

Interviewee: Honee A. Hess
Interviewers: Herbert Woodard and Bianca Ravida
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Overseen by: Profs. Leslie Choquette and Maria Parmley, Assumption College

Abstract: Honee A. Hess was born July 11, 1953 in New Orleans and moved to Worcester, Massachusetts in 1986 to take a job at the Worcester Art Museum where she is currently employed as the Director of Education. She lives in “Crown Hill” the first planned neighborhood in the city built in the middle of the 19th century. After the tragedies of Hurricane Katrina, she and her husband started hosting a charity event in order to raise money and awareness for victims of Katrina in New Orleans. In this interview, Honee Hess discusses growing up in New Orleans, having politically active parents, and how her educational opportunities led her to the Worcester Art Museum. She also expresses her love for New Orleans and how there have been many changes in favor of women in Worcester. Education, and political and social activism are the highlights of the interview, and her everyday life. She is active in Worcester’s First Night, Family Health Center, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday celebration.

HW: 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 Women’s Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women’s education, health, work, and politics/community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with work. Thank you for your help with this important project. I would like to ask you if we have your permission to record this.

HH: Absolutely

HW: Thank you.

BR: We’re just going to ask you a few basic questions first

HW: Can you tell us your full maiden and you’re married [name], if applicable.

HH: My name is Honee, middle initial “A” H-E-S-S that is my maiden and my married name, and that was it huh?

HW: Can you tell us when you were born?

HH: I was born July 11, 1953

HW: Could you tell us the name of your current husband?

HH: My only husband and I have only been married three years. Phil Magnusson and he was from Auburn, Massachusetts

BR: Can you spell his last name, please?

HH: M-A-G-N-U-S-S-O-N

BR: Thank you

HW: Do you have any children or grandchildren.

HH: I don't have any children. I have a lot of children who think they're my children and we don't have any grandchildren... yet.

HW: What cultures/ethnicities do you identify with your background?

HH: You know it's interesting, I was born and raised in and spent a good part of my adult life in New Orleans, which is my home and that's the culture that I identify with. I don't identify with an ethnicity or historical heritage, but I'm a "New Orleanian" and the Saints [pro football team] are 8 and 0! [Laughter]

HW: Yes they are.

[Laughter]

HH: I just had to say that.

HW: I like Reggie Bush.

HH: Oh Good!

HW: Could you tell us about your parents?

HH: My father actually was born in West Virginia and came to New Orleans when he was in high school. My mother grew up in New Orleans. My mother trained to be a dietician. My father was a lawyer and his specialty was a kind of law that was very unpopular in New Orleans -- he represented local labor unions. My parents were very active in civic affairs. My father spent six years on the New Orleans' parish school board. They both were very active during the Civil Rights movement and making sure that all children were able to continue to go to school because in New Orleans they were threatening to close the schools rather than integrate. They were pretty cool people.

BR: They sound like it.

HH: Mhmm. Yeah, I was very lucky. Unfortunately my mother died when she was in her 40s of breast cancer so don't know what I would of thought of her as an adult, but...my father was great.

HW: What was the neighborhood like generally in New Orleans?

HH: [Pause] Well right now it's almost empty after [Hurricane] Katrina. Oh it was a neighborhood full of lots of kids! I think they were only maybe...two or three on our block that didn't have three or more kids in the family. People next door to us...you know when you're a kid, everybody looks old...so they were probably younger than me, but they didn't have children. And it was one of those neighborhoods where you know you had to watch your step because somebody else's mama was watching out for ya. And if you picked Mrs. Smith's flowers SOMEONE was going to see you and call your mother so it, it was a, it was a good neighborhood.

HW: You now live in Worcester, correct?

HH: Yep!

HW: How did you come to live in Worcester?

HH: I came to Worcester in 1986 because I took a job at the Worcester Art Museum and that's the reason I ended up here.

HW: Where do you live in the city now?

HH: I actually live downtown. About four blocks behind City Hall there is a neighborhood called "Crown Hill" and it is a really diverse neighborhood. It was the first planned neighborhood in the city built in the middle of the 19th century. So the house I live in was built in 1863 and I own the first floor and then there's someone who lives on the second floor and someone who lives on the third floor and they're condominiums. So it's downtown... and it's great...except for you know when people have all night parties or when, not that this has happened very often, but you hear gunshots or when someone walking along flicks their cigarette and you have to go get your garden hose to put out a blaze of fire in the autumn leaves. That just happened to me yesterday.

BR: Oh God.

HH: But you know the good news is I don't have to bag up those leaves, because they're all gone.

[Laughter]

HW: True, true. And you've lived in this area since you've been in Worcester?

HH: Yeah, when I first came to Worcester I rented an apartment in one of the houses on...in Crown Hill.

HW: Do you have any family members that live in Worcester or are they all in New Orleans?

HH: Not my side of the family, my husband has relatives in the area. All of my family is in a big arch up the East Coast: New Orleans, Atlanta, Washington, and Philadelphia.

HW: What challenges do you think the city still faces and what would you change about the city?

HH: When I first moved here my answer to that question, you know “what would I change,” would be to add more restaurants. But in 23 years, I’m AMAZED, when you’re from New Orleans, food is important, I’m AMAZED at how many restaurants there are and you know you actually sit down and you have to think about where you’re gonna go. But I have to say that, I think [long pause] I think that if, if Worcester could really concentrate its energies on the public schools and make the public schools one of the best systems in this state everything else would fall in place. I think businesses would come here because there would be a ready labor force and people would want to live here and work here. Even people who commuted to Boston would live here because it would be a good place for them to raise their families. So I think it’s the schools probably the thing I think we need to do. Having the commuter train was a big thing; downtown is A LOT more energetic than it has been. But I still only have one restaurant that I can walk to and no movie theatre I can walk to and you know when you LIVE downtown you expect to be able to do that. Forget retail I have no place I can go to buy something. So I think schools, they have to work on the schools.

HW: Are there any distinct characteristics that make Worcester what it is today?

HH: Oh yeah. Well first of all the architecture, the architecture of sort of the mill town but then there’s a lot of old houses left and I think that gives Worcester a certain flavor, it’s how I ended up living where I live because it’s so interesting to live with those houses around. So I think there’s a unique look to Worcester. I also really think that even though it’s certainly changing, the various neighborhoods and the amount of different kinds of ethnicities and cultures that can be found in Worcester give it a real liveliness that I think is great. You never knew there were so many Middle Eastern groups until I moved to Worcester and that has just been expanded and expanded as new immigrants come in.

HW: What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been like?

HH: I mean it's been a tough place for women ironically since the second women's convention was here so long ago and there's some real notable women come from Worcester. I think that it's changing but I think that the "Old Boys" network, where all the deals were made at the Worcester Club is not quite been broken. So, when I think about Worcester public schools hiring a female head, that is tremendous, that is REALLY, REALLY tremendous and I think that that speaks...speaks sort of...of the fact that things ARE changing but when I look at the recent election I look at the at-large candidates who were voted into office, they're primarily male, they're primarily part of a particular political machine and not that I disagree with the political machine, but I think that makes it more difficult for women to enter into seats of power and right now the city is like the only power because there's not a lot of difference.

HW: Before we move onto education is there anything else you would like to talk about in regards to women in Worcester or anything else related about Worcester?

HH: Well let me just say that you know I think that women still have a hard time getting to the top of things in Worcester. I also have to say that I have never met so many engaged, intelligent active, women in my entire life until I moved to Worcester. People who were very civic minded, were working really hard AND who had families and other responsibilities so...

HW: Could you tell us about the school you attended?

HH: Hmm, what level?

HW: We can start, we can start at grade school and gradually go up

HH: Danville Elementary School is around the corner from my house, I went there and so did my five sisters. I went to John F. Kennedy senior high, which was probably a mile away from my house. We didn't bus students in New Orleans, and the whole motion of riding a school bus is like foreign to me you we walked or when we got our driver's license we talked our mother out of the car and we drove. Kennedy was, let's see there was, 1500 kids in the school, it was a fairly new school. It was the first school in the city of New Orleans. [Reflecting] okay, I'm dating

myself back but you already heard when I was born, was the FIRST school in the city of New Orleans to have a computer.

HW: Wow

HH: It took up a room this size. We had to punch cards. We had to learn Fortran, which was a programming language and from eleventh grade in my trigonometry class we had to learn Fortran and we had to learn how to key punch and how to put a card into the computer so then it could solve mathematical problems for us.

BR: Are you serious?

HH: Oh, and I was scared to death because I knew it was the only computer in a high school in New Orleans and I thought “Oh my God! I’m gonna break it! I’M GONNA BREAK IT! And everybody’s gonna be mad at me!” (Laughter) But I didn’t...so unlike most of my peers I left New Orleans when I graduated from high school and I went to a small liberal arts college in Iowa called Coe College where I majored in Art and English and then came back to New Orleans after I graduated because my mother had died and it was my turn to go home to help with the kids who were still at home and got a job, quit after three months. What do you do after you quit your first job? [Singing Voice] You go to GRADUATE SCHOOL!! I enrolled in graduate school at Tulane University in Art History after a semester I said, “Oh this is great! You know I love to read! I love to write! I love to research! But who cares?” And so, I quit school and started looking for another job. Found a temporary job at the New Orleans Museum of Art and as they say that’s when everything lined up and I thought, “This is what I wanna do!” And so I went back to school, I- I worked... at the- at the museum, re-enrolled at Tulane in Art History and Education and got the degree that led to working in museum education, which is what I do at the Worcester Art Museum.

HW: Okay. If any, were there any challenges in your education that you had to face or overcome?

HH: Noooo. I was one of those kids who you know... I should’ve had some challenges ‘cause I kind of would’ve learned more, but everything was easy and so I did what I needed to get by. I mean the biggest challenge was that my mother died when I was sophomore in college but I was able to stay in school and I just had to – to go back after I graduated.

HW: What support networks/mentoring have been important to you

HH: You know family is like really high on the list and even though my mother died when I was a sophomore, I would say my mother and my father's emphasis on education and on the fact that girls could do anything that they wanted to do. I think this probably is the strongest influence in all of the decisions that I have made in life. I was real lucky when I started working at the New Orleans Museum of Art, I had a supervisor who saw that I was capable and let me do things that you know my job did not entail but she let me really stretch and do a lot of exciting things and I'm very grateful and she even made me go back to school. So I've-I've been lucky in that way. I say that Annabelle Hebert was one of my first important mentors, who was not a family member.

HW: And her name was Annabelle...

HH: Hebert. H-E-B-E-R-T

HW: Talked about the art...The New Orleans Art Museum. Can you tell us about, what - what you, how did you like become interested in working in the art museum?

HH: Well, I was really just looking for a job, you know because I had quit school and I had actually applied for a secretarial position and didn't get it. I didn't get it because the person who got the job could take short hand faster than I could and neither of us knew shorthand but you know, we're like you, we were just out of college and we were used to taking notes and so we could pass the shorthand test just by taking notes. So, they called me back and they said, "You know, we're really sorry we really wanted to hire you but we have this temporary job." And I said, "Oh, how temporary is temporary?" Cause you know how it is, and they said a year. And I thought "Oh my God, that's a major commitment! A year!" And so I went in and interviewed for the temporary job which was to assist in the education department of the museum... to assist them in creating an education exhibition that was going to explain the function of writing and religion in Ancient Egyptian Culture and the museum had gotten a BIG grant from the National Endowment for Humanities and it was, the goal of the exhibition was to prepare the citizens of New Orleans for the Treasures of Tutankhamun Exhibition, which was coming up at the end of the year that I would be there and I can just say that I have been lucky because on my first day there in that position, I thought, "Oh wow, this is the kind of place that takes my interest in art, my interest in education, my interest in writing, my interest in helping people discover more about themselves, discover how to be creative. It takes all those things, wraps it up in a job in an Art Museum."

HW: So, so it sounds like this work has meant a lot to you.

HH: It has, it has. You know it's interesting I have lots of friends in many art museums and..... [Long pause] we all sort of take a slightly different perspective on what we do but to me the thing that I've always valued about my work in the Art Museum is that it's using a resource the common public trusts. You know the Worcester Art Museum, all those objects belong to the public and figuring out ways to use that resource to help people grow and learn and do lots of things and that's really been my goal. Just to give you an example, this weekend we had a family day and the... the theme of the family day was East meets West, and we wanted to show how the cultures of the East influenced the cultures of the West and we decided to also have a contemporary focus in very Worcester specific and I had heard that Mass Audubon had someone who... had made a Asian Longhorn Beetle Costume [Laughter] and so we called them up and arranged for that person to come to talk about how small the world is [Laughter] when a bug can travel all the way from China to Worcester and make life miserable for people.. [More Laughter] that we're all so interconnected, so...ya know you can use the study of art for a lot of things.

HW: We talked a lot about you know your work in the... in the Art Museum, could you tell us about your primary responsibilities like around the household with like housework?

HH: Let's see what do I do? I do the grocery shopping; right now our house is torn up so I take the laundry to the little lady down the street who does the laundry because I can't do it myself. My husband and I share the cooking, he bakes brownies...you know that's really what we cook well not now because the house is torn up but... And..... You know housekeeping I don't really do housekeeping but neither does he but somehow it gets done [Laughter] yea it just works... umhmm.

HW: Could you uhh....

HH: And he takes care of the lawn!

HW: Oooh ok.

HH: Now our lawn is about this big [referring to the size of the room] and he's supposed to take care of the roses, but he hasn't and then I take care of the vegetable garden.

HW: So it's pretty even, right?

HH: Hmm well I think I do more [Laughter]

HW: You think you do more? (Laughter)

HW: Has housework changed for you over time? From perhaps when you were younger to like now?

HH: Well, you know my mother had household help and..... so I guess I would have to say it really hasn't changed because I got my attitude toward housekeeping from my mother. You know when I, when I lived in Iowa, I use to actually envy my friends in Iowa who grew up with this "work ethic" of you know when they cleaned the bathroom they felt really good about it I said, "well ya know I cleaned my bathroom because I would like to have a clean bathroom but at the end of it I don't like feel like I accomplished anything." So, I think my attitude toward that is a continuation of my mother's.

HW: How do you balance different priorities, responsibilities, rules, and interests in your life?

HH: You know that's an interesting question to ask because if you had asked me that three years ago my answer would be really different, because I just did everything, I didn't say "no" to anything, I was always on the go, I dropped by friends' house unannounced... just something you do in New Orleans. People here think it's a little weird but... but no one's turned me away. But I got married three years ago and now I'm finding it difficult to keep up with all of the different aspects of my life and.... so I... I mean I don't know. I'm not managing yet. [Laughter]

HW: Coming close?

HH: Well maybe, but you know my friends don't see as much of me as they used to. That's... that's been the biggest change; well that's not...not the only... I use to do things like fly to Atlanta for my niece's birthday, and I had to sort of cut back on things like that because there're two of us now not just me... an interesting change of life, so late in life.

HW: Just out of curiosity, do you get to see much of like your friends that were from New Orleans at all?

HH: I do... well you know I say that, I did, I used to, but my friends have been disbursed by Katrina, so for example my best friend now lives in Denver, and I haven't seen her since my wedding. My family, I go back to New Orleans at least two or three times a year and we all get together at Thanksgiving so I keep up with my family, but friends are a little harder now because they are all over the place.

HW: How would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path and how about the benefits? So costs and benefits.

HH: Costs and?

HW: Costs and benefits of like your past or your path- I'm sorry – your path... professional/personal

HH: I guess I only see benefits. [Long pause] I work in an area that people often think is really special and cool, but as I remind my staff, a lot, you know if we don't get our jobs done... no one will die. It's important work because we help people change their lives, but it's not critical work. The benefits to it is: that we see peoples' lives changed, whether it's someone who discovers their expressive voice, whether it's someone who, you know...we have this partnership with a local school and kids who don't learn as well by BOOK, when they see actual objects and learn from the objects, they understand things in a way that they don't understand through book learning. Those are all the benefits, for me, when I get to see the work having meaning in other people's lives. The cost, I did think of a cost, the cost is I'M NEVER GOING TO BE RICH! [Laughter] And the only reason that would matter to me is because I'd love to be able to give away money, you know, because there are so many great things out there that people are doing, but maybe one day I'll hit the lottery. [More laughter]

HW: What type of white...work does your husband do?

HH: He is the president and CEO of a non-profit organization called “The Visiting Nurses Associations of New England”

HW: Did you get that?

HH and HW (together): Nurses Associations of New England

HH: And they put an emphasis on the “S” at the end of associations because every town or area has like a visiting nurses association, or home health care organization, and they are members of his organization. His organization is a membership organization and they try to help VNAs keep abreast of what’s new, what’s current in the field. They help negotiate rates with payers, like insurance companies and HMOs...so they serve their members.

HW: Is there anything else you’d like to add about your work experiences or your husband’s work experiences?

HH: Mmm, well interestingly...I’m one of six girls and we’re all in education except for the youngest, who went into journalism, which we think is a form of education, and only...well I guess half of us are teachers. So it’s interesting to me that while my parents really encouraged us to dream big dreams and do anything that we wanted to do, we all ended in ... up in a field that is considered a traditionally “female field.” My oldest sister teaches math, my next sister is a director of research and evaluation for a school system, my younger sister teaches deaf children, the next sister teaches physical education, and then the last is a journalist. So it’s interesting that we’re all, you know, in different educational fields, but sort of ironic that, you know, none of us ended up being lawyers or doctors or whatever. I think that’s it though.

HW: You sure?

HH: Yeah

HW: Do you consider yourself an act-active politically?

HH: Yes.

HW: Could you talk to us a little bit more about your political aspect

HH: Well first of all, I beat people up who don't vote, not really, but I wish I could. I grew up with a really strong belief that voting is what earns us all of our rights and that we really need to vote and in order to vote, you need to know, so you have to try and keep up generally with what's going on in your community, in your state, and the nation and then that means that you need to know something about all the people who are going into public service and so I make it my business to know about the people who are in public service. I'm not active politically like I'm part of a party or I'm really active in somebody's campaign. I've helped with campaigns, you know, I always put up signs, I always send out postcards to my friends, I have friends who call me and say, "Honey, who should I vote for?" because they respect my beliefs and they feel like their beliefs are close to mine. I think there's so many important-- important issues in this country that we all need to be politically active. Whether it's questions of equality for all people, whether it's healthcare, whether it's environmental issues, I mean there are REALLY important things that, by the time I die COULD be collected and put on a path toward a good goal OR the next generation is going to still be mucking around with the same issues and debates and I just – I think that we're at a really important part in our country's life and we all need to sit up and take notice and answer the call.

HW: Besides helping out with some of the campaigns have you been involved in any other volunteer or community work?

HH: Yea, I've been on several boards. I've been on my "Neighborhood Association" board; I was treasurer for like ten years. I'm on the board – the board of "First Night" in Worcester, I've been president of that organization and I've been the fundraising chair for more years than I'd like to ever even think about. I've been on the board of "Family Health Center" of Worcester, which is a community health center in Worcester, where I actually go for my healthcare, but the majority of folks at Family Health are on some kind of government assistance, but it's a great place and I've been president of that organization and I'm currently just a member. I'm on advisory boards and committees; I'm on the Martin Luther King Jr. birthday celebration/Black History Month committee. I'm on the advisory committee for the "Joy of Music" program. I most times I can't remember.

BR: I don't think you go to sleep (Laughter)

HH: Well you see that's why my friends are getting the short shrift now that I'm married and have to figure out how to maintain balance in my life but it has helped that he's now active in some organizations that I would have been active in so we sort of divide and conquer, so he's on the advisory committee for Worcester "Planned Parenthood" and he's on the board of "Preservation Worcester" and so I don't have to do that

BR: We talked about Katrina, is there anything that you contributed to New Orleans after Katrina happened?

HH: Well, we still are actually. My own story is that my family, we had a house that we had to rebuild and we moved in in July so I didn't like go down and volunteer because I was going down and volunteering for my own family, but every August 29th my husband and I have, and that's the day the hurricane hit, my husband and I have been holding "Katrina-versary" parties and we've been working with an organization in New Orleans called the "Gulf Restoration Network" and the "Gulf Restoration Network" is committed to creating a political will to save the coastline of the country, but primarily the Gulf Coast. The state of Louisiana loses a football field's worth of land every hour and it's due to a lot of things including the canals that the oil companies have built through the wetlands so that the natural barrier has been broken so there are paths for the water to get further inland. So we are working with the "Gulf Restoration Network" to try and create awareness, to create political will, so every year we hold a party in our driveway, I make red beans and rice if you're around next year, August 29th 6 Crown Street, you're welcome to come, and it's really to help raise awareness and raise money for the effort of the "Gulf Restoration Network." My husband's son spent [long pause – thinking out loud]: was it six months? It's been a long time 3 or 6 months in New Orleans after Katrina working for the Red Cross as a volunteer and so now when we go home for Thanksgiving, his three sons go ahead of time and do volunteer work because the work is not done so that's been a really interesting part of having a new family.

HW: So you guys like have a long list of organizations you were in, could you tell us a little bit about what influenced you to join these groups?

HH: I'm trying to remember how, I found Worcester a hard place to become- to feel like home and I'd probably been here three years when I realized that the only way it was going to be – feel like home was if I made it that way and the only way I would make it that way is if I got

involved and that really was why I started getting involved was so that I could be a PART of the community and feel like I had a home.

HW: Of any of those organizations – what would you consider the major accomplishments? Does any stand out?

HH: Well, you know I think of “Family Health Center” and “First Night Worcester” sort of almost opposite ends of the sphere. “First Night” you know most people just think of a New Year’s celebration and it’s all these concer – (Tape ends)

[Herbert Woodard and Honee Hess continue conversation while Bianca Ravida changes tape]

...[Referring to her sister] Watching her play football and my father was not like, you know a “manly man” but he was there with us. We were all avid football players.

HW: Wow

HH: We were digressing

BR: I’m recording this actually... you turn the tape over

HW: Is that what you do?

BR: Yep, so

HW: Oh okay. Okay, we were talking about major accomplishments...

HH: Oh yeah, I was talking about “First Night” that most people just think, you know, it’s a New Year’s Eve party, but it really is a way that people are introduced to a whole variety of art forms, but more important than that, and this is why I’ve been involved in it and this is sort of a theme that you’ll see through the whole interview, one of the things that I think is important for communities is that there are community traditions and it’s those traditions that make you feel like you’re part of something and so “First Night Worcester” is really a community building event. We work out into the community all during the year, we train teachers in different art forms, we organize school kids, and do a lot of things that then culminate at “First Night” along with the professional concerts and things like that. So you know I think that that that’s the

achievement that I'm most proud of with "First Night" is that it really has become this community-building event. "Family Health" every time I go and sit in the waiting room at "Family Health" when I have to go see my doctor, I think everyone should have this experience. First of all you're sitting there with like a microcosm of the world and the cutest kids but a microcosm of the world and then because you know that that microcosm of the world is getting the same quality healthcare that I'm getting. You know I can afford to go anywhere, but I choose to go there because it's got such great, caring, quality healthcare and all of these other folks who are there with me in the waiting room get the same quality of healthcare and I think that's amazing because it's not funded to give quality healthcare but then they somehow do it. It's sort of miraculous. It really is.

HW: Has religion played a role in your life?

HH: It has. I grew up going to church and Sunday school, it was a big social part of my life growing up and I think having a faith that gets you through those tough times and then makes you joyous during those good times is really what has kept my family going. My husband and I currently are going to an Episcopal church, which is interesting because I would have never thought that, you know that I would ever ended up in an Episcopal church, I grew up in a Presbyterian church, but as I've grown older, all of the liturgy and the formality of the Episcopal service has become much more meaningful. One of the things, that I think I carry still with me that my parents and my church taught me was tithing, the whole concept of giving 10% away of your income. This is another reason; you know why I need to make more money, because I need to give 10% of it away! You know I can remember when I was a little girl, my grandmother always had her mission piggy bank, so we always saw the adults in our life giving; giving away money, giving away time, and a lot of that was through the church and it- it has been a very important factor in my own life and the choices I've made.

HW: Do claim any specific religion?

HH: I mean I'm Christian, going to an Episcopal church, but I don't know if I'd say I was an Episcopalian [Laughter]

HW: Okay, um

HH: As my sister says, I don't know how much religious history you know, but every once and while we'll be in some theological discussion and we'll stop and we'll go, "you know we really are children of the reformation" so we're Protestants, through and through

HW: Okay, how has health issues affected your life or those in your family, if it has at all?

HH: Well... I've been really lucky, though I did have a near death experience...that I obviously came back from. [Long pause] I think probably the health issues that have impacted me more than any other would have been my father's health issues, when he was in his late 50s he had the first of a series, which would last for 15 years, of small strokes and the first part of his brain that was damaged was the part that recalls words and for a lawyer, it's a really big ordeal. So he had to retire and he just hit a series of health issues after that. You know it's tough because it was tough dealing, helping, trying to help him long distance...and trying to access quality care from a system that we didn't think would—as high quality as we would've liked.

BR: You mentioned a near death experience, do you want to talk about it or is..

HH: Oh! Sure! It was just bizarre! I've always been a healthy person, sooo when I woke up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning one night, this was in 1999, October 29 to be exact, with this excruciating pain I thought in my shoulders and you know I'm one of those people 'cause I've always been healthy, I think you can think through anything. So I got up took three Advil, went back to bed, and thought, "Okay, I can will myself back to sleep." And it just was not going away. I was lying in bed and you know how your hand feels when it falls asleep?

HW: Yeah

HH: It's sort of tingly

HW: Yeah

HH: Well my hand started to feel that way and so you know when you feel that, your brain automatically tells your hand [does motion] to go "like this" so you wake it up, my brain was saying that, but my hand wasn't doing anything so of course, you know, I thought I was having a stroke and the only thing that went through my head was, "I'm not stroking out in bed and I'm not stroking out alone." So in the dark, I picked up the phone and with my left hand, because my right hand wasn't working, I dialed a neighbor's phone number and said, "You have to come over, something is wrong." So I was – at that point, I was still able to get up and unlock my door

so she came over, by the time she came over I couldn't sit up any longer. By the time the ambulance came, which was not long after that, I was paralyzed from the waist down and I could just barely move my fingers and the only reason I know that is when you go to the emergency room you have to sign forms and so, you know, I made a little "X". Well to make a really long story short, when they did an MRI, they saw something pressing against my spine, but in the diagnosing tools that they have, they couldn't tell what it was so they had to do exploratory surgery and when they went in, in my spine, in my neck, they found a pool of blood pressing against my spine and as soon as they drained the blood and sewed me back up, and I woke up I could move everything but I had just now had major neurosurgery, so I was out of work for about a month and a half. And then there was, in this, this was the year that I was president of "First Night" so I actually ran it from my dining room table, the staff person at "First Night" was great, I told her she was my alarm clock, she called me every morning at nine o'clock to check in and see if I needed anything, it was incredible. The end of the story, other than it hasn't ever happened again, they don't know what happened and I just was lucky that I was in the right place and got to the hospital and...

BR: That's crazy

HH: So, so I haven't... and after that I have ... I mean I've always had respect for the health care system but I now know why it's REALLY important to have quality healthcare for all people. I also know how important it is for people who are sick to have advocates because you know, no body was talking to me, I was lying there on the gurney, you know, paralyzed but my neighbor who then called a friend of mine, the two of them, and this is what I tell people, if you have to go to the emergency room in an ambulance make sure that you're followed by two really well dressed women who are going to be your advocates in the emergency room because they were interviewing everyone and so, you know, I didn't get forgotten you know, I still had to make the decisions and I still had no information to make the decisions on but you know, I had two women, who spoke English, knew how to use the system making sure that I got the best care possible. So -- So that's my near death experience they thought I was -- they thought I was going to die

BR: Talking about being fortunate

HH: Yup

HW: Wow. Moving a little bit away from health, how do you feel about the choices you've made in life and do you have any regrets?

HH: I have absolutely no regrets. There was a period in my life when you know I thought, “Okay, this is -- I’m going to be single for the rest of my life this is the way it’s going to be” and I thought about adopting a child and you know I don’t even regret not doing that because the freedom I had really gave me the opportunity to be that important non-parent adult that we all need growing up. I heard an educational psychologist talk once about some research that she did, she talked to all of these adults who were successful adults that who when they were teenagers would have been – would have been labeled “at risk” and she wanted to figure out what they had in common, was there something that really turned the tides and the only thing that they had in common was that at some point in their lives an adult, and it wasn’t even more specific than that, an adult paid attention to them. Sometimes it was a one time thing, sometimes it was a school teacher, sometimes it was a family member, sometimes it was somebody in the church and she called it the “enlightened witness” and I thought, “You know, if I can just be that, if I’m not going to have my own family, if I can just be that in, you know, kids’ lives that I know, then I won’t regret not having been a parent.” So I have no regrets.

HW: That’s always good to hear [Laughter]

HH: Mhmm yeah!

HW: Based on your life experience would you [clears throat] excuse me, what advice would you give to others and future generations

HH: I think my advice would be to figure out, no, let me start that over [thinking] I’m trying to remember this quote from Robert Browning...and I would substitute “person” for “man” “A person’s grasp should exceed his or her reach and then he says or what’s a Heaven for? You know it’s like you’ve got to reach for the stars and I would say you know, whatever you do, just reach for something that’s a little beyond your grasp because you’ll stretch yourself and you might discover that you can have a really fulfilling life doing something that you may never have thought of. You know, I’ve spent more years than I can count in art museum education, but growing up I didn’t ever know that existed, I never, I mean – I did know that civic engagement existed because that was what my parents showed me... so I would just say get out there and be involved, reach and then whatever you decide to do, go ahead and do it if it’s traditional go ahead and do it to the best of your abilities, if it’s non-traditional go ahead and do it to the best of your abilities, and never look back.

HW: Powerful words right there. Now that we're working to tell a fuller story of the history of women that has been reported in the past, what should we be sure to include.

HH: Well, you know there have always been stand out women even when women couldn't vote, even when women couldn't own property, even when women were CONSIDERED property, so there's always been stand out women. I think, what I hope history will reflect is that the significance and the accomplishments of women whose lives made it possible for all those other stand out people to be a part of history, you know there was somebody at home cooking Thomas Jefferson's supper and doing his laundry, you know there were people teaching people who went on to be Nobel Prize physicists and those teachers were just by percentages, probably women. You know, I think that women have had an incredible supporting role even when they had no rights and they continue and I think history should acknowledge that.

HW: Okay, I want to ask you one more question before we wrap up. Do you feel you have a legacy, and if so, can you tell us about it?

HH: Hmm [Thinking]... That's a tough question. I think part of my legacy are all those children who are now adults who, you know I was an important part of their growing up, who are now contributing members of society. I think part of my legacy at my job will be the fact that I looked at the art museum as a tool to do a lot of different things and only one of them was to teach about art and to me that's an important legacy [pause] and I think I'll leave it at that.

HW: Is there anything else you would like to add?

HH: [thinking The only thing I'll add is that I think the Worcester Women's History Project is a really sort of amazing thing because there are all these volunteers, who also volunteer in everything else who make sure that the outstanding women and people like me are part of the history of Worcester and I think that that's a great thing.

HW: It's interesting to like talk to a woman like yourself and get like your aspect and your thoughts and feelings about things

HH: Yes

HW: It was very interesting to me, especially being a male so it's pretty interesting.

HH: Yeah, Yeah well you know, when I first came to Worcester they had JUST opened the front door at the Worcester Club to women, there used to be a women's entrance and there was a women's dining room and a men's dining room. 1986, 1986!

HW: I wasn't even born.

HH: Can you imagine? That's like yesterday! They were just opening up the front door to women and I'm sure there are many front doors that still aren't opened to women but that was a big symbol in Worcester, was when the Worcester Club opened its doors.

HW: Looks like we're just about done here

HH: Great!

HW: You know, I would first like to thank you for volunteering

HH: Oh, you're welcome!

HW: Taking the time out

HH: I hope you get a good grade!

HW and BR: We do too! [Laughter]

HW: Final thoughts...comments?

HH: If when you're writing this up if you have any questions feel free to call me, or email ... email is a really easy way to get in touch with me.

BR: I will.