

Interviewee: Jennifer Swan
Interviewer: Abigail Duggan & Alexandra Finn
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Abstract: Jennifer Swan was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1977 and now currently resides in Barre, Massachusetts. Jennifer, a local artist, attended Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. She has traveled to India, Colorado, California, and New Mexico for her art. She received a Kinnicutt Travel/Study Award from the Worcester Art Museum. In the interview, Jennifer stated she is an art teacher in Worcester, who enjoys teaching all ages from children to adults. Jennifer helps many schools, ranging from elementary to high school aged student, to create wall murals around various social issues. She is involved with Technocopia which is a makerspace and a studio space in downtown Worcester that does a lot with 3D printing and laser cutters and technology-based art. One of her main messages in the interview focused on being an individual. She explains that being unique and following one's dreams is one of the most important things in life, along with living in the moment and being true to one's self. Jennifer looks to art as a way to express one's self and better the understanding of both the problems and the beauty around the world, with the hope of inspiring people today.

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

JS: So my full name is Jennifer Mary Swan and I am married but I kept my maiden name.

AL: Where were you born?

JS: I was born in Worcester, Massachusetts.

AL: And you said you've been married, what is your husband's name?

JS: Jason Michael Pelletier.

AL: Do you have any children?

JS: Yes, we have a daughter, her name is Lyra Swan Pelletier, age 3.

AL: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify as? Any family background?

JS: So my grandparents are from Finland and Sweden, and my husband is half French Canadian, Native American, and also Lithuanian.

AL: So, if you want to talk about your parents a little bit?

JS: Sure, my parents are wonderful, they've always supported me as an artist which I'm really lucky and my mom is recently going through a really difficult time, she has cancer, so now the roles have kind of reversed and I'm helping them.

AL: I'm sorry to hear that.

JS: That's okay.

AL: Where have you lived during your life, where were you born, have you moved at all?

JS: I was born in Worcester and we also have actually a lake house in Rutland, MA in a Finnish community, so I spend a lot of time out there on the lake as well. I went to college in Providence, Rhode Island at the Rhode Island School of Design and after college I traveled. I actually received a Kinnicutt Award from the Worcester Art Museum. I lived in India for six months. I've also traveled across this country many times and have lived shortly in Colorado, California, New Mexico. More recently, I lived in Princeton for about five years and now we bought our home in Barre for the past seven.

AD: So you said you went to India, what did you do there?

JS: I went to India, the Kinnicutt Grant, part of it was to study art in India, so I traveled to Ladakh, which is northern India and I studied a bit of traditional Ladakh medicine and looked at different plants that they used and did illustrations of medicinal plants for *Himalayan Journal*. And then I also studied yoga. My husband, after he got out of the Marine Corps, he became a yoga teacher and that's how we met so we also took a lot of yoga courses and did a lot of yoga.

AF: So you said you were born here, you grew up in Worcester and do you have other family members here still? Are your parents still here?

JS: Yes! Most of my family is in this area.

AF: So this is more of a question about Worcester in general. Do you see any changes that the city faces and if you were to change it, how?

JS: Yes, I do. I work a lot in the Maine South area and I know that art has really improved Maine South and I feel like, especially recently we've had the pow-wow murals festival the past couple of years, it's just brought beauty and life into the city and I think Worcester is always at a cross of about to change, but it just needs a little bit of a push. But I think it has improved, especially parts of Worcester have improved, but then I also think Worcester, I work in the schools a lot and a lot of them are inner-city schools and I think you know there are a lot of people in the city still struggling.

AF: So you said over time you've seen it change for the better, what distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it really is?

JS: I'd say the diversity. I do like that about Worcester and how there's all different people from different backgrounds, different restaurants, different religions, and also it's close to nature. Like I live in Barry because I like nature, and I like the quiet little gardens and horses and dark skies at night and Worcester is a hub where you can work and I can find employment as an artist but yet it's close to so many things so, you know, in a half hour I can be home and be in the country. So it's nice that it's central but it's also surrounded by a lot of really nice natural areas.

AF: So next question, what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

JS: I guess I can just speak more for myself, but I've always been really lucky to find plenty of employment. I've always been treated fairly where I work, so in general I would say it's good.

AD: You already said where you went to school, did you attend graduate school from college?

JS: I haven't yet, but it's still something that I would like to do.

AD: Where there any challenges in your education that you remember?

JS: Going to art school was incredible. I think sometimes people think of art as being fun and easy, but it has its own challenges and so I think going to college, it made me really challenge myself, think really deeply, work really hard. Art is problem solving, so learning how to work through problems, find solutions, not give up, persevere, but I think overall, it's made me the person I am today. It's made me a creative person and a creative thinker and that can be used in all different situations of life, not just college.

AD: Do you think that a certain teacher or someone helped that mindset?

JS: It was a combination of many teachers. I think as a student, you pick up bits of knowledge and sort of, I don't know how to say it but, you pick up bits from different teachers. Some things you might like about a teacher and you sort of put all that together in your experience and I know as a teacher myself, one of my fears is that, especially as an art teacher, is to never push anyone away from art, you know, to challenge them and to want them to try harder and dig deeper but yet not push them away from art,

AF: So if you see a student who is very talented but they're conflicted on how they become creative and they don't know how to be more creative, they just know the technique and how to draw, they know how to paint, so how do you influence someone to be more creative? How would you go about that?

JS: So I think, for me, I work with all ages so it kind of depends on the age too. For a younger student, you kind of work with their natural enthusiasm and energy and sort of just give them the materials they need to be introduced to a new material they've never tried, to push them a little

bit, to get them out of their comfort zone. I think with teens, and I really enjoy working with all ages, it just makes my life so much more interesting, with teens, they tend to be more emotional and they can sometimes struggle a bit, so you kind of got to know when to just back off and give them their space to be creative. And then also, not be too hard on them, but be encouraging, maybe be a bit more gentle, and to use their emotions in a positive way, to let them explore their emotions and never let them feel judged by you. And then in adults, I think with adults, I work with a lot of adults that are later in life, and they're just taking their whole life and all of those life experiences and bringing them to life. So, it's just kind of getting them to reflect on their life and use that life experience in their art.

AD: So after finishing college, did you know you wanted to be an artist?

JS: Yes. I've always known, I think my grandmother was an artist, well she did many things, but she loved art and I think I've always known that was what I wanted to be. And I've always worked in community settings as well, like in high school I worked at different community centers and the art museum as an assistant so yes. And I still try to balance, I consider myself an artist, but I'm also a teacher, an art instructor, so it's kind of finding a balance between my work as an artist and as a teacher, as a teaching artist.

AD: What support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

JS: I think the Worcester Art Museum has been wonderful. They really always suggested me for different projects and encouraged me to work in the community and one job tends to lead into another job, so I feel like everyone I meet along the way, as long as I just do a good job and it's a successful project, it leads to future projects. So I can't think of, I mean, my family, my parents are great, my husband, even my daughter, they all support me but I think it's who I meet everyday that sort of leads to the next adventure.

AD: When did you get into the Worcester Art Museum? What age, do you remember?

JS: I was taking classes there as a child and I was very shy, but then I started assisting there in high school and that's when I really became a part of the community there.

AF: So, going off of your question about working, do you remember your first job, like your first painting, your first real piece of artwork that somebody has asked you to do?

JS: Yes and no, I remember when I first graduated from college and I was working for the Worcester Art Museum and also the Worcester Center for Crafts, I was doing an after school program, doing painting but also light metals, because I did a lot of bronze casting in college, and it was an after school program and at times it was a bit crazy and I really had to learn how to discipline and maintain order in the classroom, but I guess working the after school program, that was probably the beginnings. And then teaching at the museum itself. I do remember one of the first murals I did, because I never really painted a large scale mural and often when I'm asked to do a job I say, "Sure!" and then I figure out how I'm going to go about actually doing it, and I

remember renting scaffolding, which weighed a lot more than I thought and piling it into the back of the pickup truck, you know probably wrecking the shocks and stuff at the time, but setting it up and painting a large scale mural in someone's entrance way on a very high ceiling. And being really nervous about it, but afterwards when it came out okay, feeling like, "Wow, this is something I really want to do more of."

AF: So we know what you do now, but in the meantime, what have you been working on?

JS: One of the programs I'm doing recently is working with teens from the Worcester Youth Center. So every year, they chose a problem in the community, and we've tackled everything from homelessness to addiction to gang violence to racism was the last one and they make art about that issue and then we have an art show in a gallery showing their work, so that's one of my favorite jobs that I do, because I think it's really powerful. Also, currently I'm applying for two grants, one is with the Broad Meadow Brook Audubon and hopefully if we get the grant, we'll be teaching about the watershed and it's working with elementary kids, I forget what school it's at, but I'm working with elementary students doing a large painting about a watershed. I'm also starting a mural at Al-Hamra Academy, it's a school in Shrewsbury, so I'm in the process of designing it and starting that. And also, just right now, I'm teaching a lot with the homeschool population and I'm involved with a makerspace, where, I don't know if you know much about makerspace, but makers is a new movement, it's tied into STEAM, which is science, technology, engineering, art, and math, where the students design a project and I'm part of a team that helps them complete it.

AF: They just added, I mean somewhat recently, the art to the whole STEAM, because it used to be just STEM, right?

JS: Correct, yes.

AF: Do you know they did that, or the reasoning behind it?

JS: So one of the things I do when it comes to working in the public schools is bringing art into all of the subject matters and I think people are realizing more and more that the students are very hands on learners, and art can literally connect to any subject matter so I think it's a powerful tool for teaching.

AF: So in general, you're working a lot with underprivileged kids right now, so what has that meant to you? What has this work meant to you?

JS: I think art is a really great filter for life, it helps you process everything and really get down to what is essential. I know in my own art, it's my form of meditation, it's a way to kind of get out of your thoughts and your problems, and your sadness or struggles and kind of refocusing, and I think when you're teaching people who are suffering in anyway, it's a really gift to them if you can give them that space and that time to get out of their heads, and focus on their art, it just

gives them that mental break. But it also is a great tool for problem solving and for working through any situation.

AF: How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles, any other interests that you've had?

JS: So I definitely find the hardest balance I have right now is being a mom of a toddler, and the time it takes to just really, for her care and I've cut back on teaching a bit, and I've cut back on my own art a bit, just for her sake. But I hope to, in the future, be able to focus on my own artwork, I know that's something. Two years ago I had an exhibit that I really worked hard to create, and it really felt nice to pull together, it was actually called balance, which is kind of funny, and it was really about the ecosystem and it was a combination, I painted a series of canvases that all connected on different ecosystems and from very small, microorganisms to the plant life and the animals, and the landscapes and even going beyond to like cosmic nebula and things like that, kind of showing that everything is connected and everything relates and so I'd like to have another art show like that, with an environmental kind of theme and I'm thinking about that body of work, and it's still in its sketchbook stage but thinking about creating work about all of the natural disasters going on and the state of our environment, and the environmental crises that seem to be going on.

AF: So intense, but very meaningful.

JS: Yeah and that's the challenge of this body of work that I'm struggling with and I'm sorry this may be off topic but, I do like to create work that is beautiful. I love plane-air landscapes like I said, my meditation is going outside and painting a beautiful place and really being surrounded by all my senses being alive from painting outside, but yeah I feel like I really want my art to be meaningful and art provoking and that's one of the main issues that I'm really thinking about and just recently it seems like a lot of people are thinking about global warming and carbon footprint, so I want my body of work to somehow address that, but not be sad and depressing and ugly as some of the situations I'd like to paint. So trying to find beauty in the imagery but having a powerful message dealing with things like the effects of a hurricane, or a landslide, or a flood on the animals and the environment and the people facing that.

AD: Do you have a favorite project you've done?

JS: I have so many! One favorite project I did dealt with night and animals and it was a cultural partner, I did it as Worcester Art Magnet School and I worked with younger students and we painted a really large roll of canvas with lunar moths, and moon phases, and night animals and I just really enjoyed that and it really got me thinking about the landscape at night and all the things that that involves.

AF: I guess this next question is kind of personal, don't feel like you have to answer it, but how do you feel about the choices that you've made throughout your life up until this point?

JS: I feel good about my choices, I feel like this year, I guess I've been really thinking more about how, and it's probably with my mother having cancer, and I guess that's really made me think more about how memories are more important than things and I think the past ten years, my husband and I have been really focusing on things a lot, like buying a house, and cars, and building our life up in more a material way and just recently, which is fine, because I didn't have that in my 20s, I was more a free-spirit, and more traveler, but right now I think it's shifting and it's important to make memories and to have experiences and I'd like to take more risks and don't put things off, and live in the present moment. I feel like I did that when I was younger, and in college and in my 20s, and now I'm 41 and I am just sort of back to that point again.

AF: Our parents say that all the time now, we both completely agree. So I guess these next few are also... we put a questions mark next to this one because we don't like to talk about politics only because we don't really know much about it, but do you consider yourself an active political person?

JS: Yes and no. I mean I do have strong feelings about equality, and you know, I guess I would be more democratic. I'm very much for, I don't know, I like immigration, I'm very much a supporter of gay rights, I want there to be great education and great medicine for everyone, but I don't necessarily actively talk about politics in my life. I believe I'm more of one to just lead by example.

AF: So have you ever been involved... you said you work a lot with the community... so more deeper questions about that. What specific groups have you worked with or for?

JS: Well I worked at the Worcester Art Museum, and the Worcester Center for Crafts. I'm also involved with Technocopia which is a makerspace and a studio space in downtown Worcester that does a lot with 3D printing and laser cutters and technology-based art. But then in the community, I also work at the Listening Wellness Center in Barre doing an after-school program and they are very much about yoga and meditation, and spiritual based learning. I've also worked with the Highland Grace house which is a home for young girls who have drug and prostitution problems and I've done some art yoga with them trying to get them through situations. I've worked in a women's juvenile prison in Westborough painting murals. I've worked with Girls Inc. I've also worked a lot with the Worcester Youth Center working with the teen programs there. I've worked with Ivy Child International which is mindfulness program that works with middle school girls. I've worked at the Ecotarium. I've worked with, actually a really amazing group called Hope. It's a teen group that meets in Worcester about community engagement in teens and I've worked with them on and off. I've done murals at many many schools including Assabet Valley, Algonquin High School, and Union Hill. Recently I did a large external mural with them, so a lot of places.

AF: One of my best friends went to Algonquin

JS: Oh really?

AF: Yeah, she graduated in 2015

JS: Oh okay, that mural was right around that time. I think it might have been 2016 maybe. Actually, no it might have been 2015, so she was probably there. It was in the cafeteria. I was with the Arts National Honors Society and I helped them design a mural for their cafeteria, and the theme of that was “breaking free” so we did a trompe-l’oeil effect of a hole in the wall with an owl flying out and a pathway leading back.

AF: When you do murals do you do them with the students or do they help you design them?

JS: I do both, like I’ll paint murals on my own for a client, but when I work with the students what I do is I involve them in the whole process, and they’re the ones who actually paint the mural. I’m more of like the composer, so I go in and we figure out what some of their ideas are for the mural, and then I work with them on sketching and just to pull it all together. I do a final sketch based off of all their ideas. I do a few that they vote on, and then we do a final blueprint of the sketch of the mural, but then they get it on the wall, and they do all the painting. I do some guidance, but for the most part they do all the actual work, unless I’m doing a community mural. I try to involve them as much as possible, but yet you can’t just give everyone a bucket of paint and some brushes and say “go to it” unless you want a cohesive image and message.

AF: So the next few questions are about health. So, you pretty much answered the one about who else you’re responsible for health wise, but how in general have health issues impacted your life, your family’s past, present, and future.

JS: So in my own life you know that I’m happy and healthy, and my daughter is healthy as well. She was born... she came a month early so she was actually in the NICU here in Worcester Memorial, and they really helped. Luckily, she didn’t have to be there too long, it was just 10 days, but they were great at getting her strong and have her come home. And in my own health it’s fine. It’s important for me to eat well and exercise and get as much outside time as possible. And for my husband, he is the same way. He balances his work and life, and I feel like in general if you feel good in your body, everything else tends to fall into place.

AF: So, you talked a little bit about your thoughts on health care, but what’re your experiences in accessing affordable health care. It’s kind of personal, you don’t have to answer.

JS: It is personal, and as an artist because I’m married it helps a lot. Because as a self-employed artist I would have to be purchasing my own health care if I wasn’t married. So I remember there was a time in my 20s where I was past being covered by my parents, and there was a point where I wasn’t married and I didn’t have health care, so luckily at that time I was fine and healthy, but I do think that it should be easier and less expensive for people to access. And I also believe in alternative therapies. I know acupuncture has helped me in my life, and so I wish sometimes that more of that was covered by insurance, and more accessible for people.

AF: Do you mind just speaking a little bit about acupuncture since I can probably say we both don't know much about it?

JS: Yes, so acupuncture is kind of incredible. I never thought I would ever do something like it because you think it looks painful with needles, but it's actually not very painful at all. And for me when I was hoping to conceive, and I do have endometriosis, which makes it harder to conceive I met an amazing acupuncturist and she worked with me and I found it helped that, but it also helped everything. It's like almost as if you were an instrument and you're being tuned. That's how you feel when you leave an acupuncturist. It's not painful, and they're very small needles. You don't even feel them at different points in your body, and it can help so much: chronic pain, headaches, depression. It's actually very relaxing, so I would encourage it if you ever find you need something like that.

AF: Our final I few questions, they kind of go more personal. If you don't want to answer, feel free not to. So in general how do you get through tough times in your life, and what keeps you going?

JS: So definitely my art and my paintings. I think getting outside, working in my garden, going to a lake or a river, or somewhere beautiful in nature. Those are the things that have always helped me, but also having a good support system of friends and family to talk to. And I've always believed in talking things out, to let them go, and to not hold things in. Share problems, and to cry, to express them, and then to move on and let them go as best as possible.

AF: So how do you define the success you've had in your life, and has that definition changed over time?

JS: Well I think success as an artist, it's not always about financial success, or about fame. For me it's that success is wake up and do what I love every day, so whether that's doing my own artwork or teaching, or painting a mural. I feel very lucky and successful.

AF: Based off of your own life experience, what advice would you give to women today or future generations so maybe speaking for your daughter?

JS: Definitely to follow their dreams even as impractical or impossible as they seem. To be strong. To not be afraid to use their voice. To figure out how things work. To not fall into a gender roll of what women should and should not do, but to be true to yourself. And I think to be strong and to be comfortable with your body, but to also to be safe with others. And for my daughter right now, as a mother, I just want for a child to have a happy magical childhood filled with art and music and muddy puddles and fairy gardens and all those wonderful things. But then as she grows, you know to be taught the practical skills in life and to really take care of herself, and not expect others to take care of you, but to be able to do it yourself. And I would say to just be confident.

AF: I'll just read this question straight out. Now that we're working to tell a fuller story of the history of women than has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

JS: I think already knowing the little bit I do about this project, I think it's great that you do include all women, not just so called "successful" women, but a broad range of all the roles and jobs, and cultures of Worcester in this area, and all that women do. I think that's going to give you a deeper understanding of the role of women in our society, and not just to prioritize or choose someone because they have a certain career over someone else.

AF: So a range from being artists and teachers, and maybe even chefs throughout Worcester, and even range to doctors and lawyers, and then that middle range?

JS: I would also look for women who are really pioneers in their field as well, so even the women who are getting even more and more into engineering, or medical research, or mechanics, or things like that. Sports, athletes. maybe focus on the women who had really had to struggle and tell their story of how they got to where they are today. Maybe that would encourage other women and young girls to be confident and follow their dreams.

AF: On to our random questions... Did you have a favorite musical group or singer or song growing up?

JS: Growing up I, and to this day, really enjoy reggae music. Just for how danceable it is. And positive. I think it has a positive, not all reggae, but most reggae, has a positive message about being yourself, and being kind to others.

AF: So this is kind of a funny question... How old were you when your parents let you date? Were you allowed to go out on dates?

JS: My parents were surprisingly ummmm, relaxed. They trusted me, and they knew that I would make the right choices. With that being said, I didn't really date a lot, until—I mean I met my husband right out of college, and we dated for 7 years and we got married, so I don't think dating was something I was very focused on when I was younger. And if I met someone that's great, but it wasn't my top priority like some people, you know. I think having good friendships, and having art was what I liked to do, and that was okay.

AF: What was considered fashionable when you were young? What was your style when you were younger?

JS: My style... I was never one to really do what everyone else was doing. I think being an artist you're always a little bit of a risk taker, or you want to be different than everyone else. So in the early 90's when everyone was curling their hair, and using lots of hair products, I just had long straight hair. And then in college I had dreadlocks for many years, and style wise I never liked clothes that were uncomfortable. I think I've always gone for good colors, comfy clothes, and

maybe just not necessarily worry about what everyone else was doing at the time. And yeah, these are some really random questions

AF: Obviously today you can visually see how girls treat other girls, and sometimes it's tough, but when you were younger, how were girls treated in your school?

JS: I feel like girls have always be been mean at times, but I've always been one to, more be a peacemaker. I've always tried to find friendships in all different kinds of people. I've never really felt I was bullied in any way, and I never did any bullying. I've always been somewhere in the middle, and tried to if anything, prevent that from happening. But that is a really good question to ask people because nowadays it is worse in that there are phones, computers, social media, you know. I do know young nieces, and women, in my life who have really struggled with that because they just can't get away from it.

AF: Do you have any siblings?

JS: No, I'm an only child.

AF: So, if you want to talk about your parents a little bit. What was their education? High school? After high school?

JS: My parents both went to college. My mom worked for many years as a legal secretary at an office, and my dad was also in business.

AF: Where'd they go to school?

JS: My dad went to Clark [University] actually for college, and I'm really sorry I can't remember where my mom went for some reason, I'm blanking.

AF: Do you have any memories of significant historical events that took place while you were growing up?

JS: So, actually I was in India during 9/11 and that was significant in that we were in a [foreign city]and we had to leave even though we were supposed to be there for the full 6 months, we had to leave a little early because of it all. I didn't feel in danger in any way, but just everything... It was funny to come home to America and see how people were affected and changed by it because we weren't here, so we didn't feel the same way in a sense. We came home to a very different country.

AF: So since you had to come back on a plane, how did the airport change?

JS: It changed from our flight there to the flight back definitely changed, but other than that I don't think I remember stuff as a child. Not much was significant to me as a child. I mean I know things were going on always, but it wasn't something I was super focused on.

AF: Do you have any other hobbies or activities outside of your family and art career?

JS: I also love to work outside in my garden, and I just built a stone wall. And I love to cross country ski in the winter, and in the summer I love to be on boats, and go kayaking or canoeing, or sailing. I'm very nature based.

AF: Do you have a favorite place to do art?

JS: So probably my favorite place would be Wellfleet, Cape Cod. So, on the beach. Definitely nature.

AF: So is there anything else you'd like to add because I think we're actually done

JS: Just that I also think it's important to see that art is meaningful, and art is important. It shouldn't be dismissed as a hobby, it's so much more than that. I think it's really important to keep art in the public schools, and in the community centers, and in the community in general because I really feel like it is a tool for people to heal, to express themselves, to come together, to beautify a city, or just to feel accomplished in something they've created, so I think it's important for people not to diminish art, but to really respect it, and encourage more of it. So... go art!