

Interviewee: Alison Graham
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Transcriber: Nicole Bell, Karalyn McCann, Erin McHugh



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Abstract: Alison Gale Graham was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1979. She was raised in Worcester until roughly six years old, and now lives in Holden, Massachusetts. After graduating from Gordon College, Alison went on to be an educator, and is now an active volunteer in the March of Dimes charity organization. She emphasizes her role in volunteering in the Worcester County and is very passionate about her work. In this interview, Alison discusses the importance of family, religion, and proper education. She states, “I’ve done a lot of volunteer work with the March of Dimes because of Madeline’s premature birth. The March of Dimes is a birth defects and prematurity foundation and so all of their research is poured into finding therapies and basically fighting premature birth and birth defects.” Because of her daughter’s premature birth, Alison’s passion resides in helping other families handle the issues that come with the premature birth of a child. She has uniquely sacrificed her position in the workforce to be a stay-at-home mother. This decision has enabled Alison to be an active member in shaping her daughters’ moral, educational, and Christian upbringing. Alison’s life story helps form a new perspective of women of the twenty-first century.

EM: Okay, so, we have to start off with just a question asking permission to give the interview. So, do we have permission from Alison Graham to record this interview on March 3, 2011?

AG: You do.

NB: So, some more general questions, what is your full maiden name?

AG: Sure. Alison Gale McGuirk--

NB: Alison Gale McGuirk.

AG: -- And after almost ten years of marriage my mother slipped up and called me that the other day. [Laughs]

KM: When were you born and where have you lived throughout the course of your life?

AG: Sure, I was born January 25, 1979. I was born in Worcester and lived in Worcester until I was in first grade, at which point my family moved to Holden (Massachusetts). I lived in Holden until I left for college, after graduating from Wachusett Regional High School. I went to Gordon College, which is in Wenham, Massachusetts. After that, I moved to Southern California at the beginning of my marriage. I lived in San Juan Capistrano, California for just under three years and then moved back to Massachusetts. Did the names of the towns that I've lived in matter at this point?

KM: I don't know where they are, but [laughs]

AG: Okay that's fine I lived in Ipswich [Massachusetts] and South Hamilton [Massachusetts] before moving back to Holden [Massachusetts].

KM: Okay.

AG: About four and a half years ago.

KM: You've moved a lot.

AG: Yeah, several times, yeah [laughs].

ER: What was it like living in the different areas that you've lived in, like, over the course of your life?

AG: I would say the biggest difference was my move from Massachusetts to California. The culture is very different and it is a beautiful place, but not one that I wanted to live and raise my family. So yeah, I just love New England, I love Massachusetts. And not a

lot of variance between here and the North Shore where I went to school and lived prior to moving back to Holden, [Massachusetts].

NB: So what actually caused you to move out to California?

AG: My husband's family is from there. And so, when we were finishing college and planning our marriage, we applied for jobs here, [Massachusetts] we applied for jobs there [California], and we actually applied for jobs outside of Chicago, too. Maybe this was in the last question; I did do a very brief, very brief stint, one semester at Wheaton College in Illinois. And so I lived there very, very briefly. So, we also, because that's where we met, had applied for jobs there and just things seemed to work out to California, [laughs] much to my mother's chagrin.

KM: What's the name of your husband?

AG: Sure, David Kent Graham.

EM: Do you have any children?

AG: We do. We have two girls. Madeline turns six next week, and Emma is almost three, next month is her birthday.

NB: [Cough] Sorry, so what cultures and ethnicities do you identify with? Or, like your family background?

AG: Sure. Well we're a white, Caucasian family. Are you interested in—I mean, my

NB: Like your heritage, yeah.

AG: (I am) Irish, my dad's side is one hundred percent Irish Roman Catholic from Worcester. He had a very large family. You know I keep looking at this thing, [iPad] [laughs] as if I'm talking to the iPad and [laughs] now that's gonna make it onto the

transcript. Anyway, he was one of ten. So he has a big, big family. And then my mother just a lot of mixed European roots: French, Swedish, English, she's a mutt.

KM: [Laughs] What was your family structure like growing up?

AG: Sure, I had both my parents. They are married and always have been. I am the older sister. My younger sister is three years younger than I am and so it was just the two of us growing up.; a couple bunnies every once [laughs] and a while, but other than that, no pets or any other family members living with us.

EM: Has Worcester changed a lot since you were a child?

AG: Yeah, I mean I think there is definitely some more development, for sure. But overall, I'd say it's the same. Certainly like, this may sound silly, but this is what comes to mind. But the DCU [Civic] Center, which used to be the Centrum, lots of construction, the new St. Vincent's Medical Center that's there, Med City is new, so definitely some construction around WPI (Worcester Polytechnic Institute), lots of new buildings, and infrastructure related to that campus. The Greendale Mall has a few more stores. [Laughs] But yeah, overall I'd say the general [land] scape of Worcester has remained the same [laugh].

NB: Going off of that, have you, like, what changes in society as a whole have you seen, from when you were a child to now?

AG: Wow. I think that in the last thirty-two years, we have become a lot more technologically advanced. I remember in high school when the Internet was brand new and learning in the media center how to get online and [laughs] didn't have an email address until college. So, there are lots of things that my children are growing up with the ability to use a computer really well, and just all of the digital technology between cameras and digital television and the ability to record digitally, there's just lots of technological advances. I also think, as a Christian, that our society has definitely become extremely self-absorbed and extremely, self-centered in its desire, you know, for pleasure and over-indulgence, and everything is about me and I think that, I think that as time goes on, that has changed, I think in our culture, not that anybody wasn't self-centered thirty years ago, certainly, I just see it, A) as an adult but B) I just think our values and our morals have shifted a lot. I could go on and on [laughs] even just, I mean

yeah, our priorities, family dynamics, have changed, there's a lot that has changed in the last thirty years, I think.

KM: We know you were previously an elementary school teacher, can you tell us about that?

AG: Sure, I, as I said, I went to Gordon College, and I studied actually, in an Honors Program where I was able to design my own major, and I don't know if this is too much information. [Laughs] I thought I was going to go into Camp Ministry and work with children in a camping setting, and then later realized that I had a huge passion for curriculum and for teaching. And for working with students in that setting, and so I got a job at a private Christian school in California. So basically graduated from college, got married, started working in Southern California, and I taught first grade for the first year. It actually wasn't a full year. I wound up being hired to replace somebody that went out on maternity leave. So, I taught first grade for a semester and then the next year, moved up to second grade, with that same group of students, and I taught there for two more consecutive years before we moved home to Massachusetts. So at that time, I got another job teaching at another private, Christian school, in Beverly, [Massachusetts] and I taught fifth grade. So I taught until Madeline was born, and my job basically stopped right when she was born because my world stopped. She was eleven weeks premature and only a pound and a half when she was born. And so, I was done teaching and became a mom of a very critically ill child. Hmm

NB: So, since now that you don't work as a teacher

AG: mhmm

NB: And you are a stay a home mom, how have you, like how do you see benefits of being a stay at home mom?

AG: Oh gosh, they're innumerable. I definitely use my time well. We are busy. I've done a lot of volunteer work with the March of Dimes because of Madeline's premature birth. The March of Dimes is a birth defects and prematurity foundation and so, all of their research is poured into finding therapies and basically fighting premature birth and birth defects. And so, I work for the March of Dimes, I tutor on the side, I've had as many as eight students at one time, right now, only one. But that works for me because two kids can keep you really busy, so yeah, my priority has been to stay home, and it is

the hardest job ever [laughs], and it tries me in ways that I never expected. I never thought myself an angry person before I became a mother [laughs], and it's just interesting because God has this way of teaching you, through children, and really refining your character [laughs], and so I, refresh me on the question. [Laughs]

NB: It was just kind of the benefits.

AG: Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay thanks; I got off track for a little bit. I think being able to raise my girls and teach them to honor and love the Lord, first and foremost, and that obviously is shaped by my Christian perspective and worldview, but in order to just help mold their characters and teach them right from wrong, and I did note that it's incredibly trying, especially to not have the same time that a woman who works would be able to leave her children, and that is hard for a lot of women. But to go off to work, that's a sort of time out [laughs] from being "mommy." So certainly I, I don't know, I see the benefits of being able to engage with those two girls on a very regular basis and watch them grow and see them succeed at things and help them when they fail.

KM: What does your husband do for work?

AG: Sure, he is a senior systems engineer with a company called Cirtas. It's C-I-R-T-A-S, Cirtas Systems, and they're actually out of California. It's a relatively new job for him and prior to that he worked at EMC [EMC Corporation]. They've got several branches in Massachusetts, but they're an international company, so lots of technological stuff [laughs]. That's what he does. [Laughs]

EM: Have health issues impacted your life or those in your family? I know you mentioned your daughter, but have there been any other health problems?

AG: I mean, my grandfather died of a heart attack when I was very young. I was eight years old, and he was only sixty-eight; so I think that definitely impacted our family. I have asthma, but curiously enough was born with only one lung and so, that springs to mind [laughs].

KM: You only have one lung?

AG: Yeah, I had pneumonia when I was three months old and they did chest X-rays as part of, you know, the diagnosis, and doctors in Worcester completely freaked out and thought my lung had collapsed, and then later, at Boston Children's [Hospital] they were able to diagnose that the tissue just never developed. So, I'm fairly unique [laughs]. Not many people ever have been born, I mean people have lost lungs, you know, for various reasons, that tissue not developing certainly was just a bizarre fluke. As a child, I would say it limited me. I was embarrassed and didn't want to tell people and stuff like that, but certainly there's no reason to have that perspective. It's kind of funny and quirky, but it doesn't limit me physically other than endurance sports were always difficult. I did softball and gymnastics and dance and stuff like that, but never soccer or track or cross country, or anything that required endurance. So I'd say that had an impact. [Laughs]

NB: So you talked about how you are on, like, you volunteer, in the community for the March of Dimes, can you just go into more detail of what your position is--

AG: Sure.

NB: --in that?

AG: Sure. The March of Dimes has a fundraising walk that happens annually. It's called the March for Babies and our family has a family team and I am the team captain. We get together friends and family to raise money for March of Dimes each April is when we walk. So I volunteered as a team captain. I've also worked on a family team committee through March of Dimes to reach out to local families, who also walk at the Worcester walk, and to encourage them in their fundraising, and to answer any questions, logistic questions about the day of, or anything else, and also to provide support. A lot of the family teams that walk share the common experience of their children being born prematurely or have passed away because of their prematurity. And so, just a peer, you know, person to listen to and to share stories too. The last two years, I have actually worked for March of Dimes six months out of the year, as a family team specialist, and that sort of took my volunteer role and made it a more statewide position, where I would work with six different walk sites, family teams that participate there were served by family team committees. And so, I was in charge of, basically, creating those family team committees, recruiting, training, and helping those volunteers do what I did in Worcester, at six different walk sites across the state. And this year just decided to turn the job offer down because it's exciting, because of the revenue that was raised, and the increase of revenue due to family teams, the foundation wanted the job to be year-round, and they wanted it to be more hours, double the hours that I was working, and so, that just doesn't fit into our family plan right now. I didn't want to be working that much on a year-round

basis, but, it was great. I mean, ten and a half hours a week, six months out of the year, and I was able to do a lot of my work from home, so while children were napping, or at school, I was able to work and do something meaningful in the community. Some other volunteer work that I do is through my church. We go to Heritage Bible Chapel in Princeton (Massachusetts) and we have recently opened a play gym for children zero to six and so I have been spear-heading that project with a committee of five other women that are also moms. Most of us are stay-at-home moms. One of us is a nurse, but she also stays home quite a bit with her schedule. But anyway, we have opened a community play gym there with a bounce house and a big climb-y thing with two slides and a trampoline, and lots of space for kids to run around and it's been a huge, huge success. We've had almost seventy kids every week over the course of three hours come to play. We're open weekly on Tuesday mornings from nine to noon, and that really, I mean, includes the recruitment of volunteers and staffing and all of the leg work, certainly I did not do all by myself. But insurance proposals and all that kind of stuff has been very time consuming over the last six months. And I also help facilitate a women's bible study at my church, and so, those things keep me really busy; [laughs] never mind play dates and other things for the kids. So I feel like I use my time really well. [Laughs]

KM: It seems it.

AG: Yeah.

NB: So, just going off of that, is there any (other) reasons, like, why you volunteer so much?

AG: Hmm... well, as a Christian, I want to be part of my local church, and want to just contribute any gifts and talents that I have to our community, so that sort of answers that part. And the March of Dimes, I just really believe in what they do. I really am passionate that there are so many babies being born prematurely these days for a host of reasons, but many of them, like our story, we'll never know why. We'll never know why, and the March of Dimes is doing cutting edge research and pouring just, you know, tons of money into being able to create, you know, medical intervention and therapy in order to identify risk factors, educate women, on the risk and contributing factors that are known to preterm birth. And I just, I really believe in it. Some of the medicine that Maddie was given when she was in the NICU [Neonatal Intensive-Care Unit] was created because of March of Dimes research. You know, there's a drug called Surfactant and when administered, it helps the lungs to mature faster, and that was something that she was given and it helped her in her breathing, which is a critical issue when you're a pound and a half, and it was all March of Dimes research. So, yeah. [Laughs]

KM: So based on your life experience what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

AG: Goodness, [laughs] no pressure. [Laughs] Wow, well, certainly I have a high value of education. I was always an excellent student, always prided myself on excelling academically. My college experience was phenomenal. I learned so much about life, but also, you know academia. but certainly I didn't feel limited; maybe limited's the wrong word, but I didn't feel myself pressured, that I needed to use my degree every moment of every day for the rest of my life. I have a huge value for family and for me, I think my college education prepared me to be, I mean, an educated woman who hopefully impacts society. I have skills that I can offer in various settings [laughs]. And just, I learned how to learn. And so those things are very important, but just because of my degree I don't necessarily think I have to be in the work force. I think my value of family right now for this season trumps the education that I received. Do I believe that it was all for not? Absolutely not. I learned how to be a good learner and I, I just, I learned so much that I am able to apply in various settings, but, I think family is of the utmost importance and I think being there for children is also extraordinarily meaningful and fulfilling, but also important because as a parent I'm helping to shape two little pieces of the next generation and to teach them to be responsible, and honest, and hardworking, and loving, and caring, and kind, and considerate, and compassionate. Those things don't necessarily get developed unless you're intentional about it. And so, I'm very intentional as a mom. And so, for the next generation of women [laughs] to sum that up in a nutshell, I guess, just to value things that are really important. Money, having money is important and nice, but it's not what life is all about. And being fulfilled certainly is important to do something that is meaningful, but I think that as a mom and as a stay-at-home mom, there is meaning and worth that couldn't ever come from corporate America. So, yeah. [Laughs] I'm sorry, this transcript is gonna be so long. [Laughs]

NB: That's kind of all the questions that we have, if there's any additional information about yourself that you'd like to tell us or about anything, you can feel free, but we don't have any more actual questions.

AG: Was there anything that peaked your interest? Anything that you wanted to hear more about?

NB: We have one question that we kind of skipped over. That just asks like since you were, like, you have been educated yourself and you were an educator--

AG: Yup.

NB: -- Like what challenges did you see in this community of schools? Like, does that make sense?

AG: No. [Laughs] I'm sorry.

KM: Like, what would you change in the school system as an educator, like from that point of view?

AG: Oh gosh! [Laughs] I think that right now there is a huge pressure put on teachers and students to perform to the expectations and standards of standardized testing. I think in the public school around right now [coughs] there are excellent teachers doing an excellent job at teaching children. But I think that in many cases performing and teaching for a standardized test has, you know, taken more priority than teaching children how to really interact creatively with material. We are actually choosing to enroll Madeline at Holden Christian Academy next year, and one of our reasons is class size. Classes these days, at least in Holden, are really, really big. Certainly in Worcester, there are more class size issues, so I don't want to sound horrible when I say, "Oh my gosh! twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven children in a class," but that's a lot. And so, one motivating factor was class size. The Christian worldview that's being taught, and the children's innocence being protected, and taught biblical principles, is something that's important to us, but also, the way that they teach. They don't do the MCAS, [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] and they have curriculum that just incorporates what they're learning into every subject. It's interdisciplinary. And they, you know, if they're learning about the history of America, they're gonna do a play about that in theater. They're gonna do art, you know, about that in their art class. They're gonna work on it in History, but it will also seep into some of their other classes. And so, I just, I really like that they are very learner-centered, and really preparing the children in a well-rounded way, to not just interact with something on piece of paper [hits table] or in a book and then take the test and close it and move on, but they're really bringing both history to life and all of the other pieces that they need to learn are just really being brought to life through their interdisciplinary studies. And I think when you pull the requirement of a standardized test off of an educator and off of a child, the stress level drops, the hurry slows the pace. And so yeah, if I had to change something, I think that pressure for performance, because, honestly, I was a much better student than my husband. But really, does that matter right now? It doesn't. It doesn't. He's doing

something he's gifted at and he loves, and he thankfully makes enough money for me to be able to stay at home right now. Things have been very tight over the last several years, this new job came with more money and so, we can exhale for the first time, but to be a stay at home mom was a huge choice and we've had to sacrifice a lot. We've had to sacrifice home ownership; we rent a house right now. But you know what? I would rent for the rest of my life if it meant that I could stay home and be a positive influence on my girls. And so we have made some very disciplined choices in spending and you know what we're buying, and all that kind of stuff, in order to uphold our priorities. But, like I said, it doesn't matter that I was a better student. It doesn't matter that I graduated Summa Cum Laude. You know, it doesn't matter that I was part of honor societies and he wasn't. And, and, literally, I mean, when you become a parent, those children don't come out of the womb asking what your GPA was [laughs] you know? I mean those things, those skills that I learned, absolutely can transcend boundaries other than just academic learning, but, at the same time, when you think about what life is really about, it isn't about a GPA. And it isn't about even how clean my house is. Although it is clean [laughs]. It isn't about those things that maybe our society judges us on. You know, who made the honor roll, who made the Dean's List, who made, you know, the school play, or, you know, anything that comes with esteem. And I think, for myself, as I've grown older I've learned that my worth and my esteem is in my relationship with the Lord and not necessarily how people look at me. And so, I think that also helps shape my value as a mom, and my value in society and volunteer work that I do; differently than maybe, when I was in high school and just working so hard in my honors classes to be number one, and my rank in the school. It's like who cares? [Laughs] Who cares? Seriously, I still remember that I was number like; I think I was, like thirty-two-ish, somewhere in there in my class of three hundred and fifty students. But like, does that really matter? No, absolutely not. It is not valuable [laughs]. Anyway, sorry trying to draw this out for an hour for you girls [laughs].

KM: Yeah, what time is it?

AG: It is one thirty seven.

NB: [coughs] I actually have one more question.

AG: Sure.

NB: You talk a lot about like; [laughs] no I don't mean it like that!

AG: I'm totally teasing [laughs] you girls are doing great! [Laughs]

NB: about religion,

AG: Yeah.

NB: and were you always brought up,

AG: Mhm.

NB: with a strong religion background?

AG: Good question! Good question! I would say my parent's faith was very young when they had been married and very young when I was a baby. As you may or may not realize, that over the course of time, when you have a baby, it changes everything, and that's sort of Johnson and Johnson's tagline [laugh]. But when I was born they were like, "Hmm we should probably go to church, we should probably, like, do something to teach this child something." And so they began going to church and I went to church, I mean, basically every week all growing up and was raised in Sunday school. And so, my parents are Christians, their faith, like I said, has grown over the course of my life, but it was really in middle school, both being exposed to youth group, and being exposed to a Christian camp in New Hampshire that I went to, that I really realized I need to make my faith my own. And that it wasn't just good enough to show up at church on Sunday. I did not grow up in Catholic Church, I grew up in Episcopal Church, which was sort of a nice meeting spot for my dad, who was raised with liturgy and things being very formal, and my mom who, sort of skipped around a lot of Protestant churches. Her mother was organist in church, so they just went wherever she had job. And so it was a nice meeting place for them and their comfort levels between church, and God, and all that kind of stuff. And so, as I grew older, we remained at the church that I grew up. But I was exposed, like I said, to other, well, denominations, and just ways of worship, and understanding scripture, and understanding what God was all about, and really realizing that I needed to except Jesus as my savior. It wasn't good enough to just go to church and sit and listen to a sermon being preached about being good, that the essence of the Christian faith is about relationship with the Lord, and that He loves us so much that He died for our sins. And that we, we need to believe that and trust that. And so, from basically sixth grade on I have considered myself as a born again Christian; that I

accepted Jesus as my savior. And that even though I was young, certainly there wasn't time for me to, like, get involved in, like, heinous amounts of sin or destruction, or you know, anything like that. It wasn't like I was a drug addict and came to the Lord and stopped that behavior. Certainly it was a more gradual progression, but I started to realize that I need to stand up for my beliefs in school, and certainly was ostracized by a lot of different kids. And I, I just, I grew in my faith by reading my Bible, and being in Bible study, and surrounding myself with other Christians, and learning more about the Lord, and growing in my faith. And so when it was time to go to college, I chose a Christian liberal arts college. Gordon is a Christian college. You know, along with all the regular core classes that you have to take: math and science and language and all that kind of stuff, there were biblical study requirements, and a lot of Christian perspective, was, what's the right word, basically just informed a lot of the classes that I took, and prepared me, and stuff. So anyway. My Christian. My Christian? [Laughs] My parents have also grown in their faith and we actually attend the same church; which is kind of cool for my kids, to see my parents at church every Sunday. And, and have just really grown, they've grown as I've grown. And it's, it's kind of cool. You know, my sister is also a Christian. She goes to a different church in Worcester. But yeah, that's something we all have in common. And, I would say that that makes our family certainly not perfect in any way. But to have that common bond, and to be teaching our children about the Lord, and having the same values and the same priorities and stuff has really been a blessing.

NB: We don't have any more questions.

AG: Okay!

KM: Okay, well, thank you for talking to us!

AG: No Problem!

NB: Yeah, Thank you very much!