

Interviewee: Angela Penny

Interviewers: Kate Cibotti, Kristina Powell

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Angela Penny was born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1955 and attended North High School. Being born into a conservative working class family, Angela was always surrounded by relatives. Growing up in Worcester, she witnessed several changes in the community, such as the growing health care industry. Angela married four years out of high school, and chose to suspend her education while becoming a homemaker and mother. She is now proud of all four of her daughters, who have all attended college. Although being a mother has been her primary concern, Angela stressed her, “thirst for knowledge,” which she has satisfied with her many part-time jobs, such as secretarial work in a psychiatric hospital and in the Worcester Historical Museum. She is very proud of the “wealth of knowledge” she has obtained in her diverse experiences and looks forward to continuing her education, now that she has raised her children to adulthood. Angela treasures the city of Worcester, in which she remains active in the community. She was involved in some of Worcester’s historically monumental events, such as the reenactment of the 1850 Women’s Rights Convention, held at Mechanics Hall in 2000.

We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women’s Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women’s education, health, work, and politics/community involvement. Thank you for your help with this important project!

KC: Okay, I’m just making sure it is okay that we record?

AP: Yes, that is okay.

KC: What are your full married name and your married name?

AP: My maiden name is Angela Simirano and my married name is Penny.

KC: And when were you born?

AP: August 12, 1955

KC: And do you have children?

AP: I do. I have four daughters.

KC: Oh, all daughters! And um, how old are they?

AP: My oldest is thirty, my second one is twenty-eight, the third one is twenty-two, and the youngest is twenty.

KC: Um, what cultures and ethnicities do you identify with?

AP: Italian.

KC: All Italian? Haha, I'm half Italian, you wouldn't believe it! [Laughs]

AP: [laughs] My parents are both Italian, I married an Italian. So, dark hair, brown eyes, Italian.

KC: And what is the name of your current husband?

AP: My husband's name is Francis Penny.

KC: And tell me a little about your parents.

AP: Okay, um, what's to tell? Let me see. They're both deceased. My mother lived 'til she was eighty-two and my father was seventy-seven. They were both second generation Italian, their parents were both born in Italy and their parents came here and they were both born here in Worcester. Both working-class people, hard working people, very family oriented. I don't know what else to say! They were typical parents of the sixties, you know.

KC: Okay, and where have you lived during your life?

AP: I've only lived in Worcester. I've vacationed places, but I've only lived in Worcester. I grew up on Grafton Hill, and actually still live on Grafton Hill, down the hill but still on Grafton Hill. Very close by to where I grew up.

KC: And what was that neighborhood generally like?

AP: Very families, very working-class, middle-class, or lower-middle class, maybe. Like three-deckers. A lot of family around, also, aunts, uncles, cousins, all of that, grew up with all of that sort of thing.

KC: And other family members still live in the area?

AP: Yes.

KC: Let's see. What challenges do you think that the city faces?

AP: What challenges does it face? Uh, I think there's quite a lot of issues that the city faces as challenges. Affordable housing is probably one of the most prevalent things. All families need a place to live, so I would say housing would be one thing. Jobs for people, I think one issue that this city, that they should focus more on, is the cleanliness of the city, keeping it clean. I think neighborhoods should have more of, um, a focus on their own neighborhood, that everybody in their own neighborhood, you can't always look to the city to solve your problems. If each neighborhood, you know, got together, they could do a lot. And I think every one of us that walks in neighborhoods could help, even in a small way. And I think that's up to us.

KC: Would you say that that was what you'd change? The cleanliness of the neighborhood?

AP: Yes

KC: And what changes have you seen in Worcester in the time that you've been here?

AP: There have been quite a lot of changes, schools closing, reorganization of the schools. I attended North High School, which was on Salisbury Street, I'm not sure if you're familiar with the old school, it was on Salisbury Street, an old brick building, very beautiful. The kids were moved up to Harrington Way to a school that was built in the seventies, which is almost obsolete now. And we're gonna have to knock that down and make a new school. And just the health industry has become big business in Worcester. It was such an industrial producing area and now it's like it's a health care industry. It starts on Medical City and it goes right up Belmont Street to Memorial Hospital, to UMass. It's like almost a medical city.

KP: I never noticed that before.

AP: But if you were here before that time, there were a lot more industries. I think that's just the culture changing. It has become a healthcare industry. That's my observations.

KC: What distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

AP: The distinct characteristics that make it, for me, is that it's where my family is, where my roots are, where my history is, it's where my memories are, good memories. So, that's what makes it special to me.

KC: What do you think the woman's experience in Worcester has been generally?

AP: Well the experience, I mean if you know the history, I think it was pretty progressive at its time. To have the first women's rights convention in Worcester in 1850, right down on Main Street. There were women from all over the country that attended. People took trains to get here for the event. So I think it certainly has a history of having women involved. I think having a women mayor is wonderful!

KC: Do you want to tell us a little about your reenactment?

AP: Yes, it was held in 2000. It was the 150-year anniversary of the actual Women's Rights Convention. So it was held in Mechanics Hall, It was a wonderful experience because the women of that time were very vocal about their opinions, they wanted the right to vote, they wanted representation in government, and they didn't want to pay taxes for something they didn't have any representation in, and they were able to voice their feelings about injustices that they felt which were, you know, not being able to vote, not having a say, and also they did not approve of the slavery issue, so that was something that they fought strongly for. It was quite an honor to be a part of it, it was, you know I learned so much about that time, the people that were involved, and um, and knowing that it happened right here in Worcester made it that much more important. You know, I often wondered how that got about, how they got to the convention, how they managed to stay in those dresses. We had to have those actual costumes ... I think I might have a picture...I wasn't quite sure what you'd need so I brought everything [laughs] this is just something I keep with all my own private memories...and I think I have a newspaper article that um...This is a picture of the cast [shows photo of the reenactment cast]. That was all of us in Mechanics Hall...There were equity actors who took part in that, they were the lead actors. It was a wonderful experience.

KP: Wow! So many people!

AP: Yeah! There were about fifty extras, we were the people who would have been at the convention [pointing at the photo] these were the equity actors and they were paid for their performances and um they had the real big speaking parts but all of us were like the people of Worcester at the time that attended...And that's just myself at the Historical Museum dressed in my period garb I had a big hat, you know, we actually had to have clothing that would have been worn at that time, I mean you could buy fabric but it had to be approved by the people that that would have been something that they would have worn, they wouldn't have worn loud colors and prints like that. So my costume, my mother made it, you had to have patterns and fabric of the period that were very authentic. It was wonderful, a great experience. They had a lot of

lectures and, you know, women's issues that whole weekend too, that they put this together. That was just my experience with it.

KC: Wow, ok so now I'd like to talk a little about your education. So, let's see.

AP: I did not go to college. I did not go and that is probably the only regret I have in my life, is not going to college. I graduated from high school in the 70's and that was a time when less than half of the girls went to college, you know, most went to work. But you know there were at least probably less than half went to college, and um, so we were able to get jobs right out of high school. And I got married and had kids right away and that was my focus.

KC: Right out of high school?

AP: Four years out of high school. I did, I got married right after that and then I had kids and you know, the focus was the kids. And my oldest daughter has her doctorate degree which I'm very proud of. She's, you know, very successful and I know there will be a time for me to go back. And that's one thing I do regret in my life.

KC: Well there are a lot of colleges around here.

AP: We do have a lot of opportunities and it's not the end for me, I really believe that. And I've always had a thirst for knowledge. I've always found myself thirsting for that, whether I just attend lectures at the Antiquarian Society or, you know, at the museum, or the Worcester Women's History Project. I'm always just trying to learn.

KC: Wow, up until you graduated high school what would you say were your challenges?

AP: Challenges at school you mean?

KC: Either that or any personal ones that you want to mention.

AP: Not in high school, not in high school. I mean, I grew up in the 70's so it was a whole different culture-- a very different culture. There were a lot of things happening at the time. We still had the Vietnam War, drugs were prevalent, civil rights issues were happening, it was a volatile time, but I kept pretty much on the straight and narrow. My parents were very strict, you know, and so looking back it probably made it easier. You just didn't, you just didn't, I mean it was very easy. [Laughs]

KC: So what support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

AP: Um support networks, always friends, I would say also sisters, aunts, uh I've always had a very strong female dominated family. My mother was one of five sisters and a brother so there were always aunts, older cousins—girl cousins, and sisters, two older sisters, so I always had, you know, people to rely on. And have them as an example for me.

KP: Do you work outside the home?

AP: I do, right now I work at a store, in the Solomon Pond Mall, I work in The Kitchen Store, which is a wonderful little store-just part time. And that's what I do right now, you know, it's a great environment for a homemaker they sell a lot of house wares, it's a real nice, it's a positive thing for me in my life.

KP: And when did you first begin working and what did you do?

AP: When did I begin working? My first job?

KP: Sure

AP: Okay, my first job was right out of high school. I actually worked for my biology teacher's husband. He was an administrator in the state department of mental health. I was his secretary and it was wonderful. I learned so much, I had a lot of jobs that put me in a position where I was able to learn a lot on subjects that I never would have—but I learned an awful lot. It was the Department of Mental Health, his offices were in Worcester State Hospital, so I got to see things first hand in a hospital—a psychiatric hospital. I got to see patients up close and personal. I got to see the way they were treated in some hospitals, especially in the 70's when things were a little harsher than they are now. I got to hear stories about the past the way they were treated, going back probably to the 30's and 40's-- electric shock treatments. I witnessed it first hand. I really have had a lot of things up close and personal. I was home, like I said, for several years after that-- several. My husband owns a printing company and I went back to work before I had my third child. And I did billing; it was more or less billing and paperwork type of thing. My third job, lets see, after that I worked for Weight Watchers for five years, which was wonderful. I got to meet so many wonderful women, and women's issues. That was up close and personal too, very, [laughs] and then from there I worked up at the Worcester Historical Museum, I was a receptionist there—and a world of knowledge there, just a world of knowledge, they have collections that they share, and I got to see things that, I know, my girlfriend is a history teacher and she's never seen. I got to actually hold a Civil War diary. It came through the front door and I was able to do that. And I said to my girlfriend who's taught history in the city for thirty years, "did you ever see or hold a Civil War diary or something that's been in the Civil War?" She

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looked at me like “No.” I was like “well I have!” [laughs] I mean I got to read what this soldier actually ate for dinner. I mean, so I’ve had quite a varied opportunity to be really up close with some of this stuff. Daguerreotypes, I’ve actually held in my hand. Early, early photographs. It’s before photography they had Daguerreotypes which were done on glass-- a photograph that’s on glass. The museum has quite a few. And sometimes when people donate things to the museum they come right through the front door and there I am at the front desk. And I was able to see a lot of things and I’m very grateful for that. Costumes and, oh boy, even old yearbooks. I was able to look at old yearbooks and see old class histories, what was happening in the 20’s, what was happening in the 30’s. A wealth of information.

KP: It seems like you got a lot of your education while you were working.

AP: Oh definitely, I certainly have.

KP: So, back into the home, what are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework?

AP: Everything. [laughs] Everything from decorating and painting to cleaning and organizing and shopping and cooking, everything.

KP: So, mostly it falls on you?

AP: Yes.

KP: How have you balanced your different priorities, responsibilities, working, housework, all those types of things.

AP: Well for myself, I believe, well I’ve always wanted family. That was the most important thing to me. I always wanted a family, so I always made that my priority. My children were my priority and in that I mean that I had to provide a safe environment for them, nurturing environment, and a warm environment and an environment where they could be all that they could be because I don’t think that children can really come into their own potential unless they’re in an environment that fosters that, believes in it, and is willing to make sacrifices for it. And yah, I didn’t get to probably have all the education that they’ve had, all of the opportunities that they have had, but there’s still time. I don’t think that that’s it for me. I still feel that I have many more years to learn, to grow. But I did make them my priority. They were involved in all kinds of activities in school, and theater, and dance, and all of that. They’re successful, I think, because they had that environment and their father and I made that our priority. And they also needed an environment that was free of discord, disharmony, anger, bitterness, fighting and I think a lot of kids that grow up in that kind of environment are at a disadvantage because a lot of

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their thoughts are in the back that things aren't stable, so if they're in an environment where they don't have that concern than they're free to be all that they can be.

KC: Do you have grandchildren?

AP: I have no grandchildren. My oldest is thirty years old and like I said she's focused quite a bit on her education and her career. So she doesn't have any children now but that's ok, she's only thirty. [Laughs] I'll have to show you a picture of my kids, if you'd like to see them. Those are my girls, this ones the oldest, she's an audiologist at UMass. This is the second youngest and [points] third youngest, she's twenty two, she just graduated from Framingham State, [points at other daughter] she's at Worcester State, and these two older ones went to Worcester State. They're probably around your age.

[Interview interrupted by class needing room we were in.]

KC: Is there anything else you want to tell us about your kids?

AP: About the kids? Hmm, well it's been interesting; let me tell ya, four girls, it's been interesting. They're all different. They have different temperaments, different personalities, and from what I've experienced, I would say you have to let your kids be who they are, not what you think they should be, not what you want them to be, but just who they are. And they do come around eventually, like the one that has always challenged me, she has always had her own opinions—which is fine, I respect anybody's opinion, but you know, she would always bumped the system, and slipped away a little bit and she has really come around, every time she comes home now she's like “oh mom, you know you were right about whatever.” I love that. I knew in her own time—I mean she's twenty-eight, but, I knew in her own time she would figure it out or come to understand.

KP: So what have you come to learn about the dynamics of having four girls? What have you learned about the dynamics between them?

AP: Um, oh I think there's safety in numbers, that's one thing, I mean they have each other. I grew up with two sisters and I think it's wonderful to have a sister, you know, somebody, no matter what, they're there, your sisters are there, with bad or different. That's what I've always experienced. It doesn't seem like there's that competitiveness like that you have with friends, it's your sister, they know you good, bad, and everything in between, so I mean they're always there for each other. And there have been times when girlfriends haven't been there, but their sisters have. My kids have done so much, living out, living in apartments, living in dorms, living back home, and they've always there for each other to move or help each other move out, and you

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know the girlfriends have all come and gone, but the sisters have always been really in tight, and that's how I've been with my sisters and that's how my mother was with her sisters. They're always there when you need them.

KP: Okay, so moving on to another subject. Do you consider yourself active politically?

AP: Politically? I'd say probably not. Not real active politically—I mean I'm aware of current events, I have opinions on things, but I wouldn't consider myself somebody who's out there holding a sign, you know, on Washington Square.

KP: Have you been involved in volunteer community work?

AP: I have done some volunteer community work. I'm not sure what exactly you consider volunteer, you know I've done things within my own church, you know collecting for various things, I always worked at the schools when the kids had things they were doing, you know, fundraisers, things like that. But I wouldn't say that I was overly [active in volunteering]. I've been involved in the preservation of Worcester, and have done some presentations and research work for them.

KP: It seems like kind of a lot! [Laughs] You talked about church, what role has religion taken?

AP: Um, well I've always belonged to the same church. As a youngster going to church, it was a good thing. It was a positive thing for me. I remember going to catechism classes and I remember the positive teachers that we had. As a young child, I'm sure you can both relate, there were times when you felt like the whole world was against you, and you went to church or catechism and the teacher would tell you about the love that Jesus had for you and it made you feel like you were really worthy of somebody special and I think that's a good thing and I think kids need that. And then later, as we got to be teenagers, we were very involved in the church, there were quite a lot of functions that were available to us as young teenagers, which was a very safe environment, we had a basketball team and the cheerleaders and we got to meet kids-- our own peers in a real good setting as opposed to being out on the streets. We did lots of fundraisers, we did car washes, we did bake sales, we went on some trips, and we had quite a lot of fun and I think that that's really missing in kids today. We really had a ball, we had a good time. And as we got older, of course, we got married, had kids and the kids all received their sacraments in the church. You know now that they're old enough to make their own decisions, they go. It's something we exposed them to and it was a good thing for them and they're able to make their own decisions now and they go on their own, they make their sacrifice to go and they believe in a power greater than themselves.

KC: How have health issues impacted your life?

AP: Well, I'm someone that is very believing in natural health. I had a cousin in the seventies that was very involved in natural health, she kind of exposed us to a lot of this yoga, and meditation and natural health, positive thinking, and we don't spend a whole lot on conventional medicines, things like that. It's a real integrated lifestyle, basically.

KC: So do you do yoga and all of that a lot?

AP: I wouldn't say I do yoga a lot, but I do walk and meditate and I do pray and I do go to the chiropractor, and my kids are into that also. And that is a whole different method of health care that we don't go to a doctor to take medicines, things like that. You know, it's all holistic, in the whole body health, the mind's health the body's healthy, and vice versa, the body's healthy, the mind's healthy. So, it's very connected kind of a thing.

KC: What are your experiences in accessing quality, affordable healthcare?

AP: Okay, could you repeat that question?

KC: What are your experiences in accessing quality, affordable healthcare?

AP: Well, I know that you need health insurance, in case of something that comes up that you really need to be covered for. We actually pay out of pocket for a lot of services that we believe helps us, whether it be a massage, whether it be reflexology, chiropractor, you know, taking vitamins, taking nutrients, and a lot of that stuff isn't covered by insurance. So I think it's a lot more about educating yourself about what's available and being willing to pay the money that it requires as opposed to going to this particular healthcare that says, "this is how we treat your problem and this is what you should do." I had a problem with my back about ten years ago and the mainstream healthcare industry told me that I should just learn to live with it and that just to take painkillers every day that was their solution to my problem. We actually did more research on our own and went to a chiropractor and he helped me within a month. So it's something that I think people have to educate themselves more about the problems they are having and that there are alternatives to just mainstream going along with the program of what they say "well this is your problem and this is what you have to do and this is the only thing." Well there are other things that you can do that you have to educate yourself of.

KC: Whose health are you responsible for?

AP: Whose health am I responsible for? Well, that's a big question because it seems like, I mean I am responsible for my health, but I'm also having the responsibility to my kids to make sure when I buy food its healthy food and its prepared healthily and that they have the adequate educa--information that I have about healthcare, you know I share with them a lot of the things, I mean the trials and tribulations that we've had, my husband and I, along the way and how we found relief and how we found help. And in that way, I can only share what we've experienced and then they have to go make their own decisions. But, their basic philosophy also, even at these ages, are just kind of liking to follow along what we're doing, as opposed to running to a doctor and just because somebody says you have to take a flu shot, you know like why? What's in it? What is really, what is the substance that you're putting in [your body]? Just, why? I think people need to start asking "why?" before they take it.

KC: Do you eat all organic?

AP: I don't eat all organic, no. I can't say that I eat all organic, but I try to make good choices.

KC: Okay, let's see. Do you want to do the last one?

KP: Sure do. Now that we're working to tell a fuller story of women that has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

AP: Oh boy, how confident women are, how they can take on so much, and juggle it all and keep it going full speed ahead, and being so capable. That's something I learned from my own mother and grandmother and they were immigrants who came to this country and they still prospered, they were still happy, they still were positive, they still were involved, they still cared, they still kept busy, they still created. You know? That's just my experience of women into their eighties, because those are the examples that I've seen, from my own aunts; vital people, who still enjoy being part of society, being happy and productive.

KC: We have a couple additional questions. You said your parents were strict, so how old were you when you were first allowed to date?

AP: Fifteen. My first date was here at Assumption College.

KC: Really? Haha, what did you do here?

AP: I went to the basketball game, Serge DeBari was on the team in those days, it was 1970, so he was on the team and now he's the coach. So everything that goes around comes around. So that was my first date. It is interesting that you would ask that question! It seemed like the

biggest gym ever. You walked in, I mean I was 15, we didn't, I mean a college campus and a college gym, we never saw more of a back yard or a school yard and grammar school, I thought it was the biggest gym. There were people everywhere, it was so exciting. And it was an exciting time for the school and the team was really good in those days. The team is still good, I come to the games a lot. I love basketball. Like I said when we were kids, I mean teenagers, it was all the teams we were involved in, we were cheerleaders, we got to go to all of the games, it was so exciting. So I kind of forgot until I took my daughter to a game again, she wanted to go watch, so I took her, and I thought, "wow I remember how much fun this was, why don't I do this more often?" So I found myself at quite a few games.

KC: What was considered fashionable when you were a young woman?

AP: This is great, my daughter is a fashion major at Framingham State, so she just did a whole paper on me and fashion in the seventies, that was really what the theme was. I went to public school, North High School, and we could wear jeans. We called them dungarees. And that was a big deal that we could wear them to school, so we did we wore them and the shirts and the jeans and the platform shoes. We used to buy our jeans on Highland Street. There were two shops, one was Rosarian, and the other was Mood and everybody bought their jeans there and you had to get your jeans there. And there were big flarey legs and the pants were always dragging on the ground. We had the long hair and it was always parted in the middle, long, straight hair. There I am! [Points to a picture] Oh boy, I mean we wore cut-offs and daisy dukes, everything's really popular right now. In fact, my daughter is twenty and she actually wears things and I'll say, "my God, I wore that." 1972, honest to God, she came out last summer in a little gauzy sundress, platform shoes, big hoop earrings, and you know the hair and the thing. I'm like oh my god! We wore the same thing, I had a gauzy dress, the same thing, same exactly. I wore it to a wedding, I'll never forget it. So, pretty much what you see, we've already done it, girls. [Laughs]

KC: Where are the particular areas of the city that you spend most of your time? Restaurants, whatever?

AP: Probably, I'd say more the East Side. Restaurants, oh boy, we go a lot of different places. We're everywhere, Shrewsbury Street, Dino's, we hit a lot of the-- mostly everything on the East Side. But, I'm over here too, like I said, I love to come to Assumption. Oh boy, I love the library, I do a lot of family research, Worcester history, that's a good resource for that. I like to go to the Antiquarian and hear the lectures they have over there. I love Elm Park, I love to walk in that area, there's that nice big square that you get to walk the outside for the park. But I'd say I'm all over, the Centrum, I'm everywhere. We love Mechanics Hall, we love Foothills Theater, we

were at the new opening of the Hanover Theater, love theater. We're patrons of the Worcester County Opera; also, our friends are involved in as actors, so we go there a lot. We're kind of all over the city.

KP: Based on your life experience, what advice would you give to women today and to future generations?

AP: Okay, I would say, certainly be true to yourself, know yourself, appreciate yourself, respect yourself, care about yourself, always grow, always look to growing, working on yourself, being a better person, be the best you can be, don't be afraid to make mistakes, don't be afraid to admit you made mistakes, don't be afraid to try things. Oh, there's loads of advice I could give you right now. But I really think the relationship you have with yourself is probably the most important relationship you will ever have. It's so imperative that you know and are true to yourself.

KP: And one last question, do you feel that you have a legacy?

AP: Do I feel that I have a legacy? I hope I do. I hope that I've been a positive example to my kids, my girls. I hope that they always remember the good times, the happy times, the positive times, those things. The good times that they felt confident to take a challenge because of something that I might of felt confident to do. So, I hope that I have some kind of legacy, yes, certainly.

KP and KC: Okay, well thank you so much for your time.