

Interviewee: Sasha Adkins
Interviewers: Alicia Perry, Lauren Sutherland
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Abstract: Sasha Adkins, Ph.D. of Clark University, attributes her unique upbringing, whereby she spent seven years at sea, as crucial in her exposure to the importance of communication and the value in diversity as she encountered a variety of walks of life and cultures; of which, one that played a most formative role was her time spent in Hiroshima. Adkins describes her experience encountering survivors of the American bombings as transformative, whereby she began thinking about her role in the world and the tools, or lack thereof, that she had at the time in order to stop these acts of violence from occurring again. It was not until Adkins travelled to Kenya while studying at Wesleyan University in Georgia, that she first encountered immense suffering first-hand. Adkins time in Kenya profoundly altered her vision of war-violence and heightened her desire to engage in international research in the hopes of making a positive impact in response to the atrocities which she could not unsee. Time spent at the School of International Research provided Adkins a unique educational experience, during which she had the opportunity to go out into the “field” and engage with women crossing the border to give birth around the El Paso, TX area, to give meaning to the texts she and her peers were engaging with in the non-normative, narrative-based classroom. Her research is focused on environmental degradation, in particular, the ways in which our societies engage with non-biodegradable materials that end up killing those who are most disadvantaged. She hopes to deteriorate the arbitrary, socially constructed binaries that exist with regard to the hard sciences and faith, suggesting that the manner in which we treat one another is correlated to the manner which we treat matter things.

Alicia Perry: Alright, awesome. Well, thank you so much for coming. We're so excited to meet you and to have you and have your time. So, Lauren and I are in a seminar called Women and Nonviolence, we're both sociology majors, so it's a sociology course and it's pretty exciting 'cause this semester our Professor is doing something new, where we're interviewing women who've been involved in peacemaking activism, for the Worcester Women's History Project. And I'll just have you sign that stuff [paperwork] afterwards. So, we'll just go through some

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questions today, basically just hear about... a little bit about your life and your work and your experience at Clark [University]. So yeah... so maybe if [we] wanna start maybe by hearing about your childhood. Maybe you could talk about where you were born and raised and what your family life was like.

Sasha Adkins: I actually lived in a sailboat for seven years.

AP: Wow

SA: So, from when I was seven until I was 14. And my parents and I lived aboard and sailed. So, I was always in new places and I think one of the gifts from that was that I learned to communicate with people who were not the same, it wasn't a homogenous group of friends, I made new friends as I travelled. But one of the challenges was not having any... consistent home, any consistent group of friends. But I think that I started learning communication skills that really—life depends on it when you're on a boat. Yeah. [laughs]. Like, throw me the line, which broke... [laughter]

Lauren Sutherland: Wow.

AP: Yeah!

SA: So, yeah. That was an interesting way to grow up. And then I went to high school for a year in the U.S. and then I went to Japan for a year and a half and I love to talk... so, I learned Japanese pretty fast and... was in Hiroshima for a year and started thinking about international peace movements with the people that I met there.

AP: Awesome.

SA: Yeah.

AP: So, where were you—were you home schooled while you were on the boat or were you travelling to other schools or...

SA: I would be enrolled somewhere, we would land there for a half a year or a year and while we were at sea my parents homeschooled me but it didn't work out so great. My mom did

humanities, my dad was supposed to do math and science, but he didn't have the patience.
[laughs]

LS: That's funny.

AP: How cool. And, do you have any siblings?

SA: No.

AP: No siblings, so you're an only child. And were you travelling around the U.S. or more internationally?

SA: Both... internationally with my parents... Bermuda, Canada. They did transatlantic, but we hit a reef when we were in Bermuda, we almost sank, and I told them I wasn't doing anymore blue water with them...

AP, LS: Wow.

SA: ... so, I went to stay with my grandmother for a few months and they sailed across the Atlantic, but I didn't go to Europe with them.

AP: Wow, wow, how cool. So... so you're early schooling was a little bit of both, you were doing home schooling, you were docking and going to schools. Awesome. Maybe if you wanted to talk about, kind of the type of... you were talking about how you met a lot of different groups of people and how the lack of homog... it wasn't homogenous and you liked that. Can you maybe recall and experience, a particular place or group of people that you kind of really started to notice that [lack of homogeneity]?

SA: I remember Bermuda, that people weren't celebrating the fourth of July when we were there. [laughter] I was really young... I was seven or eight... and I didn't understand why we didn't all have the same holidays, and then people were explaining it to me from their different perspectives and... that was one of the first times that I noticed.

AP: Great, thank you! And you said that you first started thinking of international relations when you were studying in Japan. Do you want to talk a little bit about how that came about? [When] you were in school there?

SA: I went to high school in Hiroshima and I remember on Peace Day I went to the Memorial [Peace Memorial Ceremony] and there was a man there who was missing an arm and I spoke Japanese at the time, and he looked at me, he said, “Are you American?” I was like, “Ah!” [laughs] And it turned out that he was a survivor of the bombing [American atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, August 6th, 1945] and he told me his story and I apologized for what happened. But—and we parted very amicably and he wanted to be at the peace museum not to... hurt people, but to help them put a human face on the suffering that war causes. So, I got very interested in how to make sure we don’t have another atomic bombing—well, there was Nagasaki [American atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Japan, August 9th, 1945] as well. But, yeah—so, just—there’s a lot of people in Hiroshima, of course, that are passionate about global peacemaking so...

AP: So meeting them played a formative role for you?

SA: Yeah.

AP: Awesome, thank you. So, after high school experience where did you go to college and what did you study?

SA: I went to Wesleyan for two years, it’s a women’s college in Georgia and I studied comparative religion and philosophy in a self-designed major. But then, I went to Kenya for a summer and that was really transformative, so, when I came back, I transferred and I finished up at School of International Training in Vermont, and was studying what’s called the “World Issues Program.” It doesn’t exist anymore, but it was an undergrad degree. For about, I don’t even think there were 20 of us [students]. And we were on a little farm house on a hill for nine months together, sometimes fighting, sometimes being friends [laughter]

We read really tough stuff about Central American politics and U.S. involvement and torture and famine and economics and development and all of these things and we debated—we were from different countries. And then, they sent us off for a year to go do a project in a “culture not your own” whatever that means to you, and then we came back for two months to talk about what we learned, how the theory works or doesn’t work in practice. So, I feel really fortunate to have had that undergrad experience—no grades, narrative evaluations— it’s all about developing your character as well as your knowledge base. And I had incredible professors from all over the world, who were talking from a first person perspective about the impact of structural adjustment

policies and U.S. militarization and other things like that. So, I would say that a lot of my current political meanings originated there, at SIT [School of International Training].

AP: Awesome. It sounds like in the whole importance of communication and working with other people has been huge for you throughout your life.

SA: Mhmm.

AP: I would love to kind of just hear about what you did in Kenya and what drew you there prior to Vermont?

SA: I was with InterVarsity [Christian Fellowship] doing a Christian missions team and InterVarsity does some wonderful work, but, this particular one, I remember—see, it's only one person who stands out who now represents that whole group to me, but we were seeing children literally starving to death and she [a member of InterVarsity] said, "Oh, don't worry. Give them [the starving children] a Bible and their soul will go to Heaven," and that style of dealing with the trauma of watching this and feeling helpless, which, of course, she's shutting herself off from those feelings, that didn't work for me. So, I connected with a group called Lighthouse Project that was trying to pull the kids, street kids, into boarding schools so they would have a safe place to live and meals and training for a job. So, I sort of separated from the group and worked on trying to connect those kids, build a trust with them and connect them with the program. And they invited me to stay, but I got malaria and I got sent home.

AP: Aw. Wow.

SA: I survived [muffled].

AP: Yeah, you did!

SA: But, it was experiencing violence there—I don't want to go into too much, but, I came back with PTSD [post-traumatic stress syndrome] and had witnessed murders and was seeing poverty and riots and police brutality firsthand and that was shocking to me because I was so sheltered living on the boat, and then at Wesleyan, and then Japan. So that's when I started really asking hard questions of myself, like, "What have I been trained to do with my life? I've been trained to play violin and do horsebacking riding. Like, what do these skills mean in this context? Do I have any skills that could be useful here?" And so I thought, of course, I should go be a doctor,

'cause if I were a doctor then I could heal people. I couldn't think of anything beyond that in terms of bringing healing to these situations. And I didn't become a doctor. [laughter] I started midwifery after that. But I started trying to figure out like, what is the place of a Westerner, in particular, someone raised in the U.S., in the context of another country? And there was a Maasai man, I knew because he had the distinctive ear decorations, and he said, "Mzungu," [pronounced moo-zun-goo] which means white person, "what are you doing here?" I looked at him, and he said, "Mzungu, go home," I was like, "Oh, okay." He wasn't—he was angry but he wasn't angry in a hostile way, he was just asking a very real question that I then took to heart and struggled with for years. So [I thought], so, what skills do I have and what is my place in the world? How is my country part of creating these problems that I'm seeing? How do I stop participating in that and start participating in undoing some of the damage, if that's possible.

AP: Yeah

SA: Yeah.

AP: Thank you. And then, obviously did that play a big role in your decision to go to Vermont and study this issues? [reads head nodding cue] Yeah, very much...

SA: I wanted to find other people asking those questions.

Ap: Yeah!

SA: And I did!

AP: What did you do after Vermont? Is that when you started to study midwifery?

SA: I did study midwifery as part of my undergrad program. So, I went to Texas and I worked at a birth center on the border of Juarez and El Paso [Texas]. We had all Mexican women, there might have been a Guatemalan women or two, but almost all Mexican women who were coming over the border to give birth, and that's where I did my project "in a culture other than my own."

AP: Wow.

SA: Yeah.

AP: [to LS] Before I keep going, do you—is there anything you would like to add?

LS: You're doing great.

AP: Love it. Well, just pop in [whenever]. So I guess in transitioning, I would love to hear what ended up drawing you to Worcester and if that had anything to do with your involvement... I know you (???) ... in childbirth education... kind of what drew you to Worcester? Clark?

SA: I moved here because I was hired.

AP: Yeah?

SA: Otherwise, I would not have come to Worcester. I visited once for a conference once before, but I think that's all that I knew of Worcester. So, I came in December a year and a half ago.

AP: Oh, wow. So, pretty recently.

SA: Mhmm.

AP: Great.

SA: For a year and a half contract. Today is my last class teaching here.

AP: Wow.

SA: Yeah.

AP: Where are... where are you headed?

SA: I am going to Monson [Massachusetts] by Springfield where my partner lives.

AP: Oh, nice.

SA: And I'm going to look for work.

AP: Great! So, prior to coming here, how did you go from studying... your involvement in midwifery towards deciding that you wanted to get into teaching?

SA: It's such a long and convoluted path. So, I, after SIT [School of International Training] I lived in Japan for a year and I did interpretation, translation and language instruction and came back [to the U.S.] and worked with migrant farmers for a year as a health outreach person. And I went to study nurse midwifery and realized that hospital birth was not what I wanted to do, and then I went out to Oregon to do more home birth apprenticing, and that midwifery school closed, so I went back and got a Master's [degree] in public health while I was out in Oregon. And then met someone very special and the two of us moved out to Massachusetts to be married 'cause at the time that was our only option—it was 2004, just when marriage was legalized here for all couples, and out here, I started doing nonprofit work, Girls Inc. I [was] part of a mentor program, volunteer recruitment and training for that. And then what did I do? I worked for an environmental health group for about ten years and, during that time I was also working on my PhD. [Doctor of Philosophy] and when did I get into teaching? I went to Washington, D.C. and I worked for a year in a GED [General Education Development] Program doing environmental justice education and also, there's a faith-based group there called Church of the Savior, which is unique and also formative for me. They ran a school called Servant Leadership School, and so, I was invited to teach there, which was really, really cool. I had students in my class who were homeless, living in Union Station and other students who were like, high level Washington politicians, university professors, people from the local coffee shop, like, just sitting around at a table talking about social justice issues. [It] was really amazing. So, I loved learning in that setting and decided to try teaching so that's how I ended up here. But, I don't know what's next.

AP: Yeah, yeah, that is awesome, thank you. So, I read a little bit about your work with GreenFaith, would you like to talk about that at all?

SA: Sure. So, GreenFaith is a spirit, stewardship, and there's another "s" [word that starts with s] something about social justice but it starts with "s." I don't know how they did that [laughter].

AP: No worries at all.

SA: But, it's a wonderful interfaith group of people that I got to go on retreats with and talk about how we connect science and ethics and faith and activism. I really enjoyed our Silent Retreat, where it was the first time we were meeting each other, so, at first, we were frustrated with the setup because we couldn't talk to each other! These amazing people we've been reading

about in books and here we are all together, and we can't speak?! But, we hiked together and we ate meals together in silence and then did a lot of reflection on our own traditions and each other's traditions and it was wonderful to feel part of a community where other people are viewing the world's challenges through similar lenses. In a lot of my life, faith is very separate from teaching, separate from my work, and I have a secret fantasy of wanting to be a chaplain someday because what I'd really love to do is just sit and listen to people, especially people who are lonely and just need someone to talk to. And that's very faith based, not proselytizing, not, "Give them a Bible, their soul will go to Heaven," but, in the sense of Saint Francis, "Preach the Gospel, always... only if necessary, use words,". So, how do we live our faith? And GreenFaith has been a really big part of that.

AP: Awesome.

SA: So, I do translating my research into faith-based contexts. I've been leading adult ed [education] for different churches, and helping start community gardens, and things like that.

AP: Great. So I'd love to hear about how you connect what your research is specifically, what you've been teaching and what your specialty is in connection with that?

SA: I've been looking at environmental justice as the large umbrella issue and, so through that lens, how are the toxics that we produce as a society, affecting most vulnerable people? And, for me, most vulnerable people are workers. We all work in some way, but when I say workers, I'm primarily talking about people who manufacture and deal with the disposal of consumer products and I've been studying plastics, because for me, they're a symbol of a disposable culture. So it's the idea that we make things to be used, and once they're not useful we don't need them anymore and throw them away. And my main idea is that we train ourselves to do that with things, and then we start treating each other the same way. So, if we break the habit with the things, it can be just a spiritual practice, a way of shaping us to have a different relationship, to find beauty in garbage. I smile now because my partner really takes this to an extreme and [laughter] doesn't throw anything away. We're trying to clean out the house now. [her partner says] "But, my brother slept on this bed before he died 20 years ago," Okay... [laughter] So, there's gotta be some practical balance of not holding onto things, but letting them go in health, loving, respectful ways so that other people can use it or so that the materials, ideally, can go back to the lifecycles of the planet. But, when we have plastic, it's not part of the life cycle. Instead, it's entering the lifecycle and poisoning it. And so, I study the plastics in the ocean specifically and how they attach themselves to different contaminants, especially mercury, that's

what my research was on, and then how they carry that into the fish, and the fish to the people, and which people are most affected and how is this symbolic of our whole culture's problems...

AP: Wow, awesome.

SA: And, how do we fix it? [muffled]

AP: Isn't it always?! That's great, thank you. Going off of that, what impact do you hope to have on people you interact with, be it your students, be it the adults you're working with in the churches—what impact do you hope your work has on them and your presence?

SA: I want to erase the line that somehow has been drawn between things like toxicology, hard science, and anti-oppression work, it's really the same thing. There are lots of ways that we kill each other, and police with guns, that's only one way, we're also killing each other by producing things that are really toxic before we know how to handle them responsibly. So, I want to bridge Black Lives Matter and environmental toxicology, like, these lines don't seem like they're being drawn, to me, very clearly and, when I talk about plastics, I really have people respond to me like, "I'm really only concerned about me and my family, I don't care about workers, that's not a sexy issue." Well, but you need to think about the workers who make these things for you before you buy them and their working conditions and, so, I want to just keep making those connections really explicit, surfacing them.

AP: Great.

LS: It just sounds like you have a ton of different experience in a ton of different places. So, how has your experience in Worcester been in comparison to all those places? Worcester is a very unique place, in some good ways and some bad ways. So...

SA: I've experimented a lot at Clark in my classes, and I've had a bunch of really brave and wonderful students who have come along with that. So, we've done a lot of experiential exercises about oppression in classes, on science, and tried to ask them to reflect on, "Do you feel like these connections?" Or, "How do we express this in a way that makes more sense?" And so they've been teaching me a lot. And, also, I'm a part of SURJ here which is "Showing Up For Racial Justice" and figuring out in a community-activist context, how to bring in what I do in my day job to benefit? Which is again, the same question from Kenya... so, "I'm learning these skills, I'm learning these things, what good are they? What do they look like?" And then

struggle with (???). And listening project have been a big part of that, which is sort of what you're doing, too. Figuring out how to use them in an academic context. So, I was doing an assignment for students on food justice that involved going to listen to people, I specified who have a very different worldview from you, whatever that is to you, to talk about the root causes of hunger and poverty. And, then, write a reflection on that, and you can only include your own opinion in the reflection, not what you were listening [to]. So, I'm trying to bring that to SURJ, if we could do, I know a lot of groups doing racial justice are doing this—go door to door in communities where you think that people don't have the same analysis that you do, and just listen. As a peacemaking skill; it's hard. And I'm going to train with Herb Walters this summer who's the founder, the original Listening Project, because he's retiring, so, he wants to have another training to pass on this knowledge. I'm excited about that.

AP: That's so exciting.

SA: So, how do we take these tools and use them in other places? And what are other tools [that i need?

AP: That's exciting, though. Awesome. Lastly, is if there's any, kind of—you talked a lot about transformative experiences in your life. Is there anything else that, any memorable experiences that you feel like have shaped, kind of, all of the exciting and cool things you've been involved in? Or where you hope to go? Is there anything, any memorable experiences that maybe we didn't touch upon? Yeah, anything you want to speak to.

SA: There are so many. Julius. One of my students at The Academy of Hope really shaped who I am because I was going there thinking, “Oh, I'm a teaching, I have things to offer now,” and the class was struggling with identification (???), I remember one student looked up on her phone the word and said, “it's a real world” I said, “Of course it is. I don't make up words in the class and tell you they're real” and she said, “Well, if they know that it's happening, if there's a word for it, people know it's happening, then why do they allow it to happen?” So, the class sort of took that focus on “Why are these things happening to us in D.C.?” And Julius was one of my students, a young guy, late-teens, early twenties, full of energy and life and he got really depressed as we were talking about these structural oppression issues and what... and all of the things that were happening inside his life outside class, as well. And he got more involved in drugs and he started missing class and I found him one day and he was under the influence and I said, “Why didn't you come to class?” he said, “I don't want you to see my like this”. Like, “I want to see you, I don't care.” But I didn't see him again until he came back to class, and he was

armed. And we had a safe room and so everybody went to hide in the safe room and i got to talk to him and he's saying, "Sasha, what is the answer?" and I'm like, "I don't have an answer." "But, I thought you would," and I'm like, "But, I don't." I gave him my contact information and told him, "You have to leave, the police are coming," and, "Please stay in touch with me," but I never heard from him again, the school never heard from him again. And I remember thinking, "This is the turning point in his life and he's in so much pain and he's looking for an answer, and I don't have it." And so part of what I've done with this experience is try to figure out how to be honest with students and set realistic expectations—no one has an answer—and if you think that there is one out there then it's setting you up for disappointment. But we all have to find an answer for ourselves, but the answer that works in my life, I rely on Les Mis. Les Misérables is a really formative narrative for me about how it wasn't the barricades, but it was about Sean Baligian and his faith and love that shaped history, in my opinion, more. And, that no character in that story is all good or all bad, everyone is both, and everyone is constantly changing. And, so I tried to give that story to Julius. And so I said, "Look, here's how other people have handled this," but, it doesn't connect with him. Paris, in the 1800s is not his context, and so, how do I find a way to be with people in a very different context than the one I've known and not that I want to offer an answer, but have more empathy, to have more ways of just walking alongside them and being with them. And so, I still don't feel ready to do this and I just ask myself all the time if that were today, do I have any more ideas of what I might say to Julius or don't I have [an answer].

AP: Thank you so much for finding that.

SA: I've tried to find him on Facebook. I know his last name, I can't share it, but yeah I keep. If by some miracle he ever hears the interview... [laughter]... please contact me and let me know you're okay.

AP: Wow.

LS: And how many years ago was this?

SA: 2010, 2011.

AP: That's very special. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

SA: I'm curious, maybe off the record. [asks interviewer's about their transformative experiences with social justice issues]

AP: So, the work that you're doing like, in, you know... in these community efforts and with your students is making a difference. I, we can say that from our perspective.

SA: Thanks. One thing that I do to try to get the class more diverse is bring Worcester in. And I think it's different than reaching out to go volunteer, so, I have people come who are in a program for folks struggling with addictions coming out of prison, and they come and talk to the class in a panel first, and then I invite them all to come back as students, and a lot of them do. So then, they're in the classroom, reading the same material, having the discussions with students as peers and I think that, for them, it's fun because they're not the person being labeled. They're just an ordinary person in [this] context and, for the students, they're getting someone with a lot more life experience, 'cause these are usually older folks like mid-twenties, not older...

AP: Yeah.

SA: ... not just out of high school. And, it's pretty cool, and so we had a basketball game to say goodbye to them

AP: Aw

SA... on Wednesday. Only one of my students showed up to play, but all of the guys from Jeremiah's Inn did. So, I want to find more ways to do that so it's not just, "We're gonna come help you," because that's what I feel like repeats my experience in Kenya.

LS: Mhmm

SA: And there's problem with that. But how is it that we form community? Because that's a different thing. But the schools have so many different rules about it...

LS: Yeah

SA: [sighs] has that been tried here that you know of, having community members come in and audit classes?

LS: Not in my experience.

SA: Maybe it's something to try, the soc [sociology] department would probably be open.

AP: Yeah they would. Aside from having like big sister, i know the little sisters come. But that's like totally different, totally different. But it sounds like something very worthwhile trying, because, I agree, its stepping beyond charity work which has that negative like, we're coming in as the "savior" and, you know, try to do something but, sometimes kind of like, are you just like, going and leaving, you know?

SA: Mhmm. And I feel like, we can't study these issues without people in the room who are living different aspects of that experience, right? So, I guess I'm trying to recreate the Church of the Savior. I wanted to say something about that because this is a faith-based school. So, that was my favorite church ever because the idea was that you have to live the gospel as close as you can, so, if you're a person of privilege and you have an extra bedroom, you have to have a homeless person share your house with you. And if you have a job, then it's not like you give ten percent of your income, you should be supporting one of the ministries so someone else is full-time in ministry and you split it with them. So, the Church started a hospice for—in the eighties—for men who were living with HIV AIDS who were homeless. And they invited those folk to come into the home of my friend and his family, who had young kids at the time, and lived there. So that they [the men] could have families meals, die with dignity, and this was in the early eighties before people really understood what would keep you safe [and] transmission and they started Christ House for people getting discharged from the hospital who were going back to live on the street but needed an in-between step.. Because they weren't ready to survive on the street yet medically and that also people live-in the program and eat meals together with the patients and worship with the patients o there's not that hierarchy as much. And that really appeals to me and I'm trying to figure out if academia is a place where I can try to recreate that, because there's so much hierarchy and it feels like it separates us: "You're a student, your job is to listen and learn," like, I'm supposed to have the answers. Well, obviously I don't. How do we break that down? Barriers between community and college and just other artificial splits that we impose.

LS: That's interesting because Janette, who we just emailed the other day, was talking about something similar, like, how she can teach in her classroom but not have those lessons just stay within the walls of their community at Clark, but to get outside of that and actually like use these

things in real-life situations and use these skills that they've learned to do good for other people. So that's funny that you said something really similar to her.

AP: About like, breaking out of the boundary of the classroom and I think we talk about that all the time, getting rid of these binaries.

SA: Yeah.

AP: Thank you so much.