

Interviewee: Sharon Smith Viles
Interviewers: Caroline Walls and Kathleen Fitzgerald
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Overseen by: Professors Maryanne Leone and Regina Edmonds, Assumption College

Abstract: Sharon Smith Viles has lived in Worcester with her husband Peter H. Viles since their move here with her five children in 1976, a long way from her hometown of Wisconsin Rapids, WI. Sharon attended Northwestern University Nursing School in Chicago, has her B.A. in sociology from New York State University, and has her Master's in Psychology from Assumption College. In this interview Sharon describes what it was like to raise five children and how she put her education to work as a surgical nurse, a charge nurse, and a psychiatric nurse. Sharon has also taken many opportunities to volunteer in the community including Abby's House and the Worcester Women's History Project. Most recently Sharon Smith Viles teaches Sumi-e ink painting at the Worcester Art Museum.

CW: This is Caroline Walls and Kathleen Fitzgerald and it is October 24, 2008 and we're here interviewing Sharon Smith Viles, it is around 11:00 am. We are probably going to ask you a few quick questions that were already on the bio sheet so um could you just tell us your full maiden name?

SSV: Sharon Smith.

CW: And your married name?

SSV: Uh, that's my last name Sharon Viles.

CW: OK all right. And where were you born?

SSV: In Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.

CW: Did you want to tell us something about that or about Wisconsin?

SSV: Well I lived there until I was seventeen. I lived in Wisconsin Rapids until I was about seven, and then my parents moved to the southern part of the state...I went to high school there. And I went to nursing school in Chicago. And from then I haven't been back to Wisconsin.

CW: OK. What year were you born?

SSV: 1937.

CW: Did you want to tell us a little something about how you met your husband?

SSV: Well I was in nursing school in Chicago and he had just graduated from Harvard. And in those days nursing school was off limits to men. And so I had four roommates living in an apartment with two bedrooms and you know a living room it was really nice right in the and he and his buddies had prior; had blind dates with uh some women in the class ahead of me. This I didn't know. He, called her and she said, "It's really nice that you're coming to Chicago but I'm engaged, I'm so sorry." [Laughter] So, what they did, they came into nursing residence, picked up the house book. You know what a house book is? Uh, like a bulletin board, with a list of pictures, but a list of the spring formal queen or something like that and her attendants and I was one of them. So they started at the top, and they went down until they got someone who would actually talk to them. [Laughter] And I answered the phone, and three of my roommates, we were all, we were all there ya know. We had no, we were free and uh so we, they called and they wanted to know if I and a couple of my friends would like to come down and meet three really handsome Harvard men. [Laughter] It was just hilarious and the guy who called they picked him to call because they thought he was the smoothest. [Laughter] And uh, so we, two friends of mine went down, we met them and they said, "don't you want to come up for a ride?" So all the concerns and worries the young women had these days, we didn't and so we did. So we walked out and here's this gorgeous baby blue Pontiac Bonneville convertible. Like my future husband slid in behind the drivers seat on the driver's side and I said, "I'm taking him." [Laughter]

CW: It was the car huh?

SSV: It was the car. It was the car. And his two buddies, we all you know piled into the car and his friends father had a Pontiac agency down in [INAUDIBLE] and Eddie could go take any car he wanted when he was home. It was gorgeous. You know in those days, I don't know whether you know anything about automobiles, but the Bonneville was this huge boat, you know giant car. Big ..the rear fender had these big flares. It was just gorgeous from the point of view of a twenty year old, anyway. So we did that and the next day he called me and asked me to go out on a date. Peter did, and I still didn't know that it wasn't his car so then we started to talk a little and any so that's how I met him. By the way, it was interesting because I was in nursing school; he was on his way to medical school. And I had sworn to my roommates and my parents that I would never marry a doctor especially not any stupid idiot from Harvard. In fact, I dated a guy from Harvard. That's pretty funny.

CW: That's so funny. Can I ask you a little bit about your parents? Do you want to talk a little bit about your parents, what were their names?

SSV: My mother, her name was Gretchen. She was from a little town in northern Wisconsin and she grew up a single...an only child in relatively poor middle class. Her parents were not, had no education...she went to nursing school and became a nurse and was living in Wisconsin Rapids. And her father was, from my point of view, my grandfather was the nicest person on the face of the earth. But in the real world he was kind of a failure. He didn't make very much money didn't keep jobs very well. And anyways she was working in a hospital in Wisconsin Rapids and she met my father who was admitted to the hospital...and she used to tell me that she never met anybody like him. Well my kids used to talk about their grandfather like this guy who was like one of them. A kid. He was always playing tricks on people, always joking, always telling funny

stories. Generally a really funny guy and my mother had grown up in this family, in this Scandinavian, serious you know, people who really didn't have much of a sense of humor, so this was very new to her. My dad was born in Wisconsin. He originated in Milwaukee Wisconsin. His parents were both well educated for the time. His mother had a teaching certificate from Drake University in the 1890s and his father was an engineer and in those days, an engineer, he was an engineer, who was basically built cars. We're talking 1910, 1915. And so he, my dad was the eldest of three and his mother was a nasty, nasty person. She was abusive and angry all the time, my dad was not the favorite she did not like him. He was the class clown to get out of things

CW: Like joke around?

SSV: Yes. His younger brother was the favorite child and he was identical to [INAUDIBLE] his brother was quite handsome curly blonde hair blue eyes. That's how I remember my uncle, really very handsome. And then he had a sister who was completely rejected. My grandmother was jealous of my grandfather's attention to her. Really bizarre. And anyways my dad, they told him all the time in school that he would never amount to anything. And his determination, he was a very determined person and he went to Iowa State University with no help from his parents and worked in the kitchen and worked off of his tuition and got a degree and basically did it all himself. And then he arrived here in Wisconsin Rapids he was a forester had gotten a job with the Wisconsin Preservation.

CW: Do you want to tell us a little about growing up there? What you were like as a child, and what you liked to do?

SSV: I was a very shy quiet kid. I did a lot-- I read a lot and after I was seven I remember very vaguely going to first grade in Wisconsin Rapids and then my dad was, well he was offered a job, a better job in another part of the state so they decided to move and we went from a town of 30 k to a town where my nearest neighbor. Our house was in the middle of a state forest so it was a real shock to everyone. And one of the things I remember about the first couple years is that my mother spent a lot of time in the kitchen crying because she missed her parents, she missed people. She was, there was nobody around and at that point it was... But after we got there. It was very quiet and rural. We took the bus to school, actually high school. We walked to elementary school I had four people in my class and the school building was about the size of these two rooms with a big hot stove in the middle and the classes or the courses the teacher doesn't teach us we listen to say a radio program out of University of Wisconsin in the mornings, we listen to the radio. And get courses on geography and on agriculture in particular. And art and music, we would sing along to the radio, it was hilarious, I mean when you look back on it, it was quite interesting. The way that people were educated and while I lived in the country but I wasn't a farmer's child so I was sort of an outsider but I spent a lot of times on farms because all of my friends were farmer's kids. So it was a very rural, really neat my brthero and I both agree that we really enjoyed living there once we got used to it.

CW: And how old was your brother? Was he an older brother, younger brother?

SSV: Younger brother.

CW: And were you two close growing up?

SSV: Well we were and we weren't. We did fine until...He was a lot like my dad playing jokes and I didn't appreciate a lot of the jokes. And we had a younger sister as well who was 5 years younger than me and was 8 years younger than David. And I remember her as being a pest. [laughs] We've become really good friends as we grew up as we grew older.

CW: And what were their names?

SSV: David and Marion.

CW: Um I heard you mention your children; it says that you have five children. Did you want to tell us their names and ages and a little bit about them?

SSV: Ok well, we'll start with Kate. She is now 50 and she has, she's a nurse she has one son who is 10. She lives in Vermont, she is a dog breeder, she breeds Australian shepherds. And they live on a dirt road in a log house. They have a barn that is better built than their house is. They have sheep and she told me last week that they just got a half dozen goats and what she does is she trains the dogs they are herding dogs and she trains them to be herders. And the others are event dogs and its called agility and they are working dogs. So, and her husband is also a nurse they have both been nurses for 10 years.

CW: Are they nurses in Vermont?

SSV: Yes, and before that he was in real estate and she was, did accounting and she started her life as a forester. She has always lived in the country, She was the one child. We grew up in the city but always lived at the end of a dirt road. She is very tall, and slender, and blonde like her father and she is a pretty nice person she helps me out. My second child Charles is 47 and he is recently divorced. He has 3 sons or 3 children, 2 sons and a daughter. And lives in a home close to Chapel Hill. He is a software engineer, and he started out as a forester in college and a story about him, when his father took him to interview for college. My husband has generally let the kids take responsibility for themselves with their clothing. So they arrived at Virginia Tech and it turned out Charlie brought no clothes. All he was wearing, he was wearing a pair of beaten up fatigues with red, white, and blue patches all over and a holey t-shirt . So that's how he interviewed.

CW: Did he get into Virginia Tech?

SSV: He did!

CW: There ya go!

SSV: He was a very smart kid. In high school the kids, him and his buddies their comp, the competition was who got the highest grade on SAT. They did There was one kid who was within a couple points of a perfect score. It was just a matter of competition and Char has played

basketball all his life. And but he had to he is 6'6 but he has stopped. His eldest son is 15 and is a freshman and is winning races all over the place, breaking his own record his school record. His daughter Claire is 10, she loves school. [INAUDIBLE] They are great kids. The divorce has been going on for three years they seem to be managing very well. The kids are doing very well. Charlie is doing OK but it's hard for him. The third one is Andrew he lives in Lynnfield. And he has four kids. His wife Lauren is a local girl. She was born and raised here graduated from holy cross she is a physician and he is a lawyer in Boston. He's a lawyer but he does something else with investment. We don't know really what [Laughter] His eldest daughter is about 18, she's a senior in high school she applying to NYU and is also tall and blonde.

CW: Runs in the family!

SSV: Well yea it's interesting because most of them are tall and blonde. My children are but anyways. So Emma is 18 . Patrick is 14 and just started at North Andover private high school and [INAUDIBLE] should have sent their oldest daughter there also. And then they have two sons. [INAUDIBLE] really interesting kids. He's the one who comes to our house and sits in the kitchen and reads my how to take care of your house plants book [laughs]. He has a gecko and fish and he has a houseplant and almost everytime he comes, he takes a houseplant. He's just a really interesting kid. And Owen is younger, the youngest child. He's eight. He's a great kid. He's gonna be a football. Andrew's wife Lauren is 100% Irish. Her father was sort of the big burly Irish man her mother was a little woman. So the kids have these different, different. So that's Andrew and they are the closest of all of our..

CW: Do you see them a lot?

SSV: Not a lot but ya know. I'd love to have them next door. My, our third son Michael just moved to New York from the west coast he and his wife. His wife Amy, They have only been married three years and Michael is, has spent most of his adult life on the west coast. He is the one who went to Assumption for two years then went off to... He spent the time he was 16 until the time he was 25, he worked at bike shops. He was well regarded for fixing bikes. And the time came when he wanted to pursue his musical career and stop messing with bicycles. He learned computers and from then on, his musical career didn't go anywhere anyways, he plays in a great jazz band but it didn't turn into anything and so he became involved with Paul Allen, have you ever heard of Paul Allen? He is one of the creators of Microsoft. Paul Allen started another company called Starwave so eventually he went from doing just some computer data and data entry into working at Starwave. He ended up being in charge of all of the servers. He became sort of a self-educated. He hardware comp moved into doing comp data into Starwave. And he spent most of his life working for about a year to five years. And this is what he's doing now. He's actually for the last three years been working for a health services agency. His wife was a software person and she just got hired by Bravo, NBC's Bravo in New York City. She has been traveling, doing contract work there, and she did contract work .. now they are there. They found an apartment about the same size as the house they were living in in Seattle about 900 square feet. A little, tiny apartment, a little, tiny house. So Michael is doing consulting work for [INAUDIBLE] but we're thrilled it's the first time for him being back in years. But her family lives in Barre, her father was born in Barre. They met in London, they had no idea that there was this connection so that's them they have a dog they have no children and don't plan to have

children. My youngest daughter Rachel was very good to me through the surgery and she and Craig has four children and her eldest is also a senior in high school she's very smart. Rachel's kids are, two of them are strawberry blonde and the other two of them have dark hair. And her husband Craig is a short sturdy guy. Rachel is shorter than all the rest of her siblings she got the shorter, somehow she got the small genes and she's only 5'5 [Laughter] And their daughter is 5'7, their eldest daughter. Craig is pretty tall their son Craig Jr. is 15 and he is pretty tall too. And there's two little girls that are six and [INAUDIBLE] They're little girls. Rachel is a cost accountant she works for an energy service company. [INAUDIBLE] and her husband is a carpenter an architectural -- he has a degree in architecture but he did my kitchen actually. So that's our family. But actually, I forgot my eldest daughter has a stepson.

CW: Ohh ok.

SSV: And they, her stepson and his girlfriend just had a baby so I'm a great-grandmother. [Laughter]

CW: Well Congratulations! They were all kinda close in age, how was it raising five kids around the same age? Was it difficult or?

SSV: Oh all right. Well you didn't get any sleep, literally, literally you didn't. I remember talking to, at one point when I was pregnant with my first child, I took, I went to a work surgical nurse in Fremont. My husband was back in school and I was talking to the wife of a pediatrician of a pediatric surgeon and it...it was a party a Christmas party for surgical staff and we went and talking with her she said she had five kids. She was you know a little older, she had five kids under seven. And she said, "its so nice to have...to talk to someone." I mean basically there's nothing you can do. In those days everybody had very large families and there was no work outside the house you just couldn't, there was no daycare. There was never a lot of daycare unless you lived next door to your mother; you had to look after your children. There's no possible way, it was frowned upon.

Flipped tape

CW: Ok

SSV: So anyway, it was, you just didn't do anything else. And at that point we were having the children, well actually the first four..... I did a lot of uh, sewing kid's clothes. I cut their hair. I canned fruit and vegetables. You know, had a garden. It took all day long every day to umm..

CW: The chores?

SSV: Right. Get them done. And the technology had not stepped up to assist housewives... yet. [Laughter]

SSV: It was tough, very tough.

CW: They sound like active kids too, you were ...

SSV: Of, of course they were

CW:probably always on the go? [Laughter]

SSV: Of course they were, and you really had to watch 'em. Cause you don't know what they can get into. I talk about walking my kids around, ya know, I had a harness,

CW: Yeah

SSV: You know, like you would a dog?

CW: Right

SSV: But when you live in the city, you can't not control themm. You know, a two year old doesn't know that running into the street is dangerous.

CW: Right

SSV: And so ya know, one in a stroller and the other one in a harness and it was really...
[Laughter]

[Laughter]

SSV:and people would look at me like "you put a leash on your kid?" [Laughter]
And the other thing that I used for all of my children was, a play pen. I had a play pen in the living room or the foyer or wherever it was. We would move it around so the child could be where I could see her or him. But they were safe. They weren't going to get into stuff that was dangerous.

CW: U-huh.

SSV: The first time that you um, have some kind of minor accident you realize how important that is. My neighbor and closest friend had a child that was always on the go. And he was a uh...a monkey. He was a spider monkey. [laughter] He was everywhere. He would, he ran into the bedroom climbed up on the open drawer of a dresser flipped it over on himself.

CW: Oh, gosh

SSV: So, you know that was a very hard lesson. He didn't hurt himself too seriously but it was uh...scary.

CW: That is scary. Let's see. So when did you say you moved to Worcester?

SSV: 1970.

CW: Oh, ok. Um, do you want to go ahead?

KF: Yeah, sure um ok...Where did you attend school?

SSV: Uh, oh several places, many places. [Laughter] My nursing diploma was from Northwestern University... and then I went to took some courses through the years but I didn't get a bachelors degree until I was in my mid 30s from the State University of New York. A new program designed...college. And, basically what you do is you document your life experience all the college courses you've taken etc etc and write them down. And, so I did that and I got a Bachelor's degree in psychology. [INAUDIBLE] So I did this because I had, I had decided I wanted to go into the seminary so I started seminary. Around the same time my husband was hired here to start a pediatric care unit at UMass Medical Center. A hospital had just been built. So I was in the middle of my course in seminary and I came to this area. During that period of time I realized that I really wasn't, in order to be a minister or pastor or priest you have to have a calling, you have to have a calling. And I was, I discovered in years worth of work that I wasn't called to the priesthood. [Laughter] And I found a job right after I graduated from, with the local bank. Did that for a couple years and thought I really wanted to go into medicine so that's when I went to Assumption and got a masters in psychology at Assumption. And after that while I was getting my masters, I did my internship at UMass Medical in the department of psychiatry. And one of the places where I did some work was in pediatric psych ward. And one of the nurses found out that I was a nurse and she said, "why don't you come and work for us?" So, I did. Part time. Twenty-four hours a week. Eight hour shifts. And, six months later she quit. And I had two masters degrees, not a whole lotta experience in hospital place, but a lot of experience in counseling that I had done over a period of 10 years or so. And I, went from being the intern to the charge nurse. Because she left. And that's how I became the charge nurse.

KF: Oh, wow, really?

SSV: And that was a period of time when healthcare was changing. They were looking at the bottom line and not thinking much about quality and it got to a point where I felt that I couldn't take responsibility. Because we had 14/15 disturbed children between the ages of 2 and 16. Crazy, they closed the treatment center, but..but, in that period of time that last year we had three serious injuries to staff and didn't really have much guidance or direction. They were absolutely understaffed, and I just felt like I couldn't take responsibility for a center run like that. So I quit. And from then on I worked for a small private agency that placed disturbed kids in homes. I trained parents. I also did behavior modification to help structure the life of the child. Most of these kids, all they need is structure. But, most of these kids are not inherently bad. Their environment makes them that way. It's irrational parents. They are what drive them that way. So you put this kids in a stable setting and they look perfectly normal.

KF: U-huh

SSV: Well, after a while they do. [laughs]

SSV: So I did that for three years. And then, and my husband was going to go on sabbatical. So I, I quit my job. And then he couldn't go. That year. We had to wait a year. And in terms of education that's as much of formal education as I received.

KF: Ok now when did you stop working, are you still working?

SSV: I teach two classes at the art museum.

KF: Oh really?

SSV: Yes.

KF: The Worcester Art Museum?

SSV: Yes. I teach oriental brush painting and Sumi-e Ink Painting.

CW: What got you interested in that?

SSV: In 1991, I've always sort of taken art classes here and there, always loved art. Should have been an art major, I think. [Laughter] but in '91 I had an accident and couldn't work. Came back from the sabbatical and couldn't go back to work. And, but I couldn't because my fracture...all sorts of medical issues. So I needed to do something to occupy myself. So I took a class in brush painting and it was love at first stroke. [Laughter] I love the process. It's, it's very soothing, it's very meditative. The technique really excited me. The centering, if you think about yoga, it centers you, you have to center in order to focus yourself. You know you can't think about what happened yesterday or tomorrow, you have to focus on right now. And I've been teaching that class since 1999. One class or two.

KF: Awesome. So we know that you're very involved in the community then. Are there any other community organizations that you're involved with?

SSV: Oh, I'm on the board of trustees for Briarwood which is a continued care retirement community in Worcester. And I just came on the Worcester Women's History Project board of directors. I started with them before the women 2000 congress. Women 2000 was a national three-day conference held in October 2000 to commemorate the first [national] Woman's Rights Convention in 1850. Over the 30-year period in the area, I've been involved with Abby's House. It started out as a homeless shelter for homeless women. And, all but I spent 9 years working in these shelters.

KF: Were there any moments that stick out as the most fulfilling?

SSV: I think the first two years or so of working at the shelter were very eye opening, and what I learned was the value of providing whatever was necessary to make life a little easier for people through the hard times. You know, I remember a woman came into the shelter. She had walked from California.

KF: Oh my...

SSV: You know, like God!. She had walked from California? I mean she was, she was brown as a bear, she was tan. And she had shared about her experience. You know, this was the 70's. She was running away from her life and she ended up in Worcester at a bad time. But I mean, to walk from California? Life must have been pretty tough. There have been many like that. And to help someone like that was something I never thought would happen, but it makes you feel good. I think the work I did at Abby's House is the proudest I've been. Women were struggling. And I think it's important to help in this kind of way, and it's something that the next generation needs to find in themselves to help others.

CW: Definitely. I actually just was curious when you started working, what age your children were when you started working again.

SSV: Went back to work?

CW: Yeah, started back working.

SSV: The first job I had a small job and my youngest was well a year old. I was going to organize a conference for a Presbyterian church.

CW: U-huh

SSV: And from then I worked on a contract basis with the church in the area. Organizational management. So I worked very part time but did organizational development, planning, training,

CW: I know how in class we talked about how it is hard for women to go back to work after having children, finding a balance there.

SSV: Definitely. I was, found for three years from the time Rachel was one until she was five, I was fortunate enough to find a really good daycare provider. The person was actually.... one time I was punishing Rachel for something she had done and I told her to go to her room. And she stopped at the landing at the top of the stairs and yelled, "If you not be nice to me I go live with Ann!" [laughter] 'Cause she had done something that she should do and I said go to your room [laughs] So that was it really, when we came here she was in kindergarten and I worked out my classes so I only had them in the morning and I would be back here by 12:30. And you know as things went on I worked when the kids, when kids were occupied. Day, daycare was very, very rare.

KF: Yeah

SSV: Cause my husband, like I said, was a pediatrician, and with him starting up the center at UMass Medical Center, and wasn't around to be a babysitter. I could not count on him to be home for the kids. I never had any help all those 30 years that he worked here. Before that it was a little more regular but still...it was just me.

CW: Any other questions?

KF: I think that's it.

CW: Ok, well we just wanted to thank you for letting us come and ask you these questions. It was so interesting

SSV: Oh, well you're very welcome.