

Interviewee: Joan Webster
Interviewers: Lindsay Schoen and Leslie Lupien
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Transcribers: Lindsay Schoen and Leslie Lupien



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Abstract: Joan Webster was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1932. From a very young age, Joan was drawn to political activism and awareness. In this interview, she focuses on her education as well as her continued involvement in many community and political activities. She discusses her experiences participating in extracurricular activities at Clark University, including theater productions and founding the campus literary arts magazine. Graduating from Clark in 1954, Joan explains how she sacrificed acting ambitions and put-off plans for a Masters in Social Work in order to get married and start a family. She speaks about her active support of the women's movement, anti-war protests, and voter registration in the South. As a lifelong educator working at every level from preschool to adult higher education, Joan also addressed such issues in the classroom. In defining success in her own life, Joan reflects upon her ability to positively affect the lives of her children and students and leave a positive "footprint" on the world. She remains determined to be an active participant in her life and is currently involved in many organizations such as Assumption College's WISE program and the Universal Unitarian Church. Throughout her life, she has striven to help others, and hopes to continue this feat in the future.

LS: Do we have permission to record this interview?

JW: Yes you do.

LS: Oh, excellent. What is your full maiden name and your married name?

JW: My maiden name was Joan Greenbaum and my married name is Joan Webster

LS: When and where were you born?

JW: I was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey ... 1932.

LS: Do you have any siblings?

JW: Yup, an older sister and I have a younger brother.

LS: Do you have any children?

JW: Yup, I have three of them, two sons and a daughter.

LL: And do you have any grandchildren?

JW: Yes all three of my grandchildren are grandsons.

LL: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

JW: Simple question, complicated answer. I was brought up as a Jew, and whether that is a religion or an ethnicity is heavy debate topic, but it certainly made a difference in day-to-day as well as religious activities. And for a long time that was my identity. When I became disillusioned with organized religion I still identified myself as ethnically Jewish. I now—and have been since fall of the year 2000—I now am a Unitarian Universalist, and so that kind of overlays the religious question. But the nature of UU-ism is that I can be a Jewish U.U. so I don't give up that part of my heritage. And I don't know if that answers your question.

LS: Yea I think it does. Why did you decide to become a Unitarian Universalist?

JW: I had retired in December of '99 and the work I did, that I retired from, involved things that had been important to me on a continuous basis. I worked in the town of Framingham as the administrator of human relations. And so what I did was receive complaints from people who believed they had been discriminated against and help them sort out whether their experience matched the legal definition and worked with them on what options they had for resolving the situation. I also worked with groups in the town and did a whole lot of community education work on discrimination, on stereotyping. In addition to some of the classical categories for discrimination, I was fair housing officer for the town, so that meant I got calls from landlords and the tenants both, and again did community education about what responsibilities and privileges there were. In addition, just to keep it from being boring, I was 504 coordinator for the town, and that was federal legislation which had to do with disabilities. And it was limited to programs where there was federal money. When the A.D.A., the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed—and that broadened the scope considerably—I became the A.D.A. coordinator for the town and again there were all kinds of activities involved including starting and working with a disabilities subcommittee of the Human Relations Commission that I started because those issues weren't going to wait. And when I retired I no longer had a base to work from, but the issues of justice and discrimination and stereotyping and inclusion—which for me is really what those all are about—are really kind of a passion. So I was searching around Worcester—I lived in Worcester all that time—I was searching all over Worcester to try and find a group that I could work with because those are not issues that you set yourself up as a solo someone or other to pursue them. There really needs to be a group, and I was getting increasingly frustrated. And then a friend that I was visiting down on the Cape took me to a U.U. church, and I was amazed because there was a sense of community and people seemed to care about the same things I cared about. So I decided when I got home I would check and see if I would find it again, and it's not perfect but it's...you know. There are two U.U. churches even though one of them is called just Unitarian, the two groups merged and so officially they are both U.U. There's one on Main Street and there's one on Holden Street and the one I go to is the one on Holden Street. It seems to fit me, and the sense of community that there is there is important to me, and I never thought that I'd find it again. I knew it back with the program I taught in there was that kind of sense that you don't have to earn a place in the world, you get it just by being and that's really very strongly there. By the way a number of the people...well which sentence should I finish

(laughing)... The first time that I visited that church, there was a special ceremony, not the usual service and the special ceremony was to celebrate the Women's History Project, and there has been a strong connection between the Women's History Project and that church for some time. It's less subtle then it once was, then it was originally, so of course I became a member of the Women's History Project back when.

LS: Oh that's great

JW: And I have since let it lapse.

LS: You're busy though. Yeah, very busy.

JW: Long answer for a short question

LL: Obviously you just talked a lot about the programs that you have been involved here in Worcester. And you arrived here in 1986? Or moved here?

JW: Yeah, I came to Worcester in—actually the first place I lived was Shrewsbury and lived there six months and then moved to Worcester and it was in '86. But the jobs I had were kind of on the demanding side, and so I mostly slept in Worcester and didn't do much else. I didn't really know the town. I had some erroneous memories because I had gone to Clark. But I graduated from Clark in '54 and Worcester has not stayed the same, and my memory also is kind of fuzzy so there would be things that happen when I came back and I would remember that Chandler Street was important, but I couldn't remember why. So it was quite disconcerting to know and not know. The first job that I had coming out of Vermont—which is where I came out, where I came from—was a statewide job as teacher-trainer for the bureau of institutional schools, so I was hitting the road and traveling all over the state, so you don't get to know your hometown very well. At least I didn't.

LS: Alright, where did you attend school?

JW: By school you mean college? Or do you mean...

LS: Yeah, you can start from the very beginning. We're focusing on education, I guess, so where did you start initially?

JW: I went to public schools in Elizabeth, New Jersey where I was born and that's where I went through elementary school, junior high school, which I guess no longer exists anywhere. And I guess the thing that's kind of interesting educationally was the high school that I went to was a public high school and it was all female. The city powers that be, when the high school became too small, needed to build a new high school, and it seemed to them that if they segregated by gender, that it would be cheaper. Because instead of having to have for instance...everyone knew we weren't going to use automotive shop, and boys wouldn't use sewing and cooking, and you wouldn't have to have two sets of restrooms and so they built a new school, and the new school was built for the boys, and the old school was given over to the girls. And it led to kind of interesting experiences for the girls because the boys couldn't take all the leadership positions;

there weren't any. And so things that in co-ed schools frequently girls don't have a shot at, at an all-girls school we all did everything. So the education, the high school has grown again and they have reconsidered in Elizabeth the single sex schools and they now have co-ed schools. I think it was not really a disadvantage to have gone through that in some ways. It meant that we were really silly when we were around boys. We didn't know what those creatures were (laughing), weren't used to them and we didn't quite know what to do with our leadership skills because there were our mothers telling us we had to hide that kind of thing. Can't let them know that. Can't let them know that you're smarter than them either. And that was the mood when I was growing up. You hid certain things, like your ability, definitely, definitely, your ability and your smarts. Anyway when I graduated from high school, I then went to Clark for four years. And when I graduated from Clark, I never expected to be back in Worcester. So this has been kind of a surprise. I went on to get my masters but that was not until 1980 and it was because I miraculously was teaching in a BA granting program without a Masters degree, which doesn't make very much sense in some ways. But there were a lot of things at Goddard College which didn't make sense to the rest of the world, they make perfectly good sense to Goddard. And there was a self-assessment tool that I wanted to do with my students, and I developed it and one of my colleagues said, "This is somebody's PhD that your doing. You ought to at least get your Masters out of it." And that made kind of sense, and so Goddard had a Masters program and allowed me to do the kind of thing I wanted to do at that point and really really hewn the self assessment tool. And so my Masters is officially in two fields. It's in both education and counseling psych, and that's in part because the argument I was making in my thesis was that those two are the same side, or two sides of the same coin rather than separate. And when you teach you better understand counseling psych in order to be an effective teacher. And if you are an effective counselor, you better understand teaching 'cause that's what your doing. So that's where I went educationally, and I am not at all interested in getting a doctorate.

LS: A lot of work I hear. (Laughs)

JW: Well, I have a son who did it and that's fine 'cause he wanted it and he needed it. But I'm...

LS: Well if you're happy where you are...

JW: Well, I had I tough enough time agreeing with myself that I would pursue a Masters because I am much more interested in what people do than letters after anybody's name. And when people have PhD's, they almost have to convince me that they are good and effective human beings. It's a reverse snobbery.

LL: While you were in school what were you involved in other than academics? I'm sure there's a long list maybe just college, or high school.

JW: When I was in high school, I came from a family that didn't have money. And there was real limit on what I did as far as extracurricular stuff because I worked after school. I worked at the public library for at least three of my high school years. I also worked before school selling delivering the New York Times to the high school community. So I was interested in theater; I did some of that. I began working in the summers, doing group work. I keep doing things I'm not qualified to do, but I do them anyhow. But I also got involved during the year working with

groups at the local Y. But that was...I consider that pretty limited. When I got to college, I was bedazzled by the opportunities that there were. One of the things that I got involved in was quite accidental. I was asking as a freshman trying to say, "What is there around this campus, what are my choices, what's the menu? Where is the smorgasbord?" And so one of the questions I asked was if there was a literary magazine because I was interested in writing. And there were a couple of professors who said no, but there should be. Why don't you do a survey? Now I was a freshman and I didn't know what was going on. And...but they said why don't you do a survey and we'll help. So coming from that, I accidentally started the literary magazine on the Clark campus. (Laughs).

LS: Funny how that happens

JW: And we agreed...and the two guys, the two men in the English department who had kind of pushed me on this volunteered to be the advisors. So that was all set. And I told them that I didn't think I should be the editor-in-chief. I was only a freshman. And they agreed that that wouldn't be a good idea. But I still feel really pleased with the rules that we made up for how the literary board would behave. And most important one, which drove some people who wanted to be on Lit Board and some of the other people involved with the magazine right up a wall, was that if anyone submitted anything to the magazine then they were entitled to get a critique. If it was not going to be accepted to be published, and have an opportunity to redo it if they wanted to. And so Lit Board's responsibility was to provide that feedback. And when all you're interested in is the power to say yes and no it's a real nuisance to have people write and do critiques to fellow students. But Clark was so small in those days that we couldn't limit it to undergraduates, we wouldn't have had anything. So we included the entire community. So, in addition to people on campus, undergraduates, graduates, faculty and grad students, we really solicited graduates and got some incredible stuff from people who were...we got someone from S.N. Behrman who was a very established writer and he had been a Clarkie, and so he wrote a piece about F. Scott Fitzgerald. Anyway, I'm not exactly sure how long the magazine survived after I graduated, but someone told me that it was quite a few years and eventually it died. When I was in college I continued to need to earn money and so I worked at the library as a page. I worked in the dorm as a proctor. I did some other...I did babysitting and other things. All the things you do to earn some money. But my love of theater continued and so I got pretty heavily involved in being a ham. (Laughs) And had a good time doing that. But you know, being curious about the world really does lead to getting involved. I got involved in the newspaper too of course.

LS: No, that's great to get involved. I'm curious to learn about the world. (Laughs)

LL: Were you involved in any political activities while in college?

JW: (Laughs) Actually my being involved in politics goes back before college. I was living in Elizabeth, New Jersey, very close to New York City, and I remember going to New York City for meetings of something called The World Federalists, which was a one-world government group. This was well before the U.N. When I was sixteen, I terrified my parents because it was 1948, and in the election of '48 there was a third party called the Progressive Party, and I became a young progressive. And I would—was there stuffing envelopes and being at really and passing

the hat, and also learning how rough the police could be with people that they didn't approve of. And it very much made a dent on my view of politics and political parties, those years of that campaign. And there'd be rallies broken up by police on horseback. It was not nice. It was not kind. I didn't think it was very democratic and I still don't. So I had been politically active with third party politics. When I got to Clark I was not involved in any organized political activities, although I, you know there would be impassioned arguments at the dorm. You know arguments about Eisenhower. Whether, what did he represent? And change if you don't know what you're changing for is worthless, and all the other arguments that I suspect still go on.

LS: Why did you choose to go to Clark?

JW: Clark was among the least expensive colleges at the time. And on a very personal level, it was the right distance from home. I had an older sister who went to a New Jersey—what was that called? New Jersey College for Women. It now has a new name, but I watched my parents drop in on her periodically when they thought, when they...so I wanted to be where I was a little out of range for that. I wanted to be close enough so I could get home if I wanted to.

LS: The convenience factor.

JW: Yeah, but not so close that they could drop in on me if they wanted to. And I knew of Clark because some of my sister's friends had gone to Clark as graduate students in psych, and so I knew something about its reputation and that it was a good solid small liberal arts school. And I was looking for a liberal arts school. So that is what drew me to Clark.

LS: Did you enjoy it there?

JW: Oh, I had a wonderful time. Very open. One of the things that contributed to education at Clark was the ease of making contact with faculty. So that, I think we all knew which bars each of the faculty members hung out in. And so if you wanted to talk to one you would not necessarily go to an office you would go to Moynihan's or Brine's or Gilrein's depending on the faculty member's choice. But I guess my... stop me please...I tend to be a storyteller.

LL: Oh no that's good.

LS: Perfect...we like the stories. (Laughs).

JW: Now thinking back on it, I think it was sort of nerdy for us, but at the time it seemed perfectly reasonable. There were a bunch of us at the Student Union who got into an argument about whether or not Socrates had been a Sophist. And it was a mix of people who were in some philosophy classes and political thought classes and the argument got really quite heated. And then somebody said, "Let's go ask Jordan," and professor Jordan was—he taught the political philosophy class, but he lived in a house that was on the campus; it no longer exists. They've torn all those frame houses down, but there he was very vulnerable. And so it must have been nine o'clock or later. A group of us trooped down from the student union and knocked on the door and he and his wife were so gracious. And we stood there at the doorstep and we said, "Professor Jordan was Socrates a Sophist?" (Laughs) And they were wonderful. They invited us

in, and his wife managed to find some cookies and something to drink. And I don't remember whether the answer was yes or no. (Laughs) But I will never forget going there and knocking on his door and he was...he had a problem with his back so that he wore a brace and he was very, very straight up and down. And you'd think that you'd be put off by anyone who looked severe like that, but there was something about his manner and something about Clark at that time. I don't know if people would do something like that today. But that was the kind of place that it was.

LS: That's good to have approachable teachers. That's a really important aspect. When you finished college at Clark what did you see as your options for your career?

JW: As I was finishing my senior year, I was torn between theater and social work and actually had an application to go to New York School for social work, which was a particularly good school in those days; may still be. And I also had applications to spend the summer in summer stock, and my—I thought, if I spent the summer in summer stock I would have a better reading if I could consider theater as a career. I was good within Clark, but Clark was so small that that wasn't a good enough test for me. So those...my thought was, well, I could spend the summer in summer stock and then decide whether to continue pursuing my love or go the social route. Social work route. I ended up getting married instead, and doing neither of those things. And not getting an MSW, and that's ok, 'cause that you can do later. But I am haunted by not knowing whether or not I could have made it in theater. 'Cause that I can't do now. That I couldn't come back and pick up. And now I've got problems with my voice, so here I am unable to really really play with theater as much as I'd like.

LS: Do you still go to the theater a lot?

JW: Not really, I'm a ham. Going to see other people hamming is not what it's about. It's about...it's about the hamming itself. I did community theater at various places where I lived. When I was teaching, because you could generate ideas for classes, I came up with the notion of something called appreciation of theater and got to teach that. And that was a matter of looking at all the tech stuff that goes into theater. And being able to learn how to read a play, how to read dramatic literature. And that is the surface explanation. The real explanation was it gave me a chance to ham. And I also directed some community—but, and directing community theater is what convinced me that that's not what I want to do. I want to ham. So I would...if I ever got a voice back, I would try organizing some reader's theater productions, or readers theater that might have productions. But without a voice that's not very satisfying.

LL: After you graduated from college—you said that you graduated in 1954—were you involved in any of the civil rights issues in the sixties anything like that? Could you just elaborate on your political things after college?

JW: Yeah. I guess the most coherent activity that I was involved with was in attempt to do voter registration in Fayette County, Tennessee. And Fayette County is geographically in Tennessee, but a whole lot of what life is like, is more like Alabama. And there were a group of people from Cornell and one of the Mid-western schools who banded together to really organize voter registration. And in the sixties, I was the mother of young children—had all kinds of things

going on, so that I was not a good candidate to going down myself. But what we did was to do a whole variety of ways of supporting that project. It was so difficult for the people to live there that they really needed, every so often, a chance to get some rest. And so the role that I was playing in connection with that was, we would, we would host some of the folks who were the people who lived there and needed time out. And we'd bring them up to Cortland, which is right near Ithaca where Cornell is, and there was a kind of a support group out in Cortland. And we would give them a chance to catch their breath and also organize events that would be a combination of fundraising, and a chance for people to tell others what was going on, what was, what life was like for them. Some of my friends, some of the people who were teaching at Cortland at the time actually did go down and came back with bullet holes in their cars and people played rough. And they weren't playing. They were dead serious. Bad pun. No pun intended. But, and then when, and then there was an overlap time when the civil rights activities were continuing and anti-war activities were starting and it got all blended together and a lot of who was active were the same people. And so I became...I was running preschools and every time I said to three and four year olds, "Just 'cause your bigger and stronger then somebody else does not give you the right to push them around," it became more a more difficult for me to stay silent and do nothing when it appeared that's what my country was doing in my name. And that's how I became more involved with anti-war. And a group of us started something called Cortland Citizens for Peace. And every Saturday there was vigil in front of the post office and we held signs that said, "Why not withdraw." That's all the sign said. And it was not a silent vigil because we wanted to talk with people. And it wasn't just to demonstrate our purity; it was a matter of really wanting to talk about the issues there were and why we came to the conclusion that are involvement in Vietnam was wrong. And it's sort of ironic that I'm back to wearing a peace pendant. And I really hope someday I can stop. But it just feels like such Alice in Wonderland use of language when the way you support troops is to kill them and put them in danger. That doesn't make any sense to me. And so I am one of the people felt that the way you support troops is to protect them and you don't put them in danger unless there is something really compelling. And there isn't. We got it wrong in Vietnam and we got it wrong now as far as I'm concerned. But I think when I first started reading and learning about Vietnam, I was hoping that I would find some reason to do nothing, some way to justify that. Because you know I just wanted to do stuff with kids; that's what I did. And the more I learned, the worse it became until doing nothing was not tolerable. And so I guess you've asked me about civil rights though. (Laughs) I wandered. But because of the sixties, because of what was happening, for me they kind of blend. They're very related, and then as now, one of the civil rights components is that the men and women who are dying in larger—if you look at percentages, it's people who are minorities. Minority people who are doing the dying, and there's something wrong there too.

LS: Yes, it kind of relates to your job working with different ethnicities.

JW: Yeah, it concerns civil rights, I think. It has been one of the constant themes in my life. And it probably will continue to be because the world changes very slowly. And when the women's movement came along that was kind of fun too.

LL: Would you like to elaborate?

JW: (Laughs). Well, obviously it was...once people started recognizing that women were officially abused and the women's movement started, then I knew that I was going to be part of that too. But in junior high school before there was a women's movement, I refused to learn how to sew or to cook. There was no vocabulary and there wasn't an analysis, but I did have this feeling that somehow if I were cooking and sewing and typing—by the way as well, though I resisted that in high school, I waited 'til then—that somehow you got second class status. And so the way to resist second-class status was to not learn how to cook or how to sew and then later to not learn how to type. And what that is a version of shooting yourself in the foot because those are skills that are very useful. And eventually I did need to learn how to cook. I eventually did learn how to sew, and if you're going to work with computers at all then you have to, you have to know your way around a keyboard. But so that the women's movement gave a vocabulary, gave an analysis. When I was in Vermont, when the women's movement really took off—lived in Cortland when it began. It was just the stirrings, but it really took off when I was in Vermont. And so there were several projects that I got involved with, in addition to teaching, but as part of the Massachusetts State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, I was one of the people who worked on the booklet for sexual harassment that was aimed at employers to let them know why they needed a policy and what sexual harassment was. And one of the things that was really fun about that was that there was a man who was part of the chamber of commerce who cooperated very heavily in putting that booklet together, and offered using his mailing list and subsidizing getting mailings out to all the employers in the state. And we were sitting there, we were scratching our head trying to figure out what was going on. Turned out he had two daughters and this was his way of helping to protect his daughters. So there was that booklet. Also, I was part...I was involved in ACLU Vermont, American Civil Liberties Union in Vermont, the state affiliate, and I ended up being head of the state affiliate so that I could help get things done. And we ended up doing the first conference that there was in the state on women's issues with a whole lot of workshops. And we were criticized by some of the feminists because we didn't have enough women panelists. We used men, how dare we? And the answer was very simple. At that point, there weren't women in positions to have experience with a whole lot of the stuff. The best lawyers in the state, at that point, were still men. And if we were going to have the best information available for women, then we were gonna use men. But that turned out to be a slightly controversial aspect of that. So there were a variety of things when that started going. And when I was teaching, there were two of us that were interested in teaching a class called "Issues of and About Women," and we didn't plan it well. We didn't plan well how each of us would participate. And we ended up, the first class meeting, discovering how far apart we were. She identified men as the enemy, and I don't do that, and I didn't do that. There was a more systemic thing that I was interested in, and I didn't see why giving women power to abuse men made things better than having men abusing women. There needed to be some other change needed. But in that first meeting, I think that both of us were stunned at the difference we discovered. And I'm sure that our voices got raised because we were so startled. We ended up scaring our students because this was a program for working adults, minority people, low income people, a lot of them women. And for a lot of those women, when voices were raised, when there was anger, the next thing that happened was somebody got hurt—usually them. And so, when there were two faculty who were clearly very angry, our poor students were absolutely thrown. And in a way it worked out well because doing one-on-ones with some of those students afterward, it was possible to process that and to encourage them to consider the possibility that anger did not always lead to someone getting hurt; that it was possible to disagree, disagree

strongly, and not have anyone get hurt. So we ended up deciding there was no way that we could bridge that gap and that we would each teach separate sections and run it our own ways, and we did. And in the group that I was working with, the students said, “This is all very nice to have a whole bunch of women talking about this, but the real test would be, what happens if we get with the men?” And so they put me up to designing a workshop called “Between Men and Women.” And I told them that I would do it but only if they cooperated and helped with putting it together. And the basis of this thing is a set of three sets, which are basically questions, incomplete sentences that are the same in the way. So, one of them is “most men...most men are...” and then “most women are...” and the third one was “I am...” And so, they’re all the things that the students wanted to find out, that interested them. Most men think the most important thing in life is...and then most women...and then I... It’s way too long as it developed because those things—that’s what they wanted to bring to the floor. And so the way the workshop ran was to ask people to quickly respond to those. We told them we’re not going to ask you to disclose your response; you can keep it secret. Because then the questions had to do with what you saw, what ones were easiest or hardest to respond to. Were your responses about yourself most like your own gender or were they most like the other gender? And, let the discussion go where it would go. So, I knew that had been successful because all the rest of the residency weekend, people were going around sharing them with others and the discussion was continuing after the workshop ended. And the people who hadn’t gone to the workshop because it was open to anyone in the program were sitting there saying, “Oh, I want to do it too!” and they were writing out their responses. So that’s when I knew that it was a success. And then I taught another class called “Between Men and Women” and that was a mixed class. You know the issues continued, and I did teach something called “Dynamics of Stereotyping” and that was focused on the dynamics, not racism or sexism or any of the other –isms, but how does it work? And I still don’t know anyone else who’s done that. But I think that’s what will hold no matter what.

LL: Are you currently still involved with these issues?

JW: Well, it’s hard not to be involved with women’s issues. At least, I don’t see how you cannot be. By being female you’re involved in women’s issues, in one way or another. Whether it’s formal or not. I am a member of NARAL, in support of reproductive choice as a women’s issue. So, is there another kind of involvement that you wondered about? (Laugh)

LS: So you’ve been an educator for a while, what levels did you teach? What age ranges have you taught?

JW: I’ve done the range. Originally I worked with preschool kids and I taught in and ran preschools. Then when my children were in school, I did substitute teaching in elementary schools. Then at Goddard, I was hired as a preschool specialist and that got broader because of the nature of the program, and because I think the excitement in anything is the nexus between theory and practice. And that’s where the excitement lies. And I could—in doing workshops for potential preschool teachers—I could no longer say, “Well, last week in my class this is what happened.” And so, I said, you know, I gotta stop doing this. And someone else needs to. So we would hire adjuncts so we could do that, and I began teaching more and more other things. So that was BA granting for working adults. You had to be at least twenty six to be in the program and be out of formal education at least five years. Or you’d have to petition for admission and

convince the faculty that you would use the program well and that you had something to offer your fellow students—that you'd been involved in the world in some way so that you had something to teach your fellow students because teaching came not just from the faculty, but every student, both a learner and a teacher in our view. And so that's where I ended up and I did that for over 11 years. For a while I ended up teaching a lot of writing. I had done a lot of writing, and even then my formal training was not in writing. I would go into faculty member meetings and scream that no matter what else we were teaching we were always teaching writing because whatever the topic was, the means of conveying it was gonna be the written word, and so we all had to keep remembering that we were teaching writing. And so when one of my colleagues who officially had the background to teach writing came in and announced that he was bored with the basic writing class—someone else needed to do it, everyone turned to me and said “you.” And I thought, well, you know, here I'd been working one-on-one with students; it would be fun to see what I could do with a class. And I found that I really, really enjoyed it. So, I started teaching writing classes and did a lot of the basic writing and I also ended up doing editing and polishing. Each of our students had to do a senior study, which was a bigger or more important or deeper project that lasted for a full year. And all students, all of the senior studies were shelved in the college library. So editing and polishing really mattered. And, so I switched in a way, but the principles of this thing would ever age group you're working with. When you're working with the contents, which is how you approach things, doesn't really... And the way I taught was very much influenced by...the way I taught in my program was very much influenced by what I thought was important with three and four year olds. And basically the word empowerment is the key and that's what you're doing as a teacher.

LL: How would you define success in your life and how has this definition changed over time?

JW: Hmm...I'm not sure about success in my life as a global thing. I know the way I knew a class was successful when I was teaching was when it continued after the class ended. A course was successful when it made a difference in what students did. When the course was no longer going. As a parent, I feel very successful because all three of my children are competent, confident, autonomous adults, and that's what I think parenting's about. As far as a total life goes, I'm not sure how to judge success on that. Maybe, maybe, hmm, I'm not sure. Maybe it's the human heart, or the willingness to be engaged in the world and in your life, to play and be an active participant in your life rather than passive. On that, I guess I sure have. And trying to live in a way that's ethical, that's right, that makes some positive contribution so that you're stomping around on the earth isn't creating damage, but is leaving some decent footprint behind. But I guess I feel as one person, what I can do by myself is very tiny. And that's okay because that's what any one person for groups and I guess that's why I look for groups because they can do so much more. Now you've got me thinking about that question though.

LS: Just back to education, what subject areas were you most successful in, or what were your challenges?

JW: It's easier to answer the other way around. I never thought of myself as a particularly successful student. My sister was brilliant and I knew I liked learning and I liked solving problems, but I thought of myself, actually, as not college material, as that phrase goes. When I was graduating from high school and there was a teacher and my sister and the two of them

pushed me to apply because I think I wouldn't have applied otherwise. And I guess I still, even though I've been an academic, I still don't think of myself in terms of academic success. I stayed away from anything involving numbers. I am not willing to memorize because that's too dull. And that may be why I never learned to add, subtract, multiply, divide, or spell. Those are all the things in elementary school and my elementary school education really went off the rails. In my mid-forties, I did teach myself how to add but that's as far as I go. There are advantages to not knowing how to spell. When you don't know how to spell and there are times you have to write publicly, you need a bigger vocabulary than other people so that you can think of another word, a synonym, that you can substitute, and the word that you want to use is one that you know. You don't have a chance at not embarrassing yourself. You also develop editing skills so that the sentence you had in mind has a word that there's no way that you're going to try that one, so you have to recast the whole sentence to avoid that word. You can't think of a synonym. I think I really can't respond to that question, so I ought to really shut up.

LS: (Laughs). No that's a good response.

LL: Well, we've talked a lot about your past, what are you doing now?

JW: A lot of my energy goes into being a mediator. I mediate two afternoons a week at the courthouse in small claims court. At least I go there and that means that people who file claims have a choice about being heard by a magistrate or trying to work things out with the help of mediators. I also have advanced training to do divorce mediation and family mediation and that's not as regularly scheduled. The mediation center in Worcester trains me to use, and so I've been involved in that. We've started training divorce mediators as well as doing the basic mediation with the training, and I'm involved in that. And various other chores around the mediation center, and that takes a lot of time. And it's very satisfying stuff, and always different because even if it's the same basic kind of case, it's different people. And so, it's not going to be the same. So that keeps me going a lot. Having discovered UU-ism I've gotten very involved with my church. I'm no longer on the board, which is great because I discovered I'm not a good board member. One of things about boards is that they're the fiscal agent. Fiscal agent means numbers and my relationship with numbers is still not good. It's only taken me how many boards to figure that one out. But I'm on a long-range planning committee right now. I chair the accessibility committee, dealing with how to be welcome to people with disabilities of all kinds. I'm also on the church district disability committee and that's getting launched doing interesting things. And I'm on the bylaws and governance committee at the church. It's a really nice three-person committee with two men who are respectful, despite my being female, and who, if I say something, listen, and who, if I don't say something will ask me what I think. And that is amazing in men of their age because you don't find people who are 55 and older and behave that way, but these two guys do. And that's a very nice group and I will do odd and end things. Saturday afternoon I was out there working on some crafts to be sold at a craft fair. I think about my kids a lot. They are too busy for us to spend great gobs of time, but what time we have is always valuable time together. One of the things that is kind of waiting for me to get back to is making art. And I haven't done much of that because between the church and mediation. And I also take classes at WISE; somehow time just evaporates. I'm not quite sure how that works. And my daughter's significant other was very sweet the other day. The two of them were over and he was looking at a pastel that I did of my daughter and he said, "You really have to go back

to making art.” So it was very nice of him. But I don’t know when I can do that. I’m not sure when I can elbow it in.

LS: Your busy schedule.

LL: Based on your life experience, what advice would you give women today or in future generations?

JW: Probably, do it. Whatever it is for you, do it. Go for it.

LS: Why did you decide to continue your education by going to WISE?

JW: There were several prongs to that. When I retired, I didn’t know people in Worcester because I was running all over the state or I was getting consumed by the town of Framingham and so, I thought that WISE would be a place that I could meet other people, particularly people who are interested in stuff. If you were taking classes then other people who were taking classes in the same things you were interested in, would be apt to be people who’d be potential friends. Hasn’t worked well, but that’s okay.

LS: Oh.

LL: As we’re concluding this interview, is there anything else you’d like to add?

JW: I think that you two have been remarkably patient.

(Laughs)

LS: We’ve enjoyed it; I have.

JW: You really are. But, I just hope that this turns out to be useful to someone in some way. I mean, maybe, another story occurs to me and I think in the back of my head, I’m still trying to wrestle with the question about success that you asked. And the story that just popped into my mind was when I gathered my kids together—my daughter was seventeen, and there’s four-years difference between each of my kids, so that they weren’t very advanced as far as age goes. And I gathered them together because I wanted to talk to them about when I died. My mother died and there was such chaos and I swore that I didn’t want my kids subjected to nonsense like what I saw happening. And so, I wanted them to be protected by having talked about everything and capturing things on paper so that we could talk about what kind of ceremony would be useful to them. Because I figured I’d be dead and gone, and what mattered was what would help them. So I wanted to talk about that. I wanted to talk about a will and what ought to be in that. But one of the other things that I wanted to talk about was an anatomical gift. And I had seen some of my students when their parents died just completely freak out when they discovered that their parents wanted to donate parts of their bodies. And so I wanted to find out what my children’s reaction would be. And so we sat there around the table, and I said, “What would you think of donation of anything that would be useful, any body parts whatsoever? Would that be okay or not okay?” And one of my sons looked at me and said, “Mom, you’ve spent your whole life

trying to help other people, why would you stop just because you were dead?" (Laughs.) And I guess that's sort of the feeling I have about this process. Is maybe it will be of some use to somebody. So why would you stop just because the recording machine got turned off.

LS: That's a good way that your son put it.

JW: So, I now have this anatomical gift thing.

LL: Well thank you very much for your time.