

Interviewee: Lisa A. Raymon
Interviewer: William Rein, Brian Hulley
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Transcriber: William Rein, Brian Hulley



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Abstract:

Lisa Raymon was born in Brighton, Massachusetts in 1966. She was a diligent worker growing up, and always had a job. She looked up to her godmother and married young to Charles W. Harris, Jr. She had three children and came to Worcester five years ago. She struggled with her marriage, which eventually ended in divorce. Trying to generate money as a single mother was rough for her. This resulted in her opening a hair salon on West Boylston Street in Worcester. At the salon, she met close friends and learned valuable business skills. The revenue created from the business allowed for her to put her kids through college. In the interview she talked about how she loves her children and would give up anything for them. There is not a day that goes by that Lisa regrets having her kids. She also discussed many of the difficulties in her life that resulted from health problems. Lisa has suffered from Marfan Syndrome her entire life. Marfan's is genetic, as two out of her three children have it. Lisa in the interview was proud about how her children cope with the medical problem. She said how her children are track stars, and can stand out even at the college level.

WR: First off, we would like to ask your permission to record this interview... could you just say your name and date.

LR: Lisa A. Raymon, March 16, 2012. Yes, you have my permission.

WR: Thank you. So first question, what is your full maiden name and, if applicable, your married name?

LR: My full maiden name is Lisa Ann Raymon R-A-Y-M-O-N and my married name, which I am now divorced, was Lisa Ann Harris

BH: When were you born?

LR: March 14th, 1966.

BH: Growing up, did you have any role models or someone you looked up to?

LR: My godmother Janet Hartley H-A-R-T-L-E-Y, she was a nurse.

WR: Have you ever married?

LR: Yes.

WR: What is the name of your previous husband?

LR: [laughter] Charles W. Harris Jr.

BH: Do you have children?

LR: I have three.

WR: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

LR: White, American culture basically.

BH: Tell me about your parents.

LR: My parents—my dad's name was Joseph M. Raymon. He was a private first class in the Korean War. He owned his own hair salon before he retired and has been deceased for the past nine years. My mom, Dorothy Grace Frongillo Reymon, F-R-O-N-G-I-L-L-O, she worked at a private school in Chesnut Hill for over 40 years and in the kitchen and ended up running the kitchen. She retired a few years ago, when she was 73. So, she is still alive and well, kicking.

WR: Where have you lived in your life?

LR: I grew up in Brighton, Massachusetts, I lived there for the first 24 years of my life. After that, I move to Waltham, MA and lived there for 12 years. Moved to Princeton MA and lived there for six years and then I moved to Leominster where I presently live.

BH: Growing up in Brighton, what was your neighborhood like and did you enjoy it?

LR: Yes, we did. Well, we lived behind the post office, right off of Brighton center, so it was a bit noisy. But it was families—mostly families in the neighborhood, a tight knit group. I went to a Catholic school and most of the kids, we all went to the same school so, parked nearby, we could walk to friend's houses. Nobody drove you anywhere in those days, [laughs] you either walked or took your bike. You know, it was a good neighborhood, safe.

WR: Which school did you go to?

LR: St. Columbkille, C-O-L-U-M-B-K-I-L-L-E, and that was in Brighton.

BH: Being so close to the city, how did that affect your life?

LR: It was a positive experience, we met a lot of people, we used to do a lot of things in Boston, know we had a lot of family around the Boston area. We would go to various things as a group, as a family group, and you know, it just taught you a lot about different types of people because you had exposure to other ethnicities and stuff like that when you went into the city. But yeah, it was positive in that way.

WR: When did you come to Worcester?

LR: I came here five years ago. I opened my hair salon on West Boylston Street.

WR: How did you come to live in Worcester?

LR: Basically because of the business, so that is what brought me here. It was more finding the area to open the salon, it was not an easy thing back then to find a property that was affordable to rent [laughs]. That's how I ended up coming over here.

BH: Growing up in Worcester, what were some of the women's experiences?

LR: Well, I have met a lot of women since coming to this area. I have a lot of contact with them because it's my job, so you hear a lot of stories but most of them like hearing my stories, about my life [laughs], they seem to find it completely interesting. A very open community of people, I've been fortunate to meet some very interesting people, professional and otherwise. They have become very loyal clients of mine.

WR: What challenges do you think this city still faces?

LR: The challenge that I am facing now, which is to move my business, is that most of the older buildings are not set up for handicapped accessibility. I'm finding that a big chink in trying to find my property. A lot of landlords, if you're going to rent, want you to renovate them and I don't really want to do that. I'm actually looking for a property to purchase, still in Worcester. Doing that, I would be putting money into my own but, I'm finding that to be quite the issue, with other people I talk too as well. You know, just getting it to that point, I think that repairing some of the older buildings and talking to other people, safety wise. Environmentally, there are some issues with some parts of the city. I've talked to *many* different people about this issue, with many people just trying to find a property. It's amazing what kind of discussions you get into. I just had an environmental—some guy who is involved in environmental scanning and reviewing of properties. He just happened to come in as a walk-in and said, "Yeah well, there are parts of Worcester that are not good when it comes to underground." So I would say that is one of the major issues for anyone who is trying to establish a business, especially a small business, in this city.

BH: What changes have you seen in Worcester?

LR: I've seen—when I first started here I saw a lot of growth. Not so much since, I think things sort of slowed down because of the economy but when I first opened my salon there were other people opening up businesses. I am still there and established, which I am happy about, but I have seen some close only after a few years. So, those are the changes I have seen as a business owner, the businesses who have not survived. There are some that have started and are still flourishing, but I've also seen quite a few who have folded up their tent and closed.

WR: That is sad, sign of the economy. Now we can move on to your education. Where have you attended school?

LR: Well, [laughs] I graduated from St. Columbkille, I graduated valedictorian out of my high school. I really wasn't sure, I had a few things going on. So, I attended Suffolk University for a few semesters and then left there. I eventually went to Northeastern's nursing school, I never finished, then I became a mother. When I moved out to this area back in 2003, I attended Rob Roy Academy in Worcester for Cosmetology and graduated from there in 2004.

BH: What was your parent's education?

LR: My mom graduated high school, my dad I believe had an associate's degree in accounting. Then he attended Mansfield beauty academy and became a licensed cosmetologist as well.

BH: What were your challenges in your education?

LR: I loved school, I can't really [say I] had any challenges in school. If I could go back to school to be a professional student I would love that [laughs]. I, myself, never really had any, I always did very well in school. When I attended Rob Roy, the only challenge I had was getting financing through, but I did... was able to get student loans. As far as the education part, I'm one of those crazy people that loves all of that [laughs].

WR: What difficult transitions did you go through when moving from childhood to adulthood?

LR: Well, I had a lot—we had a lot of issues growing up. My dad was an alcoholic, and we had a lot of family issues in reference to that. For myself, I mean, I don't know how personal you get with this stuff, but when I was 16, I was date-raped. That was part of the reason I faltered in college and did not tell anybody for 20 years. For me, that was a big—as I'm older now, when I look back, but when I was going through that, that was very...I was the brain. I worked, I did basketball, but I wasn't the beauty queen. So, when

it happened to me, it was a big—so, I couldn't tell anybody because, I couldn't tell anybody because, "I am too smart for that," not trying to bother anybody. That was a great difficulty for me, you kind of squish that down, until you—but it quite honestly effected my life for a good first half of it at least. Until you realize you gain a little age and things are a little bit different when you look through older eyes. You know, if you were to ask me this question 20 years ago I probably wouldn't have told you, but that was the big thing for me in gaining my own footing again, confidence wise. I was supposed to go to Boston College, and I was supposed to do all this stuff, but when your head isn't right, you do a lot of transition things. I never had any problems with academics or working, I worked from the time I was 11, until I had my son when I was 24. It was all the emotional stuff that I dealt with in reference to that. My children, my nieces and nephews—it did eventually come out, I did eventually tell my family as an obligation so it wouldn't happen to them, and if it did, then it's okay to talk about no matter what. For my children, my son has a lot of respect for women, and my daughters are very, very strong and they each have a boyfriend. They have also learned from my experience that no one is going to get it over me, same with my nieces and nephews, they needed to know. Quite honestly, if you don't tell anybody, they don't. So, for it to happen to somebody like me, it had a lot of effect. Once I could get over that and I got myself organized, when I got into school for hairdressing was when I got myself on track in my career. I was a mom, which was a wonderful job, but as far as my paying career, that happened after the fact.

BH: So during that time, was there any mentor that could support you?

LR: I had a lot of support, but when you kind of live a life in secret, which I ended up doing, that part does not come into play because you can't really talk to anybody about it. My parents were very wonderfully loving people, the whole reason was I did not want to disappoint them, and they both worked very hard. My sister Diane, Susan, my sister Kim, my sister Diane I always looked up to because she worked at children hospital and did very well, she graduated from Boston College. I always looked up to my oldest sister because she always took care of me too. For me, I had one professor at Framingham State who I always go back to. His sense of humor was tops, you really never knew you were learning. You would get an A in the class but not because of anything else other than your work just paid off and you remembering everything. A few people I worked with in the operating room during nursing school were top-notch people, I learned a lot from them. I learned a lot about work experience, dealing with patients, stuff that you take into life too.

BH: Now we will talk about work. Did you work outside of the house?

LR: When my children were younger, yes, I did other jobs. I worked for a student loan company for Sally Mae. I did many different jobs for them: records management, customer service, collections. I waitressed at Friendly's and Waltham Seafood. Then, I started my own cleaning company, which allowed me to set my own hours. When I

moved out to Princeton, I basically worked on my house and then when my kids didn't need me as much, I went back to school. I worked when their father was home, so one of us with always with the children. We never had them in daycare or anything like that.

WR: When did you begin working?

LR: I started working when I was 11. I started babysitting when I was 14, I started working at the rectory at the church, I babysat and then I got a job with the newspaper distribution office. So basically, I was 11.

WR: How did you come to find this work?

LR: My sisters they had worked for some people, so when they became tired of babysitting they gave me the job. The church was the church that I attended so they were looking for someone responsible so I was actually recommended to them. The paper office a friend of mine worked there, so she got me a job there. When I was in high school, I worked at a pizza place and basically got that job on my own. I worked at a Laundromat too, but I would go on interviews myself. Even for babysitting jobs, I would look it in the paper and call them myself, so I wasn't afraid to do that stuff at all.

BH: What has this work meant to you?

LR: That work? Building blocks mainly, I guess. Establishing a work ethic, which I think is important. Responsible to start, show up this time, finish at this time, you get paid. Responsibility for money, you know, because I actually made a decent amount of money when I worked. That sort of helped paid off as you get older and learning how to budget, manage your time.

WR: What were your primary responsibilities in terms of housework?

LR: When I was growing up? [laughs] Saturday mornings we had to clean the house, we couldn't watch cartoons, we'd get yelled at. So we had to dust, vacuum and I had to polish that wonderfully silver tea set that I absolutely hated (laughs), every Saturday. We had to change out sheets and clear off the dinner table that kind of stuff too.

BH: How did you balance different priorities, responsibilities, roles, and interests in your life?

LR: Well, I think it depends on what stage you are at. When you are younger, your priorities are homework, keeping your room clean. As you get older and go into college, managing, working and the school, deciding what it is you are going to do. When I met my husband, establishing a life together, having children, mostly taking care of them and doing all of that. With my case, it was a lot about unemployment with my husband, so we had a lot of hard financial times, managing everything. Then, the dissolution of the

marriage, which was something that I wanted, as I went back to school to become a cosmetologist. I wanted more from life than just work, kids, and a marriage that wasn't working. Now, I can set my own schedule, but I basically do work Tuesday through Saturday. My children are older, two are in college, one is in high school so I don't have to be home and be mom all the time, which is nice. You establish that you are dating, establish time for friends. One thing I would like to do is to go back to school, and do something, as it was always a goal to finish my education, not necessarily nursing. Very sidetracked, which is why I tell my kids, "Don't get sidetracked" [laughs]. So, all the stuff I have been through has put me to the point where I am where I can run a business, I've been doing it for five years and I'm still able to do it. So, I take my success from that, that I am doing okay with organizing everything.

WR: When you were not at home where did you usually spend your time?

LR: Usually at the salon, so and I am trying to curve that a little bit to have a little bit of a social life. So but generally speaking when I was not at home, I would be working. When you first start the business it is all you, and making sure the hours are cover and you know it is a learning experience definitely. So now five years later, you know a lot more and instead of putting posting hours on your door. You put hours by appointment, walk ins when available, so that you don't have to be there every hour of the waking day. And one good thing about my career and about my job is that I can set my hours and if I don't want to be there I don't have to be. So but yeah it has been mainly work, and now that its established it is getting a little easier to have a life outside of that.

WR: How would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path and benefits?

LR: It has really been a lot of, well I, with my marriage and all of that stuff, it's that was feelings about him so that wasn't a cost of reference from my job. The choice of me going and finding a career wasn't a necessary thing anyway. But to support myself, so but I have been able to balance it out, with my children. I was blessed with three great kids, so I haven't really had any personal costs to establishing you know my career and my kids. And able to see my family and my sisters and my mother and that kind of a thing, so for me that really was never came into play about sacrifices. I was always able to manage it.

BH: Now will you tell, talk a little bit about your role in the community, and do you consider yourself active politically?

LR: Not really, I vote. I have an opinion like everyone else, but I have never gotten involved to, you know, the polls and that sort of thing. It really has never been my—I have gotten a little more political, as I have gotten into the business world and had my own business because you see how it affects you when you actually have a store front and

whatever. In the last five years I have become more aware of politics, Republicans, Democrats. My parents were Democrats when I first started to vote [laughs] what do you do you vote Democrat. But your views change and you become more of an Independent, you know, maybe go a little toward this side that side so I would say now I am a little more politically active and aware and I watch debates and all that stuff but I have never actually, you know done anything with a candidate or anything like that. So, you know, maybe in time but we will see.

WR: Have you ever been involved in volunteer community work and, if so, what groups did you work for?

LR: When I was younger we did a lot of community service work. We worked at a rehabilitation center for head trauma patients. We worked up at the hospital doing you know going through patients rooms, giving them magazines, that kind of a thing. I haven't really done a lot of community work. Myself, I usually will do donations; you know gift baskets that sort of a thing. My kids have been more involved in stuff like that. I mean I volunteer at their school and stuff like that but not too much of that myself in the last few years I have to say.

WR: Did you have any hobbies/interests? What were your hobbies and interests?

LR: Hobbies and interests, well, let's see, not really too much I like music. I have always been interested in sewing stuff like that. I like quiet time stuff. But then I also have for the last few years we have gone into concerts, rock concerts. I never did it when I was younger but my first concert was Nickelback and then went to Atlantic City, to see them again, Puddle of Mudd, Shinedown, met some of the bands, so that's been kind of exciting, a little revamp of my youth. And I keep planning to do that, that's kind of that last, kind of American thing to me is a good old rock concert because everybody just is there for the music, but you know I just like to travel a little bit. Haven't been able to do much of that but my family, my kids and its great being back in the dating scene again. That's different -- here we go again [laughs].

BH: What role has religion played in your life?

LR: Well I was raised Catholic and unfortunately for the Catholic Church, we had some naughty little priests. Some of which, one of which was at our parish, my own experience with it was a friend of mine and went to his parents and talked to them about it and they told him that he was speaking blasphemy and that he was wrong and that he should repent, and years later well there's an egg on their face, it came out. And he was sort of vindicated and so I had a real problem with my church but when you're Catholic you kind of follow along. I can't say that I'm, as one of my clients put it "recovering Catholics" so I have my beliefs, I don't, I don't, I am not a devout Catholic. But I do believe I have—I am a Christian, and I guess you could say, you know if I want to pray I can pray right here outside or wherever. So

WR: Now we are going to move on to your health and have you or how have your health issues and impacted your life and those in your family.

LR: Well, as a child I was always kind of sickly. They never knew why and all these weird things were wrong with me. My breast bone stuck out my, you know, my feet were flat, I was always having rashes. All different kinds of stuff and [I] always would catch everything blowing in the wind. When I was pregnant with my son, my sister read an article about a condition called Marfan Syndrome, which is a connective tissue disorder. And every characteristic they talked about she said, “Well that sounds like Lisa.” So in a little bold print: “people with full blown Marfan Syndrome should be careful when they give birth.” Apparently, your aorta could burst and you would be dead, if you had an unchecked heart defect. Well I was in with the cardiologist seven and one half months pregnant and yes I do have it by the way. And basically what it is, any part of your body that has connected tissue is affected, it just depends on how severe. Mine was fairly mild, the doctors said to me, “Where have you been?” I said, “I don’t know. Why?” He says, “Well because nobody caught this” I said, “No, I guess not”. A dislocated lens in your eye, which connected tissue holds your lens on your eye. I don’t have, which is usually a tell tail sign, that you have it. So, basically, what he told me was that I was a mutant because it probably started with me cause no one else in my family had all the characteristics that I had. So that’s great. From that moment on I had echocardiograms, you know once, twice every two years or whatever, and fifty/fifty chance that my children would get it. So my two oldest have it, my youngest does not. And basically they watch you, your aorta is the vein and the biggest one, and what happens is it stretches if you have seen basketball players that are so tall and then they collapse on the court more than likely they have Marfan’s and either they are not taking their medication or they don’t even know they have it. It makes you very long and lean, very tall. They think actually that Abraham Lincoln had it. If you look at him he is very—I am mild. My kids—I mean my son is sixteen and 6’5 and my daughter is 6’0. And they are, I mean they have long--my son’s hands can palm a basketball, size 15 shoe, she is a size 11, I mean so but for them it is easier just they know what they have. I didn’t, I all these things that came up, they just kept bringing me to the doctor. So, I mean my shoulder used to dislocate and we never knew why. And then, now we know why. Eventually I have staples just slip out and then if you have ever seen Lethal Weapon and he has to push his arm down, that would be me. Go up to make a shot on the basketball court and it would just swing out, and yea (laughs) it was fun. So that kind of impacted my life because I wanted to get into more physical therapy workouts stuck like that. I stopped lifting heavy stuff, well no you can’t do that, can’t go on rollercoasters, you can’t do anything that will give and impact to the chest. So my kids have all done track, they would have all been very good at basketball especially the two older ones but that too much of a contact sport. It has limited me and them, and now that I am older, you know, they watch me ‘cause I’m in the grey area for possible aorta replacement, which yeah I want to kind of avoid. But so that was kind of a little bit of a different thing so—but it could be worse, I could

not know about it then be dead somewhere. So that was the big medical thing that happened to me.

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

LR: My advice to women would be to stay focused on what your actual goals are. I think as young people you get caught up in too much drama and get side tracked very easily. It is a competitive world, you know, keep your family close and get as much education as you can. I think that is extremely important. I kind of crawled my way around because of my experiences and didn't really get my act together career wise until I was in my thirties which is hard because I should be skating right now and I am not. You still, you know, but that would be my advice is to do as much of that when you are younger so you can establish yourself and then actually enjoy the fruits of your labor. I mean I'm—my other advantage is that I did have children very early so I can now have a life. A personal life, which is fine, but I think that the whole rushing into marriage, rushing into children, is something that I would tend to tell them to wait if possible, once you have children, you have children, their your responsibility and that is where your life lies. I have three great kids, absolutely blessed and as a single mother, I am very proud of that, and they are all doing the right thing. My son will be graduating from Fitchburg State University in May. So, he will be the first in the family in a while to graduate from college. And then my daughter will graduate in a few years from UMass, and my younger one will graduate from high school next year. But I think education is key in stability, and the other thing is never be afraid to talk about your issues because that should all be passed—it can affect your life dramatically if you don't.

WR: One more question health and spectrum I guess you could say, what are your experiences in accessing quality and affordable health care.

LR: When I was younger my dad was a veteran, so we went to the military hospitals, the VA hospitals and that is part of the reason why they believe they did not catch my condition was cause the doctors change hands there all the time. But I did have access to Children's Hospital, which is where I had one of my surgeries and they have excellent care. I have had, I get my health care right now through the state, and so far so good, but you have to fight for it. You know if you qualify for it, if you don't whatever, so my position now I qualify, in a few years I probably won't. Then I will be doing my own health care plan stuff like that, but when you are a single mother and you have a small business in Massachusetts, you don't make a hell of a lot of money. So but I really have not had any real issues, I know people that have but, for myself no.

WR: How do you feel about the choices you have made in your life and do you have any regrets?

LR: Well, I don't have any regrets that I would, because I have my kids. You always have things you wish you could go back and slightly amend. But you know, I don't really have regrets, that I would say. I think that life is whatever is put in front of you and you just deal with it. But if I were to say I have regrets, then I, that just would not be right because I just cherish my kids mostly and my family. What I would have hoped I would have done would be a little bit more focused but that wasn't to be. So if I could change a few things, a meeting I had one night at a Boston College party I went to might have changed, but then again I would not of had my kids. But you know my whole life experience has been—there has been a lot of difficulty, but it has made me the person I am today. If you met me a few years ago when I was younger, I would have not been as open or forthcoming with my answers as I am now, life experience as taught me that. So, I have become an extremely independent person, and a fighter, and that is fine, and who I am today is helping my kids be who they need me to be today. I mean my parents, my mother was very strong and I learned a lot from her, but my life experience has taught me the most, so if whatever has happened to me helps other people, then all the better. So every day brings something else but you just—my grandmother had a saying that hell is on earth and how you get through hell decides whether or not at the end you actually go to heaven. But if you have totally screwed it up, you get thrown back into hell again and you have to start all over and see if you can actually get to heaven through the next life [laughs]. So sometimes I think I believe that 'cause really, is this really happening, so yeah, I'm just grateful to have the opportunity to start things over again. And I actually think that's the beauty of living in America, believe it or not.

WR: So now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women that has been recorded in the past, is there anything else you would like to add?

LR: No, I think that men and women now—today the roles are very well matched and as far as having a career and things, I believe women do still struggle with that. When you are a mother and a career person, you still struggle with that. I think fathers tend to be involved a lot more but it still is when you are the mother, you are the mother. For me I have been a single mother pretty much even when my kids were, when I was still married, it was still me. I mean my kids would come find me at a neighbor's house a mile down the road and just ask me if they could have a glass of water because there father would always say no. So I think that women definitely still struggle with that issue today, but it pays off in the end, all of that hard work, all of that, you know, in raising your children does pay off especially if they become working individuals in the community and just all around good people. And like I said, the one thing I would not change is being a mother. Everything else is kind of there, but now that they're grown up and they don't need me so much anymore, you know, I can just sit back and watch and watch them develop into people which is exactly what they are doing. So and every once in a while, "Mom help." My twenty-two year old son calling me on the phone and wanting advice about what do I eat when I am not feeling well. But you know like I said I believe for everyone that education is key and getting involved, as you asked me with politics and things like that, being aware of what's going on in the world, and having a voice. I really

sometimes believe that one day when you talk to people—and I talk to people every single day that sit in my chair. Some people I see all the time, some strangers, there is always a commonality among what people feel is a frustration that they are not being heard. And that everyone feels the same, why is this done this way, how come this is going this way, why are we not, and you almost want to have a day where everybody just stands there holding hands and is able to say all in a line and we would all be saying the same thing over and over again of what we feel the issues are in our own country and why we are where we are at today. I mean I think a lot of people would like to see change, instead of working your fannies off all the time and saying ok, why is it not change that much. So I think that people getting involved is the only way that this is really going to change. And getting people like yourselves, young people involved enough to care, my son is political. He is a Republican, my daughters well [laughs] trying to get them involved and, you know, making positive change for communities, which turns into positive change into, you know, cities and states and then the entire country. So that would be my advice to people is to stay aware, and stay involved, and don't say, "Well if I don't vote it doesn't matter." That is actually quite distressing when people say that. So not to take such a lax attitude that it is not my problem, it definitely is your problem because if it all goes away [laughs] what are you going to do? So you know that would be my advice.