

Interviewee: Sara Robertson, Mayor, City of Worcester
Interviewers: Linda Rosenlund and Melanie Demarais
Date of Interview: Wednesday, October 4, 2006
Location: Beechwood Hotel, Worcester, MA



Abstract: Sara Robertson was born on July 22, 1934 in Long Beach, California. She was a Worcester School Committee member, president of the Worcester League of Women Voters, and the first woman to serve as Worcester's mayor (1982-83). She also taught at Becker College and Worcester State College during the 1980s.

Mayor Robertson was in Worcester as the main speaker for a co-sponsored League of Women Voters and Worcester Women's History Project event "Celebrating Women in Politics." Newspaper articles reviewing the event and a tape of the program can be found in the WWHP archives.

LR/MD: You came back for a while after serving as Mayor. How do you think Worcester has changed?

SR: The first time I saw Worcester was from the window of a train. I had left California to go to Boston University graduate school. I had never been to the East. Coming in to Worcester I looked around, all this smoke coming out of stacks, houses on top of houses, I had never seen anything like that before. I literally sat in my seat and thought to myself, "I feel sorry for anyone who has to live in a place like this." It just to me was the worst environment I had ever seen. I found out I was very wrong. You can't tell a book by its cover. Smokestacks are gone, probably the greatest thing that happened was the Worcester Common Outlet, the Mall was built, and that was a tremendous thing to have happen. Even though it's had its growing pains, but it served its purpose at the time.

The second greatest thing that happened, the reason I got my arm twisted to run for City Council, was the Civic Center. Our market strategy, our strategic location was so fabulous. Seventh largest density population within a 50-mile radius of any city in the US -- you can't beat that for a Civic Center. That is why ours has been so much more successful.

I've seen a lot of change, but I see a lot of sameness. Roads still narrow and windy, very familiar and picturesque. Reminded every time I come back to my daughter who lives in Sudbury and to visit friends at Thanksgiving. You have to allow time for the traffic jams, we really have traffic jams at certain parts of the day. It's just one of those quirky things about Worcester, big back up at Forest and Salisbury, I've got to plan for that. Worcester is a doable city, a very affirming city. If you have a contribution to make, it will be gladly accepted. I think you have seen that with your historical project [WWHP]. I didn't get involved because I knew I was about to leave.....I had already done the League of Women Voters and done the politics, and I didn't want to be doing WWHP but so glad it was being done. And it's a great idea and so you've been immensely

successful. The harder it is to grow, the more successful you'll be in the long run. If it had just been like the Mall, you saw what happened to that. I think you'll be around for a long time.

LR/MD: When you arrived in 1962, did you have any political aspirations?

SR: I cried for nine months. I had a baby that was 14 months old, and one three months old. Stuck in the suburbs, one car, and no public transportation. When I was in California and I had my daughters, I taught adult education, I had all kinds of outlets and weather was always good. I had lived in Boston long enough, and I remember my mother had saved all my letters and October 10, 1962, "I can't believe it's snowing." It was. Jobs with Dukakis Administration, Assistant Secretary of Commerce, and Central Massachusetts Regional Developer for Affordable Housing Initiative, under Amy, Cabinet Secretary. I did have a couple of real jobs.

MD: What time was that?

SR: 82—83 – Commissioner of Commerce, fall of 83 or 84 -- had to be 84. Evelyn Murphy, a very close friend of mine, was the Secretary of Economic Development and I went to work for her. It was great. Very challenging, something I could sink my teeth into. Teaching is fun, but even more fun is to be in a line situation where what you are going to do is going to make a difference.

LR: When you came to grad school at BU for a degree in government, specialty in international relations --and undergrad in psychology, from Pepperdine -- how did you get involved in politics in Worcester?

SR: First thing I did was I joined the LWV, had joined in California, but I was having babies so I was not a very active member. I found out how to join here and I was just, it was sort of like, the first meeting, I walked into a room full of Sara Robertsons.... "Boing! This is for me." There were others [turn off tape] So I started some new initiatives with the LWV -- women to be observers at City Council meetings. I often was one of those observers. I loved that government was that close. Not off in the statehouse or Washington, DC. It was right here. I could sit down and watch it here. It was like the popularity of reality TV, watching the dynamics of reality. They are not playing games; they are really trying to survive. It's all for real, not made up.

That's when my children started school, I had benefited when Earl Warren was governor, he started pouring oil money into education into California. Money dried up in the 70's. I was able to take advantage of it. We had the finest of schools, education, activities, debating club, sporting events, art, drama, piano, and violin. Whatever you wanted to do there was someone there to help you do it. One time in my life, I was in Washington, DC and Robin Spaulding had a school volunteer's program conference DC. Never been to the capitol and she said, "Let's go." Turned out Earl Warren, was Supreme Court justice, he was there with his wife, I got up and walked across the room and thanked him, I had just been elected to the School Committee and I said, "I want to thank you for my education and now I am serving as member of school board," -- what they call them in other states. His face lit up like a light bulb. Mary, Mary, listen to this girl, she's from California and dah,dah, dah. Very cathartic moment. I think he was glad too.

LR: You were elected to the School Committee in 1969?

SR: My son was only two. Get elected in the uneven years. I only served two terms.

MD: Was Ogretta McNeil the first woman School Committee?

SR: No, Helen Bowditch and Christine Plumley. Ogretta McNeil was long after I served. Helen got off after my last term. Christine was off, so I was the only woman. For my second term. Then I got off and Jane O'Brien came on at some point, and then Ogretta and Connie.

LR: Did a group of people get behind you to run for city council?

SR: Like a said, I had just moved into Worcester, but I had been President of League of Women Voters and I went to City Council, so people were aware of me. Helen Bowditch and Christine Plumley called up, "May we come and see you?" Christine, her husband, Ladd Plumley, President of State Mutual -- he was ready to retire and they were not going to be around very much. [Christine said] "And I'm not planning on running for school committee and Helen Bowditch and I think you would be a good person to run." You know EGO ran....on the other hand, I've got a two year old and 5 and 6 year old. I'm saying, "Hey wait a minute, what does it entail?"

"Oh just go to a few rallies, hand out emery boards." and Helen believed that's all you needed to do. She was so revered; she could have been anything she wanted to be. She was so self-effacing. But strong, positive influence in the community, before or since. So I thought let me talk to my husband. My husband came f from an old family, mother was a Morgan, and family owns a company in Worcester. Men in family -- uncle ran for mayor, cousin, city councilor, so was sort of a family tradition but had gone, by the way side but he thought it was a good idea. He said I will stay home in the evenings when you have to go out. We were both so naïve that, frankly what someone should say is how could you be so dumb. Even though I had studied government and taught government, I had never been active in a campaign, so I had no idea what it entailed. Well once I got into it, I realized people were saying "Sara who?" I had zero name recognition.

My last name was not Morgan, my mother-in-law was the only Morgan girl and her name was not Morgan and she was not known, so I had to decide how I was going to handle this situation. And I got some people together, well Christine helped me, she had a campaign organization that I sort of inherited. You know you never have the same allegiance, not the same for you. So anyway somehow I figured out that the only way I could get over this "Sara who" business was looking at the precinct maps, looking at the voting list, and look at the neighborhoods and figure out where folks didn't know who I was. And go door to door. And that is what I did. Every two years I did that. I never didn't go door to door. It's sort of what [Michael] Dukakis did -- get precinct captain, get these layers-- I wasn't that sophisticated. I was running citywide and I had never voted in a city election. So it worked. I have tried to tell other people to do that but I've never been successful.

I enjoyed it. Underneath the veneer is an encyclopedia salesperson. I like to go door to door and see what's gonna appear It was a challenge, entertaining, frustrating and onerous but I loved it. I

really always love it. I would do it tomorrow. I like meeting people. Boy it was interesting. I met some doozies but I met so many warm-hearted people, just the fact that you have come to the trouble to come to my door. And then when I came home at night, after dark, I would sit with my brochure, and wrote a note on it, and it was on my handwriting in, inefficient in this computer age, but folks who weren't home got these handwritten notes in their door. You bring back lots of memories. My daughters came with me; they were cute, just little tykes.

Why did I decide to run? Not just Christine Plumley, but getting back to Earl Warren, my kids were about to start Lee Street School, an old, run down, brick building, with a teeny playground. I was used to going to a school that had a block of grass for activities on. They zoned, Horace Mann, they zoned for schools and parks. Unlike anything we've had in New England. I was very concerned about the lack of libraries, the lack of extracurricular activities. Nothing of what I had had. I thought I could get on the School Committee I could change it all around and I quickly found out differently.

Did I make a difference? I followed my mentor Helen in being a consensus builder. Restraint, resilient, so that anything I was specifically responsible for I felt very strongly that -- the School Committee meetings use to be in City Hall back then -- we should get them out into the community. With a lot of prodding and pushing, one meeting a month would be at a school. I think they gave that up eventually. I'm proud of that. We got tremendous support for that. The parents would come because it was right in their neighborhood. So it put out some trouble for some folks, so what? We were bringing government to people. For people to get to City Hall, there is no place to park. Unless they have a burning issue or unless they are hanger-oners they are not going to do this. It opened up the process.

MD: Tell us about your grandchildren.

SR: Four granddaughters and three grandsons. Three granddaughters are in Texas. Last fall 2005, my daughter in Sudbury with her kids -- took our picture with [Sara Robertson's] portrait at City Hall. All our children were there for the display of the portrait. Kids are very supportive and very proud. It was a two-year blip.

LR: How have you balanced your priorities, children, and husband?

SR: No one complained. I'm really, really organized. Juggle ten balls and never, ever drop one. Memory fading, but still do many things at once. If you interviewed my kids, best homemade meals, best sandwiches, homemade pies, loved their pies. I just did it. Because I loved them and I wanted them to have a normal childhood. And I think they did. All have advanced degrees and all have wonderful kids. Even though my husband and I parted ways, he was a very good help.

MD: Your experience with LWV, were you active with the League in California?

SR: No, just attended a few meetings.

MD: Was your Mother involved?

SR: No because of my graduate work, heard about it and thought I'd be interested in it. Not very involved, got involved here. Served as President here as three years.

MD: I like the idea of the observers at Council meetings. They continued that for a long time.

SR: When I arrived in 60's it was a large vibrant group. Women are off doing other things. Wished I had had other opportunities. What I did that put me on the map, when I was nine months pregnant, President of LWV, we ran a voter services drive, in the economic areas, and we had to fight, got City Council to say, Joe Tinsley very involved, take voting out of City Hall. At the time that was the only place to register to vote. Got them to agree to register to vote.....my idea. Got the league behind me, City Council behind me. Bob O'Keefe, City Clerk, diametrically opposed to it -- if people can't bother to come to City Hall to register they shouldn't vote. First night we went to, loudspeaker on my station wagon, such and such night, you can register to vote at your neighborhood center. First night to Green Island, and we had big van and [roommates coming in] big van with tables and chair. City Clerk said, "I won't do it. I thought I'd be in an office." This neighborhood center didn't have an office. Clerk said, "I won't do it." I called Joe Tinsley he came down and said, "Bob, we voted to allow this to happen, come on." Bob said "No, I'm not gonna do it." So I got on the phone with Msgr. Harrington, not Bishop then, and I said, "Msgr., we are having a problem down here at Green Island." I knew he was a, we had a good bond, I'm not even Catholic. He came down and said "Bob O'Keefe, I think you want to go down there and register the people." And that's how it happened. These vignettes. Yes I did make a difference. And then we did it all over the City. It was great.

I was pregnant with my son that is when people took notice of me. I accomplished something that no one thought was possible of accomplishing, with Bob O'Keefe in there. David Rushford is nothing like that. He is very good.

SR: Need to ask you a question, agent of commerce, make a map at the turnpike, where folks get off, to eat, get gas, - this was so simple. You know what, I thought of it; they didn't, so they never did it. I thought what a waste. You know by the time they get here, unless they stopped in Sturbridge, or some place like that, they might like to get out. Because by the time people get here, see our museums all the things we have to offer, hand it out to them. They were handing something at the turnpike, so I knew it wasn't something the state said they couldn't. They never did it. That would have been a good achievement and could have been done.

LR: Interesting story of how you got here, on the train ride, folks think you were born here.

SR: Do I dare say, "The first election I ever voted in, I was on the ballot." I think I'm not comfortable with my speech for tonight. You have given me good food for thought.

LR: Just listening to your stories.