

Interviewee: Birgit Straehle
Interviewers: Virginia Burton and Anna Conley
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Place: The Sprinkler Factory, 38 Harlow Street, Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcribers: Anna Conley and Virginia Burton
Overseen by Dr. Carl Robert Keyes and Professor Caryl M. Nuñez, Assumption College



Birgit Straehle was born in Rothenburg Ob Der Tauber, Germany, in 1973, and works as an Art Conservator for the Worcester Art Museum, located in Massachusetts. Birgit graduated high school, and eventually went on to major in art history at university in Germany. In 2003, during her second semester at university, she took a break from her studies to start her internship in Worcester for half a year to gain hands-on experience in her field in-between her studies. Birgit then returned to Worcester in 2006 upon being offered a fellowship by her current employer at the Worcester Art Museum, and to pursue her dream career as an art conservator. In this interview, Birgit discusses the challenges she faced when she first arrived in Worcester in 2003. She was forced to dust off any English that she learned in Germany, as she explored the limited resources that were available to her in the city for assistance. Birgit does not conform to certain political or feminist groups, but she enjoys connecting with the young artists throughout Worcester, as well as learning with her colleagues at the museum. She currently owns a nonprofit art gallery, The Sprinkler Factory, with her husband, where they display pieces from artists all over Worcester. Her heart lies at the gallery with Luis, at the Worcester Art Museum, and back home with her roots in Germany.

Quotation:... Worcester is a welcoming city, it's the city of inventors. Just went to the Harvey Ball last night, to the Historical Museum. And I think that's a good place where all the inventions are well-kept, and you can see what Worcester was and is still! Worcester, I think, follows that tradition because now it's more, less the industry. But I love, I love, a lot of new entrepreneurs are starting in Worcester.

VB: We are completing a city-wide oral history project of the lives of Worcester women aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Woman's Rights Convention of Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, politics, and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with whatever you would like to share with us. And thank you for your help with this important project.

BS: Nice job.

VB: [Laughs] Thank you.

AC: Okay, so we will just start with the questions. What is your full name, including both maiden name and married name, if applicable?

Worcester Women's Oral History Project
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BS: Birgit Straehle.

AC: Okay. Where were you born?

BS: In Germany. In a small city called [in German accent] Rothenburg Ob Der Tauber.

AC: [Ohh]

VB: Do you mind spelling that for us? [laughs]

BS: [laughs] Okay. I have to write it down so...

VB: Okay.

BS: [Writes out city name on piece of paper] It's actually a four letter word. R-O-T-H-E-N-B-U-R-G, first name, and then, O-B, second, D-E-R, third [chuckles], T-A-U-B-E-R.

VB: Okay.

BS: Yeah, located in Bavaria.

VB: Okay, great! Thank you.

AC: What is the name of your husband? Because I--- you said that you were married.

BS: Luis Fraire.

VB: Luis!

AC: Do you have children? Or grandchildren?

BS: No, we don't.

VB: Are you planning on having any children?

BS: Oh, not for now. [laughs]

VB: Not for now? Okay. [chuckles]

BS: Probably not.

AC: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with? Like, your family background?

BS: German? [Laughs] I know I have Swiss ancestors.

AC: Yeah, yeah [laughs].

BS: [laughs] But that's way back.

VB: Tell me about your parents. Were they born in Germany? Did they come from other countries, or did they move there?

BS: No, they were both born in Germany.

VB: Okay.

BS: Yeah, and my dad is, was born in '39 and my mom in '41.

VB: Okay. [paper shuffles] Alright, so when did you move to Worcester to begin with?

[whistling noise from other room]

BS: I came twice here.

AC: Nice!

BS: Yeah, so I did an internship here in 2003, for half a year. So, I moved here, yeah, for half a year, couple of months, and that was in- between my studies, and, of course, I had to go back to Germany, and, yeah, and finish my master program. And when I was about to finish, I got a call from the Worcester Art Museum, my current employers still, and they offered me a fellowship. So, I moved a second time to Worcester and that was in beginning of 2006.

VB: Okay, great, so a three -year gap in between. But that's good!

AC: Yeah!

VB: Okay, this was when you first were younger and you were in Germany, but what was your neighborhood like, generally? Was it a very tight-knit neighborhood? Did you...

AC: Was it in the city?

VB: Yeah, was it in the city? Was it urban?

BS: No, I rather grew up in a smaller town. [car outside squeaks] I think at that time it was probably, I don't know, maybe 8,000 people?

AC: Oh, wow.

BS: Yeah, very rural, but it's, it's in an area where a lot of small little villages are? But I grew up in the big one [laughs]. So, I always felt more like city, but it was definitely not a city. Yeah, and it's, kind of very picturesque, little town, too. It's like having especially for Christmas markets, and in the summer, they have some spots, there's a lot of hiking, yeah, cross country skiing.

AC: That's so exciting!

VB: [to Anna] Want to jump down to [number] 11?

AC: Yeah. Do any of your other family members live in this area? Or is everyone really, like, in Germany?

BS: Yup, I'm the only one here.

AC: Yeah, you already kind of answered what your connection was to Worcester. What challenges do you think that Worcester faces, and what would you do to change it? Like the city, do you think it faces any kind of challenges? Something that you see from being here for quite some time now?

BS: Yeah! Well, I mean, I can rather start with positive, optimistic views! Because I think, when I came here in 2003, I have to say, I fell in love with Worcester right away. No matter how it was, or how it looked, to me it felt like, maybe being in a new city, starting, starting an internship in an interesting place. You know, I was probably also living in a bubble because I hardly spoke English [laughs]. So, that was kind of an adventure, but, yeah, I fell in love with Worcester right away. But, of course, I was coming from, from Europe. I felt like, yeah, Worcester is a little bit rough and tough around the edges. But people warned me going to certain areas, that would be dangerous, and is which a little bit over-cautious. I figured out later on. So, there's more drama verbally. I know it's a city with a lot of problems, like other cities, but yeah, I came in 2003. The mall was just done, finally, so the city center looked very uncomfortable, not very welcoming. I have to say usually when I was traveling, I looked up on the web, or I called up all the tourist information office and asked for information. And when I came to Worcester, I couldn't find anything. So, somebody said there was a little office in the mall, so I went, but I think it was just a little stack of information with a map. And I thought, "Oh, so you have to figure out everything on your own!" [laughs]. But yeah, especially during maybe the last five years, and I'm observing Worcester really well, because I'm connecting with a lot of institutions. Yeah, and I'm following what's going up. I have to say Worcester kind of skyrocketed [laughter], yeah, in terms of entertainment, culture, food, almost anything I see signs of tourism here.

AC: Yeah, they're calling it like the "New Boston"! I like that.

BS: Yeah! Yeah, and I think that when--- when it--- at this point it's almost hard to find negative things, I mean you can always find negative things in the city. I think there are areas in the city that should be more taken care of, more money should go into them, for maybe safety, for more children-friendly environments, for--- I wouldn't mind having more little supermarkets that we can, you know, that you can walk to your next supermarket, you don't have to drive to a mall. So, I think that creates community and I think that would---- that the city would really benefit from that. You know, like the canal district for example, that's a good example how things can go really well. [laughs]

VB: Absolutely. Were you--- you were talking about how when you went to the mall, and you had to figure things out on your own and do your own research about the city, were you ever intimidated or a little bit nervous and scared when you first came here in 2003? Or did you feel confident and were willing to take on this challenge?

BS: Yeah, no, I felt completely confident!

VB: Oh!

BS: [Laughs] Yeah, there was nothing really to be, to be scared of, and I think I figured out really fast that people are very helpful here, and very patient.

VB: It's interesting! Yeah!

BS: Where--- when, when I went to Main South my first day, people said I should go there. And I had my camera with me, and I met people I never--- I mean it was during the day, it wasn't four o'clock in the night, which I did, during that year, too! And I wasn't in trouble at all. But it's uh, yeah, I think, I think people, if you ask them nicely, usually you get a nice response.

AC: Yeah, absolutely! It's interesting that you said you, like, didn't really speak much English when you first came here. Like, how would, like, how was that for you and how did you figure out, the way, to communicate, and get where you are now? Because, you speak pretty fluent English...

BS: Yeah, yeah! I'm almost there. Yeah, well, it's hard to tell, I mean, I, I was pro--- yeah, I was suddenly aware that I don't understand everything, and I try to figure out how many percentages I understand. I--- it was really sort of an adventure, and I had to start a --- I started really with basics, you know? I learned English like you probably, like you learn your second language, and I have to say, I've never been a very good student in English. I also had Latin, and my teacher in Latin was very strict, so I think I spent all my remaining brain cells to repeat the grammar to, to learn this. So, English was, yeah it never came too easy to me. But I think I always learned enough that I could travel through Europe with my backpack and ask anything for the way in France. So, I think everyone who's not really into languages have certain standards. Ask for the next bakery, and things like that... But I have to say in retrospect I, I found my--- now I'm find-

ing myself very brief. I don't think, I didn't think, about that at the time that I did it. I was just 29, yeah, I was just at the break of my 30th birthday here, so kind of naive for a little bit. I thought, oh, it's only for half a year and if it's a disaster, half a year goes by pretty fast. But it, it, was really a wonderful experience and, so that was easy because it was only an internship. I was a little bit more concerned later on, when I started my real job here. You know, full time, paid, writing reports, presenting, responding to questions for all sorts of people in the community and in the museum, and I thought, oh! How will I manage that? Because I think probably, as I started in 2006, I think around 2008, I really had probably my, my, breakthrough that I could respond right away to you. So, now you're asking me something, and I'm not translating in my head [laughs]. That sometimes, sometimes, creates a little break. And in the beginning, it was really hard to follow conver, coner, conversations because people say something, and I translate, and then...

AC: ... and it takes a while.

BS: Yeah! It already goes to the next point, and that was--- I think it---- that was very frustrating because I'm fluent, and I'm, and, of course, in German I like the fast-paced talk.

AC: Yeah!

BS: And suddenly I was really forced to slow down, and I always--- sometimes I had that feeling that people think I'm not smart, or I can--- no, it's, it's better when people don't think that because they think you're a foreigner! But, I think on a personal level it's very frustrating because, I mean, even if I can answer the question in a very plain way, I think it takes some time until you can have fun with your humor, with your sort of, intellect, and yeah! Really, I think that language really reveals who you are, and in the beginning, I couldn't do that.

AC: What distinctive characteristics make Worcester the place it is? Like, from your standpoint? What do you think that Worcester is? Like, what kind of characteristics make Worcester what it is?

BS: Yeah, Worcester is a welcoming city, it's the city of inventors. Just went to the Harvey Ball last night, to the historical museum. And I think that's a good place where all the inventions are well-kept, and you can still see what Worcester was, and is still! I mean, today Worcester I think follows that tradition because now it's more, less the industry. But I love, I love, a lot of new entrepreneurs are starting in Worcester, colleges, as you know. We have a Umass Medical [University of Massachusetts Medical School], which I think is top-notch in the country, and WPI [Worcester Polytechnic Institute], which I think is a great institution. People have come from all over the world. Yeah, it, it's a very innovative city, and it's---- but I think it's, it's, like I said before, it's, it's still the way that, not everything is present to you. It's probably not a tourist city but it's--- I think it's good for people who are curious, who want to figure out things on their own, and what I figured out for myself and I--- and also when I talked to a lot of other people, it, Worcester, I don't want to say that it's classless because there's no place in the world that's classless, but it feels more like that way. So, if you go to Boston, I feel like, oh! You have to be-

long to a certain circle, or you know they understand that sort of people project that onto you. And Worcester, no matter who you are, you can invent yourself - again! Or, invent yourself the first time, if you're young. It's - it's really I think, it's - it's very much without prejudice, and if you go to a group of people, if you come here to the Sprinkler Factory for example, I mean, some people walk in and they aren't artists or they're not interested in art, but it's, I think it's, it's a place where everyone is welcome.

VB: Absolutely. I think it's really interesting you said that Worcester has--- it almost has its own characteristics. It's not like Boston, or some type of city where you're familiar with the pace of it. It has its own set up. It's very different. I, I, agree with that! [Laughs] With everything you're saying... Absolutely!

BS: And it's a little bit stubborn because people don't really follow the traditional models, which is a good thing because everyone is following some things, and I think that makes, makes, cities, people, boring? So, I think, it's, it's, Worcester is a very creative city. Also looking at different--- yeah, like the Sprinkler Factory, the craft center, us, Worcester. So, I think there's very long history in artistic tradition. Like Worcester Art Museum, who had an education program established right away when they started the museum. So, I think everything is rooted already in the modern day in Worcester, and I think that now every--- all, all of that memory and history is exploding, and you are the ben, benefactors. Which is wonderful.

VB: It is a flourishing city, definitely changes every year, I think.

AC: Absolutely. What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been like generally? Like, as a woman yourself, how do you feel experiences of other women have been presented to in Worcester?

BS: Well, that's a trick question!

VB: It is a tricky question!

[Laughing]

AC: I was trying to read it and then... [laughs]

BS: You know, I was actually wondering that you were interviewing me because I'm not very active in feminism or in certain women's groups. Some people try to catch me for that but I, I usually, you know I--- maybe also because where I grew up, I don't think so much in gender categories. I mean I, I'm certainly aware of that there are different people but it's, well--- I think--- if I speak for myself, I, I don't feel any restriction being a woman here. I never had a problem, rather than being an immigrant is more problem for me than being a woman, but I think it's, it's-- I mean there's so many cultures and living situations where it's certainly tougher for women than for men. Yeah, being a single mom here in the city, and not having a great income, and,

yeah, looking for scholarships for their kids that they can have a better life, and, of course, their safety... I mean, as, as I have said, I have never been in trouble in Worcester, but, yeah, I think many women are intimidated by going to certain parts in the city, and they're scared that their kids would go.

VB: Okay.

BS: So...

VB: Okay, alright. Wonderful. We're going to go into the education part of some questions.

BS: Mhm!

VB: Did you - you attend school back in Germany, was that in your town? Or was that outside of town?

BS: Yes, so my first 13 years I was in my town, basically, so the school system in Germany is a little bit different than this country. We don't have college.

VB: Okay.

BS: Yeah, so I went to school until the 13th grade, then you're around 19, 19. Some people are 18, some people are 20, and then you decide to go to university or do something else. But, in-between the 13 years, you can leave the school after the 10th year, and not go to university, starting an apprenticeship, or something like that. But, yeah, I did my 13 years, and then I went to university.

VB: How wonderful! Did many people from your class attend university? Or did they go back home and do appren-, apprenticeships? Sorry! [Laughs]

BS: Well, some of them--- so I think it's--- yeah. Some people got married right away, some people, I think not too many, did apprenticeships. So usually the, the people who finish the thirteenth year, so they pursue their career at the university, or, yeah, doing something similar or at university combined with the job experience. So, there's also the sort of school-model. So, if you just go into a plain--- if you want to become a nurse, you don't have the right service through school all the time. Yeah, but I have to say, most of my classmates, if they went to universities, so they stayed in the area. So, it has--- so they went a little further.

VB: Okay! That's alright.

BS: And then more people who went north, yeah.

VB: Okay! What, what did you study at university? What specific courses, do you remember? Or do you have any favorites?

BS: Yeah, so that's also, so if you, if you start a university program in Germany, it's not like here that you can choose between a lot of things. So, it's already very--- so your classes--- so I studied, I started to study art history.

VB: Okay.

BS: So, and I took a lot of art history classes, and then the master program required, that was the main program--- and then you had to pick two other subjects which are related. So, there are a certain combination to which you could choose, kind of philosophy or social studies, or history, and I chose medieval history and new history of that combination.

VB: Oh, wow. I wish I could do that!

[Laughs]

BS: Yeah, it was interesting!

VB: What were your challenges when you were in school?

BS: So, at the university or at my high school?

VB: Both.

BS: Both.

VB: We'll do both.

BS: Hm. Well, probably challenges like anyone goes to school. You don't like all your subject matters you have to, like English for example. But you have to learn it and, yeah, I wasn't really strong in, I would say math. Or...

VB: Me neither.

BS: Hm. What else? Well, yeah, it's, it's busy! You're in school and you have to---- I have to say later on when I started art history, which I think has the prejudice that yeah, people have a lot of leisure time, and they're a little bit lazy, they're getting up at 10 [o'clock]. It's true! I took advantage of that system! And, yeah, as I'm a conservator now, so I didn't end up becoming an art historian after I finished my studies. But yeah, I think that I was challenged. When I, when I studied art history because I think I envisioned it differently than it was. So, I think in high school--- so you know what you're going in. But when--- if you're suddenly kind of, yeah not a

real adult I would say, you're just star, just starting to become an adult, I think. And I--- but I--- the, the great thing was I could move out, I could start my own life. Nobody tells me when I have to be at home and I can eat what I want to do, I can do with my money what I want to do. But then, of course, you're an adult and if your money is gone, so then you have to earn something so that's a good lesson, too! But, yeah, I was a little bit disappointed that, how dry art history was in the end, and how stiff my, my colleagues, my classmates were. They were all very ambitious, and not so friendly, and so, I--- as I had so much time, I reached out to other people, I hung out more with the history people, and I, I didn't do, I didn't overdo studying because also, studying is free in Europe so you--- yeah, you had to pay a fee of I think 50, 50 DM [Deutsche Mark] at that time, which is \$25. So, my parents didn't have to pay \$30,000, \$50,000. So, I think I would have been probably finishing all of my studies really fast if my parents had to do that. But, you know, that was--- I was set free. I, I worked on the side a little bit, my parents gave me some money, which I thought was really nice, to live. And, yeah, more studying for less. I started to cook a lot with friends, and I think I learned a lot during my art history studies. I learned tons of other things that are really important in life. But--- and it took me a really long time to make, to, to receive my master degree because also during that time, when I figured out, oh well, it's a little bit too dry for me because I knew I'm interested in art, art history, but I was missing the practical side of it. So, when I was in my second semester, I met a conservator who also studied art history at the time. She was, I don't know, 10, 12, 15 years older than me, and she figured out that I draw a little bit of artwork, and then she asked me to do a little bit of an internship with her.

VB: Oh, wow!

AC: Wow!

BS: So, when, yeah, when I was 22, 22, I had my first experience in conservation, and in the beginning I thought, oh, this is a great opportunity to see something else, actually to touch artwork, to understand it better. And I thought, oh, this could only enhance what I learned in my, in my regular career and it can help me. It, yeah, it will broaden my view. But as it--- I continued and art history became more and more dry, and I became more and more interested in, in the practical work, which is not only practical work. I mean, if you want to ask me later on question about conservation, it's a, it's also a very academic job. So, it combines all the facets that---so I, I think that my challenge in my 20's was that I wanted to finish my degree, because in Germany I also learned that since I'm here, so if you don't like your profession here, you'd say, "Oh! I'm doing something else." And in Germany it sounds more like a failure if you stop what you're doing, so I think that's also different mentality a little bit? I think it--- I don't know, maybe, maybe that was 20 years ago, but I, I felt like, and I was only child so, you know?

VB: Okay.

BS: My family was watching what I was doing!

VB: Oh, yes!

BS: So, I secretly started an internship in a museum during my studies, which I could do, yeah, because I didn't tell my parents right away. Because I had so much free time anyway, like it, it was a very loose programs. So, I had a, I had a full- time job as a conservator in the museum, which is the requirement to go later on into universities. There is a two to three- year requirement of working full- time.

AC: Okay.

BS: And I thought, oh, maybe I'm just doing that! So, I so I, yeah. So, I had soft transition from one to the other, but as I said, I finished my studies in art histories, and I have a master's degree, but I have my heart in conservation, which I later as a second study. Yeah. I pursued a career in conservation.

VB: Wonderful! That all worked out though.

BS: Yeah, yeah. And my parents are really proud. I told my mom right away. And my dad, I couldn't tell him right away, but now he thinks it's great what I'm doing!

VB: Oh, good!

[Laughter]

AC: Absolutely!

VB: Alright, so you did answer a bunch of my questions from before, so we're going to jump into the next session, section for work.

BS: Mhm! Okay!

AC: So, you talked a little bit about like some jobs that you had, so what was your first job? And I know that when you were 16, when you get a job at a grocery store, that's what I did when I was 16. But what was your first job?

BS: Yeah, around that age 15, 16, it wasn't an official job, but yeah, I did gardening for friends of my mom's. I cut trees, I helped persons who couldn't really take care of her garden. I did the lawn, and things like that. But I--- my first real job, paid job, with an employer, was yeah, that was when I was starting to study, so I thought, oh, I want to live really the high life and I need money for that! [Laughs]. So, I started in a--- I did actually sort of conservation? Because I started in a sports store and I was, I was in the ski department.

VB: Oh, okay.

BS: And I repaired skis! And I put, I don't know what the English term is, but I sold the shoes on the skis so when they, when they were scratched or something, I repaired them with wax. Yeah, that was briefly before I started also the interning at the conservation, but that, that was even the first one!

AC: Absolutely! So for your job now, like what specifically does it entail, what you do now?

BS: Yeah, so I am a paintings conservator, and I work on paintings but I also work on--- yeah, this is part of my job I have here. I'm also taking care of frames, and yeah, and "paintings." I should say because you think if I say "painting conservation," you think of canvas painting. But it includes, yeah it includes panels, everything that is painted basically.

VB: So, do you touch it up or do you try to preserve certain older paintings a little bit more, like what is the work that you do?

BS: Yeah, everything. So, yeah maybe that would require another hour, but to put everything in a nutshell... So we, we, in the museum, first we want to--- we preserve the artwork as it is, kind of preventing from more aging, from more soiling. So, it can start with simple things like dusting but---so usually--- so if I say, 'Oh we clean paintings,' that means we take surface prime off paintings. But most of the time if we say cleaning, it means removal of varnish layers and---I don't know should I talk about varnish?

VB: It's up to you, if you'd like!

BS: Well, maybe that would go too far but... Yeah but also if for example, if there's a tear in a canvas--- we in former times so that people probably put a patch on it, or tape, or something. I still see that sometimes if people bring artwork to the museum. But, yeah, our profession is, yeah, really very scientific and we, we also look a lot in medicine, what they use in terms of tools and in terms of techniques because we are kind of art work doctors. And, so for example, if a canvas has a tear, we mend that tear under the microscope, so if there's substance loss we, for example, take a little bit of canvas from the sides. So, if you have a burn, for example, then somebody takes something, some skin from your thigh and put it on your face. So, we do that with paintings, too. So we take something from the side and insert it and under the microscope we attach thread to thread and if we--- sometimes we have to (____???) canvas. If the tear is kind of distorted, we have to put every little thread on it.

AC: That's so interesting, that is really so interesting!

BS: So, it's really time intensive, and yeah. So, to give you an example, we have one painting in the gallery, it's actually in the gallery, in the English gallery. It's from Sir Thomas Lawrence, its the huge portrait with the lady and the umbrella!

VB: I think I remember seeing that one!

BS: Yeah, that's a really beautiful painting, and I worked on that painting from 2008 to 2010.

AC: Oh wow.

BS: So, it took me two years. I worked on other things, too, but that was my main project and yeah, you can't rush in my job. You have to be very patient and a lot of time we, we don't really work, we look at things, we do scientific examinations, so that takes time. And then you start slowly working on your project and people always ask me, "So what are you doing when something goes wrong," because people want to hear the stories. So, what happens then, but in my experience, and I'm in the job for more than 20 years, nothing ever traumatic happened, I never ruined a painting, nothing, because we work, we work really slow and whatever we are doing, which is also really important in our profession, everything is reversible.

VB: Good!

AC: Wow!

BS: Because yeah, if I--- I mean it happens that I have bad reattaching day and I just don't match the color, or the sun is in a different area, or you know, something... You're not at the same performance every day, so I can remove, I can remove my material, but just not always on an oil painting, it's something else---with just a yeah, with a solvent water or whatever you're using as a medium.

VB: Interesting!

AC: Oh wow, I didn't know that.

BS: Yeah! You have to come.

VB: We have to, definitely!

AC: That is so interesting!

AC: So, what exactly has this work meant to you? Like as a person, what does this mean to you to be doing this, and have this as your job and as your life and...

BS: Yeah, it's very.. fulfilling. I--- yeah I couldn't, I couldn't imagine--- well I couldn't imagine doing other work, which I do anyways. I'm helping running the gallery, which is sort of related to art but I think paintings conservation, I'm spending time with art objects, which I appreciate very much. I have--- but I'm, I'm not working in solitude, I have--- I'm fortunate that we have

quite a big conservation lab at the Worcester Art Museum. I have usually around six, seven colleagues.

VB: Oh wow.

BS: Yeah, including, including fellows, and we used to have an internship position that unfortunately got cut but yeah. It can be lively, but we are all very respectful, So, we don't listen to music loudly. I mean, we can have headsets and things like that, but, yeah, and you collaborate with your colleagues. So, if you have an idea--- and as I made the comparison with medicine, so if you have a patient, a painting, even if you have a lot of training, the patient is always different.

AC: And you need a second opinion?

BS: And you obviously have to start in the beginning to understand your patient, and sometimes it's good to have a second, a third, a fourth opinion.

AC: Absolutely. This is kind of a random question going back to work, what like--- when you were younger, what were your primary responsibilities in terms of like doing housework and doing stuff around the house with your family and stuff?

BS: Hmm, what was my responsibility? Well I always enjoyed working in the kitchen.

AC: Yeah!

BS: Yeah, so I can remember---I grew up with a grandmother...

AC: Mhm.

VB: Okay!

BS: So, I think that probably changes a little bit your life, so I am probably very old- fashioned because I grew up with my grandmother who was born in 1915.

AC: Yeah, oh wow!

BS: And yeah, my mom worked when I was... She, she did a break, a little longer than people can take here, I think she was--- she took a break when I was born until I was five or six, but then she started to work again, but my grandmother was always at home.

AC: Okay!

VB: Yeah! Always having a helping hand.. Did your father work too?

BS: Yeah, he--- both of my parents were teachers. They are retired now, but, yeah, my grandmother was all the time there and she was actually the cook in the family. My mom can cook but she, she doesn't have the patience or the, the yeah. I think she (____??) us other things.

AC: Absolutely.

BS: So, I helped with the little things, but I didn't have to do a lot because also our school system is different. So, I came back home from school usually, yeah, my lunch was already finished.

AC: That's always good!

VB: Alright, do the next one here.

AC: 27?

VB: Yeah.

AC: How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles, and interests in your life? All things combined, how do you like balance all of this?

BS: Hm, good question. I'm trying, of course. I have to do things that I like most right, but then there are things you don't like most. So, sometimes you have to force yourself to include them because otherwise you're in trouble. That's what you're learning when you're, when you're growing up. Yeah, I think I have a lot of energy because I like to do things. You know, most of the things I'm doing I really like, so I do that with passion and so I can fit a lot of different things in my day, or in my daily life. And then sometimes but I, I have my notebook and then I write the things down which I tend to forget because I don't like to do it. I think I'm becoming really good doing also the things that are sometimes work related, like writing reports and things like that.

AC: What do you think are the pros and cons of this path that you've chosen to go down for work and stuff?

BS: For work.. hm, well it's, it's a limited profession so if I don't like it, I can change really fast. So.. hm that's maybe, that would be the con. Hm, but yeah, the cons are I still like it and if I don't like it, doing my job at the place where I am right now I could become freelance. So that's a good thing. If other jobs you can't, yeah start your own business so I have, you know, you have some perspectives.

VB: Mhm!

AC: Mhm absolutely!

BS: And, yeah, I like flexibility, I don't like to be trapped in something, so that's, yeah...

AC: How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life? Do you have any regrets on anything you've chosen to do or...

BS: Hm, probably everyone has little things, and it depends how you feel. But I think in general, I think, I'm pretty happy on how things went so far, happy to be in Worcester. I mean, I don't know where I'd be, probably somewhere else, but I think yeah.

AC: Here you are, good!

VB: Alright, so this is going to be on politics and community involvement, the next two questions...

BS: Mhm.

VB: Do you consider yourself active politically?

BS: Not actively, no. I'm an immigrant, I can't even vote. I wouldn't know anyway who I would vote for, but alright.

VB: Have you been involved in volunteer community work? I know you said some feminist activist groups will come up to you and try to have you be involved in them but have you ever?

BS: Not really no. I trust if I talk to, to individuals they say, "Well maybe we should talk about women should trust each other more, we should get together," and that it. You know, I have a lot of male friends and obviously takes time to trust people no matter if they're female or male, so I think I like to see people more like wholesome, they are good men, good women...

AC: Absolutely.

BS: Yeah, but in general I think that I am active in the community, but more in the, yeah, arts. My husband is, yeah, he's in work here in the Sprinkler Factory managing the gallery, we have two exhibitions every month.

VB: Oh wow!

BS: Yeah, one in the front, one in the back. As you saw, that requires a lot of work and I'm his helping hand.

AC: Yeah!

BS: And I'm involved in the Family Health Care Center, art in the city event, then I'm involved in the craft center pasta dinner that's happening annually. And, yeah, we just had Powerball this

year I was on the committee as well, the mural festival and I think that will continue too. And what else, oh there was something else--- well I'm--- Yeah, I'm a member of the Harvey Ball committee of the historical museum.

VB: Oh yes, of course!

BS: Yeah.

VB: I actually had a question about the Sprinkler Factory. Where do you get the art work from? Is it from locals who do their artwork and you collect them here or is it...

BS: Yeah, so the gallery is a nonprofit institution and the---it's a nonprofit since 2010, I believe, but already in the '80's artists exhibited their artwork here, so it's an old place. And the Worcester artist group had concerts and exhibitions here in the '80's, '90's and early 2000, I think. I just, I just saw one, one, man, I was here in 2003, but they moved out and it was going a little bit slow. But I think the place picked up a couple years ago really fast, and so it's, yeah. And we have a website if somebody is interested to run a show, they can write a proposal.

AC: Oh!

VB: Very cool!

AC: Wow!

BS: Actually, Luis and I, we look over the proposals and see that we have a good range of different things solo shows and--- we had a show up to 50 artists!

VB: Oh wow!

BS: For both spaces it was a huge, yeah, show including a lot of sculptures, and so yeah, artists can rent the space. I think right now its \$325 for a month.

VB: Okay!

BS: And they organize their own show, but most people we sort of know. We like to bring groups in where we know at least a few people, so they know the drill and we usually help with lighting, hanging promotion and things like that. And yeah, what the really attractive point for artists here, they can keep all the proceeds. So, if they sell the art work for for \$5000, we don't get anything. We don't want to have anything because I think that's also a very supportive, yeah, feature for the artists because they're actually not making a lot of money. They have other jobs, too, just as the artists.

VB: What role has religion played in your life?

BS: Not a big role I would say, yeah. I was raised Lutheran, like in Germany either you're Lutheran or you're Catholic and a few other, yeah, we yeah, but yeah. I think I became sort of an atheist when I was eight, and then I stepped out of church, I could do that when I was 14 which I did, but I--- well I mean, in a way religion plays a role because one of my best high school friends he became a priest, so kind of --- and for Worcester I have to say I'm, I'm good friends with the monks in Spencer, so yeah.

AC: Alright!

BS: I mean, you know I really, yeah — in a way I'm probably a little bit spiritual but I don't even think about it.

VB: Yeah!

AC: Yeah!

BS: Maybe I'm too young for it, too, but I think I yeah, but I, I, I think I really appreciate and like to hang out with people who are truly believing that it's a true belief, but unfortunately I think would wish I would be religious because it can help you in a lot of things. But I think if you're not, then you're confronted with the, with the plain facts with is sometimes also good.

AC: Yeah absolutely.

VB: Do you think you respected for those ideas and beliefs that you have by other people or have you ever been tried to be swayed in a certain religious background?

BS: Me? No, no. I think my priest friend always jokes that he wants to turn me into a Catholic, but he said I would make a good Catholic, but I don't know about that.

VB: Okay, so the next few questions we're going to have about health. How has, how have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

BS: Yeah, I've just been back from Germany, my dad had a heart surgery. So yeah that's yeah, my--- I'm a single child, too, so I think yeah, the health of my parents is now my concern because they are running both towards 80. And they don't have other children, and yeah, they're divorced, too, so I have to deal with them separately. Yeah that's a little bit stressful, but yeah yeah, maybe that's one of questions you asked me before, what's the downside of your career or the path you chose.

AC: That you're far away, yeah.

BS: That yeah, I'm really far away which yeah...

VB: But you still keep in touch with them which is wonderful. Some, some kids don't even talk to their parents at all anymore, its just--- I don't know.

VB: What are your experiences in accepting quality, affordable healthcare?

BS: Oh, I'm not too excited about this country in terms of healthcare. And I have to say I still keep my dentist in Germany, and whenever I go, yeah... I had one bad experience here, and I think it shouldn't speak for all the dentists here. But, you know, I started to do that in the beginning when I felt like, yeah well, maybe I want to talk to a doctor that really speaks my language. So that's also--- now I'm thinking what you asked me before when you visit a doctor and you don't speak the language really well, that was a stressful experience and also the way patients are treated. And it's a little bit different, and also the monetary system is... I'm glad that I'm pretty healthy so far, knock on wood. I only had a broken foot--- what was it--- oh, I broke my ankle two years ago!

VB: Oh wow.

BS: Yeah, but--- and I was happy how it was treated but...

AC: Yeah.

VB: Yeah.

GB: Do you mind explaining a little bit more on how you're treated differently, you said that doctors might treat you a little bit differently.

BS: Yeah well, maybe also because--- when I was in Germany I speak with the same dentist until the dentist retired for example. And I had my, my primary care doctor. I knew who these people are and here, I think it depends on what kind of healthcare system you are. So I'm with Fallon Health Care from the museum, and I'm trying to avoid every check or whatever but as--- if you're, if you're--- I feel like every time I'm going, I have to sign up with another doctor because they're leaving and...

VB: Oh yeah, it's hard to switch.

BS: Yeah, it's less personal, but I mean maybe it depends on what kind of system you are in or, yeah.

VB: Yeah, okay. Alright, you actually answered this question. It was going to be whose health are you responsible for besides your own? Your parents, right?

BS: Yeah, mhm.

AC: Okay so, these next few questions are kind of like conclusive questions. How do you get through tough times, what thoughts keep you going? Like if you're having a tough day or having a tough week?

BS: Yeah! Hm, events that I'm looking forward to join!

AC: Yeah! Okay.

BS: Yeah, yeah. Yeah I think I had a tough working week and then I think, "Oh, but I have the opening here," or "the Harvey Ball was yesterday," so that's--- or I have a good German beer

VB: There you go, solves your problems right.

BS: And yeah, or I make a nice dinner for my husband and myself, or try to meet people to bitch about my terrible situation I'm in...

AC: Yes.

BS: And then sometimes after two hours, your situation changes.

AC: Yeah, it's good to talk about it sometimes. How do you define success in your life? Has this definition changed over time?

BS: I think it's happiness is the most, yeah--- sometimes it doesn't even need to be happiness, because nobody can be happy all the time but reaching a certain degree of being content, I guess.

VB: Mhm.

AC: Absolutely. Based on your life experience what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

BS: Mmm, yeah, follow your path. If you have an idea, even if you're young and everyone tells you this is a bad idea or this is--- you won't get a good career, you won't get a lot of money, you won't succeed in life. But I think people, people have good instincts and they should follow their instincts. Of course, you should, yeah--- I yeah--- you should listen to all advice that people give you and collect them and come to your own conclusion.

AC: Okay, so now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women that has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include? What is something that's very--- like something you want us to include in this, in this, project that's important. Something important, that's tricky!

BS: Yeah, addressing to women? Or addressing in general?

AC: Yeah!

VB: To women, in general.

AC: In general!

BS: Yeah, be nice to each other, be respectful.

AC: Yeah absolutely!

BS: Yeah, if you have bridal or baby showers invite men, it's more fun.

AC: Yeah!

BS: Yeah, I think you know if, if--- I think maybe that's a little bit what, what makes me not wanting join certain groups because it's obviously restrictive. If it's a feminist group, oh my God, the poor men. You know, sometimes I feel like they sometimes need a support group, too.

AC: Yeah!

BS: So, it's like oh--- you know my, my husband is--- his family is from Mexico so--- and he sometimes jokes--- we joke about--- he jokes about German, I joke about the, the Latinos and it's, you know. What I think is really great in Worcester that you have so many ethnic backgrounds.

AC: Absolutely!

BS: And it, it's wonderful to celebrate them but I, I sometimes see now the tendency that people single out. They say, "Oh we want to appreciate more this and this group," which makes them feel like, "Oh we are not appreciated now. They want to appreciate us instead of including everyone." So that's what I mean it would be nice if, if yeah men, women, different groups can...

AC: Band together, yeah!

BS: Yeah!

VB: Mhm.

AC: Okay so there's a few more questions that we have to...

BS: And I think art is a good clue!

VB: Yes.

AC: Absolutely.

BS: Yeah, art, music and yeah.

AC: Music, yeah all that kind of stuff.

BS: Yeah, politics are always tricky. That's maybe the reason why I stay out a little bit in politics, I have--- I think I have always an opinion about something but it's, it's really hard to verbalize it and it's--- I think right now the political climate everyone is very sensitive about things and I think it's good to bring people together on a more... naive level than trying to solve raw problems.

AC: Absolutely.

BS: Yeah.

AC: Absolutely, so now we have some supplemental questions, there's only a couple. Who were your role models when you were growing up and who are your role models now?

BS: Hm, also tough question.

AC: I know!

BS: Well...

AC: Could be anyone!

BS: Yeah, I think my grandmother was obvious a cool role model and she, she, she, she died when she was 90. So, I had quite a little bit of her, and yeah, we clicked really very well, we had the same humor.

AC: Yeah, absolutely.

BS: And here you know it's now, role models. Well, there are so many people, you know, you live in a society and you, you, meet people, usually it's your friends you admire, That's the reason why they become your friends and I--- you don't want to be somebody else but it's, it's good to see what other people are doing. So it's more--- I can't really say that I follow a certain, or have a role model but I, I think you should reflect society and try to gather the best what you see other people are doing, or you look what they do badly and then you try to avoid it.

AC: Yeah.

VB: Yeah.

AC: I know you kind of talked about this a little bit, but do you believe that being a woman has been the cause of any setbacks or disadvantages in your career?

BS: Mm, yeah! That, that might be a problem, the payment for women is still not as equally great as men and I, yeah it's kind of a funny thing because just yesterday one of my colleagues showed me a publication that was done by The American Institute of Conservatives and that was a study from 2014. And they compared our salary within the country. It was only then for North America and what women and men are earning, and I was shocked to see how, how much more men earn in general, which is a little bit almost ironic because our field there are, I think, probably 70% women.

AC: Yeah!

VB: Really?

BS: Yeah, so it's a little bit.. hm really? Yeah.

VB: What is the, the gap? Like what percentage of more, more money do you, they get do you think?

BS: Umm..

VB: Estimated.

BS: Yeah, I almost think it was for 20 percent or something.

VB: Oh wow, it's a big gap!

BS: Yeah!

VB: Okay.

BS: Yeah, which I mean it's not like the two people are in the same, same institution and one gets more or less, but I feel like the statistic ended up that men in the end are getting better positions which are higher paid.

VB: Mhm.

BS: So, I think that was--- this will be my first feminist concern. I had recently saying wow you know there are more women, but obviously more men ending up in, yeah, higher positions. But maybe there's a change, too, because you know our field is changing.

VB: Absolutely!

AC: Absolutely!

BS: And my supervisor's female in the museum, which is a good thing.

VB: Okay, there you go! Alright, just two more questions and then we'll be all set to wrap up. This one's jumping back to your education and when you were younger. How were girls treated when you were in school?

BS: Hm, I was probably in a unique situation because I was in a class there were 17 boys and in the end we were two girls.

VB: Oh wow, oh my goodness!

BS: Or even, yeah, yeah there were more girls in the--- I think there were four or something like that, that was the last five years and I have to say I enjoyed it.

VB: Yeah?

BS: I didn't want to change with the French class so was--- as I said, I was in the Latin class which probably I think girls wanted to learn French, but I hardly could learn English so my teacher obvious said, "She can't even speak English, we should learn Latin!" And I, you know, I think even--- so maybe that's the reason why I'm thinking today less gender oriented because I have to say, of course, sometimes the, the boys were teasing me or whatever. But I think all in all for teenagers they treated me really respectful. I mean I earned my respect, too. I guess and I--- with, with quite a handful. I'm still in touch so my oldest friends are male...

VB: Mhm... and a priest!

BS: And a priest, yeah he's one of them!

VB: Alright and last question, what memories do you have of significant historical events that took place when you were growing up?

BS: Um, the fall of the wall. [Berlin Wall]

VB: Yeah.

SB: The Berlin Wall, yeah, which was just the anniversary. October—

VB: Yeah.

BS: Yeah third. Which, yeah. So my family didn't have relatives in East, East Germany, but I was--- As I later on started history, I was very fascinated because nobody, that was something nobody really could predict

VB: Mhm

AC: Yeah!

BS: Except for one of my teachers. He said a year before and I, I couldn't understand why but he was convinced, and I thought he was fantasizing or something.

VB: Oh my gosh!

BS: Yeah! He was the only person who ever said that, what I heard, but yeah, that was a pretty traumatic event.

VB: Yeah, mhm.

AC: Absolutely.

BS: Oh, and then there was Chernobyl [Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant]

VB: Yes.

BS: Yeah.

VB: Absolutely.

BS: Yeah that was '86, which at that time, yeah I was 12,13 and I was--- I knew it was bad, but as a kid, or as a teenager, I was more upset that my parents didn't allow me to go swimming anymore for that remaining summer.

VB: Mhm, yeah

AC: That's your biggest concern, yeah.

VB: Alright, I believe we are all set with the questions. Do you have any other points that you would like to add on right now?

BS: No, if you have any more questions, I'm happy to try to answer.

AC: I actually have one more, I think this one's kind of interesting. Do you believe that some men have been threatened by your success in the past, do you think that men could be continued to be threatened by your success? Because you're a very successful woman...

BS: Um, I don't know. I'm not that successful, I don't know, I'm usually not very threatening.

AC: No?

BS: No, I--- and if I am, than it's probably their personal problem not mine.

AC: Yeah!

VB: Would you say about the same thing for women and general and their success path right now?

BS: Um, yeah, it really depends on--- like I said, I think there's certainly men who, who are freaking out if a confident women tells them what to do. Maybe they grew up in a, you know... I think we are always reflecting how we grew up and. I mean my dad would be probably terrified if he had a (???)— and he was an engineer and I, I would, I would just guess that he probably would follow orders really well because he was growing up in a yeah environment, probably like every, every, every country (_____) country. Like here maybe your grandparents would be the same but I think it's really... I think I'm, I'm fortunate that I that I don't probably--- I don't have to think about, or I don't have to fight, and I'm grateful for the feminism that took place in the '70's, for example and yeah in the late '60's. So, I think we are just benefiting from the sexes and I think there's still some tweaking but, yeah, the salaries for example and yeah just figuring out how to deal with people who can't, like I said, accept that you can have a female supervisor.

AC: Yeah!

VB: Mhm.

BS: Who might be more educated and more, more— have more knowledge than you and then you have to follow or you have to collaborate, that what people should do anyway.

VB: Yeah! Alright, I think that is good for the questions now.