

Interviewee: Cherisa Hernandez
Interviewer: Sam DiMauro and Jamie DiMarino
Date: March 31, 2014
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts
Overseen by Professor Keyes, Assumption College



Abstract:

Cherisa Hernandez was born in 1985 in Boston, Massachusetts. Originally from Trinidad, with her father currently residing in her homeland, she has lived in Massachusetts most of her life, but did attend some schooling in Trinidad. Growing up in the inner city of Boston, she was able to participate in the METCO program, allowing her to receive an education at a suburban school system, in Concord, which helped her achieve her educational goals. Cherisa did not always aspire to be a teacher; originally she planned on studying Pre-Law at Boston College. However, she decided to make the change to studying Math and Education during her time at Boston College. Cherisa moved to Worcester in 2009 and became a teacher at South High School upon her arrival in Worcester. With South High School being one of the most diverse high schools in Massachusetts, she finds herself able to relate to her students because she herself is a minority. Worcester is a special place to her due its diversity and opportunities. Teaching and volunteering with programs at South High School are not her only endeavors; she is also the Treasurer of the Worcester Caribbean Carnival Association. Cherisa believes that women, though they may not be physically strong, are mentally strong and are able to show compassion, making them strong.

JD: [Said before the interview was taken place: 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 health education, work, and politics and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with your work. Thank you for your help in this important project.]

SD: OK, so, what is your full name?

CH: So my full name is Cherisa Chriscenta Hernandez

SD: Where were you born?

CH: I was born in Boston Massachusetts.

SD: And when?

CH: On September 18th, 1985.

SD: Have you ever married?

CH: No, not yet. Hopefully one day. [laughs]

JD: [laughs] One day.

SD: And do you have any children?

CH: I do not.

SD: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

CH: My mother and my father both are from Trinidad, which is a sister island of Trinidad and Tobago. So I identify with the Trinidadian culture, which is hugely influenced by Hispanic culture and tradition, also hugely influenced by British culture.

JD: Oh, really?

CH: It was last under British rule before it had its independence, so speak English there and I grew up there for a long time. So..

JD: Where is that located?

CH: It's in the Caribbean, it's very close to Venezuela.

JD: OK.

CH: It's like the last island in the strip of the Caribbean.

JD: Oh, OK.

SD: Tell us more about your parents.

CH: My mom, she was born to a Spanish mother and – or a mother of Spanish descent – and a father of African descent. And she was born in Trinidad and grew up there for a while, and then she moved to the United States with her mom and dad. When she was maybe a pre-teen, my dad also was born in Trinidad, and he was born to a Spanish father and I believe my grandmother on his side was pretty mixed, I think she's native Trinidadian, similar to native American, and I think she had a couple other of cultures, but my dad has lived in Trinidad all his life. He's never, he's been to the United States to visit, but he never lived in the United States.

JD: So he still lives there?

CH: He still lives there. My mom currently lives here. She came and went to school here and high school and eventually college and she's currently a registered nurse. My dad finished maybe middle school level, actually no, I think he finished through high school. High school works a little bit different there, he probably finished up to 10th grade. And he works I believe as a sales representative for an air conditioning company in Trinidad.

SD: Ok. Since you weren't born in Worcester, when did you arrive here and how did you come to live in Worcester?

CH: I first came to Worcester at a WPI program when I was in high school. I don't recall the program, but that was my first experience being in Worcester. I later came here to work at this school as a math teacher. So I graduated Boston College in 2009 with my master's degree in education, and I was looking for jobs in the area and Worcester had an ad in the paper. My step dad's father actually told me about and so I applied, and that's when I got the job in late August and started working here in 2009. I then moved out here in 2011, so two years after and I've been living here for three years.

SD: Where in the city do you live now?

CH: I live in the Main South area. I live on Agawam Street. So 5 minutes from here...

JD: Oh, nice.

CH: ... down Main Street.

SD: Do you have other family members who live in Worcester and the surrounding areas?

CH: On my mom's side, no, most of my family on my mom's side either still live in Trinidad or in New York, or Boston area, or in Florida because that's where a lot of Caribbean islanders like to be. But my – most of my dad's family still lives in Trinidad, but my stepdad's family, I believe he has a couple of relatives, cousins, or so in Worcester. But I don't really know them that well, so I'm pretty much it out here.

SD: What challenges do you think the city of Worcester still faces?

CH: From what I see and from being a teacher in this building I feel like a lot of the minorities are still under privileged. They're not attaining their highest potential and I feel that Worcester lacks a lot of minorities in the career field, you know there are a lot of minorities working like regular jobs but nothing like you know... not to many like in business, you know even in the schools there are a lot of minorities working in schools, they just don't attain degrees and their not really moving forward as some of the rest of Worcester. I see that there's a huge immigrant

population in Worcester and that could be part of it. So a lot people, a lot of students might be – the younger generation are first generation immigrants, and so there's a big push sometimes for those students to really make it and go into college and do well for themselves, but maybe I think the Hispanic population I think there's not – they're not as motivated to be as successful. I think everybody likes the American dream, but it's... I think we still have a long way to go to get the whole general population of Worcester really reaching for better.

SD: What would you change about the city of Worcester?

CH: Probably that I would like to see more minorities and you know...higher places because there is, there's such a diverse population I think that people need to see more faces like their own and I think that motivates people to do better as well. So I would change that and I think with that change might come less crime, you know...in certain areas. I think though that Worcester is very, very diverse. Not just in race and ethnicity, but in like socioeconomic class, so I feel there's places in Worcester that you can go and, you know, there's – you'll see that there's houses that are very expensive, people that are living there that are doing well, you know, very affluent. Then there are other parts that are not as nice or very urban and very un-kept. So, that can be a good thing and bad thing. That it's right there, I think what I like about Worcester and moving from Boston to Worcester what made it easy for me is, everything's right there for me, grocery stores, you know, stores whatever I need I can get, and I don't have to drive, you know half an hour to get there. Whereas if I was living in a suburban [speaker].... Yeah so if I was living in a suburban area then I would have to probably travel farther, so I like how everything is central and I also like that there are really nice areas in and around Worcester that when I, when I do start family and if I wanted to buy a house I'll feel safe and comfortable there, I would.

SD: Have you seen any changes in Worcester during your time here?

CH: Not particularly anything thing that can stand out, I mean we've been through election and stuff so changes like that yes. But what I have seen is that funding is very low for urban education and because of that, my first year here I got laid off because, you know, I was first hired is always last fired. First- last hired is always first fired when it comes time to cut people from the building or a workplace. So my first year here back in 2009 to 2010 I was laid off because they had budget cuts, which was kind of surprising to me because I was kind of told that being a math teacher there always looking for math teachers.

JD: Especially good math teachers [laughs].

CH: Exactly [laughs], but I wasn't – I probably wasn't good then [laughs]. I've, I've become you know a little better as the years that went by, but, so, you know...that was a bit frustrating for me but I guess it was like a eye opener to the fact that the country as a whole, is in a, in a large deficit and just how it affects, you know just the smaller places like Worcester at, you

know, I believe we had too, we lost 14 people that year. And I only came back because someone left and went to a different district. So that was kind of disheartening you know, going to school for five years to be a teacher thinking that I would kind of have some sort of job security and then I didn't, and then this year again we're going through another set of budget cuts. So this is like five years later, four years later and it's kind of the same thing, so it means to be some sort of a cycle that is – I think part of it has to do, huge part of it is political. Obviously, but I don't know, it's just, probably the biggest thing that I recognize that's changed is that some years are good years, we can keep the staff that we have, we can do good things with the kids and students. But then other years were kind of limited to the resources that we have.

SD: So, are there any distinct characteristics that make Worcester what it is?

CH: So I think it's diversity, I've never been to a place, and I mean maybe Boston is, I've just never really, I went to school in Concord, Massachusetts, which you guys are from Massachusetts I don't know if you know much about Concord Mass, but I went to school there through the METCO (Metropolitan Council for Education Opportunity) program, and so that was – that was like my teenage years and what not growing up. And what I saw – I lived in Boston but I wasn't very present in the Boston community because my life was in Concord with high school and as you guys probably know, which you know how you are in high school you're very committed to certain things, and you're very busy trying to get into good colleges and what not [laughs]. So, that was like my life so I didn't get to see a whole lot of the Boston community as a student, and then going to BC is very similar to Concord, Massachusetts. That's all I really knew of Boston, which was not really diverse at all. And, so Worcester was like – it was like a shocking moment for me, but not really because living in Trinidad, where, you know, I was never in the minority. So being here was like that in a way where it was very diverse it was familiar, and you know I could identify, I find myself being able to identify with a lot of my students and not just my students of color, but just immigrant students in general because I in a way feel, because I went – I lived in Trinidad for a long time. I went to school there, can identify with some of the things that they struggle with. So even with my Albanian students or my Polish students or you know not just my Hispanic students or my African students that are immigrants, but I can – I think being an immigrant kind of unifies everyone no matter what the color of your skin is or what race you are. You understand your parents coming from immigrants and what not. We have common values, so you know, that was something very different for me, was being in a very diverse community and seeing that. Now where I lived in Boston is very diverse. And, you know, is very urban also but it – and probably Worcester is the same way to. It has its pockets of communities, you know so a certain race will live in this area, same thing kind of in Boston. But, I just feel like, Worcester's like a whole other level, in fact this school itself, South [High School] like last year I think it was voted, oh it was named the fifth most diverse school...I believe in Massachusetts, but I want to say...

JD: Yeah I think we read that.

CH: Overall, and this year we were the third most diverse school. So we have kids in here from like almost 70 something different countries, you know 40 something different languages, it's crazy. So, or just different versions of languages. You know, so that's something that I really appreciate about working here, is just the exposure that I get to different cultures, different...you know cultures, ethnicities, backgrounds, both religious or whatever, you know it's just- and in Trinidad is very much like that because Trinidad has people from all over the world that live there. They have its main ethnicities that are like in the majority, but we celebrate in Trinidad, we celebrate like all holidays because there's a huge Islamic population so we celebrate all of those holidays. There's a huge Indian population from India, so we celebrate a lot of their holidays. Huge Hispanic population, huge African population, and a huge Chinese population, or just Asian in general, so that's something that was very like, oh, eye opening to me.

SD: So like the diversity is similar here as it is in Trinidad?

CH: Yeah in a way yeah, I would say so that's something, kind of, maybe made me feel a little bit more comfortable, and really appreciated for what it was. I think people miss out on that that don't know Worcester. Like I said, first time I came here I did a program at WPI, which as you guys know college life is a lot different than what you see in the city, so what I, what even though doing that program there I didn't know what Worcester was like at such a young age.

JD: Is it like difficult with all the different ethnicities to teach?

CH: It can be because we have a huge ELL(English Language Learners) population more so than other schools. So, but we have a lot of supports put in place for those students and as teachers we have to be certified, and we have to take certain courses and stuff to be able to provide in class support. So currently I just finished taking a recertification class for teaching English Language Learners, and coming into teaching it was heavily pushed that I should be ready to teach English Language Learners because Massachusetts is known for having huge ELL populations within their urban schools. So, I came in having that certification when I came to work here in 2009, so I was prepared for it [laughs].

SD: Do you think teaching kids with the ELL program places it ever, do you ever feel that it's harder. Or does it put like a strain on your job or whatever?

CH: It can be stressful when students aren't placed in the right placement, so when I have students that really don't know English at all and very new to the school which, we do have a new citizen center where students are supposed to go to for a year before they actually come to our school but we do here and there gets students where they come straight here or after being there for a year are still struggling with the language and sometimes that can be difficult to have a student like that in my classroom because it does take more time to really focus on that one particular student and in this building we have a ELL math teacher that is certified to teach ELL to ELL students like only. And so if we have a student like does really struggling in a regular

math class, we can put them in a class like that. Or at least just having a person like that in the building is good that you can have someone to talk to about strategies that you can use for a student like that. But, I like to think that I can get through to a lot of my students partially because I did come prepared with the certification that and the other part of it, I don't speak a different language at home but I do speak a different dialect of English at home and just that difference I understand where some of the students are coming from and where their struggles came be, because even in Trinidad we have different words for different things and you know I think sometimes students don't have decoding skills and because a language is completely foreign to them that can be difficult. And I've struggle through some of that myself so that sometimes that allows me to tackle those issues a little bit better.

SD: Moving onto education, what were the names of all the schools that you went to?

CH: So for elementary school I went to the Thoreau School in Concord, Massachusetts, they have three elementary schools and I went to Thoreau. Through the METCO program.

JD: What is the METCO program?

CH: So it's a program in Boston where inner city kids that live in Boston – the cities of Boston – can apply for or parents can sign them up and they can go to school in suburban schools so they basically get bused out to places like Concord, or Lincoln Sudbury, or those different areas and they can go to school there instead because the bus you know started back when the Boston Public Schools really weren't good school systems to send your kids to and so my mom really wanted my brother and I at the time to get a good education so she signed us up for those programs, for that program. So I started going to elementary school there and then when my mother decided to go back to school to get her bachelors in Nursing we ended up, my brother and I ended up going back to Trinidad to stay with my paternal grandmother for about four years. So I went to school at a primary school, which is you an elementary school called Carmel, so C-A-R-M-E-L preparatory school, and it was basically a Catholic private school that my mom paid for us to go to and I went there till about 4th grade and then when I came back here I kind of skipped a grade and went to 6th grade back with the Concord public schools. So I went to Sanborn Middle School they have two middle schools there, and then I went to Concord Carlisle Regional High School, and then I went to Boston College from there and I did both my bachelor's and my master's at Boston College. I did the five-year program where I was able to take graduate classes my senior year at Boston College and I also did the Donovan Program which is a program for people that wanted to teach in urban schools so it was for urban education and there was a commitment if you wanted to get loan forgiveness there was a three year commitment teaching in a school like this they call them Title 3 schools or an urban school. Currently I'm taking classes at Worcester State [University] and I took a class at WPI [Worcester Polytechnic Institute]. I'm going for my professional license in teaching and you have to take a certain amount of credits in your area. So my being math I have to take certain amount of credits in math graduate classes, so that's what I'm doing right now at Worcester State. It's a little bit

more affordable than WPI, especially since it doesn't really get me a pay raise and I'm just doing it to get my professional license so.

SD: What were you challenges while you were during, your education?

CH: So a major challenge for me, when I left Trinidad was coming leaving a place like Trinidad and coming to the United States going to a school like Concord it is predominantly white there and, you know the population is predominantly Caucasian so it was a huge struggle for me from being in some place that was very diverse where I wasn't a minority to being in a place where I was a minority. I did well in school, and a lot of my peers in the METCO program didn't, so many a times I was the only person of color in the classroom and so that was also a huge struggle for me. Not having anyone that I really identify with in the classroom with similar background, I really appreciated my mom for pushing us and putting us into a program that would make us competitive when it came time for applying for colleges, but personally I don't feel like I had the best high school experience because of it. I was very involved in my high school. I did cheerleading, I was co-president of a club called Unity, which promoted multicultural awareness and I did other clubs and whatnot there. So I was very involved in the community very involved in what was going on there, but there still some things missing that I didn't feel like I really fit in. So, when I went to BC, again, that was another issue because not many minorities go into college wanting to be a math major and initially I went in as Prelaw, but then I eventually switched to, wanting to major in math so that became, you know, that kind of continued, that kind of uncomfortableness for me, you know, being there alone, but college is different, you can find groups of people you know you are similar to in different ways like sports or your major or whatever. So my first year a B, BC I applied to be on the multicultural floor and so I think that was a smart decision on my behalf because I was able to make a lot of friends that year that kind of I stuck with through the four years that I was there and even after to this day that I'm still friends with. So and then it was just, just, there was a lot of competition. So, and being a competitive person that I am and always feeling that prove myself that I was worthy to be in these honors classes and worthy to be in these AP classes and worthy to go to Boston College on my own merit and not the color of my skin that was always – sometimes that was a struggle for me trying to prove that and for people to know that I was capable.

SD: What made you want to become a math teacher?

CH: I really, really, really wanted to be a lawyer, but I don't really, really like to read [laughs].

JD: That would do it [laughs].

CH: So, I remember, I was a senior in high school and I had this math teacher Mr. Yered at Concord Carlisle and, I had taken AP(Advance Placement) Calculus and I really didn't have much faith in myself that I really understood the information and that I really got it. And through the whole year he was like, "Cherisa, you're going to get a 5, you're going to get a 5," and I'm

like, "I don't think so." And I just felt he was putting a lot of pressure on me because I'm like I don't think I'm going to get a 5 and I'll be really embarrassed if I don't get a 5 because he thinks I'm going to get a 5 and I'm not going to live up to his expectation. But apparently Mr. Yered saw something in me that I did not see in myself, because I took that AP and I did get a 5.

JD: In AP Calc?

CH: Yeah [laughs], and I did get a 5 so. I remember taking my second prelaw class, and, it's not that I didn't do well in the class because I did fine, I just wasn't interested. And really, the reason why I wanted to do law is because I felt that it was my way to give back to the community and felt that it was my way to help people that were less in need, that was more in need and you know less capable of, you know or didn't know the ways to get things that they needed to do. A lot of that has to do with the law, so I was actually thinking of international law because a big dream of mine is to go back to Trinidad and actually work there and be a part of the political system down there in some way. And, so that's really why I went to prelaw track but then I just was not interested, and I didn't feel like my money was going to be well spent taking classes that I wasn't interested in or I wasn't challenged myself in because it really wasn't a challenge at all, so I decided that I wanted to be a math major that and, you know, a lot of students that are a math major take the LSATS [Law School Admissions Test] so I still figured that I would go down the law career. Eventually, but then I spoke to one of my advisors my sophomore year, and he was like oh well we have a really good 5 year education program if you're doing math and want to go into education, and I remember as a child always making my brother sit in school [laughs]. I would be the teacher and he would always have to be in school and so I was always teaching him something and so I thought, oh that's really my calling, and math is a subject that a lot of other people struggle with and, like I said, there weren't a lot of minorities in my classes so I would really like to give back to that community by making stronger math students, or people as a whole. And honestly, a lot of the issues that people have, have to surround financial issues which is basically numbers. And part of it is just being able to problem solve situations or problem solve how to deal with their bills and all that type of stuff.

So I just was like first teach people how to handle numbers. That made sense to get a master's in 5 years also made sense. And in the back of my head I still thought that one day I'd go back to law school. Right now I don't know. I don't think I'm going to go back to law school, but I do, I do see myself getting a few more degrees. So, I guess on the whole I really just want to give back to the community and I think that teachers are some of the best people that give back to the community. They give students educational power. If you are – if you know enough you can go places. If you don't know enough, you're stuck.

SD: What is being a teacher like done for you or meant to you during your time as a teacher?

CH: It means a lot, I learn a lot from the kids that I teach, and on a daily basis, even though I never, I never feel like I get through to these kids or the kids, we always focus on the people that

we can't get through to right, so I'd be making it through to five kids in my class but the other 20 I'm looking at like ok what did I do where did I go wrong, so on a daily basis I am refining the person that I am, how I teach something, how I deliver something, constantly like, you know thinking about what could I have done better. And I think that's a good characteristic for anyone to have it to constantly think about, you know what they do and how they could be better at what they do or how they can change something that they do. So, and also it means a lot to me because I am giving back to the community, I spend a lot of hours in this building. I tell the kids that I sleep here [laughs]. So, I not, it's not even the case that I'm getting paid for really what I do but the reward the fact that, I know that these kids are gonna either to pass the MCAS, someone I didn't think was going to pass the MCAS, these kids are going to move on, have learned something even if it's not a math equation that it's a life lesson that they learned from me in the classroom, they have a mentor or an advisor or someone they can come to and look up to, that not only identifies very well with many of them and the situation that they deal with on a day to day basis, having grown up in a single parent household for, you know, all my life, and you know having to be someone that, knows what it's like, to have a parent that was not able to work for a while, having to be on, you know assistance, you know having to receive reduced lunch. I know a lot of the struggles that the kids go through so, I think them just having someone like myself in the building that they know can really truly identify with their struggles that they deal with on a day to day basis, I think that's good. So if that's all I do, is show them it doesn't always have to be the end all be all because they're struggling now that the one day they'll not be struggling or they can make it so that they're not struggling, then I've done my job.

SD: Other than teaching are you involved in any other volunteer or community work?

CH: Mhmm. So, in this building, I do the National Honors Society, so I'm the advisor for them and that has anywhere between 50 to 75 students that I have to, you know. We do a lot of community service, so we do different walks for breast cancer and you know hunger and all different types of things right here in Worcester. So we put in a lot of community service hours. We just actually did Pennies for Patients for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. We try to help out with them, Red Cross sometimes, or at least try to donate money, so we do fundraising and stuff for that. So that's hugely volunteer, stuff in community service. I'm also the coach of the Math Team, so that's something else that I do that's outside of teaching that you know, is another club here at school. And I also did the Dance Team, but this year I did not because we did not have enough participants. But outside of this building, I am the Treasurer of the Worcester Caribbean American Carnival Association, which is a newly founded organization that held Worcester's first Caribbean Carnival in August of last year, 2013. So, being from Trinidad where Carnival originated, I saw an ad on Facebook, or a post on Facebook that someone was trying to have a Carnival in Worcester, a Caribbean Carnival in Worcester and that they needed people to come together and help them put it together. So, I basically emailed and answered the ad about two years ago, or a year and a half ago probably and started working with the president, Jennifer Gaskin. And we got a nice little board of members or committee members and we started working on it and we were able to successfully hold Worcester's first Caribbean

Carnival in August of last year, I believe it was the 25th, if I remember the date correctly. That is hugely community based. We recognize that Worcester has, being as diverse as it is, a pretty big Caribbean population, and so we wanted to do something within Worcester that spoke to those people like they have you know the St. Patrick's Day parade, they have you know the Albanian Parade, they have the Puerto Rican Parade or the Latino Parade I think what is. They have the African parade, so we figured why not? So, you know, Jennifer did a lot of the leg work and got everything kind of set up and then the date secured and then we just helped her see it through till the end. So, were going to be having that annually every year and so this is our second year that we'll be having in August on the Sunday, the last Sunday in August, which I believe is the 24th this year. So right now we're just all about fundraising money to see that through. It's a pretty hefty bill, when you have to have the whole Worcester PD (Police Department).. a lot of Worcester PD there, blocking off roads and doing a detail from about 10 in the morning till about 9, 10 at night. So, my main job as the treasurer is to make sure we're bringing in money and to you know, manage the money. So, that's what I do, I try to do fundraising and make sure that we can bring that. And it just about again bringing awareness to the community that you know, it is very diverse and you know bringing, people always come together in good spirits with like music and food so that's really what the festival is really about.

SD: Has religion played a large role in your life or your culture in general?

CH: So, I was raised Roman Catholic, I did my, I was baptized or christened, I did my first communion, I was confirmed in the church, and the last sacrament is marriage for me along those ends. And, so, I do still observe my Catholic religion, I don't go to church every Sunday, but I do go to church, and I do go to church in Catholic churches. Religion in general has played a huge role for me because I feel like without my faith I probably wouldn't be as, I guess blessed as I am to have been the first person in my family to get a master's degree. And you know, to be living on my own and doing my own thing, you know I feel like in the economy that we're in right now a lot of people my age are still at home. You know, I left college thinking that I was going to be out of my mother's house and not dealing with her and I was there for two years before I just stepped out on my own, so the expectations are a lot different than reality. So, I feel as though my faith has a huge role to play in that. And the fact that I was able to come back here and teach, you know and the fact that I've been here for five years and I've been successful here. You know, and also I think a lot of the cultures in Worcester, are, they do observe religion, you know, it is a very important part of their culture too, so I think that also gives me another edge with the students. Although I was raised Roman Catholic, I have, you know studied with other types of religion. Like I have studied with a Jehovah's Witness before, I've attended masses at Pentecostal churches and Baptist churches, you know. So I am very open to different things. In fact, when I went to BC, my two theology classes I took one was in Islam and the Islamic religion and the other one was on Judaism because I wanted to just learn about something different. I have two half sisters and they are half Indian from, you know there... they have ancestors from India and they are Hindu. So, also being from Trinidad, religion is a big thing there. Huge religious holidays that we observe and so, you know I'm pretty aware of a lot

different religions and a lot of the things that they do and stuff like that. So I'm always, what can I say, I'm always open to different things and you know just learning about new things. So, I do believe strongly in the catholic religion but I am not against or anything any other religion. Part of the reason why I did take the Islam class is because I wanted to understand the Islamic religion better especially because it was after 9-11. And you know, like I said, living in Trinidad there were a lot of Muslims in Trinidad and I just didn't understand a lot of, you know what was going on and I just wanted to know like why, you know why are people that believe in a religion, why can they do such bad things and stuff like that. So, that was part of me just wanting to understand that. And even with my own religion, I sometimes question certain things, certain values, and certain morals or certain standards that we have to uphold in a particular way. So I would say I'm kinda a relaxed catholic. I'm not very strict, but I do take religious very seriously...religion very seriously.

SD: Would you say that helps you with your students, that you're open to different religions?

CH: Yeah, yeah, I mean I have students in my class from Ghana, Nigeria, from, I have Burmese students, I think it's, Burmese, but I'm drawing a blank on the country. I have Asians, you know Chinese, Vietnamese, I have Dominican, you know, Puerto Rican students, Albanian students, Polish students and all of them have, you know, students from Iraq, Iran, other places in the Middle East and they all have different cultures, different religions, and I have to be able to because, kids can be nasty sometimes and kids can say things.

JD: We know [laughs].

CH: Just a student's name can be a whole conversation of, you know inappropriateness or whatever. So I have to be on the ball when it comes to that type stuff because kids don't realize when they're being mean, they might think it's funny and so they might say something that is inappropriate, that they don't think is inappropriate because they're saying it to their friend and their friend is just like, "Ohh its just funny". But, so, in terms of religion, yeah, I do have to be open because I think if I'm not open and then if someone says something then I will miss it. And then with everything with bullying and everything, I could, it could open up a can of worms, so I think one is being aware and two is being open to that type of stuff because our own views and the way we look at things influence the way we deal with situations. So if I am, you know, if I hate, if I hate Catholics you know, and someone says something about Catholics, then I may just ignore it because that's something that I hate or I don't really agree with. So I think being open is very important.

JD: Would you say that you are like, what's your political status like are you very political?

CH: I wouldn't say that I'm very political. I'm usually Democrat because it seems to follow more the way I think as a person. It's not 100%, there's a lot of things that I don't agree with. So

I would consider myself a Democrat. It's funny, because I would, like I said earlier, I would eventually like to go back to Trinidad and be some type of political you know...

SD: Advocate?

CH: Yeah, or something. Really what I want to do is I would like to do education reform in Trinidad. The education system needs a lot of work and so I would like to go back and be the Minister of Education.

JD: OK.

CH: Which I would assume is similar to the Commissioner of Education here. So, that's really what I would like to do, which I know is very political. But I would like to hope that I would keep, you know, because politics can get nasty and I don't really, I'm not really, I'm just all about equality and people just being able to live together comfortably. And you know, respect one another, accept one another, and be understanding. So, I feel like being on the educational side of it, it's not as political in terms of like, you know being a part of a political party, even though I probably would have to be to you know. I would have to be on a particular side to get a job or anything like that. But, you know, politics for me is just kind of murky.

JD: OK.

SD: How would you say girls are treated when you were.. girls were treated while you were growing up in school and how they are now that you see as math teacher in South High School?

CH: Yeah, well growing up in Trinidad is very different in a way. Women, it's very traditional in Trinidad, even to this day I think you know, women are expected to, you know, keep a clean household, have kids, you know, stay home with the kids, now though, more people are leaning towards working women but still having all those other roles moved into it. So, I think at school there, I remember having altercation with, altercations with guys because I, they were disrespectful and I am not one to just take things lightly, so you know I would speak up for myself or speak up for other people. I think for women here, especially in the United States, physical image is huge. Physical appearance and you know, how you view yourself and what not. And so I feel like both male and females in school can be very nasty towards females for those reasons. What I worry about too is like females who are all about appearance and not so much about their education. I feel like I tell a good bit of my female students, that it's very nice that they're pretty and dress and look really good but if you can't put any smarts to that brains to that then you're not doing yourself any good. So, I almost feel like sometimes it's all about physical appearance, there's a lot of pressure on females to look good, you know be thin, and not necessarily be smart, that's what I get. I know I got a lot of crap for that. I'm not a thin person [laughs], so I was teased about that. I was pushed to be smart and to perform well, so I got a lot of crap about that for being in honors classes and stuff and wanting to be a goodie two shoes. Or

even people calling me white [laughs], you know acting white or whatever because of doing well. So, and I was not so much worried about, you know, not that I dressed any particular way, or anything, I was just more about going to school and getting my education. It didn't matter if I had on sweatpants or if I was comfortable. Or if I didn't have, I know like now, with students it's the latest Jordan's. I never had a pair of Jordan's day in my life until I got to my age now, and I don't even buy them [laughs] for myself because they're just too expensive. It's like, it's not economically sound, so, you know that's like the big thing and that's not what I was about so I think there's a lot of pressure for females to downplay their intelligence and for them to you know, look good, and act a certain way, that's not necessarily me.

SD: What do you think women's experiences in Worcester are like generally?

CH: For me personally, being a woman in Worcester, I feel like for my age is a lot different than maybe if I was younger, I feel like, I've had positive experiences, in education a lot of women in education, you lack more males than you do females. So I feel like I've had more positive experiences because there are a lot of females. You know, but also when there are a lot of females there can have issues with that too because only so many personalities work well together. So, for me personally I haven't had any bad experiences with it and I can't really say that I've experienced anything that is, that comes to mind that is prevalent or that was bad or anything. I think that a lot of females are in education. Maybe it's just my, because I'm in education that that's what I see and I'm probably tunnel vision because of that. But my experience in general is that I'm around a lot of strong females. So, there are a lot of women in high positions and what not here. And I feel almost like females are more apt to push themselves and be more motivated because they do have to like take care of a lot and they have to handle a lot. So I feel like even like in parent-teacher conferences, I do see a lot more women than I see males. Like dads, moms, I see more moms than I see dads because they're more you know, involved than the dads, kind of like you know like the woman has to take care of that. So that's really, that women are like strong, have to take on a lot and they're more motivated to me than males out here. And, I do from his side of things I see more single-family households with moms not dads, there are some dad single parent households, but more so moms.

SD: Were there any memories of any significant historical events that took place while you were growing up, like you said 9-11 was something that got you interested in taking a class in Islamic religion, were there any others?

CH: So, when I was in middle school, I had a really good history teacher, I think it was like 8th grade. And I remember at home, my mom would sometimes, I remember watching The Color Purple with my mom but in history, and then in history I think it was 6th grade I remember watching I think its Glory, but I remember watching Roots in 8th grade and that really, leaving a mark on me. I can't really say what the mark was it was more like just questions, a lot of questions, it brought up a lot of questions. I remember when I was in college I was able to take e any type of class I remember taking a class around race and racism to understand it better to

understand that better. And I'm trying to think I would say probably, probably just that, aside from 9-11, yeah. And I think when I took my philosophy classes, that really, just being in college and taking those classes and thinking about things in a different way. It wasn't any particular any particular event that made me think well, let me take a class for this or whatever, but I think just philosophy makes you think about things in a very different way you question things around you a lot more and I think that's a good thing for people to do, is question exactly where, what they're doing, where they're doing it and all that type.

SD: How do you define success in your life and has your definition of success changed over the years?

CH: So I think as a kid, I probably would have thought success to be like, be a lawyer make a ton of money, live in big house, have nice stuff, a good car but as I got older I just want to be comfortable. I could probably teach for the rest of my life and be OK. I don't need to go back to law school just to make more money. I do sometimes wonder, you know what would it be like if I had another job if I was paid for the hours I was working, how much money I could make and all that good stuff. But at the end of the day if I close my eyes today or tomorrow I can't take any of those things with me. All I can take with me is the time I spent with the people I was around. So ultimately, success to me would to one day be a mother and to be able to provide for my kids the way my mom provided for my brother and I, with a father or not. I, I recognize that you know not everything is set in stone so even if I were to get married today or tomorrow, I may not be with my kids father forever. I would love to think that and I would love to have it be a story-tale. But the reality is that the worst happens a lot, I do want to get married, I would like to have kids and I would like to be a mom, but I would like to ultimately, success for me would be to take care of my kids on my own if I ever had to. So, I don't have to be rich but I should be able to provide for my family and not be on welfare or not be struggling, that would be success, to just be comfortable and happy and make sure that my kids are OK.

SD: How do you feel about the life choices you've made?

CH: I feel like a lot of things have been put in front of me. That it was hard for me to make a choice either way because it was like you have to do. I had to go to college, I had to graduate, I had to do well, I had to get a scholarship, so a lot of the times I felt it wasn't necessarily a choice, but I do feel and I am grateful that some of those choices were made for me, because if it really was a choice, I'm not sure I would have made the right choice. After all of that, I think or even like my job, it wasn't really a choice, it was like this is where I got a phone call and this is where I ended up. And I feel like actually going to the interview was a good choice because the last five years that I've experienced, I can't trade them in for anything. They were not all great experiences but I learned from all of them I think that you know, even though it wasn't necessarily a choice that I made it was kind of like put in front of me here's the job interview, take it, you have the job, take it, and I feel like it was you know, the experience was a good experience. If I were to leave at the today or tomorrow, you know at the end of the year, I don't

feel like I made a bad decision for five years. Sometimes I do wonder if I did stick with law and I did get my law degree, what I would be, would I be happier or would I not be as happy or would I, you know what would I be doing? Would I be here till six o'clock at night making worksheets and correcting papers and doing homework for a or class I don't know if I would I probably be putting in a lot of hours as a, you know a new person in a law firm somewhere. So I'm not, I'm not upset that I didn't go down that road. But I recognize that I can always, there's always room for me to do something else if I wanted to. I do feel you know if I wanted to change at any point in time I could change, and that I could experience something different, but I think somewhere along the lines teaching is something that I was supposed to do. However it, however I do it, it's the profession I was supposed to do. And it could be that I go and get a job somewhere else where I'm teaching people how to do a job and that's fine too, but I, I don't think I've any poor [decisions]. That if for some reason if something didn't work out, I did learn from whatever bad came of it.

SD: Based on your life experience, what advice would you give women today or your female students for future generations and like their experience as a woman?

CH: I would say to take full advantage of the opportunities that come, that come to them. I think a lot of times people want something to just fall in front of them and be like the end all, be all, which I was kind of saying was kind of the way it was for me. You know that things are just put in front of me, put in front of me, put in front of me. I just kind of grabbed at it. So, I would say to take advantage of things that fall in front of you. Don't you know, overdo it because I think from a lot of our students, here that are really top performing students that they try to do everything and you know, but recognize your strength and push forward at those things. Like, I know I can't sing, so I'm not going to try to like join an a cappella group or anything like that. Because I'd hurt somebody's ears. But you know, I don't, I mean I, so I was talking with some co-workers today in the lunchroom about how the kids are always like "Yolo, you only live once" or whatever. Alright, so yes, I agree that you only live once, so take advantage or you know do crazy stuff here and there but with reason. You do only live once and you do have, a lot of times in life it seems like you do only have once chance but that's not always the case. Because I think if I decided to choose to leave teaching this year, and go do something else that I could. As long as I push myself hard enough, I will be successful at it and as long as I'm dedicated enough, I will get what I want out of it. So, my suggestion again, would just be to take advantage of the opportunities that come in front of you, that are put in front of you. Don't think that it's just going to fall there and you're going to have to do it. It's going to take some work for you know, you to see the fruits come from it you know, or for it to give you the outcome that you want. What I've noticed is that everything is not, everything is not going to come easy. I worked very hard to be where I am, it didn't come easy, I didn't have the best experiences, but I did learn from them all. And like right now, as, as a woman in my late twenties, almost thirties, my thing is like get married, have kids, but that's not coming easy to me so I have to deal with what I have and you know, just keep pushing forward. A big part of my life is my boyfriend who's in the Navy. Which is a difficult situation, you know dealing with people in the armed forces. So, my

thing with that is I have to wait a while for my boyfriend who's in the Navy, who's in a sub, so he's underwater, he's gone, you know. I think that tends to scare people away sometimes when you have to wait for things to really happen the way you want it to happen. And I think especially with my students, they want instant gratification. That was an opportunity that was put in front of me. It was like here's your boyfriend, you can either be with him or you cannot be with him because he's in the Navy. And for me, the outcome of him being in the Navy and us being together when he was done to me was more important than you know, not being with him just because he's in the Navy. So, waiting sometimes is a good thing. I waited. Everybody doesn't want to be in school, right? [laughs]. And sometimes it can be difficult, but when I graduated and I got that paper, it was like a weight lifted off my shoulder because I was like this is what I had been working towards all my life. So, when he gets out of the Navy, and we are able I will be able to get married and have kids and I hold my first child in my hands, I'll be like this is what I've been waiting for. I took advantage of the opportunities that were put in front of me no matter how difficult it seemed that it would present a problem and in the end it worked out.

SD: Now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women than has been recorded in the past, is there anything else we should be sure to include in this?

CH: Just that women are very strong individuals, we're not necessarily strong in strength, but we show our strength in other places. We are very compassionate and we are strong in that aspect. I am very compassionate about my job, I'm very passionate about my job and in my job I show compassion. You know, to my students and to the people that I work with. You know, and that those traits being strong in those areas shouldn't be considered a weakness, which it usually is. But you know, when the going gets tough, we're usually the people usually that people fall back on, it's usually a woman. They always say behind every strong man or every good man, is a strong woman and that is the truth. Whether it be that person's mother, sister, wife, daughter, whoever, there's always a strong woman behind everyone pushing them. The person was my mother she pushed me and that's the reason why I am the way that I am and where I am in life today. If my mom as a single mom didn't do what she was supposed to do, I probably wouldn't have a degree today and I probably wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation. So just that women are strong and the strength doesn't necessarily have to be physical it could be just one particular characteristic that we show and I think it is compassion and being passionate about the things that we love or the things that we do.

JD: I think we're all set.

SD: Thank you so much!

CH: You're welcome [laughs].

JD: Thank you.