the chair of the speakers committee. I have four other people on my committee, and we get the speakers. Once a month we have a speaker come in, so that's where I get my—and I've always been interested in foreign affairs and international relations so I love that. Now I have lot of time to do that and watch C-span on the weekends. I'm a total news junkie. Politics and foreign affairs.

BM: I think I'm going to ask number 17 [referring to a list of interview questions]. So how would you define your success in life?

CS: Hard work.

RM and BM: Hard work.

CS: I worked very very hard. For forty years I worked seven days a week. Even when I worked at the law firm. I used to go in on Saturdays and Sundays because the kids had been sick during the week. I'd go in and I just worked. Just plain old hard work.

RM: What do you think about women's experience in Worcester? In general.

CS: [Sighs] I think women are doing better here. Obviously all over. I think there's still problems. There's still problems especially corporate wise. The not-for-profits, the women run—the women pretty much run the city. And especially now, most of the heads of not-for-profits are women. We have a lot of young women running not-for-profits. Both Tower Hill and the Ecotarium are women who have come in within the year, who are in their thirties. They have really good jobs. I run a women's group. I have been running a women's group, at the

Worcester Club for thirty years. We meet once a month and have speakers, and that's mostly professional. It was originally, thirty years ago, it was professional women. Now most of us are retired, and we are getting younger women in. Now it is younger women, professional women, and retired women who are community activists which is really great. Worcester has been pretty good. I think corporate, it's much harder. I think, as I said, the not-for-profit is very different from the corporate situation here.

There are lots of women in law offices now. My best friend was the second woman accountant in the city. So things have changed. Thank goodness. We have a lot and lots of women now in those things. But I don't know, or I don't think, corporate wise, other than Sue Mailman who runs Coghlin [Electrical]. There are a couple of them [in the corporates] but that was a family business. There are not that many. The Crowley girl is involved with Polar [Beverages], but she's not running it, her brothers are. I think, unfortunately, that's how it is. Boards of corporate businesses do not have a lot of women on them unfortunately. The glass ceiling is still there. Worcester is really pretty good. I never felt a problem. But I also was never in the corporate world. Other than that, horrible eight years which I hated. [Laughs]

RM: Why do you think there are less women now?

CS: Pardon?

RM: Why do you think women are not getting more involved in the corporate world?

Carol: It's not that they're not getting involved, I don't think they're getting promoted. I think it's the same old boys' network. I mean research shows that, especially if you have a baby, and you drop out for a year or two, it's really hard and you lose more than that year or two that you're out coming back and getting back in. I mean I laughed when I went for that interview at 1972. Sunny looked at me and said, "Are you gonna get pregnant?" I said, "No. I got a tubal ligation." He never discussed that with me again. [Laughs] Never came up. And, they were really good. I'm not sure why they were so good about mothers' hours. Or they knew that I would come in. I would make up the time if I wasn't there. But it's hard. My daughter's in a great—I mean, my daughter works for a small publishing company in New York, and she's been there at least fifteen years, I think. Yeah, at least fifteen years. It's small and her boss, the president, has a young child. His child was born about the time my daughter had one. They're very good. But she works, she's like me, she works crazy hours, and she's had a nanny since he was six weeks old. But every once in a while he gets sick and the nanny gets sick, or whatever the hell happens. So, they've been very accommodating and that's why she hasn't left that job. She could probably make a lot more money, but she doesn't want to go to work at Random

House or make a lot more money but be a cog. She's director of publicity. She had Caleb ten years ago. I'll do two trips a year. That's it. She doesn't travel. Which is unheard of in her position. If she was at Random House she'd be traveling. So she made a decision. Luckily, they make enough money between the two of them that they can live in Manhattan. But she's very lucky. But lots of people aren't and I think that it's hard. Even with everything, it's hard. And you can't it all. We've all found that out. [Laughs] Everybody thinks that you can. You can have it all if you don't have kids. The minute you have kids forget it.

RM: Yeah.

CS: [Laughs]

RM: But times are changing a little bit.

CS: It is, but still even as I said my daughter has a housekeeper two days a week, a nanny, Fresh Direct delivers her food, they eat out or they call out for dinner three nights a week. I mean she's got all the help you could, but it's still hard. She's exhausted.

RM: Based on your life experience what advice would you give women today, like me?
[Laughs]

CS: You can do anything you want. Don't let anyone say that you can't do something. That's number one. Hard work, finding a mentor. I think finding a mentor is really important for women. I don't think men do that, but I think women do. And they need to. And it doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman I don't think. I mean, as I said. Two! One was a woman and one was my boss. And you know I think that's important. Do something, if you can, that you like. Work is work. But if you can, find something that you can get enjoyment out of, that you get pleasure. I worked really hard for that business, but we did really great things for people. We did a really great job. I think that just feel that you can do anything you want to do. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't. I think it sure as hell is easier than 1971 that is for sure, yet not so different.

RM: It's still difficult yeah.

BM: So now I just have one last question. Or if it becomes an open-ended question. Now that we are 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?

CS: I have this thing about Worcester and I think it's about women in Worcester. Worcester's really quite amazing in that it's a small city. We have all these private foundations. Most of them came out of wealthy families that were manufacturers. We're really blessed with all this culture. From the Worcester Art Museum, to American Antiquarian Society, to Mechanics Hall, to Music Worcester, you name it. I mean it's quite amazing what we have here. And we have a lot of suffragettes who were in Worcester like Abby Kelly Foster and Clara Barton. I mean there's all these women, who lived in the Central Mass area. That is an amazing heritage. There were a few suffragettes still alive when I started working at the law firm that I got to talk to. That was really cool. So I think Worcester's a very special place because you can really have a very good life here. My family thinks that I live in the boondocks. My sister lives in Washington, my parents lived in Manhattan, my daughter's in Manhattan. They think why would I live in Worcester? And I think Worcester's great. I love it. My home. But I think there's lots of young women now. Hopefully there are more, we're all trying to get more college students to stay here.

And with the biomedical there's more going on. We'll never be a manufacturing city again that's for sure. But between healthcare and biomed those are our two biggest employers in the city. Which is important. And there are tons of women doctors. UMass Medical is more than fifty, way over fifty percent women at the med the school and WPI [Worcester Polytechnic Institute] now is fifty percent. It's amazing.

BM: That is really good.

CS: It is! Because even 15 years ago when I moved into 16 Salisbury Street which is right down the street from WPI, if you went and walked around now there are women all over the place. Which is amazing. Which is really really good. So, I think it's easier in a way to be a woman here. I really do. There's lots of things you can work on. Because also we're a very open city and we have tons of immigrants. There's loads and loads of social service agencies and loads of places that you can contribute to or you can physically work at. You can be on boards. I mean I was on a million and one boards in the city. And they're all very valuable.

RM: I'm just curious. Where did your parents come from?

CS: My mom was born in Chicago. Her parents were born in Chicago. I'm trying to think. Nobody has done ancestry on either side of my family. But my great grandmother on my maternal side remembered the Chicago Fire. They were German-Jewish. They came over in that first waves of German-Jew's around 1840 we think and ended up in Chicago. My mother's father's family, his father's father was, I think, born here. But his father was born in Germany and came over very early. But my grandfather's mother was Irish-Catholic and is the only person

I look like. But she too was born in Chicago. My dad's family came from Germany but before World War I right at the turn of the century really to get away from the Prussian Army. Again German-Jewish. Ended up in Newark. So, his whole family was born—he had three sisters and they were all born in Newark.