

Interviewee: Barbara Combes Ingrassia
Interviewers: Melysa Faria and Mike Walsh
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Abstract: Barbara Ingrassia was born in 1952 in New York. Her father had an Associate's Degree in rural engineering and her mother had a Bachelor's Degree in Education. Few parents at this time had degrees, and both of hers did, so she was very proud of them. Barbara received a Bachelor's Degree with a secondary in Social Studies from University of New York Geneseo. She also received her Master's Degree in Library Sciences at SUNY Geneseo. She looked at education as her job and she put all her efforts into her studies. She received a scholarship for school and it was a good experience for her first time in a town setting, which was different from the farm life she was used to. She continued her interest in education with librarian jobs at multiple schools such as, Clark University, UMass Medical, and a Community College in West Virginia. She has seen a lot of progress in women's liberation over the past years and has been active in the United Methodist Women.

MF: I would like to ask you permission, Barbara Combes Ingrassia, to record you and interview you, today on November 13th, 2009.

BI: Yes. It's a pleasure.

MF: Alright, thank you. [Pause] So, what is your full name?

BI: Barbara Jean Combes, and my married name is Ingrassia.

MF: Okay. Thank you. And, when were you born?

BI: I was born July 15th, 1952 in Newark, New York.

MF: What is the name of your current husband?

BI: Thomas Andrew Ingrassia.

MF: And, do you have any children?

BI: No, and no grandchildren.

MF: What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with?

BI: Well, sort of a hodge-podge; English, German, French.

MF: Can you tell me a little about, about your family background?

BI: Yes, my father was a dairy farmer; we grew up on a dairy farm in upstate New York in a town called Sodus which is between Syracuse [New York] and Rochester [New York] and my mother was a preschool teacher.

MF: Okay, where have you lived during your life?

BI: Well, the dairy farm in Sodus, New York and then I went to college at SUNY [State University of New York] Geneseo in—in New York. After graduate school, got married and we had agreed that we would go wherever, whoever got the job first and I got the, a librarians job in a community college in Moundsville, West Virginia--well in Wheeling, West Virginia and I lived in Moundsville, West Virginia. And then lived in Urbana, Ohio and in 1980 we moved to Worcester, for my husband's job here at Assumption College.

MF: And, what neighborhood did you live in, in Worcester—like where in...?

BI: Lancaster Street.

MF: Lancaster Street.

BI: We lived there for 10 years.

MF: [Mmhmm] And what was the neighborhood like generally?

BI: [pause] In... where I grew up or—or in Worcester?

MF: In Worcester.

BI: In Worcester.

MF: [Mmhmm]

BI: We lived in an apartment, and there were triple-deckers nearby so WPI [Worcester Polytechnic Institute] students, Becker [Becker College] students, that kind of thing. We were in a building where people had—had lived for quite a long time and so we were new for quite a few years but in ten years we were sort of veterans of the place.

MF: [Mmhmm] Okay, do you still live there now, or...?

BI: Nope, moved to Holden [Massachusetts] in 1990.

MF: Okay, so do your family members live around the same area?

BI: My family is in upstate New York, and...

MF: So they stayed there...

BI: Yes, so I am the one who left [laughter]. And my husband's family is in downstate New York.

[This side of the tape was filled up, so we had to pause for a minute and flip the tape over.]

MF: What challenges do you think that the city still faces?

BI: Well, carving out its own identity. It's always in the shadow of Boston [Massachusetts] and being compared to Boston and people go to Boston because there is nothing to do in Worcester. In contrast, Springfield [Massachusetts], which is that much farther from Boston, has major television networks there, and—and Worcester has just sort of local TV . So, carving out its identity.

MF: Okay. What changes have you seen in Worcester over time?

BI: Well, since moving here in 1980, one of the exciting things about being on Lancaster Street was being within walking distance of downtown; and the galleria; and the Worcester Public Library; and, so downtown has changed. Things have deteriorated, but there's been the new public library, and seeing the new redesign of Lincoln Square several times. It was a rotary when we got here and they—they rearranged it and made Main Street at that end one way and turned it around in the tunnel and—and what-not; the colleges building new facilities, a lot—a lot of exciting things going on there.

MF: What distinct characteristics would you say makes Worcester the place it is?

BI: Well, its name is often a challenge. People don't know how to pronounce it, [laughter] 'war-chester', or—or whatever. But a lot of special things, about Worcester, a lot of history here; and—and sort of an unknown—an unknown claim to fame. It was a leader in manufacturing in the Blackstone River; Mechanics Hall; The American Antiquarian Society; you know moving all the important documents here to the frontier during the Revolutionary War and the things didn't go back, and so many researchers come here from around the country and around the world. Higgins Armory Museum is--is very unique and such a unique building and collection. The Worcester Art Museum is world renowned for its—its size. Elm Park and its--and its designers. [pause] 10 colleges in the area, and that surprises people oftentimes. U-Mass Medical School [University of Massachusetts Medical School], where I teach is the state's only public medical school, and the story of that process is quite dramatic; how—how it ended up way out here in Worcester. Clark University is unique; I worked there for—for 13 years and with Goddard being the father of modern rocketry there and his collection there. And Sigmund Freud made his only U.S. speaking appearance, in the U.S. here at Clark University in 1909 so they're celebrating the hundredth anniversary; and his only honorary degree came from Clark. So—so, I've always been—been proud—proud of that fact, and Clark's well-regarded in psychiatry and geography; and then of course the fact that the first Woman's National Rights Convention, was here, in Worcester. And that's—that's very exciting. Seneca Falls in New York state gets all the—the attention, but that was just the regional meeting So, I'm really proud of Worcester's claim to fame in that regard, and I have been involved with the Worcester Women's History Project quite a bit.

MF: Well then, other than those things, what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

BI: [Pause] Well, women have been in leadership positions, in city government and in the colleges and the public schools, but, it took a very long time for women to be recognized, for example with portraits in the past and it was the Worcester Women's History Project that, that brought that past. [Pause] In general, I don't think that the experiences were any—really any different from—from other places in—in the Northeast; I think women have had a lot of [pause], a lot of privileges, a lot of advances in the work force, a lot of—a good reputation, good opportunities in Worcester for women.

MF: [Pause] Now, where did you attend high school?

BI: Well, I attended Sodus Central School, in Sodus, New York, for K through 12, then went to SUNY Geneseo, for an undergraduate degree in a bachelor's in history with certification in secondary social studies and then got my masters in library science there as well.

MF: Okay; what were your challenges in education?

BI: Well, I was fortunate enough to have a New York State Regents scholarship to be able to attend school; I needed to—I needed to have that—that funding to be able to go to school. My mother had gone to school there, and so—so that was a, sort of a natural choice, but—but having scholarships was very essential; and having grown up on a farm, it was the first time in a—a—sort of a town-community setting, so that was—that was something different. [Pause] I considered college and education to sort of be my job and—and so that's how I concentrated on things.

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

BI: I think various women's groups have—have been important; church groups; the women's movement was beginning to flourish while I was in college in the mid 70's, a raising of awareness with that process, so close friends at work or through school through the years.

MF: And you said that right out of college, out of you and your husband, you were the first to get your job?

BI: Right. He had a—a Master's in, he had gotten a Master's in Latin history; and so he was looking for a teaching job, I was looking for a library position, and I got it first so off we moved to West Virginia.

MF: How did you come to find that job? Did the school recommend it, or...

BI: There was a posting, you know job—job wall posting, [pause] at the library at school.

MF: So, what has the librarian work mean to you?

BI: Well, it's been [pause] a way to serve, a way to teach, preparing the next generation, at Clark—well, at the Community College of West Virginia Northern Community College, and then Clark , and then UMass Medical School.

MF: What were, or are now your primary responsibilities, like in terms of housework?

BI: Well, I said that as—as a college student, school was my job; as a kid school was—was my job, and, so, and then when I got the job before my husband, he took on the household role. He was a much better cook, and—and all of those domestic things, and so it was almost a—a role reversal; so, I'm not really strong in the household things. When we moved to our house, I would be out mowing the lawn and my husband would be hanging laundry, and the neighbors couldn't quite figure that out [laughter], but, so, you know, I'm involved in the dishes and the laundry, and—and things like that, but, I'm not really strong in household things.

MF: Has that changed at all, or, is it still pretty much, like when you started?

BI: Yes, it—it—it's pretty similar, you know, through the years.

MF: So, how have you balanced, like, different priorities and responsibilities and roles and interests in your life?

BI: Well, I very much admire, women who are able to balance family and children and career, so I haven't had the children piece and—and my husband has been such a good house person as well as his—as his career. But, I do find it—it difficult to balance all that, and I, so I have a lot of respect for women who are able to add the children piece to that.

MF: So, how would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path?

BI: Well, I still think I wonder; what am I going to do when I grow up? [Laughter] I was always going to be a teacher; first an art teacher; and then a social studies teacher, and, then , but my degree was in...and I like to teach, but I didn't like the disciplinary, though I have enjoyed teaching at the college level, as I mentioned, I taught some women's studies here [Assumption College], with the evening program; the "Images of Women, the Shaping of Feminine Roles", and so we looked at history and music and art and politics and the economy and all kinds of interesting things. When I first taught that in Ohio, in Urbana, Ohio, my first class was all male veterans; they needed a humanities course, and so they weren't sure what to think of me, and I wasn't sure what to expect from them, but it all worked out fine. Librarianship is a traditional women's job, and [pause], so, I sort of wish it weren't [laughter]; but I do a lot of interesting things, I've been involved in technical services behind the scenes work for a long time, but now I am involved in copyright, licensing of electronic resources, staff training and development, managing the disaster plan, working with the strategic plan, working as a member of the management team; so there is a lot of good variety that I enjoy. Basically, I—I see myself as not having been a risk taker. And, so, I see, time sort of—sort of running out on—on finding out what I am going to do when I grow up. But—but, there's been the benefits of—of being in a service situation, being able to teach; it's funny, when I was a kid, my goal was, to be able to wear white clothes, meaning I wasn't going to be getting dirty, and I wasn't going to be a nurse; and to drive a Ford LTD Wagon, which, was a huge tank at the time and they don't even make anymore but[laughter] but, but, I think service and education kind of things were always my interest.

MF: And you said your husband was teaching also, right?

BI: Well, he fell into higher ed. [higher education] administration continuing education, so that's what he did in West Virginia, and in Ohio, and then we moved here to Worcester for a position with the evening program here at Assumption [Assumption College] and, so we go for work for Clark , and a couple of times, Regis College, but in 2001, he pursued his dream of being involved in the music industry, he worked with Mary Wilson of the Supremes for a number of year, and now he manages artists, he has evolved to classical organists, he does motivational speaking, he talks about Motown and the civil rights movement, those kinds of things; so I really admire him for—for identifying his dream and pursuing it, and then I hasten to say, that I maintain the health insurance, through—through UMass [University of Massachusetts Medical School], so, that's my—that's my role.

MF: [Laughter] So, do you consider yourself active politically?

BI: Moderately; I became involved as—through the United Methodist Women, which is a mission organization of the United Methodist Church, and their focus is a mission with women and children around the world, and I became coordinator for Christian Social Involvement for the Southern New England Conference which was in 1989-93. So I coordinated campaigns on affordable childcare, universal healthcare, which we're still working on, it's long overdue, and, so then I've been involved through the years, continuing years with health care, [pause] the Iraq war, the election of President Obama; I'm involved with moveon.org and various online groups, so, that involved.

MF: So, with all the groups that you are involved in, what would you consider the groups' major accomplishments?

BI: Well, I have been involved with the Worcester Evening Free Medical Service, which is stationed at Epworth United Methodist Church, near the art museum [Worcester Art Museum], and I'm at the Eye Glass Ministry portion, at Wesley United Methodist Church, and so, we give free eye glass, or free eyes exams and then eyes glasses at a very nominal fee, so—so I'm there, one Monday a month, and I certainly see the—the need for—for that program to increase through the years. Then, I was—was very involved with the Worcester Women's History Project. I was involved in PR [Public Relations] in Outreach in the late 90's, and did some speaker training, then for Women 2000, I taught two courses for the WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] Program here at Assumption [Assumption College], two five-week sessions on the development of the Worcester Women's History Project and the history of the area of the first National Woman's Rights Convention, honoring the—the portraits in Mechanics Hall of Clara Barton and Dorothea Dix, Abby Kelley Foster, and Lucy Stone, and, highlighting the Heritage Trail Project, and then talking a lot about the Women 2000 event; so I taught the course here in March and April of 2000, and then was invited back to do it again in the fall, so I was in one of the—one of the delegates who the convention that was portrayed in the Angels and Infidels play that was part of the Women 2000 celebration. I portrayed a woman from New York state, and, represented UMass Medical School at some of the events during—during that one event. That evolved into a—a relationship between the Worcester Women's History Project and UMass Medical School's Lamar Soutter Library when we sponsored a—a national library of medicine traveling expedition called [pause] Changing the Face of Medicine: Celebrating America's Women Physicians, and the Worcester Women's History Project was one of the co-sponsors with the library of that.

MF: And I noticed that you mentioned your church a lot; would you say that religion has played a big role in your life?

BI: Well, I—I've gone to church since I was—since I was little, gone to Sunday school and whatnot. I, sort of fell away from that in college, primarily by the lack of transportation and—and you know, that feeling of camaraderie. I would—I would still go to church when I was at home and, but I've been very involved in—in the United Methodist Church through the years, and, you know, various committees, and, you know, seeking to grow in—in—in my faith.

MF: So, have you had any health issues that have impacted your life or those in your family?

BI: Well, I had asthma as a child and, that was the source of one of my scholarships, was that, a rehabilitation scholarship. I developed osteoporosis in the last 10 years, and, so that—that's a concern. My brother had a kidney removed when he was quite young, and so, dealing with that to some extent. My father had prostate cancer, which became bone cancer, so, and he passed away in 2006, so, and he had allergies, and living on a—on a farm was not the place to be with allergies; in fact, one of my allergies was to cows; and so there I was on a dairy farm, and for years even after leaving, you know, moving away, going to college and—and getting married and moving away, those allergies would pick up when I—when I came home. That, I seem to have grown out of that now, but...

MF: That's good. [Laughter] So you talked about that you have the health care for your husband and you. So what are your experiences in, like accessing, the health care?

BI: Well, because my father was self-employed and my mother was part-time employed, there was no—we did not have access to employer paid health insurance, so we were self insured for major medical kinds of issues, hospital type things. And, so really, my parents didn't have good comprehensive health care until they turned 65 and had access to Medicare, so, that's one of the reasons that I feel so strongly about health care reform and universal health care. Yes, my husband is—is self-employed so I carry the—carry the insurance; but the fact that insurance is so employer based and pre-existing conditioned, portability is—is very important and, universal health care is important to me, and we're the only industrialized nation that does not have some

form of universal health coverage, and so, so that really comes out of my childhood and—and through my—my church projects and—and (_____???)

MF: So, what major historical events in Worcester have occurred during your time here; when you did live here, or while you've worked here?

BI: Well, yes, you know, I have ties through—through work and through church. Well, I mentioned the—the redesign of—of Lincoln Square a number of times, the auditorium closing, EM Loew's closing and changing, the Galleria and the closing of the Galleria. [Pause] Worcester's anniversary. Oh, and of course, the Women 2000 event.

MF: So, how were girls treated when you were in school?

BI: Well, I was in high school in the late 1960's and we couldn't wear slacks to school, and upstate New York was very snowy and very cold. Finally, in 1970, slacks were involved and so there's the great revolution of that. One of the only major troubles with my mother was that I wanted to wear slacks to church youth groups on Sunday night, and she wouldn't allow it, and so now, she wears slacks to church in the morning! [Laughter] So—so, it's been an interesting revolution. I took a lot of math. I took a lot of sciences. Women's sports were available, but I don't think that they were—they certainly weren't emphasized to the—to the extent they are now. [Pause] I was valedictorian of my class, the salutatorian was also female, the class officers though, were male, except for the secretary and the treasurer; so, I didn't think that I was being treated poorly at the time, but as I look back on it, there probably could have been some more opportunities.

MF: Yeah. And what did your parent's education consist of?

BI: Well, my father had an Associate's Degree in rural engineering from Alfred Ag. and Tech [State University of New York College of Technology at Alfred], in Alfred, New York, and he earned that in 1943, and my mother had a Bachelor's of Science [Bachelor of Science Degree] in education from SUNY Geneseo [State University of New York Geneseo], and I had been really proud of them because there were few parents of my generation that both parents had college degrees. And so, that was special, to me.

MF: Do you have any hobbies, or do any regular leisure activities, other than, like, the groups you're involved in, or work?

BI: Some sewing and some Bible study kinds of things. I don't sew as much now as I'd like to; and I don't read as much as one would think a librarian would, you know, you're--you're looking for little pieces of information.

MF: So, now that we want to tell, like, the full story of the history of women, than has been recorded in the past, what do you think, like, that we should include? Is there anything else that you want to say, that we didn't ask?

BI: Well, I'd like to talk a little bit about the significant historical events, while I was growing up. Oftentimes, certain events define a generation, and so, my parents' generation can remember exactly where they were when they heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and so, I think for my generation, it's the assassination of President Kennedy and then, the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the riots of the 60's. Then, the moon landing in 1969. The wedding of Prince Charles and Diana, you know, we—we all got up, I was working here, at the library here at Assumption at the time, so we all got up early to watch that—to watch that wedding. The shuttle explosion, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the end of Apartheid in 1994, and my husband and I were able to go to South Africa then, in 1995 and see the role the churches had played in bringing about the new South Africa. Of course, 9/11 is a defining time for—for all of us living now. And the development of the internet; looking back on typing papers and getting down on the page too far to put the footnotes in, [laughter] having to start over, and now the wonders of—of word processing. And the—the election of our first African American President. In terms of advising women today and in the future, I think defining and identifying your dreams, and really pursuing that and taking risks, focusing on that, not taking—not taking the easy way; taking sciences and technology are important areas that are going to grow. Participating in team sports, and how that developed; that—that camaraderie and—and knowing how to work in a team as a—as a member of the group, knowing that you'll probably change careers, not just job locations, several times in your lifetime, and so being open to change and seeing that as an opportunity. Not taking the gains that have been made by women through the 20th century for granted, continue to work for equality and (_____???) and to support other women in that...

MF: So how would you define success in your life, do you think the definition for you has changed over time?

BI: Well, I think initially, I would be able to wear white clothes, and drive a Ford LTD Wagon, I think success was a financial thing for a while. But, certainly, you find out quickly that money doesn't bring happiness, and so I think being happy, being fulfilled, fulfilling a purpose, having a purpose and fulfilling a purpose, making a difference I think now would be the definition.

MF: And how do you feel about the choices that you've made in your life; do you have any regrets?

BI: Well, again I—I think I took the safe way, I didn't take risks, I wasn't a risk taker. I did what was expected. I think that I sort of fell into the work that I—that I do, so I—I continue to look for my purpose and remind myself that life is a journey; it's not a destination, you don't arrive, you're—you're always continuing that journey. So, I had always thought, well, when I get out of college, you know, I will be an adult, I will know what I am doing, and that's the goal, to finish college. And so—so then to find out that there's a lot more happening after that.

MF: So is there anyone else that you would suggest that we talk to?

BI: Probably, there are—are women at UMass Medical School who would be good. I looked at the list and I don't remember if Dr. Lucy Candib has been interviewed, because I know she's been active with the Worcester Women's History Project and in fact was one of the persons honored in the National Library of Medicine exhibit, Changing the Face of Medicine; so she would have interesting things to say, but she may already be on the list.

MF: Yeah. So is there anything else that you wanted to add, or...?

BI: Well, I think I've, taken a lot of your time [laughter], and I have enjoyed doing this very much and I appreciate being invited.

MW: We appreciate you coming.

BI: Thank you.

MF: Thank you very much.