

Interviewee: Kristin B. Waters  
Interviewer: Alison L. Cantatore  
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**Abstract:** Born in Rome, NY in 1951, Kristin Waters has worked in Worcester for 30 years. She taught at Clark University and the College of the Holy Cross before earning a faculty position at Worcester State College, where she currently teaches Philosophy and Women's Studies. In this interview, Kristin shares memories of her youth in Rome, New York and discusses her relationships with her family as a child and today. She discusses her development as a student at Bard College and at the University of Connecticut as a graduate student. Kristin speaks extensively about her political involvement as a student—particularly in the women's and peace movements and how it shaped the activist work she continues to do today, particularly her work as co-chair of Daybreak, a domestic violence service and advocacy organization in Worcester. Kristin discusses the ways in which her teaching has evolved over the years and gives an overview of her recent publications. Kristin also touches briefly upon her involvement in the creation of the first Women's Studies program at Clark University and the strong women academics who played a mentorship role in her life at this time. This is a topic she would like to explore in further detail in a future interview.

### **CASSETTE SIDE 1**

**AC:** Is it O.K. to record this oral history today, Friday October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006, at approximately eleven o'clock a.m.?

**KW:** Yes, it is.

**AC:** O.K. 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 community involvement. Thank you for your help with this important project.

**KW:** You're welcome.

**AC:** So, what is your full name?

**KW:** Kristin Benton Waters.

**AC:** Where were you born?

**KW:** I was born in Rome, New York.

**AC:** When?

**KW:** ... 1951.

**AC:** Do you have any children?

**KW:** Yes, I do.

**AC:** Do you have any grandchildren?

**KW:** No, I don't.

**AC:** O.K., tell me a little about your kids.

**KW:** Well, I have two stepchildren. My husband and I were married in 1980 and he had two boys, and they are now...the oldest is a lawyer in New York City, and the second oldest is working on a Masters Degree in Public Policy at George Mason University in Virginia.

**AC:** Interesting...

**KW:** And those are my stepchildren. My one biological child is Colin O'Reilly, and he is a sophomore at Roger Williams University. And I have a wonderful adopted daughter; her name is Julia Jiaqi O'Reilly. She doesn't like the Julia, (Laughs) and I adopted her, we adopted her from China in 1996, she's thirteen years old. She's a student at Forest Grove here in Worcester.

**AC:** What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with?

**KW:** My ancestors are English and German.

**AC:** What is the name of your current husband?

**KW:** Edmund F. O'Reilly.

**AC:** And tell me a little bit about him, how you met.

**KW:** Let's see, we met... we met in a way that's not allowed anymore. He was a professor at my undergraduate college, Bard College, and back in those days professors

and students dated and nobody thought too much about it, and we dated for quite a while before we married. So I met him in 1973 and we married in 1980.

**AC:** Tell me a little about your parents.

**KW:** My parents are great! Wonderful people, both alive, in their mid-80s. My dad was a publisher of the family newspaper, which was the Rome Sentinel in Rome, New York. Just a very sweet, smart, loving man. My mom, Shirley Barnard Waters is an extremely energetic, effervescent person, still extremely active. She was an artist, a painter, very much involved in her community.

**AC:** Where have you lived during your life?

**KW:** I've lived in, obviously, Rome, New York for my, all my young life. Then I lived in the small village of Annandale-on-Hudson, while I was a student at Bard College, a lovely little place. Then I lived in Storrs, Connecticut when I was a graduate student. I lived in Oxford, England when I was a graduate student—that was a very interesting experience. I lived in Boston briefly, I think during my college years at some point. Where else... I lived in Worcester.

**AC:** Do you currently live in Worcester?

**KW:** Yes I do.

**AC:** Ok. Do other family members live in the area?

**KW:** No, not really.

**AC:** Have you noticed any changes in Worcester over time?

**KW:** (Laughs) Oh yes, absolutely...

**AC:** What types of changes?

**KW:** Well, I've been in and around Worcester for about, for more than thirty years. And it's much less provincial, I would say. When I first moved here it was a very provincial city. They always of course had great neighborhoods, they've always had great neighborhoods. They were a little bit too insular, I think, back in the day. I do remember there being hardly a restaurant in town that, where you could go and get a nice meal (Laughs). So that's changed, there are lots of nice places to eat. The city is more diverse, that's a good thing. And, all together, I think it's really a very livable, good place to be.

**AC:** Where did you attend school?

**KW:** I went to Fort Stanwix School, was my grammar school in Rome, New York. I went to what was then called Laurel Junior High School. I went to Rome Free Academy which was the public school in Rome, New York. Bard College for my BA, University of Connecticut for my Masters and my PhD.

**AC:** Do you work outside the home?

**KW:** Yes, I do (Laughs).

**AC:** And, what job?

**KW:** Well I'm a professor of philosophy at Worcester State College.

**AC:** (Laughs) And when did you begin working... at this job?

**KW:** At this job? I believe I started this job in 1999.

**AC:** And how did you come to do this work?

**KW:** Well, I earned a PhD in Philosophy, and oh you know I forgot I also lived in Indiana for a year, (Laughs) I'm sorry in *Illinois* for a year. I taught at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. That was my first job, full-time job as a Philosophy professor. And then I was hired at Clark University, I taught there for a number of years. And then I went into administrative work, and helped to run the interdisciplinary program at the College of the Holy Cross, and then decided that I wanted a faculty position and that's when I came to be here at Worcester State.

**AC:** What has this work meant to you?

**KW:** I love this work; it's great. There's no better job than being in the classroom, teaching students, it's fantastic. I really think that my Worcester State students are the best, I really connect with them very well. What was the rest of that question? (Laughs)

**AC:** (Laughs) That, you covered it pretty much. What were or are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework?

**KW:** Well, my... you know my field is woman studies...

**AC:** Yeah... (Laughs)

**KW:** I can tell you a little more about that later if you want (Laughs) because I was instrumental in reviving the women's studies program here [at Worcester State]. I think I can say that, you know, like most women around the world I do most of the

work. And that's true, even having a husband who "helps", I'd like to put that word in quotes, "helps" around the house, it's always interesting that, you know, men "help" and women do the work. So I would say I do probably eighty percent of the housework.

**AC:** How do you balance priorities, responsibilities, roles and interests in your life?

**KW:** Well, for one thing you don't get everything done (Laughs). But... you know you can't, you know I think that it's wrong to say my professional life is more important than my personal life, or my personal life is more important than my professional life, or my children are more important than my professional life. Of course if anyone ever says "my professional life is more important than my children," then, any woman who ever said that, then, you know, that would be the end of them in terms of how they're perceived. We absolutely have to do what we can, as parents, as friends, as partners, as professionals, scholars, whatever it is that you do, and so I think one shouldn't rank them.

**AC:** What type of work does your husband do?

**KW:** He's a professor of psychology.

**AC:** Do you consider yourself active politically?

**KW:** Yes, I do.

**AC:** And how so?

**KW:** Oh, I mean, I've been—I'm of that generation when it was easy to be active politically if you, you know rolled out of the bed in the dorm room and managed to stumble out the door of the dorm there was a demonstration going on outside. Sometimes those of us of my generation who are critical of the younger generation for not being sufficiently active, we should remember that it really didn't take much effort on our part. But I was active, you know, in the peace movements in the 1970s. I came later to the women's movement I think in part because society is structured in such a way that it's difficult for young women to identify with the women's movement, because, at least for heterosexual women, there's always that fear of being labeled and then of not being attractive. I mean, it tells you a lot about the mindset, the ideologies that we absorb, it's really too bad. But I've been very active since graduate school in the women's movement. I've been... you know, how much do you want to know? (Laughs)

**AC:** (Laughs) We could be here for a long time!

**KW:** I've marched in "Take Back the Night" marches, I've organized women's political events...

**AC:** What kind of events?

**KW:** Well, right now I'm co-chair of Daybreak, which is the Worcester organization to address issues of domestic violence, and Daybreak is an amazing organization, now part of the YMCA, but it started as a grassroots hotline and shelter for battered women. Now it's expanding to court advocacy, education programs, and really you know, a pretty large growing concern. So, we organize fundraisers, Daybreak breakfast, and all kinds of events. Well, I organize, you know, speakers, sit-ins, teach-ins, "Week Without Violence," speakers and many, many different things.

**AC:** That's good.

**KW:** Yeah.

**AC:** Have any health issues impacted your life?

**KW:** Health issues... my own... I'm pretty healthy.

**AC:** That's good! (Laughs)

**KW:** Yeah.

**AC:** What role has religion played in your life?

**KW:** I'm not a religious person. And, you know, I was raised religious. I was raised in an Episcopal Church, we went to church regularly, and most people in my generation did. I have to say it bothers me, the assumption that people are or have to be religious, and I think there is a bit of an imposition of religion on people.

**AC:** I agree... What are your experiences in access of quality and affordable healthcare?

**KW:** I mean I have healthcare because I'm employed and so I have decent healthcare. Many people don't have that, I think it's a very important issue, but it's not one that has really affected me.

**AC:** What major historical events of Worcester occurred during your time here?

**KW:** Wow, that's quite a question!

**AC:** (Laughs)

**KW:** Alright, major historical events in Worcester... I noticed today that there is going to... there's a planned nurse's strike to start in about week, and I remember that there was a nurse's strike, maybe four or five years back, and I think, from a labor point of view, that really, that's sort of an interesting occurrence. Major historical events... my goodness. I take place in the peace, I take part in some of the peace marches around town, and we've been going around, for example, since the beginning of the Iraq War... I wouldn't call that a major historical event, but something of interest, historical interest. Police photographing, protestors, and spying on people, there was a bit of a to-do about that. Yeah, I don't know about major historical events in Worcester...

**AC:** Did any of those events that you described impact your life personally?

**KW:** You know, I participated like I said...

**AC:** Yeah...

**KW:** I've been a political activist. Aside from political rallies and that kind of thing, I mean I think that we have, you know, we've brought some fantastic speakers to the college, I wouldn't call them major historic events, but a week from now we're bringing a domestic violence activist Yoko Kato to the campus. There'll be a press conference, Senator Ed Augustus will be here, there'll be a proclamation... and so, that kind of thing.

**AC:** How old were you when you were allowed to date?

**KW:** You know, my daughter keeps asking me that question, and she asks me how old, you know, when will she be allowed to date, and she's thirteen. My parents never... made a distinction between socializing with people and dating, and I endorse that. I think it was fantastic. They never said, you can date at such and such an age, they said, you could go out with friends or a friend, provided that we think it's appropriate. So, there wasn't any date.

**AC:** Where did you usually hang out when you were young?

**KW:** (Laughs)

**AC:** What types of activities?

**KW:** We hung out, when I was in junior high school and in high school, at a sort of an ice cream parlor called King Cole, and I remember going to King Cole and ordering French fries, and Cherry Coke, which had, you know, pulverized Maraschino cherries in the bottom. And we hung out outside, you know, the guys hung out, people hung out and smoked cigarettes, it was also a big parking lot where guys could pull their cars up

and they would lift the hoods and compare engines, and the girls would pretty much hang out. Yeah, that would be King Cole's.

**AC:** Were you considered fashionable when you were young?

**KW:** I kind of don't think I was ever really fashionable, I was also always I think a little offbeat. I don't think I was, you know, on the far end of unfashionable, but I certainly wasn't, you know, sort of one of the most popular girls.

**AC:** What was your favorite musical group or song?

**KW:** Wow... depends on when as far as, you know... also when I grew up, I mean, gosh, you know, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, all of those groups... I remember distinctly Jesse Colin Young's, oh, I don't know, what was that song? "Get Together" it was called or something like that, "come on people, smile on each other everybody get together..." a very hippie-type song, but many, the Who, yeah, Neil Young, Laura Nyro, I loved her song "Timer."

**AC:** How were girls treated when you were in school?

**KW:** We were treated, you know, to fit that model of what a girl should be. We wore skirts, we couldn't wear pants to school, you know, we, we were treated as sort of uniformly different from guys, I guess. Not so much in my family... I had three brothers and one sister...

**AC:** Tell me about your siblings.

**KW:** Gosh, well I was the fourth, my oldest brother Peter served in Vietnam in the 1960s, and I think I had less to do with him because he was several years older than I was. My brother Steven went to Australia when he was in eleventh grade as a foreign exchange student, so he kind of disappeared. My sister and I, we, you know, had a kind of love/hate relationship. We were two years apart, and we battled quite a bit, and, until she was sent to boarding school... she has a lot to say about that, and at that point we became very close, and we've actually remained close over the years.

**AC:** What were your most significant extracurricular involvements when you were young?

**KW:** Gee, I never thought you were going to ask any of these sorts of questions. (Laughs) Okay... yeah, I guess I think, you know, in seventh and eighth grade, I was a bit of a, a little goodie-two-shoes type, and I was involved in every activity there could be... French Club, Ski Club, school newspaper, you know, everything. By the time I was in tenth grade, I think I dropped out, I can't put a year to that but it must have been 1966 or 7... and, you know, I hung out, you know, with an older group of friends and



we would go to a place in the woods and someone would have a keg of beer and we would sit around a campfire and drink and talk, it was a very rural area, that was what people did. And then, you know, in my later high school years, my friends had all graduated... and I think I became a bit introverted.

**AC:** What did your parent's education consist of?

**KW:** Both of my parents graduated from college with a Bachelor's degree, Syracuse University. My dad went to Journalism school, my mom was awarded a scholarship to go to a Masters Program at the Syracuse University Art School, which was a very good school, and she didn't take it, she chose to marry my father instead. It was 1943, he was commissioned as an officer... it was World War II, and she moved with him to Georgia to do training. While he was doing military training, she became pregnant with my oldest brother. I've often thought about that, you know, the fact that she would turn down that scholarship.

**AC:** What difficult transitions did you go through moving from childhood to adulthood?

**KW:** I didn't have a lot of difficulty, I don't, you know, people of my generation... at the time we used to call them identity crises, right, everyone had an identity crisis. I never felt that, I think in part because I felt strongly connected with my parents and I didn't feel the need to really rebel against them.

**AC:** What are your memories of the World War II Era?

**KW:** World War II?

**AC:** Were you born then?

**KW:** No...

**AC:** O.K. (Laughs)

**KW:** (Laughs)

**AC:** Where... were there particular areas of this city in which you spend a lot of your time?

**KW:** Gee, now I'm feeling bad that I didn't grow up in Worcester because I'm telling you all this information about Rome, New York. You know, early on, when I moved to Worcester in the 1970s, we used to go to Water Street for breakfast all the time, we would go to the Delicatessen, and get lox and bagels. You know, I loved doing that,

Sunday mornings were really special... getting, you know, fresh lox and bagels and getting the New York Times, the Globe, sitting around, reading...

**AC:** So family time is really important to you?

**KW:** Family time is very important to me, yeah.

**AC:** Do you have hobbies, or any regular leisure activities, that you take part in outside of your home?

**KW:** I'm a gardener, I love gardening... and I'm on and off pretty devoted to gardening. I think I know a lot about gardening, and growing things. I've visited lots of gardens, including in Europe. I've traveled to places, so I really enjoyed that. It seems like a great way to get the stress away.

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

**KW:** How do I get through tough times... (Thinks)

**AC:** What kind of thoughts keeps you going?

**KW:** I try to be very positive. I, you know what, I think that this is... you know, I think that there are gender differences actually, when it comes to coping with problems. I, you know, I don't want to universalize, but I think that men tend to, to gate out what's bothering them, not to say that they're not bothered... but I think women tend to both think deeply and do a lot of problem solving about what's bothering them, and think about what actions they can take to address those problems, and at the same time, you know, put on a good face.

**AC:** How do you define success in your life?

**KW:** I don't know the answer to that question. (Laughs) You know, my family life, my children have been... my children are fantastic. I look at them, and I just marvel in wonder at how I got to be so fortunate as to have the... the wonderful, thoughtful, caring, smart, loving, successful kids that I have. So I get a lot of pleasure in that. What was that... how do I define...?

**AC:** Success.

**KW:** How do I define success... (Thinks) Professionally, I think, you know, in this kind of professional world, there's always somebody who is better than you, or, you know, at the top of the discipline. I've had a lot of success, I have a... I've published a lot... I have a book that I'm very proud of, called "*Enlightened Conversations...*"

**AC:** Interesting, tell me about that book.

**KW:** Well, that book, *Women and Men Political Theorists: Enlightened Conversations...* I've taught, of course, political theory for decades. And early on when I taught it, I taught it in a very standard way. I taught Hobbes, and Locke, and Marx, and Mill, and Burke and all the usual suspects, all of them male. And, at the same time, I was teaching women's studies courses, and it didn't take long for me to realize there was a disconnect between my women's studies teaching and my political theory teaching, and yet it actually was very, very difficult to get material... written, original material, by women writers in the modern period.

## CASSETTE SIDE 2

**KW:** Alright... (Takes a drink) Alright, I'm all set. The... Mary Wollstonecraft was the one person who was taught. She wrote a *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, and she might make an occasional appearance in these political theory courses. These political theory courses, by the way, are required of every undergraduate political science major throughout the country. So, you're talking about, literally, tens of thousands of people probably... I don't know if I'm exaggerating that, who are taking these political theory courses and they're only reading what men have to say about their experiences, their ideas, their concepts, their theories, and so I set about to do research to find women writers who are contemporaries of these male writers, and I... I found them. You know, I think at first, I thought, "oh well, there just weren't women writing in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries," but I was wrong about that. So I found, for example, Mary Astell, who was a contemporary of John Locke, and she was his foremost published critic when he was writing in the late seventeenth century. And her books are interesting, and they are about political theory, but they're also about women, the need for women's university education, she writes very illuminatingly about marriage, which is of course a political institution. So I created this textbook, which paired men and women authors... Mary Estelle with John Locke, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* with Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication [of the Rights] of Woman* with Rousseau's political writing, and so on... including Maria W. Stewart, an African American woman who wrote about rights and liberties for Blacks in the 1830s. Anna Julia Cooper, another African American woman, who wrote about education and other things. And this textbook, the aim of it is to actually reconceive what we mean by political theory to include thought by woman and experiences by woman, and I'm very proud of it.

**AC:** And is that due to be published soon?

**KW:** That book has been out since 2000. I have a new book...

**AC:** And what's that book about?

**KW:** (Laughs) This is good, I should be on TV! (Laughs) It's called, *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*. My co-editor Carol Conaway and myself put together a collection of twenty contemporary essays, current essays, really making the argument that there is a Black feminist theory that has existed for at least two hundred years. So this is not primary source material from the nineteenth century, it's rather commentary on that primary material, but it really came out of my first book.

**AC:** How do you feel about the choice you've made in your life... do you have any regrets?

**KW:** Oh, gosh. Sure... I wish I had done things better, smarter, kinder, you know, more clever. (Laughs) I guess I still haven't come to terms... I guess I'm not completely at peace with myself.

**AC:** Really?

**KW:** ...And I, you know, I wonder if, as I age, I will manage to achieve more peace and understanding. And part of that is just frustration with the world at large, which seems to be in such a terrible, such a terrible mess. And part of it is, sometimes I think I just know too much, I think, particularly about the suffering of women... everybody you know, about everybody suffering, but my focus has been women, and I find that unsettling. I know some people manage to be activists and not be... not let it disturb you too much. And also my personal life, I wonder what, you know, what kind of peace will, will I find.

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

**KW:** Well, I think, you know, part of the advice that I would give is, get the very best education and experience that you could possibly get. Don't pass up any opportunities. Step outside your sphere of comfort, and do things that will stretch you. I think being self-confident is extremely important, and, you know, being with people who affirm your own confidence. Be good to yourself!

**AC:** Now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the past of women that has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

**KW:** I'm sorry, can you say that again? (Laughs)

**AC:** (Laughs) What else would you like us to know?

**KW:** Ok. I think part... you know, an important part of my story here in Worcester, is the development of women's studies. In fact, you know, if the history project is interested in doing this as a kind of a sideline, I think it would be great because I think about the development of women's studies at Clark, at Holy Cross, here at Worcester State, is a story that really should be told, and the amazing women who mentored me... the women I work with, Cynthia Enloe, Diane Bell, Serena Hilsinger, you know... you asked earlier about important historical events, and I, you know, I think the development of those programs were historically important. Clark had one of the very first women's studies programs in the country, and I was sort of in on the development of that, of course it was really exciting. And the mentoring that I received from those women was really important, and I'd like to, you know, maybe sometime have the opportunity to talk specifically about that.

**AC:** Interesting. Well, thank you very much Professor Waters, for your help today and your participation in the oral histories we're doing!

**KW:** Oh, it's been my pleasure Alison.