

Interviewee: Isabel González-Webster
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Abstract: Isabel González-Webster was born in Brooklyn, New York on February 2nd, 1979. She grew up in Brooklyn and went to Clara Barton High School. She lived and worked in Brooklyn as a translator until she moved to Worcester in 2008, where she has now worked for five years. Isabel does not have any children, but has seven nieces and nephews. She is married to Angelique Webster. She identifies herself as a *Boricua* (native from Puerto Rico) or a woman of color. She does not practice a religion and, until recently, served the city of Worcester as the chief of personnel for Mayor Joseph O'Brien. In this interview, Isabel talks about her struggle with assimilation and speaking in Spanish and English. She also talks about social justice and the program in which she participates called the African Children Education Program (ACE). This program educates immigrant African refugees now living in Worcester.

BC: Hello. Can we record this interview?

IG-W: Yes.

BC: Good. (To Marian about the description.) Do you want to read it?

MM: We are working to gather the oral history of women in Worcester to be able to know about their experiences more in depth. In accordance with the goals of the National Convention on Women's Rights, which was held in Worcester in 1850, we want to focus on the education, health, work, and political and community participation of women. Today we want to know more about your experiences relating to your career. Thank you for contributing to this very important project!

BC: Okay. I'm going to ask you about your childhood.

IG-W: About my what?

BC: Your childhood? Yes?

IG-W: Okay, that's fine. *My childhood you mean?* [The Spanish word had been misunderstood.]

BC: Yes, yes.

IG-W: Okay. [laughs.]

BC: When were you born?

IG-W: I was born on February 2, 1979 in Brooklyn, New York.

BC: How was your experience in New York?

IG-W: My experience was good. There were many Latinos. I grew up surrounded by Latino people and many people of color. So, I felt very comfortable.

BC: Did you say that you speak English and Spanish?

IG-W: Yes.

BC: When did you start speaking both languages?

IG-W: My dad doesn't speak English. He is from Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. My mom speaks both languages. I spoke –I began speaking Spanish in my house first, and it was only after this that I began taking bilingual class. And it was until my mom and dad divorced, when my father moved out, that I could speak both languages, Spanish and English, in my home. Very soon, I went from being in a bilingual classroom to a regular class because my teacher thought I knew enough and they moved me up. So, this time when the divorce happened, and also the change from bilingual class to an American class, was very important for me because it was when I changed from defending my Spanish language to wanting to be American by only speaking in English, only speaking, eating American food. So, for a long time, because my father didn't want to speak English, I was outside of the house and I was also changing classes. So, I first began Spanish and then I switched to only speaking in English until the future when I was seventeen or eighteen years old.

BC: Good. When did you move to Worcester?

IG-W: This June will be three years since I moved to Worcester.

BC: And why did you move?

IG-W: I had been working in Worcester until about five years with an organization to support many young people, to support public schools and, after commuting from Revere, Massachusetts to Worcester, which takes a long time, I decided I liked Worcester, that the quality of life is good and also the cost of housing is less. So, my partner and I decided to move to Worcester and bought a house.

BC: What are some of your favorite memories of New York?

IG-W: The food, the smell of the street, of the home where I lived, my friends, the various cultures. Only that....

BC: Well, do you like the Yankees?

IG-W: I cannot answer that question. When I moved to Massachusetts I said that especially with this t-shirt I can't answer [your question]. No, I never, never, never, never, I do not even follow baseball. So there you go. A, a, a, a very politically correct response.

BC: Good. Do you have a large family?

IG-W: Hmm... we are, yes. If there is a family between my mom and dad? Or my extended family? Because I have a large extended family in New York, I have many (sic) in different parts of Puerto Rico, and many in different parts of the country. And hmm..., with my mom and my dad, there are four of us. I am the oldest, then comes my sister, then two boys. My dad got married, after I was 13 or 14 years old, and he had two boys also.

BC: Good [laughs]. I'm sorry. We are experiencing some trouble with our recorder.

IG-W: Did it stop?

BC: No it's still going. [laughs]. [Looking to Marian]. Would you like to ask a question?

IG-W: Okay.

MM: What grade school and high school did you attend?

IG-W: Hmm... The first school I went to was PS 157, hmm... and it was in Brooklyn. Then I went to a middle school called IS 318 that was also in Brooklyn. And then, I went to Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn, too. So, just my school. Different parts of Brooklyn, but still in Brooklyn.

MM: Where did you study for your career?

IG-W: That is interesting because I think many people study for their career at the university. I learned in the street, in organizations. After I graduated from high school, I had two jobs. One teaching about how to make documentaries you young people, and the second as an organizer about issues related to the environment, about asthma, about poor communities, and things like that. And after that, I continued doing community work, which I enjoyed, and I learned in the streets, in different organizations. I learned about..., from different people with whom I worked,

and that is how I learned what I need today. So, for many people college is where they learn about a career, for me, it was the community, in..., in the street, with people whom I respected.

AS: What are some differences between New York City and Worcester?

IG-W: Ha! Wow. [Laughs.] Many. Hmm... I lived in Brooklyn, New York. And in Brooklyn, we have more than two thousand... two million people. In the entire city of Worcester there are two hundred thousand, so there is a big difference. The other thing is that my job in New York was much more community-based, hmm... there were many people that thought like me, like me, there was a lot of worked related to social justice. There were many people who worked with me and who represented many languages, different people. And here in Worcester things are a little different. When someone comes here, who isn't from here, people don't open up to you right away. They take time getting to know you. I don't think there's a lot.... People do not work together as much as in New York. There are much fewer people of color in the government, and in the schools, and in different places. So, there are many differences. Often I think that New York, you know, when it comes to social justice is a little further ahead [laughs] than here in Worcester.

AS: Where do you think you have worked more with the Latino community, here in Worcester or in New York City? Why?

IG-W: In New York City [laughs]. I believe so. Yes, I believe so. When I... So, when I lived in New York, when I began my career, one of my jobs was working with Latino immigrants that received social service support. And the campaign where I worked for was about providing translation services in welfare centers. We had to organize, provide training, and frankly, sue the city [laughs], because under civil rights law, anyone has access to public services no matter your race or language. But if you have people in need of services but who do not speak English—in welfare centers—and you do not provide them with translation services, you are keeping them away from public aid. So, now I have worked lots, lots, with Latinos. I've worked a lot with people... people of color of many kinds... because the thing is that you can be Latino or Latina and be African-American, right? Then, that means that you are not just Latino, but also African and Latino, right? So, there are many different ways in which people identify themselves.

AS: Do you like Worcester better than New York? Why?

IG-W: There are things that I like a lot about Worcester. I think the quality of life is a lot better here. In Worcester there are many parks and lakes and different public amenities that you don't have in Brooklyn, at least. You can probably find them in Manhattan, if you have a lot of money, but here I think it doesn't matter how much money you make, you have access to a higher quality of life. Although it is not—although there are differences for people who make more money here. The people who don't... don't want that... but I think the quality of life is a little better, although I never thought that I would ever leave Brooklyn, not New York, Brooklyn. Now that I've lived here for a while, I go to New York and I miss it, but it's also very fast and.... [Laughs].

Sometimes, you know, sometimes it's too much for me. You know, there you always take the train and all that. I was always riding the trains to go to school, to work. Here I am used to drive everywhere. So, it's different, so now I like it. Now—but I'm at a different point in my life, and I'm more, you know, grounded. So....

AS: What did you do when you worked in New York? I know you said you worked with social services...

IG-W: Yes, I was an organizer, so I used to do community work, bringing the community together, showing them their own power and how they could fight for their rights. So, much of my work was on this. I also worked for an organization for young women of color: African Americans, Latinas. And the people who ran the organization were also African Americans and Latinas. So, we did a lot of work on feminism. We went to conferences, we spoke with Angela Davis and Madonna Thunder Hawk and many other people. Yuri Kochiyama, who after Malcolm X died, he died in her arms. So, I also did a lot of work on women's rights and against domestic violence.

AS: How many years were you in New York?

IG-W: All of my life. I lived in New York since I was born until 2004. I had a car accident and I decided to take some time off. So, then I moved with my partner to Puerto Rico, to the mountains of Mayagüez. I spent a year and a half there and then I decided that I didn't have more money and I needed a job [laughs]. I couldn't eat anything else in the mountains of Mayagüez, nothing else. So, when we decided to return to the United States, I decided that I didn't want to return to New York and my partner didn't want to go to Maryland. So, I was offered a job in California, in Massachusetts and in Maryland and I decided on Massachusetts. So, I have been here since... 2000... November of 2005. So, I moved from the paradise that is Puerto Rico to Massachusetts. I arrived in Boston, Logan Airport, November 25, during Thanksgiving of 2005. So...

AS: What is your job here in Worcester?

IG-W: I work in the mayor's office.

AS: How did you get your current job?

IG-W: So, I met the mayor here, Joe O'Brien, when I worked in... I worked with an organization that was supporting the public schools. Supporting funds for, for, to increase the funding for public schools, and he was in the schools' committee. So, this is how I met him. Then he decided to run for the city mayor's office and I went to work for his campaign and now I am here.

AS: What is your daily routine at work like?

IG-W: It varies [laughs]. I arrive here and I check a lot of emails, return calls. We have many projects here. So, before I arrived here to do this interview, the mayor had a commission for Latino education in, in, in the city of Worcester. The commission is looking at... how we can [improve] the education of Latino students here in the Worcester Public Schools because I believe that 36% of students in the Worcester Public Schools are Latinos. So, what are we doing well for them? How can we improve? So, we were at this meeting where people were discussing what we can do to improve education in the schools and what are some recommendations. So, after I arrived today, my day started by checking lots of emails. I prepared for the meeting about, ... about looking for ways to find revenue for the city, for the state, to create jobs and services. So, we have, have a situation where we want to find 15 million dollars for the city in order not to... not to lose almost two hundred jobs here in Worcester. So, some of my responsibilities for today were to make sure that Monday's meeting will go well, that the people will show up, that I sent a news press. I also went from that meeting to the one with the Latino Commission and.... Depending what we are doing in the street. What we have going on.... [The mayor] has many goals and wants to achieve them. So, we do lots of projects. So, we could be working on small businesses, or on schools, or on taxes, on all kinds of things.

AS: You are never bored!

IG-W: Never! [Laughs.] I'm never bored.

AS: What have you learned from your job?

IG-W: When I—before I came to Worcester, I never, never thought that I would work for the government, and to work in the government, never. I thought that I would always work on the street with the community, doing organized work here in Worcester. Here in Worcester I saw a need to bring the community and the government closer together, to open lines of communication, and to assure that the people in the community know that, that the government is here for them. And also that the government knows that it has to respond to the community. So, I think that the thing, the biggest thing that I've learned is that in this city one has to be involved in local government. If not, your voice is not heard.

AS: Have you always been interested in politics?

IG-W: Always. Since I was a little girl.

AS: Why do you want to work in politics?

IG-W: I think that as a Latin woman, a person of color, I see that there is a difference in the way that I am treated. The services provided to me, and my community, and my family [should be the same] provided to white people, to people with more money. So, since the beginning I saw the

difference. But instead of saying, “Well, that’s the way things are,” I’ve always had the energy to want to change things. I’ve always wanted justice. And I will die wanting social justice.

AS: Do you volunteer or participate in community work?

IG-W: Yes, so, so some of my friends and colleagues in Worcester have a program called—a youth program in Worcester where we raise awareness about racism. I also work with an organization called African Children Education Program [ACE], a program that supports poor immigrants and refugees from Africa with their studies. So, you have a situation where there are young people coming to Worcester that left refugee camps who may not have had the same educational institutional [experience] that we have had. But they are 14 years old and here they are being placed in sixth or seventh grade. So, you have a gap where they are in a class learning English and also they have not [been exposed to] the school system we have. So, this organization does a lot of work for them. They provide ESL classes and different things. So, I am in their board of directors and... hmm... of many other organizations that I support.

MM: Have you been married?

IG-W: Yes. I got married when I was young and I got divorced. I’m not going to talk about that marriage [laughs]. But recently, about a year and a half ago, I married my partner of eight years.

MM: What is your partner's name?

IG-W: Angelique.

BC: Is she from Brooklyn?

IG-W: No. She's from Maryland. Baltimore, Maryland. Yeah, not from Brooklyn.

MM: Do you speak any other languages?

IG-W: No. I would like to learn Portuguese because you can.... The only thing I can say is, “I don't speak Portuguese,” in Portuguese. So “não falo português,” is the only thing I know how to say. “Tudo bem” o “tudo bom.” I would like to learn Portuguese and I also would like to learn Yoruba. If I could.

MM: What sources of support have been important to you in realizing your dreams?

IG-W: Give me the first part of the question...?

MM: What sources of support...?

BC: Support. [Corrects Marian's pronunciation of the Spanish word].

IG-W: Ah.

IG-W: I believe having family to support you. Also, it was very important, as a young person, to work with other young people to bring change. Because that encourages you and you can process with people of your same age how things are working out. Also having mentors who are adults and who would support me in anything that I was doing. I had people in New York, many different people, not just one person. I believe I had a great community who supported me and who wanted to see me achieve success.

BC: Good.

IG-W: Is that it?

BC: That's it.

IG-W: Thank you! Alright then.