

Interviewee: Linda Cavaioli  
Interviewer: Milagros Montenegro  
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**Abstract:** This interview follows the professional and personal life of Linda Cavaioli born in 1954 and originally from Leominster, Massachusetts. Ms. Cavaioli is the executive director at the YWCA of Central Massachusetts. Raised in a close knit and diverse community, Ms. Cavaioli details how such an upbringing expanded her perspectives. As an undergraduate, her studies dealt with social work and the impact aspects such as gender and race contain in our social world. Before working at the YWCA, Ms. Cavaioli spent years at United Way of South Florida and Worcester, Massachusetts. She details some of her experiences in the organization. Ms. Cavaioli describes her experience as an MBA student at Clark University and explains the significance of a business background in the non-profit sector. Lastly, Ms. Cavaioli details the important role the YWCA plays in the lives of Worcester residents and in the fight towards gender and racial equity. She received the Worcester Women's History Project's Women Making History Award in 2015.

**MM:** Can we start a little bit about your background? About your family?

**LC:** Okay, sure. So, my name is Linda Cavaioli and I was born 64 years ago, in 1954, in Leominster, MA to a first-generation Italian-American family—very extended, everybody was neighbors and shared family business. I went to college at University of New Hampshire. Worked for the United Way of America as an intern. They were trying to bring women, people of color into their field, so I worked with United Way in Florida for about five years and then came back home. Then worked for the United Way of Worcester for 13 years and I have been here since 1992, so I am starting my 27th year at the YWCA and it is everything I want. I grew up always wanting to be a social worker, I don't really know why but as I got into my college degree and social work, sociology, my advisor told me I should go into administration because I pretty much had no boundaries and I wouldn't be good as a direct service social worker. So voila, that's why I ended up where I was. And when I was at United Way, it was predominately, even though they were trying to bring in women and people of color in the field, it was still predominately male dominated. So, I worked a lot in gender justice and then was very active here at the YWCA almost the whole time I was there and began to see the intersection of race and gender. Social justice through race and gender became my passion and remains my passion. My husband and I—my partner John and I have five children. His two biological children and then we adopted three as a couple and we have nine grandchildren and one great grandchild. And we have done a lot of raising of grandchildren. In fact, we just celebrated thirty-year anniversary and we have been raising children and grandchildren for thirty years together and most recently because of his health, we have had to disperse people back to their parents. So, it's kind of who I am and what I enjoy, but now it is time to focus on my primary partner's needs and that's what I am doing.

MM: I am going to go back a little bit to one of the first things you said you talked about a first-generation Italian immigrant family, so can you talk to me a little bit about what that was like growing up from that.

LC: So, my grandparents—so I am actually second generation, my parents were first generation. So, my grandparents came to this country from Italy most by way of Ellis Island and one by way of Boston, my grandmother on my mother's side. I didn't really know my mother's family, well my mother's parents, because my grandmother, my mother's mother died before I was born, and her father wasn't in her life. So, I basically grew up with my father's parents, so we were a very extended family. Two double deckers, my grandparents lived in one and my single aunt and uncle had apartments over them and then next door my family and my other aunt and uncle and four cousins so within two houses all of us lived with the family business in the back. It was really all family and the neighborhood was all Italian and Leominster is a plastic city so most of the businesses were plastics and chemicals, so it was really a manufacturing area. I mean I never even knew until I was an adult that my grandmother and my grandfather were basically not even literate and they were pretty much illiterate, but my grandfather started a business and passed it on to his sons and so it was very hard working, very insular except that my neighborhood was diverse because Leominster drew pretty blue-collar workforce because of all the factories. So, my neighborhood was Latino and Italian and French Canadian, all mixed in together because they were really good jobs at the factories. It was very rich in an Italian mixed immigrant community and family business and small elementary school that went to the same middle school, so Leominster was a pretty interesting community.

MM: How was it growing up, in '54, if I recall that correctly? So, you grew up through the sixties, the seventies, the eighties, huge changes during that time, can you tell me a little bit about that?

LC: Yeah, it's interesting because my sister is ten older than me and she was born in the forties, so she was of age in the sixties, but kind of was stuck in the fifties. And I was born in the fifties, but the sixties were like—I was—my mother used to say, "Thank god for the birth order of my children" because I understood the feminist and civil rights movements and part of the reason was that in growing up in Leominster at the time there was a military base right next door so there was a very diverse group of children in my school. And so probably not as open as someone who didn't grow up in Leominster, but it was pretty clear to me that human justice and social justice was very—my parents were very open giving people and though somewhat conservative, they were pretty much open to many things me and my sister did to push the envelope. So, my sister and I were first-generation college [graduates]. My parents barely, I don't think my mother finished high school so my generation of cousins and my sister were the first ones to go to college and so it was an interesting time. When I was in college in the seventies [events happened like the] Vietnam War and so there was a lot discourse and challenging discussions and then going into the human services, particularly in an organization that was looking into bringing more women and people of color, so it was pretty evident that there was [a] white male power structure and that gender and racial justice was still not very prevalent. So

those were the times that I grew up in and it was very evident here, when I came back to this area and then worked at United Way, it wasn't as public policy oriented there, although they were in the helping people organization but in the YWCA in those times when I was a volunteer [a] full fleshed feminist social justice [organization]. So yeah, it was a very interesting time.

MM: Sounds like one. I learned about these times in school and, you know, it's almost passive in a way [matter of fact] but I guess my question to you is, how were the reactions from people who didn't see eye to eye with you?

LC: Yeah, I definitely stirred some conversations at my family table around holidays, so I definitely have a different political view point then most of my family. But we would always have respectful dialogue and so my family was blue collar and much more insular, so I was able to bring a totally different perspective because most of my cousins were born and raised in Leominster and stayed in Leominster and even though I am only in Worcester I did have a much broader view point. Plus I definitely have a different political [opinion] then most people in my family. So, it was and then at the United Way which was really good people and all the leadership in the community which were all white men obviously had a sense of looking back, but needed to be challenged, particularly at that level gender justice, you know, where were women versus men? But for me it always, when you look at equal pay and some of the disparities it's even with a gender lens, even when you put a racial lens it's even more disparate. So, I found myself raising those issues as a white woman versus always having the person of color have to raise those issues. So, I really had the benefit of diverse friends and viewpoints that gave me a sense that I came from privilege just because of my race and that it wasn't enough to say that I could understand the disparity being a woman because if you really take a look at race and gender, race is really where the disparity happens. And then when you look at equal pay and what women now make 70 to 80 [in comparison to] men, well that's white women and Asian women. When you look at black women, it's in the sixties and Latina women it's in the fifties. So I always felt that as a person who was committed to race and gender equity that was my responsibility as a white women with privilege to raise those issues and that I shouldn't have to be a women of color, that I needed to do a journey of learning and growing as an ally. That's kind of how I've seen it and I'm not exactly sure, it's not that I was so engrossed in it, growing up except that I did an opportunity to have diversity in my community, maybe not on the west side of Leominster, but where I grew up with the military base which really brought some diversity to the community and with the blue collar which brought good jobs to a diverse community. So, I felt that I had a little more opportunity to learn, but certainly being in social work and sociology in college and some of the opportunities I had to take race and gender courses gave me more of an opportunity to really learn and take a journey. And then coming here, I mean I get paid, even 27 years later to be in a job that brings all my passions together and is a place where we have direct service programs to help implement those values, but we also take all of that learning from the ground and bring it to a policy level and that's the YWCA and that's what I have had, really the blessed opportunity to do.

MM: I was going to ask you what did you major in but I think you [just answered it]

LC: I major in, well I did social work, social work in the seventies was really just starting so I really was in the school of sociology and there was a social work kind of discipline. But like I said, you are supposed to do a field work placement before you graduate and my advisors really said, "Stay in human service, there is good work in administration," and then I ended up getting my master's in business, instead of my master's in social work I mean.

MM: I majored in sociology too so, I always find it nice to talk to someone [who did as well].

LC: I thought it was awesome, I just think I got to read about things and study things that were very theoretical, but I could see it play it out in the community.

MM: You talked a little bit about working in Florida for a little bit, do you in hindsight see a difference between Florida and [Massachusetts]?

LC: Yes, because I was at the United Way at the time and United Way is all about community and in South Florida I was in the West Palm Beach community, so you had—talk about the diversity from Palm Beach of the wealthy to Belle Glade where the sugar plantations were. So it was very stark, three month people [staying there for three months] who were millionaires to migrant farm workers and it was very difficult to do this work in that community because there was a small portion of year round people who that was their home, there community versus all of the snow birds who came in for three months or six months or nine months and that's really where I got a degree in disparity. Because you would literally see the mansions on the beach on Palm Beach to the shacks that the migrant farm workers worked in the central part of the county and it was hard to take people who didn't necessarily view that as their community because they might have been living in the main land and then in the morning you would see all the domestics walk across the bridge into Palm Beach to work so it was really, it was like a sociological study but it was really disturbing in some ways. But you could always find the good in the community of people who really got that they had privilege and that they needed to share their privilege. It wasn't necessarily the wealthiest, so what I saw in my days, almost 18 years with United Way, was that the people who were the least able to give were the one that were the most generous because they were this close to needing it themselves or they needed it at one time. But I remember my father saying to me for years he would say, "Linda, what do you do?" And I would say, "Dad, I help raise money, work with agencies that work with people and we direct the money." And he would say, "What do you do?" And you know when I think about Florida [I think about Robin Hood] you take from the rich, you redistribute the wealth, and my mother would say, "That's communism." Call it what you want, it's trying to get a pay it forward from people of all levels to share in understanding the codependence at their ability to do it. And one would wish that those at the highest level would have the ability to do, and some do, but still sometime when you get so far removed, it's really those people in the middle that get [it]. So yeah, it was a really interesting place to learn community service. And then I came to Worcester, New England, and talk about the difference. And when I came to Worcester it wasn't as diverse as it is today.

MM: Can I ask you what year that was?

LC: I came to Worcester in 1980. And although the first National Women's Rights Convention happened in Worcester in 1850 with women, women's rights and abolitionist's rights, something happened for many years that it got into the hands of a few in power. There was some Latino community, and there was a small Black and African American community, but it really wasn't until—so I have been here for almost 40 years and to see the difference when that census in 1980 was like eighty - twenty and now it's like sixty-forty or almost fifty-fifty, it's really a difference in this community. I just think it's richer and a better community for it. But it's not been—I don't think that the community has really understood the value and the importance and richness in embracing all the [diversity] and it's not just Puerto Rican Latino which was the predominant population and the black population was predominantly African American. Today the Latino population is so diverse, Colombians, Dominicans, there is a kinds of countries and the Black community is African [for example from] Ghana, as it is African American. So, it's a very diverse community now and I think that makes us a much better community.

MM: How did your—I don't know if it did, but did you see a change in how you worked in the community as the community became more diverse? Was there more need for help?

LC: Yeah, I think, particularly, coming here where direct service happens. United Way was more bringing a community together to develop resources and distribute resources. Although we had connections with the agencies that delivered on a day to day basis, we weren't in the direct services business. Coming here it became clear that, well first of all no one agency can solve all the problems of this community and then it really takes collaboration and sharing of resources to solve the problems. So, the YWCA, although we are multi-service, multi-location, we know we do some things very well, but we need the connections of other services. I mean I think for me that's what is truly the value of a community like Worcester. So we are big enough to have resources of family foundations and companies, but we are small enough to really address some problems. So, if we can bring the right people around the right table with the voices of the people we are trying to help, we work with young women and the young women used to say, as we bring young women on the board at the YW, "Nothing about us without us." That was their battle cry, don't you women go figuring out what we need, ask us what we need and then help us get what we need. So, I think that Worcester is a really important place where a lot of that collaboration happens. So, there is a lot of connections and collaboration around housing and around youth services and around violence. What that shows is that when some people say, "There is a lot of duplication," well not really. There are different approaches towards addressing needs based on different populations or expertise. So the YWCA where our core work is around the empowerment model. We don't do clinical, but our people need clinical, so we connect with the clinical community. But to reinvent a clinical community is not in our best interest or in the best interest of the people we serve. So, I think that is kind of what United Way can do for a community, but I think that at the heart of it a community like Worcester has some real opportunities to make a difference. It's kind of like the state of Massachusetts, if you take it in that level, where we are not so big or so dispersed geographically, I mean people think that

from Pittsfield to Boston, but we are still close enough that if models are developed in certain parts of the state they can be replicated. Massachusetts is an awesome state to be in if you are a human service junky because we invest in our needs. I think that it's importance because it takes resources to fit problems, but it also takes diversity of services and people and perspectives to really understand there is no one way, but with the best practices and the best viewpoints almost anything we want, except for the state job wealth system, so I think that's the blessing of Worcester is that. The curse of Worcester is that we still haven't figured out how to hang our diversity that we have catapulted into.

MM: I want to get back to something that you mentioned earlier that stood out to me, correct me if I heard you wrong, you used you got your master's in business?

LC: Yeah, I'm a Clarkie

MM: You went to Clark [University]?

LC: Yes, I got my—I had to decide do I get my MSW [Master of Social Work] because I love human services or do I get my MBA because the non-profit sector is so complex and diverse and funding and contracts... So my advisors again suggested I get my MBA, so I went to Clark, part time while I worked full time and was a mother and I got my MBA. I got an MBA and then this job came open and I applied.

MM: This particular job?

LC: This particular job.

MM: My question was in regards to that, do you see a difference, of course you were part time, you were also a mother, and you were also working, was there a difference, in women in business is often seen as a male in business. Did you see that in the way that your classmates interacted with you, your teachers interacted with you?

LC: Well, because Clark is a very progressive college to begin with and because I was mostly at night with other professional people, it wasn't until I got to the end of my time and I had to take a few day courses to finish up that those five years business students that get their bachelor's and one more year and their masters. I felt that my education was richer having been in the work force, being with other people who were in the workforce and that there was just beginning to be an understanding that the non-profit and the private sector needed strong business principles to be successful. That it wasn't as much at that point that my colleagues treated me different because I think I was in the environment of a school that really saw the value in, but I will tell you that when I got my MBA there wasn't a lot of recognition that the nonprofit existed. So, for example, in my finance class the nonprofit sector, private/nonprofit used to do fund accounting, there was like one class on fund accounting but I am glad because now with all the FASB

changes we have to act the same. Finance is finance is finance, you shouldn't have to be treated differently. So that was one thing and there was only one ethics course.

MM: Oh interesting.

LC: It was Corporate Social Responsibility, never forget it. I often said, because I had stayed involved in the school, we've had interns, that there needs to be more ethics in business. Because I was with a bunch of working, part-time schooling parents, juggling everything, I was kind of in a—so no I didn't feel, I might have felt different if I was at another school that.

MM: That's true.

LC: To tell you the truth, I would have gone to Simmons Women's Business program [somewhere as progressive], I really had a different desire, look, I mean when I was getting my MBA.

MM: So tell me about this job, you said got it right after you got your MBA.

LC: So, I started 27 years ago and we were half the size we are now and really the primary focus and what we were really good at was gender justice, women's economic empowerment. And it really had been my commitment and the others that I brought to help me with the organization to really shine a light on racial justice. And it's in the field of the YWCA, the mission changed, the logo changed, for eliminating racism. Empowering women kind of became the primary focus which really was helpful to try and get this organization—not just this but I mean the YWCA in general. So, it's the people that I work with both at the board, I have an all-women board, a single sex governance organization and we still have a membership corporate structure so when we do major changes in the organization we still go out to our membership, who are our collective voice, to act on public policy issues. Sometimes it's a little cumbersome doing business with a membership structure, but generally the membership is for certain things that are under their purview versus the board of directors is able to act on a day to day governance basis. We understand that we have guiding principle of race and racial justice and women's economic empowerment and that our job is to directly impact those with those lens and to bring that to a public policy level. Because if we don't work to get the Violence Against Women Act reauthorized then there will be no money going towards that. And if we don't work at the civil rights, the pulling away on civil rights, you know women's rights, civil rights [which] so many before us have worked for and we can't just sit by and let it happen. I think that's why there is still a role and still a need and also to pass it along to younger women and youth. To have youth find their voice. Yeah that's what I get my biggest kicks out of is still working with young people and I know I have to run a business but I have most fun in young people's leadership development and really seeing systems change and engaging in the empowerment model of having the people who are being served be in direct charge of the pathway that they take.

MM: How has the City of Worcester helped in that mission or maybe not?

LC: I think that, well we receive funding for some of our work through the City of Worcester and I've been a member of the City Manager's Task Force on Bias and Hate for 22 years now and so it helps to have the City Manager's Task Force. I think that there are peaks and valleys. Sometimes we are on different sides of an issue but generally, particularly with the City Manager, I think Ed Augustus comes out of the legislature and the nonprofit sector and he has a good vision. In general, I think there is good partnerships with the City of Worcester and there is now the Chief Diversity Officer and then there is the Office of Human Rights and who he has out in charge Dr. Mattie Castiel of Health and Human Resources. I think that more and more there is opportunity to make more head way, so I am pretty optimistic.

MM: So, something I did want to ask you and of course it is based on what you want to talk about, I didn't ask you anything about your family. So, you talked about having children, being married, can you talk a little bit about that too?

LC: So my husband and I are second time, we are a remarried couple and we got together his biological twins were twelve and they became part of our family. Two years later we adopted a sibling group through DCF [Massachusetts Department of Children and Families] who were 9,10, and 12. They were all separated in the foster care and the twins were now fourteen. So we kind of raised a motley crew of different group of children. So, have had more success in life than others and out of that family of five children who they collected along the way, we have nine grandchildren and one great grandchild, five of whom we helped raise. Three of whom we have had guardianship of and then we have one, two, three, there are four who are not close to us. Three live away and seven are close. And of those seven we have been very mostly the kids we have adopted, not the twins, they are much more self sufficient because they had a much more positive, stable, even though their parents were divorced, they had a pretty damn good solid upbringing. Whereas the kids we adopted had trauma. So, we have been kind of how I grew up, although my parents were always present we were very influenced always being in the same homes as our grandparents. So, John and I have literally had the guardianship of grandchildren and right now we have had to change that because of his health. But I was supposed to have kids, I couldn't have kids, so I figured I would wait to have kids. I never forget my adoption counselor said to me, "Don't worry, Linda, you will have your babies when you are a grandmother extraordinaire." So yeah, yeah I had my babies when I was a grandmother and it became more and more difficult, particularly as they became teenagers to parent grandchildren, because you want to be the grandparent, you want to be the good guy, but I had to cross the line and I didn't do a good job of it so there are spoiled.

MM; That's the grandparent's job.

LC: But see I was supposed to do the parent's job too. So, they are, two just started college and one just got her own place with her baby and those three have been completely dependent on us. So, the three older teens are becoming much more independent and the others are pretty cool with their parents.

MM: Can I ask you how you met your husband?

LC: Through United Way, he was a volunteer and I was on the staff and it was interesting because you know, very early on he said, "I am not going to pursue this relationship unless you understand that my kids are the most important thing in my life," and I said, "Well I am not going to pursue this relationship unless you are willing to adopt kids because I can't have children." So, it was pretty cool. Right now we're partners and everything and most partners would not take on what he did, take on this family of challenged children and then raising grandchild, so he is a great partner. Now that his illness is such that he can't be as strong a partner, I can't do it all without him. But it's good, it's time to launch, I failed to launch.

MM: You did some many cool things too.

LC: My kids and grandkids grew up in my world. So, they have been volunteering since they were old enough.

MM: Here?

LC: United Way and here [YWCA] my children and grandchild. Six of my grandchildren graduated from our preschool downstairs. They all learned to swim here, done leadership programs here. One of them works here now, two of them.

MM: My last question, is where do you hope or where do you see Worcester heading towards, and this organization working towards that goal with it?

LC: Okay, well I want Worcester to completely embrace and celebrate it's growing structurally diverse community. I mean because it's not going to go back, it's definitely moving forward, and again it's not just a homogenous minority community of color. So, I think that this community needs to understand how valuable these diverse perspectives can really make us be one of the best communities. Because like I said I think we are large enough to have resources but small enough to really tackle some problems. So, I think, so can see by the revitalization of downtown, we have so many young people that we need to learn how to keep. Because we have all these colleges and we have such an opportunity to grow and keep all these young people in our community. So that's what I see, that we are revitalizing and that we need to find a way to keep the young people who stop in Worcester to go to school, keep them here to share their talent and everything. That's one thing, I see the YWCA as hopefully remaining as a vital part of the fabric of the community because we start with early care and education and we do youth development and health and wellness. In fact our department is called Wellness and Health Equity, and we do housing for women, and we do domestic violence programs. We have a very diverse but important group of services and we are a collaborator. I used to say that I would feel like I've been successful when we are called upon as an expert on race and gender and so we have been called on as an expert. When the Equal Pay Act and when the nasty laws were repealed, we get calls to comment on that and I am able to say, "Yes, pay is not equal, but when you look at race

then pay is even more unequal." And then we are the place where a lot of race and gender equity groups meet, so we are a resource, plus we are in the thick of it. I hope that we stay true to our mission and that we see ourselves as a resource to community and as a safe place for people to come together and have those difficult conversations.

MM: Sounds great thank you.

LC: Thank you.