

Interviewee: Ann T. Lisi  
Interviewer: Andrea Pesantez  
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Transcriber: Andrea Pesantez



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**Abstract:** Born in 1960, Ann Lisi was raised in a large family in Madison, Wisconsin and moved to Massachusetts after finishing college. In this interview, Ann discusses her personal work history as she moved through the ranks of different service organizations of the non-profit sector and ultimately earned the position as the Executive Director at the Greater Worcester Community Foundation (GWCF). Ann illustrates her extensive participation in volunteer work and community service, both in the past and today. She emphasizes the learning that she experienced along the way and the important role that mentors played in her personal and career development. Ann explains what her work at the GWCF means to her and to the City of Worcester. She discusses the key issues facing the city today and shares some of the positive changes that she has witnessed over the years. Ann gives her perspective on the place of women in today's society and touches upon her childhood memories in Wisconsin and her first impressions of life in Massachusetts.

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**AP:** Where were you born, and when were you born?

**AL:** I was born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1960.

**AP:** And what made you come to Worcester?

**AL:** I came to Worcester in 1989 to take a job at the Greater Worcester Community foundation, and the job was a promotion from what I been doing previously, the job was program officer.

**AP:** Oh ok, and could you tell us about your family. How many brothers, sisters you have? What kind of work are they in, primarily? And what kind of work did your parents do?

**AL:** Ok ... my dad worked for Oscar Mayer and Company, he was an engineer trained in the University of Wisconsin, and my mother was a registered nurse she didn't practice her nursing very much professionally after they were married, they had ten children and I'm the ninth of the ten so it was indeed a large family.

**AP:** Yeah.

**AL:** And they raised us ...in a section of the city that was out in the eastside, and we went to the Catholic Parish, we were members of St. Denis parish and we attended the Parochial Grade School, and then we all went off to public high school, so my father retired from Oscar Mayer after gosh...35 years or something like that, but he was a manager and a supervisor at the power plant, and they had met at the University of Wisconsin as students and so it was um...definitely a college town and many of us went to college not all of us though—out of the ten only three graduated from the university. I guess it'll be too much to go into what all the siblings do, but my five brothers um...one of them is... in the health care field, he's an emergency department director up in Wisconsin and another brother was in the Marines and went to Vietnam and now has a profession with the natural resources, and three other brothers work in, ... industry and trucking, and construction and things like that. And then my five sisters, one of them attended university and has her license in library science, and two others are in the computer field and another one; my younger sister is just finishing her degree even though she's over 40 years old, in ideology speech therapy, in hearing therapy, and also she is an opera singer.

**AP:** Oh wow that's interesting, but did you like having a big family?

**AL:** I liked it a lot, it was really neat because there was always so much going on, and my parents were very interested in being very active, so they enrolled us in scouts, and in...we always went camping we did things with the church groups and there was just so much activity it was really wonderful, and I always felt like I had a lot of friends, and in my family I could count on different sisters and brothers.

**AP:** Yeah, it would have been fun. Um, did you come here by yourself?

**AL:** Yes, that's right I did, I left Wisconsin after graduating from university when I was 22 years old, and ...I did have a friend that I knew who had moved to Massachusetts, so I just came by myself. I had no job. I had no, really idea of what I was going to do except look for a job, and I had a little bit of money saved up from my waitressing through college. I had a \$1,000 dollars, I had a stereo, I had a bicycle, and I had some clothes...that's all I brought with me. And I asked someone from my work to give me a ride and he and his wife drove me across from Wisconsin to Massachusetts

**AP:** What was your first impression of Worcester?

**AL:** Well, actually first I came to Salem, Massachusetts, I'll just say that so I went from Wisconsin to the coast there...So I was in Salem, and I just thought New England was so... so beautiful and all of Massachusetts. I'll never forget coming across the Mass Pike and the beautiful fall colors, and ...so really loved living out there and then after about five or six years working I...got involved in fund raising and non-profit management and then came to Worcester.

**AP:** Ok.

**AL:** And so my impressions of Worcester—I ...didn't know very much about it. I had thought that it was a place that was—had so many good things going on with the non-profit, that I knew about from my prior jobs, so I knew about creative people who were working in fields like uhm... homelessness, and shelters. And they were really...they were such a community at care here, and so ...I was very impressed, and I was very impressed with the different foundations that were here, as well.

**AP:** In what neighborhood do you live now?

**AL:** Right now I live on Berwick Street, and I guess that's the near west side. It's before you get out to Tatnuck Square so is closer in...very easy to get to from work and everything.

**AP:** Do you like Worcester better than your home town?

**AL:** That's a tough question—here is what I like about it. I like that it's on the east coast I like that it's so exciting and international and people from all over the world live here, so yeah I guess maybe in some ways I do. But, you know, there's parts of Wisconsin that are still in me too—that make it hard to compare. But I like living in Worcester.

**AP:** What are your earliest memories of your neighborhood back home?

**AL:** I remember being very safe, and free to play wherever I wanted to play. It was a big old farm house that was a residential neighborhood and...we just walked everywhere and we took the bus. I remember as little girl being able to get on the bus and go uptown—we called it uptown—it was miles away on the bus. And go to the movies, and go to the library, and came home and gee...and I don't know if kids do that so much any more. But you know we go out and have a coke at the drug store, whatever, and...so just being very free.

**AP:** What was the neighborhood like generally?

**AL:** It was, everybody was sort of from...everybody was white and sort of European decent. Most people were Catholic and went to the local parish so in that way it was sort of homogeneous. And it's hard because I know you want to hear about Worcester, but I don't have the memories I have in Wisconsin—childhood memories... so I hope that's ok for your project.

**AP:** That's fine.

**AL:** And I guess I really wanted to get out, too. I really thought it was...it was ok but I wasn't the world, it was just sort of small to me.

**AP:** So you wanted to leave to see something.

**AL:** I did, I wanted to leave and see something. That's exactly right.

**AP:** Did you live in multiple areas?

**AL:** Well I would say three. I lived in Wisconsin until I went all the way through college. Just like you grew up and went to college in your same town, I did that. And then I just really wanted to spread my wings, and I remember thinking after graduation from college...ok, will I go to California or will I go to Massachusetts, though or... New York? I just wanted to go to the coast and start a career and start a new life and all that. And even though Wisconsin is a very fine place and is a lot of fun and is a really wonderful quality of life there and so on—and is a very outdoors-oriented place...everybody camps and bikes and runs and all that stuff—I still personally needed to leave my home and start my own life and my own identity. And so I'm just very, very glad that I came to Massachusetts. So my only other home, my only other town has been Salem, Massachusetts where I lived for, I guess, 10 years. Maybe not quite 8 years, for most of my career. I had a couple of jobs before I came here, as I said... but mostly I am very formed as an adult. My driving habits, my professional identity have been married. My sense of family is really in Worcester now.

**AP:** Ok...so you're the only member of your family here?

**AL:** Yes that's right, that's exactly right.

**AP:** And where did you study?

**AL:** At Wisconsin I ended up getting a Bachelors of Art with a major in English. I took lots of courses in Sociology because I thought that was going to be my major, but somewhere in the middle there I decided to switch into the arts and out of...Sociology, and thought that literature was more interesting to me.

**AP:** Yeah, so you came to Worcester basically for a job... because of your work?

**AL:** Exactly.

**AP:** Ok, other than that, would you have come to Worcester?

**AL:** I don't think I would have, and when I came here for the job I didn't think I'd stay. It just was never a place that I knew about. Actually I'd never known anybody from here. Actually there was one young lady from Auburn back at college when I was younger... I remember her accent, her Worcester accent. It was very...very weird to me. But I'd never heard of it except when I was working at the Boston foundation where I worked before I came here. I had some doings with various cities and towns in the state, so I got to know the people in Worcester. But I didn't think I'd move here until this job in the foundation opened up, and I applied and I got it. I was so excited. I really wanted to come here. I really wanted to come here, but if not for the foundation job, I am certain I would not have.

**AP:** Other than your work, what are your other hobbies that you regularly do in Worcester?

**AL:** Well I do a lot of thing in the arts. I go to lots of the openings and shows and things like that. I have taken some courses at the art museum, in the craft center, just little tiny seminars and things. I also...whenever I can I get out into the mountains in New Hampshire, in Vermont, and go hiking and cross country skiing, and things. And I also go up to Maine where my husband and I have a summer cottage so we're able to go up there to kayak, and sail and all that fun stuff.

**AP:** When you're not at home were do you usually find yourself?

**AL:** I guess given my busy work schedule when I do have time to socialize with friends or not be at home, I love to be at home reading and sitting in front of the fireplace and stuff and catching up with my husband. But if I'm not, then I'm probably out in a restaurant in some place, dining out.

**AP:** Which one's your favorite?

**AL:** Anthony's on Shrewsbury Street. But is true that that's the easiest way to relax and catch up and have a nice time.

**AP:** When did you begin working?

**AL:** Well, you mean like my first job? When I was 14, I took a job in the summer. You could take a worker's permit then, and I was in the corn field in Wisconsin detasseling corn. And then I had another job on Saturdays in an office at a nursing home. And then I really went to work when I was sixteen. I still of course lived at home with my parents and was in school, but I got a job waitering at a local family restaurant, and I kept that job until the end of high school and into college, and out of college. So I had it for six years. It was really a good, so I have not stopped working since then.

**AP:** And when did you start working in Worcester?

**AL:** In Worcester it was 1989. When I was 29 years old.

**AP:** How did you learn how to do this work?

**AL:** How did I learn how to do it? That is a really good question...I think each previous, each job built on the...gave me something for the next job. I didn't go to school to be in a foundation, but my college education certainly gave me skills in writing, reading, and communicating, and critical thinking. And also the experience of being in college made you think about the world and its problems, and for me I took it as a time to reflect on where I fit in what I saw was a need to solve problems. And the pattern of jobs that I had...the first job when I came East was ... I applied for a job at a battered women's program. It was called Help for Abused Women and their Children, and actually I went in

there to see if I could be a volunteer in a hotline while I was waitressing and they actually had a job opening for coordinator of volunteers. So I was hired to serve in that role, and I just loved it a lot. I really learned how a small organization with lots of volunteers was helping all these women make safety plans and things. It would be women who were at risk at their own home and stuff, and they would call at the hotline and we would help them figure out a plan for becoming safe and helping their kids become safe. But that was an administrative job. I was learning how to organize and reach out to new people to volunteer and do public relations with the newspaper, and conduct training programs. And I really learned a lot about how the community tries to solve a problem, and then that job really led to some other jobs that I had. But I would say that it is because I just keep working really hard, and I was very fortunate I had mentors. My boss, Bare, took me with her sort of when she went to another job in a fundraising office of a children's museum, so I was her assistant. So I got to learn about membership campaigns and capital campaigns, serving donors and members at the children's museum. And then again because of people that I knew and my network, another mentor showed me about a job that she needed to fill at a Boston foundation and so I think I just learned to be open to people seeing my talents and trust that they will support me if I didn't know things. Because, believe me, I didn't know very much about any of these topics when I first started. I'll never forget at the children's museum I didn't understand a computer, I didn't...it was the first time I ever really sat at a word processor and managed a data base...

**AP:** Yeah...

**AL:** But I learned on the job and I learned about fundraising and membership from my boss. So, by the time I came to Worcester I had some background that this organization needed, and got the job as the program officer. And then three years into that, my director left and so this foundation was without a leader, and the board asked me to serve in that role while they searched for an executive. And then, also, I decided I wanted to apply for that position, as well. And now looking back it was a very stressful and difficult time to be doing my job as program officer, serving as the executive director as an interim, and also applying for the position. And now they say you really shouldn't do it that way anyway. But it worked and I did and in 1992 I was I appointed the executive director at the Greater Worcester Community Foundation.

**AP:** What kind of people did you work with?

**AL:** I have always ...been working with—except for the restaurant job where I just worked with very kind people, I would say the kindness of my bosses there was so important. It was called Elise Delis, is still there in Madison, Wisconsin if you ever go, please visit. They have a carousel outside, they collect toys, and it's a wonderful place. Ice cream and deli. So what kind of people...In my profession now in the foundation, I guess I'm working with people who are very privileged to be in positions of authority, you know, running foundations. And my colleagues here that I hire—I hire people who are able to communicate well and very smart to manage projects. And in the community here we work with all kinds of people. Our donors come from all walks of life, all kinds

of towns, neighborhoods. Our grant recipients that apply for grants here come from every sector you could think of—a lot diversity here, very exiting. But I don't know if that's the question that you had...

**AP:** Um...yeah, and have you been involved in volunteer work?

**AL:** Yes always...I always have and I would say that part of the training, and part of the reason why I'm in the field of nonprofits is a paid position now but ever since I was little and I recommended to everyone...We volunteer. My parents volunteer all the time. They were always just helping out with whatever...like the American Red Cross had a blood drive and my mother, who was a nurse, would help organize it. Or things at the church and school. Of course they would do things out in the community, like drive people to medical appointments, things like that...So I remember when I had to get a volunteer job for confirmation class—

**AP:** Yeah.

**AL:** —and I signed up to be a telephone reassurance volunteer. Everyday I telephoned a lady, an elderly woman who was living alone. Her name was Ellen and I would call her every day at 4:30 no matter what I was doing. I could be off with my boyfriend on my bike and I'll say we have to get to a phone—we didn't have cell phones then—and phone her and just say: “What did you have for lunch?” “How was your day?” “How's your neighbor, how's he doing?” She would just tell me the news of her day. I did that for six years, so that was probably my most long-term volunteer involvement. And I volunteer by serving on boards, because that's the best way I feel that I could help. Most recently, last spring, I volunteered at Citizen School. So every Thursday I went to Worcester East Middle School and taught a class with the kids after school. I had a group of about ten middle-school-aged kids. It was really fun.

**AP:** What led you to join this organization?

**AL:** Well I think we covered that a little bit but...my particular interests are so wide and so varied that being at the community foundation is a really good way to serve...that I ...the foundation's mission is to enhance the community through all sorts of non-profit support, and so groups that you might think of like the Food Bank, or the Oak Hill Community Corporation, or the New England Assistance Dog Program, all sorts of—Joy of Music Program—organizations out there that are providing services and all sorts of interesting things for people of all ages. We provide money for them and help them evaluate their successes, so I can't really think of something so stimulating and exiting, because it covers so much.

**AP:** What were some of the main programs that you worked on?

**AL:** Maybe I will skip that one...

**AP:** Okay

**AL:** Oh I think you're asking about the different volunteers...let's go to this...

**AP:** Okay... what impact has Worcester had on you as an individual and you on Worcester?

**AL:** The other way around?

**AP:** Yeah.

**AL:** And what effect have I had on Worcester.... Well, I think Worcester has shaped me in my professional role. It gave me the chance to form my leadership abilities because of the position that I hold at the Community Foundation. And I hope that in my fifteen or sixteen years here I helped shape the Community Foundation to grow it and make it a respectable organization—which it certainly was when I joined it—but to enhance all of that. And that by growing the foundation, by bringing in more gifts and more donors, doing creative things with our grant money, I hope that I've had an impact directly on Worcester through the grants that we've made and through the leadership that we provide.

**AP:** What challenges does the city still face?

**AL:** I think that the challenge is to really make do with what we have and to continue to attract new businesses into the city because people really need jobs here. And to get an agreement as a community of what is important, so that when we elect our city councilors we see that, you know, that we agree on what the values are. I think the schools are very good, people here are very good and we have so many strengths. And I think it's just overcoming the sense that Worcester does not deserve to be a fine city when it really does deserve to be a fine city. I think that there is a growing rift between those that have money, and have access, and those who don't. I'd really like to see that come together.

**AP:** What would you improve about the city?

**AL:** I would say that sense of unity. I think I also would want to help it become cleaner. I love all the construction and the new renovations. I was just driving up Franklin Street...under the bridge by Union Station is going to be open. It's exciting to think about the new development, and at the same time to just maintain its cleanliness is a really important thing.

**AP:** What do you think we should do to confront these challenges?

**AL:** I think to enlist more people in for...I don't know how you do it but I'm sure in any city every person is thinking they have something they could do about it. Instead of saying it's your job, say what can I do? So whether you're a school child or a principal of a school, a college student or a person like I am in my position, there is something that you could do personally.

**AP:** Have you seen any changes occur in Worcester since you been here?

**AL:** Definitely. I think about people rising to leadership that...I guess it just happens through time. Older people move on and younger people came up, and the new younger leaders are very strong, and good in barrios, populations of color. I have seen a black network form and that's exciting to think that there will be black professional African-American leaders and others who want to come together and say, "Hey, we're here, we're a population of pride, and could make contributions." I have seen it personally. I was there helping set around tables to—I can't take credit for it but I was witness to it—that's an example I have seen. The Southeast Asian community came forward and created a coalition, and that's really kind of exciting. And offered an annual festival. I have seen the arts organizations come together and organize themselves as a coalition, and help with the ...with encouraging our city government, companies, schools and others to take advantage of the arts as a attractive feature. It might be a reason a person chooses to live here because of all the vibrancy that we have. Those are just some examples. I've seen some streets with houses that were sort of falling apart become renovated. If you look at the Gardner-Kilby Project that the Main South CDC is doing...I've seen it. The University Park Campus School did not exist seven years ago and it's sending most of its students to college.

**AP:** You said you were married right? Did you meet him here in Worcester or...?

**AL:** I did I meet my husband in Worcester. He's somebody who is from here—born and raised in Worcester, Northborough, and went to WPI and then off to Boston University Law School...Came back and has had a law practice here. So I met him in my professional network, and we were married seven years ago.

**AP:** Do you have any....do you have a big family?

**AL:** We don't have any children, if that's what you're asking. Yeah...but his ...father is deceased, but his mother is in Maine. His sister is in Maine with her two grown children. His brother is nearby as well, and they have two grown sons, so we kind of see his family.

**AP:** How do you get through tough times?

**AL:** Well I would say that I draw on the support of my partner very much. Joel and I talk things through, and he's a very complementary force for me. When I get anxious about something he helps me put perspective on it. And I call upon some of my sisters a lot—to look forward to fun times with or to talk about things. And other close friends—I have a few close friends that I would talk with, and I would say that I just try to keep my own attitude really positive. You know, I mostly don't get too down about things because I think it's just the way I'm built. I think other people have a greater sense of anxiety than I do. I'm pretty optimistic about things. I usually could see the humor in it. I always exercise, practice various self-care things, you know, maintaining my weight and just

trying to be happy with who I am. And going out into nature as much as I possibly can, so those are really it. And also just trying to make a correlation between your feeling of powerlessness or your feeling of being able to influence things. That has to do with being able to get through stress, and I find that if I see something I don't like...to try and change it. Then that really is part of my attitude, is what can we do about it? Either let it go or see what can you do to fix it.

**AP:** You already said what kind of work your husband does?

**AL:** I might not have... he's a lawyer, and so he has a small practice. So essentially he is a self-employed business man, but he's mostly involved in property and real estate type of law.

**AP:** Do you both go out and visit your family out in Wisconsin?

**AL:** Yes...sometimes I go by myself and keep up with some old friends there, and since my parents are aging now I try to visit them more often. I'll just get out there for a quick trip, but he also does visit with them. Sometimes they visit us because I mentioned the cottage in Maine and, believe me, that's a big attraction to the family. They want to visit us and play at the beach and all of that.

**AP:** Now that we're working to tell a fuller story of the past of women that has been recorded in the past what should you... what else do you want to include?

**AL:** Maybe some perspectives as a woman here maybe I could offer that. It's always been important to me to be treated equally as men, and I feel that I have. That's been a progress in society that I've witnessed and been part of. And I guess that looking at things from the perspective of gender remains important. I think that girls and boys -- certainly we may say they are given equal advantage, but I do think that there is a division at a certain point in a girl's life and a boy's life. The treatment by adults is different usually to advantage boys in some ways, but not always. I mean, now we're seeing that boys are having more trouble acclimating to school. And so it's hard for me to say this but I think that we have to look at boys and girls differently sometimes, and see what are the special needs. And yet the power structure in Worcester is still very male-dominated when it gets to government and corporate, and hopefully that's something that could change. That's something we need to keep working on.

**AP:** So would you say you have been treated equally since the beginning?

**AL:** I personally feel that way. I was always good in school. I was always getting ahead based on my own ability. My parents treated me with very high expectations, so as an individual I can't really complain about gender bias. But that does not mean it does not exist because I know it does.

**AP:** Do you still feel the same now?

**AL:** Yes, I would say so. Now remember I'm in Worcester...I think that the first thing that comes in my life here is my job. What I mean is, in my day-to-day life I may be seen as Ann Lisi but I'm first seen as Greater Worcester Community Foundation—that's what's first. And that itself is a position of privilege at a foundation where you have access to money and people with money, so there's a positive sense of access. It extends to me a privilege. I don't think that the gender issue is very high up there from where I sit, but when I look around...City Council that's really still so dominated by males... is not their fault. They are ones who ran and won, but is just as evidence to see where women are, where are their voices.

**AP:** What do you think women's experiences have been generally in Worcester?

**AL:** I think I was alluding to that when I was talking about the power structure being still very male...and I just mean very male...

**AP:** Even now?

**AL:** Even now, and I think that was women's experience in Worcester. I think women's experience in Worcester is typical to women's experience in America. Where there you have many examples of strong leading women who pioneer...in the town and then the struggle of identity, safety, raising a family while having a career.

**AP:** Anything else you would like to add?

**AL:** I think it is just a nice project that Worcester Woman's History Project is doing to capture. I hope that you are finding some very interesting stories.