

Interviewee: Janet Wallace
Interviewers: Amanda Filipelli and Michelle Arata
College of the Holy Cross
Interpreters: Stephanie Dundiego, Christine Kelly, and
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Abstract: Born and raised in London, England, Janet Wallace came to the United States in 1999. A social worker who loves working with children, it was clear that her work means a great deal to her. With her diminished hearing, she has since changed jobs and is currently finishing her fourth year at the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing that is what connects her to Worcester. She highlights the many differences that exist between life in England and life here in the United States especially in terms of opportunities for the deaf and hard of hearing. Her experiences in England with her family have certainly shaped the person she is today. Now Janet lives in the United States all on her own, showing that she is quite an independent and strong woman. Since moving to America she has learned American Sign Language in addition to her use of spoken English, but she is also fluent in British Sign Language that was her language of choice in England. Janet also touches on the various recreational activities in Worcester that she takes advantage of, especially the excitement of Tammany Hall.

This is the interview of Janet Wallace for the Worcester Women History Project. The interviewers are Michelle Arata and Amanda Filipelli. The Interpreters are Christine Kelly, Kelly McQualin, and Stephanie Dundiego.

Hi, my name is Amanda Filipelli. Hi, my name is Michelle Arata. We are seniors here at the college of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts or Worcester, MA. We are interviewing a woman with a connection to Worcester. I am asking the first half of the questions. I'm asking the second half of the questions. Ready.

AF What's your name?

JW My name is Janet Wallace. I'm from Worcester.

AF What do you identify yourself as? Hard of hearing, deaf, hearing?

JW Well, really it depends. Before when I was a kid, I'd say I identify as hard of hearing, but now my hearing has been deteriorating maybe when my hearing aid is off I identify as deaf because I can't hear, but really it depends sometimes it's hard for me.

AF How long have you used ASL?

JW Hasn't been a long time, maybe 2 years now.

AF What did you use before ASL?

JW Well, I'm from England. So, before I used British sign language. Very different.

AF Wow! Tell me about BSL.

JW Okay, well, I can show you the alphabet; this is what it looks like and this is what

my name looks like. That's my name. Here's the sign for name, it's different from the ASL sign.

AF How old were you when you learned BSL?

JW I learned it when I was around 20 years old.

AF Wow! When and where were you born?

JW I was born in 1969 in England. The name of the place was Great Wakening it's in London.

AF Tell me about your parents, family, brothers, sisters.

JW Yup. My parents and all my sisters live in England. I have 3 sisters. I was the second born. My older sister she has 3 children, yea, 3 children. I don't have any children. Then, my younger sister, she has 1 child. My youngest sister doesn't have any. So, I have 1 nephew and 3 nieces.

AF What was your parent's education like?

JW Oh, their education. Well, that was a long time ago. I think my father finished, the school system is different in England. I don't know the name of the high school, but I think my father finished high school and my mom finished high school. She started working right after high school. It wasn't until later in life that she went to college and now she's a bookkeeper. Thanks. My mom is really smart. At 50 years old, she taught herself the computer. It's amazing. She learned all the computer programs, everything about the computer, now she teaches it. She knows more than I do, I'm clueless about computers. So, I ask my mother, I call her in England and have her help me. (laugh)

AF When did you lose your hearing?

JW I actually don't know that. They tested my hearing I was 6 years old. Before when I was 3 years old, I had speech problems, but they didn't think it was related to deafness, but when I was 6, I got sick. So, I went to the hospital and they tested my hearing and we learned that my left ear, I'm completely deaf and in my right ear I'm hard of hearing. I don't know exactly when it happened. When I was 6 months old as a baby, I was sick so maybe it happened then, but we aren't sure.

AF Do you have other family members who are deaf or hard of hearing?

JW Nope. Only me.

AF How has your hearing loss impacted your life? With family, friends, work, how?

JW Well, it's changed a lot because when I was a kid I had more hearing in my right ear. When I was a kid I had problems at school, I went to a public school with no deaf children. I'd sit in the front of the class with my right ear to the teacher because I had no hearing in my left ear. When I went to college my hearing was worse, but I was really lucky because it was a small room and the teacher was really understanding. Now, it's hard. I had to change my job because it was becoming more difficult. I worked with children. I'm a social worker, but it was becoming more and more difficult for me to get involved with meetings, I wouldn't know what was going, who said what, it was hard for me. So, I changed my job. Now, I work at MCDHH. The Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Personally, I've had a hard time and I've been worried. With my hearing deteriorating my life has really changed. Socialization has

changed. It's been so hard to be around a lot of people, it's too much for me to handle. My family, they always forget, they'll shout at me from another room. I can't hear them and they forget that. Since I've been here in America, my hearing has really deteriorated. My family comes to visit me, I won't be able to understand them and I don't know if they'll understand that. My family really wants me to hear. My mom, yea, she feels bad for. She wants me to hear more.

AF Does your family live in England now?

JW Yup. I have been here in America for 10 years. For 5 years now, my hearing has been deteriorating, it's really bad now. I have a bicross wireless ----- that takes signaling from the left ear and sends them over to my right ear cuz I can't hear in my left ear anyways. That's good.

AF Are you married?

JW No. No. I think it's because of socializing has always been kind of hard for me. People think I'm stupid because I have to ask them to repeat things. It's hard. I prefer to stay at home with my cats. My cat loves me.

AF Cats are cute.

JW Yea, cats are cute.

AF Where did you live growing up?

JW Growing up I moved around to a lot of different places. My father, hmmm, my father, hmmmm, I'm not really sure how to say it in ASL. He was a farmer, farmer, ya. My father was a farmer, so we moved around to a lot of different places with animals. We lived in small village towns. It was nice. It was a quiet life growing up. America, it's loud. People have big cars, big houses.

AF Did you live anywhere here, before Massachusetts? Always Worcester?

JW I've always lived in Worcester. I arrived here in 1998 and I've been in Worcester ever since.

AF What's your favorite memory from England?

JW My most cherish memory from England. Which questions are you talking about? I'm not really sure.

AF Favorite?

JW Oh my favorite, favorite memory from Worcester.

AF And in England.

JW There's so many. I was trying to think about this question before. My favorite time in Worcester, I think when I first arrived here and I could hear better, I definitely enjoyed meeting new people, I loved going out to different places. The beaches here, I loved to visit the beaches here. It's a great time to go party. It's hot here, so, that's nice. I can say that my favorite time was the beach. I can stay there all day with my friends and just hang out, talk; it's really nice relaxing time. It's really enjoyable.

AF Favorite memory from England?

JW Oh, from England. This one time when I was 6 years old, I remember this really well, it was a really good time I had with my family. In England have you ever heard of Guy Fawkes Day? Have you ever heard of that? It's a bonfire. On November 5th, of every year, we celebrate. There was this man from many years ago; he tried to blow up Parliament. So, every year we celebrate that day by

having a big bonfire. When I was 6 years old, my father had metal on the bottom of his shoes and when he would walk there would be sparks coming off his shoes. I was sitting on his shoulders and I would look down at his feet and I would see the sparks. That was a wonderful time when I was 6 years old to see that and the sky was beautiful at night. There were fireworks, I'll always remember that time with my father. That day when we went to the bonfire and I was on his shoulders. It was really a wonderful time.

AF Where do you live now?

JW I live near the airport on Lenox Street.

AF Tell me, do you hear the airplanes?

JW No. No. When I'm home I take my hearing aids off. It's nice and quiet. I don't hear the doorbell or the phone, I don't hear anything. It's nice and quiet, I really like that.

AF Do you go shopping in Worcester?

JW Yes, I go shopping in Worcester. I go to the movies, everything. I think Worcester has really improved over the past years.

AF Yea

JW When I first arrived here there was nothing. There were no signs. I didn't know where the airport was. I didn't know where to go, but now there are so many new buildings. The DCU building, the Hanover Theater.

AF Theater?

JW Ya, theater. Sorry, that was BSL, but ya, Worcester has really improved. There are a lot of interesting people.

AF I like the theater.

JW Do you know the Christmas Carol, did you see that?

AF Yes

JW It was a wonderful show.

AF Nice

AF Okay, we're stopping.

MA Okay. So, Hi, my name is Michelle Arata and I'm asking the second half of the questions. Ready. Ok.

JW I'm ready.

MA Where did you go to school?

JW Well, again, I went to many different schools. The first time I went to school was Farnham School. It's near South London, England.

MA Okay. When did you graduate from college?

JW I went to Reading University. The British sign language for university is this. That's also near London.

MA So, what is your connection with Worcester?

JW My first connection with Worcester is a place called The Devereaux Foundation for kids who have behavioral problems and mental health problems. The job connected me with the people there. While I was working there I would meet their friends and their families. That was my first connection with Worcester. That place is in Rutland.

MA Okay. So, now you work in Worcester?

JW Yes, now I do. My first job was in Rutland.

MA Yes

JW Worcester is a very interesting place. Rutland doesn't have a lot of places in it.

MA Yup

JW So, that's my first connection, my job now in Worcester. In Worcester Center.

MA So, how long have you worked at that job? How many years?

JW Let's see. Now, this is going to be my third year. This is my thirs year. Almost my fourth.

MA Third year, okay.

JW I haven't finished my fourth yet. So, I'm in my fourth year now. I started in 2006.

MA So, you like your job?

JW Well, yes. I like my job, but I don't like sitting at a desk all day. Before my other job, I was very active. I was always going out and I was very busy with the kids, but now I sit in a chair and I have noticed that I have gotten a little bit heavier.

MA Okay

JW On the computer all day.

MA I understand. So, your work means a lot to you? What does your work really mean for you? Working with kids sometimes, but you don't like sitting at a desk, right?

JW Well, now I work with interpreter's referral services.

MA Right.

JW Before I was a social worker and that was a challenge. Before like I said it was a problem because my hearing has been deteriorating.

MA Yup

JW My job gives me support services, the commission provided phone support. It would help me hear a lot better. It's a different phone, but I can't remember the name, but it helps me. Sometimes it's a challenge because if the interpreter is driving and on the phone at the same time it is hard for me to hear. It's a lot of distractions. I hear the noises of roads and I have to say please can you say that again. They should know to stop and then talk to me.

MA Okay.

JW There are many challenges, but there is a lot of services for the deaf and hard of hearing. So, it's really good for me.

MA Well, that's good. So, what is your favorite experiences at your job? Your favorite experience?

JW I think my favorite experience is when I requested CART services, that is when a person comes to type everything out and I can read it. I really then understood what was happening in a meeting. I looked at the cart service and I was like WOW this is really cool. Before I didn't know what was happening, but now with the service that's been provided, I wish I had that in college. Yes, the hearing aids would help me, but there's so many distractions. People talk fast; I wouldn't be able to keep up. CART service is wonderful.

MA Okay. So, in Worcester, do you volunteer, go to community events, or deaf events?

JW No, I haven't really been involved. I have been trying to find information from

CLW. Do you know that Center for Living and Working?

MA Yup.

JW So, I really haven't been involved in Worcester events. The deaf community and mainstream society, I don't know really where I fit in. So, it's really hard. In England it was different. I learned BSL; I was really comfortable with hanging out with deaf people. I haven't really learned ASL and I don't have the skills. So, I don't really feel comfortable with communicating with people in Worcester right now, but I want to.

MA Okay. There is many deaf and hard of hearing people in Worcester. So, do you participate in government or vote in Worcester?

JW Well, I have a green card.

MA Yup

JW So, I can't actually vote.

MA Okay. Yup.

JW But I have been very interested in politics and what's happening right now. I have been following the new stimulus plan. I have been paying attention to that and I have following world news. Everything. I'm always looking in the newspaper on the Internet.

MA Yup.

JW I want to make sure I know what's happening over in England and Europe and my niece lives in Australia.

MA Wow.

JW So, I've been watching the news about the fires that have been happening there. So, I'm really entrenched in what's happening in the world.

MA So, you like government? So, is religion important to you?

JW No. When I was a kid it was because it's very important to my mother. So, she raised us in a religious home, but since we've moved a lot we went to a lot of different churches, but personally, it's not the important to me now, but it's interesting to learn about.

MA Okay. So, what do you for fun in Worcester?

JW Well, I've only worked in Worcester for one year. My office use to be in Boston. So, I didn't really socialize much because I was always exhausted from the commute. It's a long commute between Worcester and Boston.

MA I understand.

JW But, my mom recently visited me from England.

MA Oh wow!

JW She was here for six months. It was wonderful. We went to different places. We saw all the museums. We went out boating. We just visited a lot of different places in Boston, but now I like to read; I love walking around, but I don't really go out much. I would like to go out more, but it's pretty expensive. I want to travel. I love traveling. I've been to Africa.

MA Wow!

JW Uh, that was a wonderful trip. I've been to Greece and France. Oops France, that was the BSL sign sorry.

MA Yup, France.

JW I want to visit Australia. I love traveling. I wish I could do more.

MA So, is the weather in Worcester too cold for you?

JW Yes. Well, I've been here 10 years now, but yea, it's really cold.

MA I understand. So, are you happy about the decisions you've made in life? How do you feel about them?

JW That's a hard question. When I first arrived here in America, my visa was only for 18 months so, I had a hard decision if I should go back to England or if I should stay here. England is a pretty expensive place to live and there's not that many jobs. So, it was hard to decide which to do, but now America is in trouble so it was a hard time for me when I was deciding if I should go back home to England, but now I'm feeling okay about staying here. I've met some really good people and I've been able to experiences a lot of different things. I feel confident that I made the right decision. It's hard to say if it was a bad decision though because you'll never know, really. You can never live that time again, you know what I mean?

MA Yes. So, you said in England there are few jobs, are there more jobs in Worcester for the deaf and hard of hearing?

JW No. When I decided if I was going to stay here in America, my hearing wasn't that bad so..... Europe is pretty expensive to live. In America, 5 years ago, everything was fine. Money was good, traveling was easy; it was a good time for this country. Now, it's a little bit different, but I think jobs in England for deaf people it's easier because England has set up a structure for deaf and hard of hearing people. The government has support for them.

MA Okay. Wow! So, what is the one thing you want people to know about you? Hard question, I know.

JW I would want people to know that I don't want to put in a box. When you first meet me, I don't want you to think, oh I know that person because I have many different faces, really. When I'm working or when I'm at home; when I'm with my family, I'm different. I have a different personality almost in each situation, it's interesting. It's fun to see the different sides of me, but I don't want to be put in a box.

MA Ya.

JW That's all.

MA Okay. So, your mom came to visit, did your brothers and sisters come?

JW I have three sisters and they all have come to visit me here. My older sister, with her three kids, she's come.

MA Oh wow she's come.

JW Then, my sister who's just under me, her husband doesn't like to fly, just like my father, I'm hoping we can get them on a plane soon over here, but she's visited me and my younger sister has visited me as well. They've all come.

MA Well, that's good. So, one more question for you.

JW Sure.

MA So, in Worcester, Amanda asked you about your favorite memory, but what's your favorite place?

JW In Worcester, hmmm. A lot of my friends go to the Tammany Hall Club. I

like to go there because all my friends go there, not because it's a bar. No, but because all my friends are there and we can go and talk and chat and relax together. It's a good place and my second favorite place, I'm a bookworm, and I love to read. So, the library is my second favorite place. I love to sit relax and read.

MA Worcester Library?

JW Yes, the Worcester library. It's beautiful new building.

MA Your favorite book?

JW My favorite book, well, this isn't really my favorite book, but I just recently read this book, this series, there's four parts, do you know the movie Twilight?

MA Yup.

JW I've never seen the movie, but I've read all four books in two weeks.

MA Whoa.

JW Ya. It's a kid's book really, but it's a fast read and it's a quick escape from the world, but my favorite book of all time, hmmm, it would have to be Emma. Ya, Emma. I love that book because it's an old way of communicating; an old style of talking. It's really different, there are social rules, and I love that. It would have to be Emma. She's such a cheeky girl.

MA I guess I need to read that book.

JW It's good.

MA I haven't read it.

JW It's an English book from Jane Austen, I think.

MA Okay.

JW You should try it.

MA Alright, thank you. It was nice to meet you.

JW Same. I hope you could follow me okay. I know I switched from ASL to BSL sometimes.

MA It was fine.

JW Oh, it was fine. Okay. Thank you for inviting me, I really appreciate it.

MA Yes, thank you for coming.

JW Sure.