

Interviewee: Diane Laska-Nixon
Interviewers: Emily Daly and Colleen Lockney
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Transcriber: Emily Daly



Overseen by: Professors Maryanne Leone and Regina Edmonds, Assumption College

Abstract: Diane Laska-Nixon was born on April 1st 1954 in Worcester, MA. She is married to Paul P. Nixon and has a college-age daughter enrolled in a Business program at Assumption College. She is currently the director of Alumni Relations at Assumption College, and also attained her undergraduate degree there for Social and Rehabilitation Services in 1976. While working in Public Relations, she was involved in diverse fields, such as campaigning for the de-institutionalization of the mentally challenged and advertising the programs and events for Men's Professional Golf Tournaments. After living in Washington D.C for a brief period, she returned to the house she grew up in to care for her ailing parents. As a progressive woman in the work force, her advice to the current generation of young women is to achieve a degree in higher education so that they may have unlimited opportunities in the work force.

The interview was held in Diane Laska-Nixon's office at her work in Worcester, MA.

CL: Do we have your permission to record your oral history today?

DN: Yes.

CL: Ok. We are completing a city wide 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 life experiences. Thank you for your help on this important project.

DN: You're welcome.

ED: This interview of Diane Laska-Nixon is being conducted by Colleen Lockney and Emily Daly. So, your first question is: What is your full maiden name and, if applicable, your married name?

DN: Diane Marie Laska-Nixon.

ED: Ok. When were you born?

DN: April 1st 1954.

CL: Do you have children?

DN: I have one daughter age 20 ½.

ED: Oh, college age.

DN: Yes, undergraduate here at Assumption.

ED: Oh, she goes here? What's her major?

DN: I don't know. Business maybe? Is there a Business major here?

CL: Yes, I think there is a Business program here.

ED: Oh, did you say...any grandchildren?

DN: No.

ED: No, Ok. What cultures/ethnicities do you identify with in your family background?

DN: My mother's side English, and my father's all Albanian.

ED: Actually, that brings me to a question I want to ask you. Do you have any relation to the Assumption College Laska building?

DN: I do. That's my dad.

CL: Oh, no way!

ED: That's awesome! So he founded it?

DN: No, he was the athletic director and coach here for 40 years. He kind of helped get it built and then they named it after him. So I'm a second-generation employee also.

ED: That's great. Well, what did he coach?

DN: Mostly basketball, but then in the early days, in the 50's and 60's, the school was so small he kind of coached...

CL: Was it all boys back then?

DN: Yeah, yeah, until the 70's. So he kind of coached a lot of little teams, or found coaches to do it. And when he retired from being coach he was still an athletic director. And he kind of coached the golf team a little bit maybe. This, that, and the other thing.

ED: Oh there was a golf team?

DN: Yeah, there still is. Oh yeah, there's a big golf team.

ED: I didn't know that.

DN: Yeah, a very good golf team. As a matter of fact, a girl that works for me, her son's on the golf team. It's a very good one and they've got some good players. So, yes that is my father.

CL: Did you grow up in Worcester?

DN: I did.

CL: In what neighborhood?

DN: Burncoat Street area.

CL: Close by.

DN: [Nods] Mmmhmm.

CL: And what was that generally like growing up in your neighborhood?

DN: Great. Lots of kids. It was back in the day when you all went to the same elementary school. Before they had Charter Schools and you could go ...yeah before bussing, so you all walked to school together. We walked home for lunch, then walked back to school and then walked home again.

ED: How far away was the elementary school you went to?

DN: Half a mile.

ED: So you would walk a half a mile there then back again? You got a lot of exercise!

DN: We had to come home for lunch for 45 minutes.

ED: Wow!

CL: They trusted that you would come back?

DN: Yeah I guess [laughs]. Well, see, back then most of the mothers were home too so they kicked you out. The mothers weren't going to let you stay home all day. So yeah, you came home and your mother made you lunch and then you went back to school again. In all kinds of weather. Our mothers didn't have cars so we did have to walk.

CL: My dad says: "Uphill both ways."

[Laughter]

DN: (Nods) Yes, yes.

CL: Do you still live in that area?

DN: I do. Same house I grew up in. I moved back there about 15 years ago.

ED: So did you live somewhere else in Worcester in between that period?

DN: I did, yeah.

ED: And then you decided you wanted to...

DN: Then my mother got sick, so I went... It was just too much going between houses and everything so my husband and my daughter and I decided we would move in with them to help take care of my mom. And now I take care of my dad who still lives there with me.

ED: Oh. Does he have any connection with the Albanian Orthodox Church in Worcester?

DN: He's the one brother that doesn't. He was like the black sheep of the family. So he does not, but his brothers all did.

ED: So how many siblings do you have?

DN: I have two brothers and two sisters: An older brother and sister, and a younger brother and sister.

CL: Do they live around here?

DN: No, they all moved away. I am the only one left.

CL: What do you think of the challenges of the city, like, do you think the city faces challenges right now that were different when you were growing up? Has anything changed?

DN: No. The only main thing is, as in every city in town, the economics of it. It's always been. Its kind of cylinder, cyclical... What's the word?... You know, every ten years or something it just always seems like you're going... Because I remember going through this before and lining up for gas in college. You know, you had to wait in line for... I mean there was a shortage of gas, never mind the high price of gas. So there's always been something, which is everyone's challenge. Worcester I think—the biggest challenge is that we don't have a great reputation, yet we are a great, small city. And that's what I chose. I did move away after college to Washington D.C and after a couple years I said: "No, that's not what I want." It was fun for a couple of years, but that was not where I wanted to remain.

ED: Where in Washington?

DN: Actually, my degree from here, from Assumption, was Social and Rehabilitation Services. [Nods at Colleen] You too? But see, I never wanted to be a clinical person.

CL: Right [Nods].

DN: So what I did is: I went to work for a public relations agency, whose clients were non-profits. So my first account... It was kind of like the business end of it. So my first account for the PR firm, they were going through a really big time in the 70's for the de-institutionalization of the mentally ill and mentally retarded, because they were still in institutions basically up until then. So I worked on the campaigns for de-institutionalization. What we did was: We had to have a lot of neighborhood forums and things and try to set their minds at ease. If there was a group home built next to you it wouldn't lower your property value. It was all the public relations' end of it. I would do the public service announcements: Radio, TV, brochures, work books... whatever you need. It was like an ad agency, but it was non-profit customers. So I didn't sell toothpaste... I sold living next door to mentally retarded citizens... you know, type of thing.

CL: When did you start working here at Assumption?

DN: Only about five or six years ago I think.

CL: Were you working with public relations up until then?

DN: No actually, when I came back here it was because—the job I had in college and high school—the family also owned a country club that ran a golf tournament, a Pro-Golf Tournament. So they asked... The father had passed away, so the son asked me if I would come back and run the golf tournament. I did that for most of my career.

CL: So is that in this area?

DN: Yeah, it was outside of Worcester. It was a men's professional golf tournament.

ED: Oh. How did you feel about the fact it was just men? Did it make any difference to you that you were heading a men's tournament?

DN: Well, there's a women's tour too. There was always a women's tour too, called the LPGA. And this was the PGA Tour. This was my choice, and it was actually this particular country club that also had LPGA events too... but that was before me. And then after that, after I left, I think they also brought the women back again. But I preferred the men's tour. But I had friends who did the lady's tour too.

ED: Yeah. Well, was there something different between the men's tour...?

DN: It was a lot bigger.

ED: More professional?

DN: No, They were all very professional. But the men's tour—you know—we drew about a hundred and thirty-two thousand people for spectators in one week, whereas the women's would probably draw about thirty thousand. So it was just a bigger scope, which it still kind of is. Any athletic event, I think the men's still draw more... unless you're UConn's women's basketball team or something like that, which will draw.

ED: Do you play golf yourself?

DN: I do not, which probably made me better for the job because I wasn't out playing golf [laughs]. So actually when he hired—it all kind of snowballed because what I did... it was PR and marketing for the agency in Washington, which was a big part of the golf job. It was just...the product was different.

CL: [Nods] The skills carried over.

DN: Yeah, you know—you did a brochure, you designed tickets, you placed advertising. It was all a lot of the same, yet a little bit different too. Which is then how I got this job because I was all programs and events.

ED: So what programs do you do now here?

DN: All the alumni programs. So, it could be reunion, we have homecomings. So after you graduate we probably have a good... anywhere between thirty and forty events for the alumni either on campus, or a lot of it is off campus. We do a lot of regional events. Last week we were in Rhode Island. We do alumni events down the Cape, we do them in the Boston area... Connecticut...

ED: And it's all connected to Assumption?

DN: Yeah, we invite all the alumni to the events. If they don't come here, we come out to you too. So I do events all over New England for alumni. Most alumni are in Central Massachusetts and Boston. So that's the majority of my events. But I've got one in Washington D.C in a couple months... We did one in New York, we have a nice club in Orlando—we have quite a few alums that work in Disney, so we do an event there every year. It depends... the pockets where they are.

CL: Do you do dinners and things like that?

DN: Yeah, receptions, dinners... anything. At the Cape we did a cruise one time. I have committees in each area that kind of help me decide what type of programs they want. Like Boston: We'll do the Red Sox, the Celtics, we might do a duck tour, or we might just be in formal receptions in Central Mass. We've done all sorts of things... We've gone to Salem.

CL: That sounds fun.

DN: Yeah, we do fun things. And then I also do travel programs. We went to Italy for the first time, so you can do that when you graduate [smiles]. We had a great group do bus trips. We did all sorts of things. [Referring to interviewers] You guys don't even see the magazine yet do you, because you're still students?

CL: I think my mom might get it through work.

DN: Ok. So that's my main form of communication in what we do and where we're going to be. And then I have a huge website, so you can log on any time and see the calendar of events. [Gesturing to flyers and calendar on wall] You know, this is a typical year... all different events we do. We do like, an alumni children's party, there's a high school basketball tournament, we do receptions between there, we do homecomings, we have reunions which are the big ones.

CL: Do you attend all the events?

DN: Yes.

ED: What was the most interesting one that you can remember?

DN: Event?

ED: Event that you planned or attended.

DN: Well, reunions are huge. We can have anywhere between eight and a thousand people here. [Referring back to the flyers and calendar] There's like ten different events that weekend, there's ten different class dinners. That's really a big one for Alumni Relations. The most fun was the Italy one. That was about a year and a half of planning. We had about 50 alumni and their families come. It was a huge group. We had everyone from eight-years-old to... whatever. It was a whole week. Yes, it was a whole tour.

ED: Oh, ok. I see.

DN: We had bus trips once we got there and we went to different villages. This was Sorrento, Italy.

CL: I hear that it's beautiful

DN: Yeah, so it was arranging... I worked with a travel agent, you know, and all that. We had dinners every night, but they could go off on their own if they wanted. And then we went to, everywhere. It was fun. Every day we had a different trip—day trip. That was called a Hub-And-Spoke Trip. We got to stay in the same hotel, but did day trips, which was good—we didn't have to pack up. So I'll plan another one.

CL: We'll be graduating by then (laughs).

DN: Yeah, we just had a couple of kids that just graduated.

CL: That's awesome.

DN: Yeah. So, I want to do Greece next. I'm thinking 2010. I want to do it so... Yeah, so it was a great group. We had a wonderful time. Then we even went to the Assumptionists' house in Italy, in Rome. [Referring to founder] He was the head of all the Assumptionists. It was great. So we got off track, didn't we?

ED: Oh, no! That was very interesting!

DN: Different careers, but all kind of the same.

ED: So what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been? I know that's an open-ended question.

DN: I mean, obviously we haven't done...

ED: Do you think there are a lot of job opportunities or, do you work with a lot of women in your field?

DN: Yeah, I do... Not bad, not great... but not bad. I mean I think it's just like anywhere else. I still don't think we're paid as well. I think in the last ten years though I think it has become very female dominated though.

ED: Yeah, I've noticed that trend in colleges. It seems like there's more female college students.

CL: Especially here. The ratio is...

ED: From an all male college...

DN: Yeah all that, switched like that [Snaps fingers]. Every school that wasn't co-ed—because there were a lot of schools that weren't co-ed in the 70s, because of economic reasons—they had to go co-ed. That was the whole Baby Boomer thing too.

CL: Did you go to grad school after here?

DN: I didn't, no. I took some classes though, mostly when I was in Washington. I audited marketing classes that people in our firm taught and things like that. But back then it was kind of "hands on." Then, when I got into sports marketing—they didn't have sports marketing degrees back then so they would come to me for training. So, they didn't have that. Otherwise I might have taken Sports Management, which is huge now.

CL: Have you been to workshops?

DN: No, well, I do for alumni relations now. So yeah, every group I worked for had their own association. Like even the golf there was an Association For Golf Sponsors and there was an annual convention with workshops—and you know, how their doing things. I always did that.

CL: How about your husband, what does he do?

DN: I don't know [Laughs]. He works for the State. [Laughter] And it changes all the time. Mostly in affordable housing. He runs those State Rent Subsidized Properties. So I don't know if there's a word per se for what he does, but he works with the landlords who have rent subsidized apartments. Trying to rid Boston of homelessness.

ED: That's a very noble cause.

DN: Good luck! [Laughs]. Its never going to happen! That's his agenda but... anyways... Well I think he was more like urban planning. And I don't know how he got into that segment, but that was his thing.

ED: So did you tell us already where you attended school... um, you know high school? I know you talked a little bit about elementary school.

DN: And then I went to Burncoat Junior High School before it was called "Middle school." Then I went to Marion Catholic High School for two years.

ED: Why did you switch?

DN: Because it was all girls. So I went back to Burncoat.

ED: Was that a decision your parents made or was that something you kind of wanted to do?

DN: Together.

Here, unbeknownst to the interviewers and interviewee, the tape recorder malfunctions and renders the rest of the tape useless. The interviewers have thus paraphrased some additional information remembered from the rest of the interview.

When asked what it was like growing up as a teenager, Diane Laska-Nixon said it was popular in the 70's to wear mini skirts. However it wasn't until a few years after this fad that nylons were invented so one had to be wary of concealing garter belts. Always in style for the times, she was the first girl in the neighborhood to get the infamous shag hair cut and prided herself in keeping her vinyl record collection up to date. Her favorite band was the Bee Gee's, particularly their ballad renditions. In her closing statements she gave advice to young women, saying, "In this day and age, it is really important for women to go to College and get a good education so that they can have better job opportunities."

