

Interviewee: Judy Freedman Fask
Interviewers: Katherine Biegner and Stephanie Bouley
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Transcribers: Katherine Biegner and Stephanie Bouley



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Abstract: Professor Judy Freedman Fask was born in Newton, Massachusetts in 1958, but she always lived in Worcester, Massachusetts. She attended the University of Massachusetts in Amherst for her undergraduate degree and went to graduate school at Smith College and to Springfield College for a second master's degree. She currently works as the director of Deaf Studies at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA, but she has also worked as an interpreter. Professor Fask is married with five children, several of whom have health complications. In this interview, Judy discusses the struggles of balancing her career life and her family life. Growing up in a large family, Judy is still close to all of her siblings, and her elderly parents live with her. Judy stresses the importance of working together to solve a problem, and enjoying life the way it is and not the way one wishes it was.

SB: So, my name is Stephanie Bouley. . .

KB: And I'm Kate Biegner . . .

SB: And we are here interviewing Professor Fask on December fourth, 2008. We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics-slash-community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences. Thank you for your help with this important project. Do we have permission to record your oral history?

JF: Yes.

SB: What is your full maiden name and if applicable your maiden name?

JF: Judy Freedman Fask.

SB: Where were you born?

JF: I was born in Newton, Mass. Just born there really. My mom's doctor was there, which is the only reason we were born there – eight kids. All grew up in Worcester.

SB: Do you have children?

JF: I have five children. My husband and I have five children.

SB: Do you have grandchildren?

JF: [laughs] No. Not yet. We have three boys and two girls. And their ages are 23, 21, and 20, and 17 and 12.

SB: Ah, a nice wide range. What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

JF: White Caucasian, and Jewish, I grew up in a very strong cultural family with Jewish being very at the heart of our family.

SB: You said you were married . . .

JF: Yup.

SB: What is the name of your current husband?

JF: My husband is Rick, Rick Fask, and he also grew up in Worcester.

SB: Would you mind telling me a little bit about your parents and perhaps your parents' education as well?

JF: Sure. Might as well. My parents. They're amazing. My dad is 90, actually 91 – he just turned 91 last week, and my mom is going to be 86 next week. They both grew up – well – they both – my dad is one of ten children who grew up in Worcester, Mass, and he didn't go to college he was in the army. He came back and he and his brothers opened Olympic Sports, a trophy manufacturing company, so he always was working. That was very – he was working when he came back, but he tells us stories about growing up and always contributing to working and contributing to the household. He has a great family, still – his sister is 105 in January and she's still alive. We interviewed her – actually interviewed her, and her brother who's 96 who's still alive, and his younger sister, kid sister, who's just 88 [laughs] and my dad. So there's only four of them left. My mom is – was – a nurse. She grew up Rebecca Schwartzberg. And her dad was a butcher on Water Street, which was a very Jewish area where they grew up over on Providence Street, and – on the Kelly Square side – that's where they grew up, both of them. And my mom's dad was a butcher on Water Street, and my mom grew up in a very Orthodox Jewish home and she has a twin sister and two younger sisters. She and her twin went to nursing school, no formal college education, but they did graduate and were nurses in the army. And that's it. I mean, my mom met my dad actually at a basketball game – my father's very athletic – and he was playing basketball and my mom went to watch and she was like “Ooh, I'd like to meet him,” and she did

and that was Friday night and he asked her to marry her on Sunday. [laughs] And they've been married over 61 years. [laughs]

SB: Wow.

JF: My dad knew a good thing when he saw it [laughs].

SB: Sounds like it.

JF: And they raised eight children, six girls and two boys.

SB: So you have seven siblings?

JF: Seven, yeah, it goes girl-boy-boy-then five girls, and I'm the second to the bottom. We just got together for Thanksgiving just immediate family – 45 plus. It was great.

SB: Where have you lived during your life?

JF: I grew up and lived in Worcester all through high school; and I went to Western Mass to Amherst to college at U Mass, and was there for four years. Then I went to graduate school at Smith College, so I was in Northampton – still Western Mass – for a year. And then I stayed in Western Mass and worked, so I was out in Western Mass a total of seven years. Then I moved back – we actually moved to Spencer, for one year because I was working in Springfield. My husband was working in Shrewsbury, so that was kind of a middle ground for one year. Then when we started having a family, we moved back to Worcester. So I've been back in Worcester since.

SB: What was the neighborhood like generally while you were growing up?

JF: Very middle class family, lots of kids, lots of fun, friendly. Great neighborhoods. We knew each other, we cared about each other. I think now people are so isolated and secluded in their own little worlds. I don't see the same neighborhood feel, I don't get the same neighborhood feel, that I had, that I remember growing up, playing--- going out in the morning and just playing outside until we got called in for dinner. Really, just outside playing, and parents not worrying where we were, because they knew we were just outside playing for hours and hours and hours. And I think it's just different. I remember when we moved in our home – most recently – no one came over with cookies or “hello” to even greet us. One person I think did, and I was so surprised. When someone moves into a neighborhood, typically I think it's really a nice thing to just go meet them and extend yourself, and give them your name, your number, bring them some

cookies or something to say “hello” and “welcome.” I don't know that that happens anymore.

SB: Do you have other family members living in the same area as you?

JF: We actually, when we bought our most recent home – we've been there almost ten years – and it's actually Liberty Farm, so Abby Kelly Foster, it was her home – and part of the Underground Railroad, which is very cool. When we bought this most recent house, we put an in-law apartment for my dad and mom. And all eight kids plus my parents pitched in and we had a discussion about it, so while they were healthy and could make a decision and not have to do it in a crisis mode or when they didn't want to do it or they needed more care. They did it when we all made that decision and they've been there about five years as an in-law apartment; so they're next to us, which is great, because then when my siblings come to visit them, they really come visit me too – they have no choice [laughs]. And my brother- I have a brother who's North Oxford and a sister who's in Boston. But then we have New York, New Jersey, Georgia, Colorado. . . [pause to think] Who am I missing? . . . New Hampshire! New Hampshire-slash-South Carolina. [laughs again] Sorry, Jayne!

SB: Are there any challenges you see in the city [Worcester] and if you could what would you change about Worcester?

JF: I would love - now that I have teenagers - I would love – and having lived in areas like college towns and small communities – I would love to see a place for teenagers and college students to go – a safe place, where they can go and enjoy, that's not just a bar, that's it's just a place to go hang out, be with friends in a safe fun environment. I don't get that feel in Worcester that there's anywhere for them to go to like that. I just remember being in Northampton, like a small town feeling, where you can just go walk around and enjoy where you are. That's what I miss. I have a sister who lives in Davis Square in Boston, and she has that same type of feeling, where you can just go right into the Square, you don't have to take a bus, you don't have to take a car. I'd love to see actually better transportation. For sure, better transportation, in a place where the young – so that we can draw the young back in and keep them here. We need that, if the city is going to survive and change.

SB: So you've seen a lot of changes in Worcester over time, or. . . ?

JF: I think when I was younger we had a “downtown,” so I could take a bus downtown to go shopping on Main Street. And then we had a mall, so we did have some of that. And as I said, we just played in the neighborhood and in the communities. And I think that it would be nice to have something like that.

SB: What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been, generally?

JF: That's an interesting question because I think for me, having so many sisters and a mom who is just so amazing- I've had really strong women role models. So I guess when I looked at women in general from the time I was little, I've always seen really positive role models, whether – and that could be from being at home with your kids as a homemaker, mom – because that's probably the hardest job you'll ever have – I think that was never a negative thing, I think. And for me, having five kids, I feel like when my kids were younger and my husband was working full time and I was able to work part-time and be home with the kids most of the time, it's almost a luxury now to do that, and I feel really lucky to have done that with my first four kids and I really feel it was a gift. And then I worked full-time and I see a huge difference on the stress, the amount of time I have, and the guilt, I think, for sure. It's very different having raised the first four and then the younger one is five years difference younger than the others. I think that women - it's not easy, because I think we're expected to do it all, and be all, and I'm not sure we set ourselves up for the best [laugh] by doing that. It's hard to achieve.

KB: Ok so we're gonna move on to talk a little bit about education.

JF: Mhmmm

KB: Where did you attend school?

JF: In Worcester I went to Tatnuck Elementary School, and that's when we would walk to school, come home, walk home for lunch, and then walk back to school, and then home. So it was also good cuz we had a lot more exercise then now [laughs]. And I went Tatnuck Elementary School then Chandler Junior High, which is now an elementary magnet school. It's no longer Chandler Junior High and Doherty Memorial High School, so all public schools.

KB: Did you attend—I mean you obviously attended college...

JF: Yup for college I went to the University of Mass in Amherst, and I graduated there and went to graduate school at Smith College. U Mass I did an undergrad degree in Cross-Cultural Education, and Speech and Hearing Sciences. I kind of created my own degree because they didn't have deaf education and I wanted to work with deaf folks. And so I created that and went out to the New Mexico School for the Deaf and I did an internship there. Then in graduate school I went to Smith College and I did my internship at the Helen Keller National Center for deaf-blind youths and adults. I worked with the deaf-blind community there and then I went—then I got married, actually. I worked in Western Mass for three years at Clarke School for the Deaf and then got married—I got married and when I started having kids, I went back to school for a second masters at Springfield College in Rehab Counseling.

KB: What, if any, were challenges in your education?

JF: For me, the hardest thing I think was going to school, working part-time, going to school and raising, at that time I had three kids, and I think trying to balance all that was probably exhausting at best. And I had a really great understanding professor in Springfield, especially the

times I was pregnant driving back and forth and just tired after working, you know all day, so he was great.

KB: Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options. Did you feel like you had to go get a job or...?

JF: I feel I've always had lots of options and I think part of that is because what I do. I'm in education, my background is working with deaf folks in a lot of different areas cuz my degree is deaf education, rehab counseling, and I also have—I'm a certified sign language interpreter, so I've worked formal jobs in with agencies. And then when the kids were born, I also had the option of doing a lot of free-lancing interpreting, which fit great into a mother's schedule because I could be home with my kids in the day and then I would work at night when my husband came home. So we tag-teamed a lot, but I was able to make the hours that I wanted to once I was doing freelance work. And it had pros and cons because when I was working with an agency, I always had people to come to and it always felt—you felt the camaraderie and the support. As a freelance interpreter I would go out, do a job, and come home. And so it was much more isolating, as liberating as it was for my schedule, it was much harder as far as a career goes. So, when I have students who become interpreters my suggestion to them is to work in an agency at least initially so you have that support from other people. But I have a lot of flexibility in what I do.

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

JF: I'm sorry, could you say that again?

KB: What support networks, you talked about a little bit about...

JF: Support networks, I'd say first and foremost my family. Absolutely without a question. I have had, my kids have some chronic health issues, and my family has been amazing, all my family. I just couldn't do it without all of them, and I've got great friends and colleagues. So, I think a friend of mine said one time, "what goes around, comes around." And I think that, having said that to me one day allowed me to accept the help that I think I was always giving and always there for everyone else. And it felt great and it was just that that was how friendships were to me. And I think when there was a time that I needed the support, I didn't feel like I had to ask for it because friends were there and family was there. And when I did finally learn how to ask for it, because I think that was a hard thing for women to do in general, especially when you're used to really taking care of a lot of things at the same time and doing it okay or well. I think it was real hard to ask for support. So when my friend ever said that, it just made me feel, "you're right" and it's almost a barter. So, it didn't feel negative at all; it was a very liberating thing for me to feel that I could ask for help because I know I give it. And that's how I run the programs here. It's not "I'll just do it for you." It's "what can we do for each other?" So, there's a ton of bartering I do within the program here that students learn how to do with the deaf community. So it's not coming across that "I will do for you" but "hey, how can we do this together?" And there's a ton of bartering and it works for everyone.

KB: When did you begin working and what did you do there?

JF: Probably started where I was babysitting when I was probably eleven, twelve years old. I mean, coming from a family of eight, we had the basic needs, but if wanted anything else, we were working. So, I mean I earned fifty cents an hour so if that gives you an indication [laughs] of when I started working. It was a while back. And I, so I would babysit. Then I worked in restaurants and most of - how I ended up supporting myself through college was basically through restaurants. Waitressing and hostessing and basically, working in restaurants.

KB: How did you come to do the work that you do today?

JF: I think doors just kept opening for me because every time I saw even the possibility of the door opening, I took it as an opportunity and pulled it wide open [laughs and mimics opening a door]. Just to at least check it out. So, when I graduated high school I – I knew I wanted to work with people, I wasn't sure what. My sister's a nurse, my mother's a nurse. I have other sisters who are in education, so it was very people-oriented. I knew maybe physical therapy, I wasn't exactly sure; but I knew I wanted to work with people. And when I graduated high school, I got a job with the Worcester public schools during the summer school program and the kids – they placed me in a classroom where the kids happened to be deaf. And I went, “Oh, cool, I'll learn your language.” And then I started learning sign. Then I became an interpreter, and then I – everything I've done for the last over 30 years – even though it hasn't been the same job, has always work- been with the deaf community.

KB: Who did you work for – who have you worked for in the past, and what has this work meant to you?

JF: I've had a variety of jobs, but my most meaningful job is probably being a mom. [Laughs] But I don't work for my kids. Just to clarify. Actually, the paid jobs I've had have been babysitting, restaurant work, when I graduated school I worked at Worcester State College. I've been an adjunct professor teaching sign language classes and deaf studies. I've worked at – and then my more formal jobs, I was a teacher at the Clarke School for the Deaf for three years, and I worked for five years for the Mass Rehabilitation Commission as a rehab counselor. I've been at Holy Cross since 1994, and as I said, I worked doing free-lance interpreting jobs. So that in general I've worked with the deaf and the deaf-blind communities.

KB: What were or are your primary responsibilities in terms of your work within your household?

JF: That's actually shifted because when I – my husband and I got married and had the kids, he was working full-time, so I really – as I said, looking back, it's an absolute luxury – to have worked – to choose to work part-time and raise the kids. And so I worked as a free-lance interpreter mostly or I would teach adjunct classes. He really had the steady income then, and in 2000 his company was bought out and they closed, and that's what made the change and the shift. So the duties changed because when I was home with the kids, and with the teaching background and coming from a large family, collaboration really works. So it was easy to set up

the household: we had chore charts, and everyone pitched in and everything I did, I did with the kids – whether it was shopping or cooking. Whatever it was it was always that we did it together. You know, every Friday we would make challah [bread for the Jewish Sabbath meal]; the kids would help and would prepare nice Sabbath Shabbat dinner, so the kids always did stuff with me and I always did things with friends and other kids so it never felt burdensome to be home-never. Now it feels different because I'm working full-time and so my husband takes care of the basics, but if he does a load of laundry – that was a learning curve, there was a learning process to that – because if he did a load of laundry, he thought he was done. But with five kids that's just the beginning, certainly not the end [laughs]. So it was load after load, just keeping things going so that it didn't end up with a huge amount to do. And I think that's the difference, maybe, I do think that's a man and women thing. I do think that's a difference in how we just can perceive things, and predict things, and keep things going and multi-task so it's not one huge job at a time; that we can keep more jobs flowing at the same time. So that's hard. I'll come home from work and see a load of laundry has been done but the rest is still waiting. So just keeping things going is probably harder and it's – it's – you have to work it out [laughs].

KB: So how have you sort of balanced these different responsibilities and how do you prioritize your life?

JF: My priorities have changed so whereas before, whereas when I was home, my house might have been a little bit more clean, a little bit more meticulous, things were put away differently or were away; I think I've let things go in my head as far as priorities now, because honestly the priority right now is my kids' health. Having kids with chronic illness, with diabetes, with celiac – that's C-E-L-I-A-C, it's an autoimmune disease – and they have dealt with depression and anorexia, and all of that at once or at the same time, with one or more at the same time, health is definitely the issue and priority in our home. So keeping that balanced is probably the biggest challenge, because even coming to work and I joke about it, I say, “Oh, no 9-1-1 call today; it's been a good day!” You know, I say that jokingly but the truth is that it's very real, that I feel like we can get through it every day and each day it's building on the kids, to learn the tools and how to manage everything, because I think there's a lot of stress and a lot of expectation now for kids. I think when I grew up we just played as kids; I mean, that was our job – to play – and I don't necessarily see that as kids' jobs anymore. I wish we got that back too [a quiet laugh].

KB: So what would you – or how would you characterize, or what would you say are the personal and professional costs and benefits of this?

JF: When I worked, a lot of programs I had even done at Holy Cross, because when I started working here, my kids were little. So I did a lot of programs for kids because I didn't see – I couldn't see myself – putting my kids in daycare to come and do programs for other kids, so I set up a lot of programs for kids where my kids would just be included. In a swim program, a hockey program, even though it was with deaf kids and they were signing – my kids could do that – so the whole point was just that it was a program for kids. So I was here – if I was at work a lot – my kids were also here in – and having fun in different programs, so that's how I initially balanced it. It got harder as my kids got older, because I was still here but they didn't – weren't anymore: either they got too old for a program or didn't want to participate in a certain program. So that's when it became harder to figure out how to balance that, and I think only now – 14

years later – I'm really trying – getting much better at delegating some of those program pieces out so I don't have to be here at each and every one of those programs. So I'm – again, and I probably do it in a barter way, where someone doesn't pay for the program but I know that they're an adult here and they will be in charge of the program – I do, I said, a lot of bartering where it works for everyone. So I can trust that the program will be run fine, because I have people who are very, very capable in charge. And the students are also very good too.

KB: Okay, so we are going to talk a little bit about politics, community involvement, and health.

JF: Mmhmm.

KB: So have you been involved with volunteer and community work?

JF: Yes.[Laughs] Lots.

KB: So what kinds of groups and organizations?

JF: When my kids were younger I was on the board of directors for their schools, for the Solomon Schechter Day School and The New Jewish Academy. I was – I am also on the Worcester Women's History Project Steering Committee, I'm on that, participate in that. The YWCA, I'm a board member for the YWCA and for Daybreak. I've noticed I've gravitated a lot more towards women's programming. I just see the strength in women and I've loved to see the opportunities that women have and making a difference in the world because I think everyone makes a difference, but maybe women haven't had the opportunity to do so as much, and I think we're at that point where we can certainly move forward and do that.

KB: How have health issues impacted your life? I know you mentioned your kids a lot.

JF: Personally, I've been healthy. Eight kids, I grew up in a very healthy home with – where health was important. We were all very athletic, we were all very mindful of mind-body connection and health on both parts, so I'm very appreciative that my parents gave us that because they were great role models. We'd go skiing together, we had a summer cottage where we'd just play and swim and be together. But most of our activities, looking back, were centered around doing something physical and outside. So health was always, always stressed to us. My own family, I love doing things with the kids; it's a different challenge now because truly getting through a day, trying – nothing is spontaneous, that's the difference. In my life, we could say “Oh let's do this!” although we planned a lot, when went skiing it definitely was a planned event because we had to have all the food ready, the clothes ready; I mean, getting - everything was lined up, that's where my dad's military background came in really handy [laughs]. Everything was lined up when we got up in the morning – that we put in place. They didn't do it for us [laughs]. We were ready. I think now it's much less spontaneous; or in my car I'll have extra food, extra medical supplies so that if we want to do something I know we can, because we really are prepared to do something more spontaneous. So that's the thing, I think my kids don't have the same freedom to just play and be a kid, because they have so much on their plate medically. I think that's been really difficult for everyone.

KB: What role has religion played in your life?

JF: When I grew up, my mom as I said grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home and we grew up in a conservative home, but we kept kosher and all the holidays were always family – my mom's family, my dad's family. So they're very positive, great memories, because it's always about family and food – so how could you go wrong with that? [laughs].

SB: How do you define success in your life and has this definition changed over time?

JF: I think success for me, is – still is – the idea of being happy with who I am and what I'm doing, not measured so much monetarily, although it would be nice to not have to really worry about money. I think having switched from – having a one – my – two incomes, my husband's and my half – to just mine, has been – has had a huge impact on us, because I make probably a third to a half of what he earned. So having that income change has definitely impacted us, and we can really see the difference in – being in a comfortable situation financially, and doing – not, spending ridiculously but being able to spend what we want, how we want, and enjoy life, where when you really need to be mindful of every single penny, and food, and having enough to cover the bills and food and everything, your life – it changes your perspective. It really does. So I think it's definitely had an impact on us.

SB: How do you get through tough times and what kinds of thoughts keep you going?

JF: Tough times . . . Family. A call to any of my sisters, any one of my sisters. [_____]??? That would be – in my – yeah – just family is always there. So I would say that and a walk with a friend or a family member would do it [a laugh]. They're very understanding. And the best part of my family, I think, my sisters – my brothers, too – is - they both make good wives I'd have to say. We've raised them all to be good wives, and my sister's married to one of the best wives – he's, Myles is great. We always joke to him when she first married him, “Myles, you're such a great wife,” and he'd look at us and go, “Huh?! I don't get it!” And we'd say, “That is the utmost compliment!” So we're very proud of all the wives. And I think – I'm sorry, I've lost my train of thought, what's the question?

SB: How do you get through tough times and what kinds of thoughts keep you going?

JF: Oh! Thoughts that keep me going, I think what's most, what I appreciate most is I don't have to always ask. It's almost so intuitive with my sisters and my family and my parents that they'll call just to check in, or they'll call just to check in, just because they know what's gonna help, without ever having to really ask. And that's huge. That's huge, not having to ask all the time. That someone can just respond because they know that will make a difference.

SB: Based on your life experience, what advice would give to women of today and of future generations?

JF: Go for it. Just absolutely, whatever your dream is or what you think your dream is, go for it, give it a try. If someone says no, then maybe say, “Okay, then how can we do this?” “No”

doesn't mean "we can't do it." No just means "we've gotta figure this out." A different approach, a different way to ask. But I definitely think if you see – and look at life as opportunities, meet people, make connections. I think that's the other thing, making connections with people and really appreciating who they are and looking for the gifts in people, which I love doing. I love doing that here at Holy Cross, because when I meet a student, if they have a talent they don't necessarily like to share it – because they definitely know I'll use it in some other program – but that there are – people have so much to offer and I think that sometimes you have to look a little bit for it and other times you don't have to look so hard. But there's so much good in people, and everyone has some gift to offer and tapping into that is always really exciting.

SB: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

JF: No, I'm just laughing because I heard a student watching a tape that's due for the class at 12:30 [the time of this statement was nearing 12:00 p.m.]. [Laughs]. I can hear it. At least they're watching it before class; that's good.

KB: Is that it?

SB: I think so. I think that's it.

JF: Thanks very much.

SB: Wait, thank you [signs "Thank you"]

JF: Very good! When did you learn sign?

SB: I taught myself the basics a couple years ago.

JF: You should come and join us for any of the programs.

SB: I would love to.

JF: And you can actually take it as a Consortium class. It'd be great; you'd be more than welcome to. We have a lot of programs with the deaf community, and that makes a difference. As I said, it's people meeting people, and it's not them or us. And you get to know people and – everyone has so much to offer, and we have a lot of fun. I look forward to seeing you in a class or even in some of the programs.

SB: I will. Thank you.