

Interviewee: Francesca Harris
Interviewer: Abigail Hathaway and Kelsey Pietruska
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Abstract:

Francesca Harris was born on Eglin Air Force Base in Florida in 1978. She grew up in Winthrop, MA and graduated from Winthrop High School. She moved on to get her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology at Westfield State College. Francesca wanted her children to grow up in a suburban-like area, resulting in her and her husband's move to West Boylston. Francesca discusses her time in college, after college, and today, working at nonprofit organizations like the American Heart Association, Girls Inc., and the Boy Scouts of America. Francesca currently works for UMass Memorial Hospital in Human Resources. She was given the Worcester Magazine 40 Under 40 Award recently. She touches upon how she loves her job, but she didn't realize until recently that her favorite thing to do is to write. Francesca is currently attending Worcester State University for her Masters of Arts degree in English. In this interview, Francesca discusses the challenges faced in having a full time job, working for non-profit organizations, and going to school, all while having a husband and two kids at home.

Transcript:

AH: What is your full name, including both maiden and married name?

FH: Francesca Harris. That's my married name. And my maiden name is Palazzlo.

AH: And when were you born?

FH: 1978

AH: Have you ever married?

FH: Yes, I'm married. [Laughs]

KP: And what's the name of your husband?

FH: Jeffery Harris.

KP: Do you have any children?

FH: I do, two boys.

KP: What are their names?

FH: Cameron and Jonathan. They're six and eight.

AH: What cultures/ ethnicities do you identify with?

FH: White non- Hispanic.

KP: Tell us a little about your parents, and your background.

FH: My parents were both in the Air Force when I was born. I was born at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, which is in Okla County. And, I was actually raised by my dad, whose name is Matthew Palazzolo. And he remarried when I was young to a woman named Sandra Caplan, who is my mom now.

AH: Where have you lived during your life?

FH: I grew up in Winthrop Massachusetts, which is just outside of Boston, which is about a mile from Logan Airport. And when I met my husband, we bought a house out here in Worcester County because that's where he is from. He has family from Millbury, Massachusetts, and we bought a house in West Boylston, and that's when I moved out here.

KP: So is that close to this area?

FH: It is, I'm very close to this area, that's why I picked this library [laughs]. I thought it would be easier because I knew where this was [laughs].

KP: What was the neighborhood like generally when you were growing up?

FH: When I was growing up? Winthrop is a small town, very much like West Boylston, basically like one square mile, like small suburb of Boston. So even though it's right outside of the city, it's kind of a little suburban town, small school. You knew everybody that you graduated with, and I really liked the small town, which is why when my husband and I were looking to buy a house, we wanted to buy something like a town like this, similar to that, so our kids would go through a school system like the ones that I went through.

KP: Yeah, that's how I grew up, too.

AH: Do other family members live in the same area?

FH: My family members don't. My mom lives in Peabody, Massachusetts, and with her husband and my dad lives in Rockland, Massachusetts. And my husband's family all lives in the area, though. They are in Holden, Charlton, Bolton, all around Worcester County.

KP: Let's see, it is asking about what challenges do you think that this city still faces and what would you change about the city, around here?

FH: In Worcester?

KP: Yes, mainly.

FH: I don't know. That's why I really like living in the suburb of the city, you get the city feel, without living directly in the city. I guess I don't know enough about living directly in Worcester. But I do a lot of work with Girls, Inc., of Worcester, which does community outreach to the urban community and I think that there needs to be, I think it would be great if there were more youth programs like that in Worcester County. Girls, Inc., of Worcester is located in the Vernon Hill area, which is very high for gang violence, so there's not a lot of opportunity for these girls to get outside and, play, and just be kids, because they live in a really tough community. So, organizations like that really offer them a chance to learn, and play, and grow in a safe area. And I would say that if we had more programs like that for the youth that were directly in the city that would be really great for young people living in the urban community.

KP: Yeah, it's hard to do anything in the city.

FH: It is.

KP: Especially with all the cars, and streets and everything like that.

FH: Yeah, and you see kids outside, too, in these really busy areas in Worcester, and I know that they have playgrounds and things like that, but other than that, you know ,you can't just let your kids just go outside and run around and play.

KP: Yeah, and then the parents would have to bring them to the play scape if they want to go.

FH: Right, Exactly.

AH: What distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

FH: [Sigh] All the hills. [Laughs] I don't know. I really like living in Worcester, I think it gets a bad reputation. You know, before I lived here years ago when I was younger, you heard about Worcester was like, I don't know, not a great city. And, yes, there are some tough areas in the city, but I think that it also has a lot of great areas, really, really nice. I mean I love the community stuff that they do like the First Night. I don't know. I don't look at it as like a really difficult urban community, there are areas but I don't know. I think that it has like that, it's not as big as Boston, which I like because it has a lot of the same kind of feel that Boston does, like that downtown feel to it. I love living near a city. You know, I didn't grow up directly in the city, but I did grow up outside of one and I lived outside of one, and I like being close to that and having

access to everything right there without living directly in the busyness of it all. But I think Worcester kind of stands out because it's got the same kind of feel as Boston, but it's smaller, it's more of like a tighter kind of community.

KP: And what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

FH: Well, I had an opportunity to see a lot with women in business in Worcester over the last few years. So, I recently won an award from the Worcester Business Journal, which is the 40 under 40, that might have been how I ended up on a list that you received. [Laughs] So, the Worcester Business Journal did an incredible job of highlighting and honoring people in the community that are doing a lot of good work, not just within the community but in a bigger instance. And I've noticed that they do a lot of focus for women in the community which I think is really incredible. They just recently had an award for the Women in Business, and it's an award that they do annually. And it's just, it's inspiring to see, you know, women in these positions such as CEO [Chief Executive Officer] and in management and in organizations in Worcester County, being honored for those positions. And it's, I don't know, it's inspiring.

KP: Yeah, definitely. All right so we are going to move onto education now.

FH: Okay.

KP: So, where did you attend? So basically all the schools you went to.

FH: Okay, so, I graduated from Winthrop High School. I got my Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology from Westfield State College, which is in Westfield, Mass. And I am currently attending Worcester State University for my Master of Arts in English.

KP: Nice.

FH: I'm on my last year. [Laughs]

KP: Did you pursue any educational programs or vocations training? So basically, getting your master's?

FH: Yup.

KP: Alright, and did you attend... you said that. So what were your challenges in education?

FH: So my challenges, so now I have a lot of them because I work full time, I'm actually currently working two jobs, and trying to finish my master's degree. So, the challenge that I'm facing is being an adult, who is raising children and, you know, living a regular life, going through life every day, but also still trying to get an education. I'm glad that I did it this way instead of going directly into my master's program, because I don't know if I personally would be as dedicated to the program if I haven't had some of that distance between when I got my

bachelor's degree and when I'm getting my master's degree, to really realize that that's what I wanted to do, what I wanted to pursue. Financially, education is a challenge sometimes for young people, it was for me. I had to take out student loans, to get my bachelor's degree. And right now, I'm paying. I didn't take out any loans for my master's degree, I'm just paying semester to semester and I'm getting some help from tuition assistance at the organization that I work. So financially, it can be a challenge in addition to time.

KP: Yeah.

FH: Still plugging away though. [Laughs]

KP: Good for you. I can only imagine with what we have to do, and then on top of it you have a whole family and a whole job.

FH: Yeah, well this way is taking me five years to get my master's where for a lot of people, if they just do it directly in their program, you know, the way that you usually do it, you can do it two years.

KP: Two, yeah.

FH: I can only do a class a semester because of my time commitments with my family and with work, and I knew going in that that's how it would be, so now like in going into my fifth year and I'm just about done, finally. [Laughs] So the reward feels that much sweeter. [Laughs]

KP: Yeah.

AH: Upon finishing your formal education, what do you see as your options?

FH: So, I have always have been interested in writing and communications, and that's why I'm going to get my Master's Degree in English. And, writing is something I sort of do as a hobby now, and I'm also working for Girls, Inc., of Worcester, and I'm doing writing for them, as a communications coordinator. What I would like to see with the master's degree is to have more opportunities to pursue that as my career. Instead of just doing it, kind of in addition to everything else, [Laughs] it could maybe be my focus at some point. It has really opened up a lot of doors because I did an internship at Girls, Inc., as part of my master's program, which is how I ended up working there. So it is already leading me to what I want to do as a career.

KP: Yeah. What support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

FH: Through education?

KP: Yes.

FH: I have professors at Worcester State University in the English Department that have been integral in my program; so to finish my master's program I have to complete a final written exam, which is a five hour exam, and in order to prepare for it I have to work with two different professors who will chair that program for me. And the professors that I selected for that are ones that I've worked with a lot over the last five years in my program and I see as mentors in the program. They are very inspiring and very supportive. Also, Girls Inc., of Worcester has been amazing, like I said I got to do an internship with them and really get my feet wet with writing corporate communications, got really excited about helping with their programs. I started volunteering with them over the summer, and it transitioned into a part time job in communications with them. And they have been very supportive throughout the program.

KP: Good.

FH: Yeah.

KP: It helps you. Alright so now we are going to move onto the work section. So what was your first job?

FH: My very first job? Or my first job out of college? [Laughs] My very first job was working as a cashier in retail, very much like everyone else, that was the first thing I did while I was in high school. I worked while I was in high school, and I worked while I was in college, as an undergrad [undergraduate]. And then my first job when I got out of college, when I got my bachelor's degree, was a receptionist for a real estate company in Boston, they owned One Financial Center in Boston, which is in the Financial District. And I worked with some really amazing people there and I was promoted to an administrative assistant, and found that I had, kind of a knack for being organized, and I did a lot of editing for letters and things like that, that the big bosses would write, mostly translating very messy handwriting into real words [laughs]. From there I transitioned to a job at the American Heart Association, in human resources and have actually been working in human resources since 2004 so over ten years in HR. But I started as administrative assistant in HR at the American Heart Association, and kind of worked more as like a generalist for them, and then transitioned into a job in HR at UMASS Memorial [University of Massachusetts Memorial Medical Center]. As you can see, I was traveling down the Pike [Massachusetts Turnpike] [laughs] then I got to Worcester, and that was by design. Like I said, I have started working in Boston, had bought a house out here, still tried to keep working in Boston. The commute was a little hard on me, got to Framingham, and then eventually transitioned into a job out here, directly in Worcester.

KP: Really summed up a lot of the questions. [Laughs]

FH: I'm sorry. [Laughs]

KP: No, that's good. So what were or are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework and child care?

FH: So, I, you know, I could say it's so much, but I really couldn't do it without my husband because working two jobs, obviously like I'm out now, and I told him I wouldn't be home close to 8 o' clock tonight. He is integral in this entire thing, I could never do this without him. But he and I share everything when it comes to what our responsibilities are at home, like taking care of the kids. And a lot of times, like I said, he takes the burden of that because he gets the kids off the bus in the afternoon and is home with them until I get home, close to 7 o' clock at night, almost every night cause of the second job that I work. Just you know, regular responsibilities, you know, trying to keep my house from being a complete disaster, which is almost completely impossible with two young children. But mostly our family focuses on the time that we do have together and just spending that time together, the weekends are ours.

KP: Yeah.

FH: Neither of us, my husband nor I go to work at all on the weekends; we are home with the kids. And with the holidays coming up there will be a lot of holiday focus things. But, yeah I really, I couldn't get anything done at my house if it wasn't for him [laughs], but a lot unfortunately has to be, like the tedious stuff, like the dishes are done every day or, you know, the floors are sparkling, kind of has to go on the wayside because with two parents working it just keeps you very busy.

KP: Yeah, I could only imagine.

FH: Yeah. [Laughs]

KP: What does he do for a job?

FH: My husband works for Boy Scouts of America.

KP: Oh! Nice.

FH: Yeah, yeah. So both of us working for nonprofits, but keep us very busy. [Laughs]

KP: So what do you feel are the pros and cons of the path that you've chosen?

FH: Career wise or just..

KP: In general, but mostly career wise.

FH: So, the pros are I think that the experience that I've had in working in human resources has given me a lot of people experience, has really helped me understand how to interact with people in a professional way. I love working in HR because it—the people that are your customers are also your co-workers and I've always found that there's a nice energy with that. The cons are that I feel like a lot of the work that I've done, you know, working in this field, has kind of gotten me to a path of—this is what—not that it's all I can do, but I like the broader experience.

And for a while I was doing a lot of human resources generalist work and, you know, which gave me a lot of different—I had my hands in a lot of different projects. My job is now a lot more focused in human resources online systems. So, I think that it's great to have a broad experience in any field, but the work that I have done, I think has really gotten me to a point where, you know, pursued more work in communications, like I've been doing for Girls Inc., has really given me the perspective of, this is what the audience is looking for because I work with, I do a lot of work with people. And I do, I do love it, regardless of what I'm doing in HR, I think that it's a really great career and I wouldn't have stuck with it for over ten years if it weren't really great work. And it is good, I also really—some pros that I find are I've really chosen a path of working in nonprofits. It started when I got my job at the American Heart Association. Now, I'm at UMass Memorial, and Girls Inc., I really love work that's meaningful, non-profit work isn't the big bucks, but it really makes you feel good about what you're doing. You go to work every day knowing that you're making a difference for the people that you're working for and I think that that's a huge pro for me, regardless of what work I am doing for any of the organizations. I really do love it.

KP: So, how do you feel about the choices you've made in your life and do you have any regrets?

FH: I think that I—it's taken me a lot of bumps in the road to get to this path. I think my only regret is that—younger I didn't really go for the things that I was most passionate about at the time because I, I—just my insecurities held me back. You know I love writing, that was really the path I really wanted to choose when I was in undergrad school, and I didn't, and I'm really glad that I got my BA[Bachelor of Arts] in Psychology because I think it's really given me insight that I needed to do the job that I do now in human resources. But, you know, if I could say to my younger self something, I would say, “Just be braver about it and not be so worried about what other people think about what I'm doing.” If I really enjoy something, then I should just pursue it. And I don't—I wouldn't even call that a regret because I feel like I'm doing it now. So, I'm just kind of learning from every time I start to feel a little insecure about the direction that my career is going, or just even when I'm doing what I enjoy as a hobby, when I'm writing something and publishing something online, just trying not to let those insecurities stop me from doing that. Remembering my younger self when I wouldn't have pursued those, those types of things, so, I'm very happy with the choices that I've made with my career. I worked with really amazing people and I still do, and now I mean I'm working two jobs which is a little tiresome. [Laughs] But I really love the work that I'm doing. So I wouldn't say that I don't have regrets, and I, like I said before, I'm glad that I pursued my master's degree later even though it's harder now than I think it would have been. I think that it, for me, personally, it just, it seems more because I have to work that much harder for it.

KP: Yeah, and you know what you want to do now so... [laughs]

FH: [laughs] Yeah it can take until you're 37 to start to think that you know what you want to do, and I'm just starting to figure it out, but, you know, it feels good. As soon as you know what you want, and you feel like you're going in that direction, it just feels really good.

AH: Do you consider yourself active politically?

FH: [Pauses] I vote [laughs]. I wouldn't say that I am like a super political person. I mean I consider myself a Democrat. I'm more liberal when it comes to my voting, but I'm not, I generally don't get into political discussions with people, partially because I'm not going to change anybody's mind about what I believe, but I'm also a little timid when it comes to that stuff, only because I guess I'm just not as—I'm passionate in my own way. Like, when I'm going and voting, I know this is what I believe and it's not like someone like my husband or my mom or anybody else is going to talk me into doing something else, because oh, I don't know what to do, but I guess I'm not that outwardly passionate about politics. [Laughs]

KP: So we know you do nonprofit work, but have you been involved in volunteer or community work?

FH: Yes. So, I have done some volunteer work with Boy Scouts of America, where my husband works. Before we had children, I did some volunteer work where I did some writing for them actually and, most recently, my youngest son—my oldest son is in the West Boylston Pack 151, for Cub Scouts and so I've done some volunteer work for the pack. I helped coordinate summer camp for the pack the last two summers, and I've recently taken on the position of the pack committee chair. Because my husband works for Boy Scouts of America, I—it's [laughs], you know, these volunteer opportunities, "Oh I need somebody to help me with this," and I'm like, "Okay, I'll help," [laughs] you know." And I've also helped the pack, the Cub Scout pack, the social media presence online. My husband isn't good with the social media and that type of thing, and I actually really enjoy it, so I've been helping with that. And it's like I said before, I did an unpaid internship at Girls Inc., for my college credits but then, after that ended, I did some volunteer work for them before they asked me to come on part time. I served on their marketing committee and would attend marketing meetings which I know is technically volunteer work, but I feel like it's a benefit to me because I just really love working with them and I like helping them out. Plus that I love writing, so any way that I can, you know, help them with that it's actually something that I really enjoy.

KP: And what role has religion played in your life?

FH: Not a large role. I wasn't raised in a religious family. In fact, I really don't have any religious affiliation. Our family is very spiritual. My husband was raised Catholic, but we're raising our children similar to how I was raised, which, I mean, you celebrate the secular part of the holidays, you know, Christmas, but we also celebrate Hanukkah because my stepmother's family is Jewish, and so I was raised partially with that culture as well. So I don't know, it just kind of like eclectic [laughs] religious smorgasbord in our family. [Laughs] We love all religions.

AH: How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

FH: Thankfully, we've been very blessed, not a lot of health issues. My dad had bladder cancer but it was—he caught it in stage one, so he's in remission now and he's very healthy. Otherwise, I have relatives that have lived very long lives. My grandparents are both in their late 80s, the two grandparents that are still alive. My other grandparents, who most recently passed away, my grandmother, passed away two years ago was, in her late 80s as well, so I have very good genes, very healthy family members, which I feel very fortunate for. And my children are very healthy as well.

KP: What are your experiences in accessing quality, affordable health care?

FH: Well I do work for a healthcare organization, [laughs] so I know a little something about this. I, again, I've been very blessed with a healthy family, but I mean we have, I guess you could say affordable healthcare, and we pay for health insurance through my employer. It is actually, you know, it's very expensive to have health insurance. But the employer, my employer, UMass Memorial Healthcare, they actually offer some really incredible benefits for their employees that are at an affordable cost, from my perspective, and because, all of our doctors are in the Memorial Healthcare Network, we get—not benefit, but the insurance is like it's the way they have the plans set up, when you go with doctors within the network, it's more affordable. And all of our doctors were already in the network so that worked out well for us so...

KP: It says “Whose health are you responsible for besides your own.” Obviously your children...

FH: Everyone. [laughs]

KP: And then you work at a hospital so... [laughs]

FH: [laughs] Yeah, I'm non-clinical of the hospital, so I'm not necessarily caring for patients, but I mean technically all of the work that the non-clinical people do does touch the organization in some way, but yeah I'm responsible for my children and my husband. You know, I'm not directly responsible for my parents, but my parents are getting older too so there's a little—all that responsibility. I feel like everybody around me I'm responsible. [laughs]

KP: Alright, so we're going to conclude it up a little with a couple questions. How do you get through the tough times and what kind of thoughts keep you going?

FH: [sighs] My husband really gets me through a lot of the tough times. He's always been the person that I lean on for things. We've been together for 13 years now, we've been married for ten years and he is my support system. I also have some really amazing friends too, who I've been friends with—my oldest friend I've known since we were in elementary school, a lot of really good friends from college too that have been very supportive. That's what really gets me through is the people that I'm surrounded by, and I'm very lucky to have amazing people who support me in all my craziness. You know when I decide to work two jobs and go to school,

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[laughs] and my husband says, “What are you doing?!” [laughs] But he’s still—even though he thinks I’m crazy, he’ll still support it. Things that help, the thoughts that get me by too, just thinking about my kids. I feel like, all the work that my husband and I do, you know we work very hard at our jobs, but also, we work for nonprofits that help the community, and I think that sets a good example for our children. And as hard as it is to go to school as an adult with kids, I feel like that probably sets a good example for them too because they’re always saying like, “Oh, my mommy is at school,” and that makes me proud because they’ll see that even into adulthood you just keep learning, which I keep saying to them and my youngest who is six will say, “So when am I going be done with school?” And I’m like, “You’re in kindergarten.” [laughs] But yeah I just feel like they’re really what help keep me going. They’re the good thoughts that I have, because even on a tough day, they’re just so amazing.

AH: How do you define success in your life and has the definition changed over time?

FH: I would think it has because I think when I was in college, I thought success would be maybe making a lot of money or having this incredible job, or I don’t even know what I would define it then. I was so not sure what direction I wanted to go in once I graduated college. But over the years I would say that I would define success as having love, and family, and support. Because you know the type of work that I really enjoy doing, I’m not after the CEO position or the six figure job. I just really like doing work that means something. And I think that if you can feel good every day about what you do and who you are surrounded by, then you are successful.

KP: So, based on your life experiences, what advice would you give to a woman of today and future generations?

FH: [sighs] Uh, that’s a loaded question. [laughs]

KP: Well you basically have summed it up. [laughs]

FH: I would say that you should surround yourself with a great support system, and not be afraid to pursue what you feel passionate about. I kind of like laugh to myself when I say that because, every day I sort of struggle with that, too, because there’s a lot that I’m passionate about and, it’s hard to just stay focused and go in this one direction. You also have a lot of things to think about, like supporting a family and—but I think that you can find a balance between being secure financially and supporting your family, but also being able to do what you really love. And I would encourage anybody to—women, men, anybody who just feels passionate about something to pursue that even if it means that you might have to do that in addition to something else, which is kind of what I’m doing right now. So [laughs] working in two different places, but I feel really passionate about what I’m doing so I’m just trying to find the balance there. I think that’s what I would say. Sorry, I’m rambling. [laughs]

KP: No, no you’re good. Now that we are working to tell a fuller story on the history of women than has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include? What do you think? Just like another, just sum it up.

FH: I think so, so wait, could you ask the question again?

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

FH: Just the kind of like the behind the scenes that goes in to a lot of the work that women do. For a time women were the homemakers, and the angel of the house, and now there are working women who are trying to find the balance. And they are still judged for working outside of the home. Are you a good parent? Are you not a good parent? The full story would really be how women are having it all. How they're making it work in both worlds. You can be still a great mom, and I think you're even like a really fantastic mom, if you can find that balance and show your kids that you can be involved in the community and work a full time job, and still be home and be there for them, too. And it is tough to find that balance. But really just like showing that that full story, that behind the scenes, too that goes into that, that there is struggle and strife that goes in to that, and it is every day trying to find a balance. And some days, I really win and I'm awesome at everything. Most days though [laughs] I'm just like, "Wow I don't feel like I really nailed it at work, but I was really great at home." You know, it's really figuring out like what that balance is. I think being able to show both sides of it. Because it is, it's hard, but I think that it's also—it's good when you can find—when you can do everything.