

Interviewee: Konstantina Lukes
Interviewer: Dominic Costanzo/Jordan Tofalo
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Transcriber: Dominic Costanzo/Jordan Tofalo



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Abstract: Konstantina Lukes realized at about the age of eight or nine she wanted to go into politics after being introduced to the mayor by her father. Her Albanian background caused her to want to be a part of politics because of her knowledge of the oppressive dictatorship in Albania. Konstantina Lukes ran for school committee in 1979, and has been in politics ever since -- about 30 years. She served January 13, 2007 – January 4, 2010 as the first elected female mayor of Worcester. Currently, she works as an attorney in Worcester. She touches upon her views of the recent election and shares her opinion of women in the future of politics and women's images in the media. Konstantina comes across as a tough and independent woman throughout the interview, most likely arising from her experiences achieving success in what was thought of as a man's world.

JT: Do you, Konstantina Lukes, give us permission to record this interview for this oral history project on the 14th of November?

KL: Yes I do.

JT: What is your full maiden name, and your married name?

KL: My full name is Konstantina B. (as in boy) Lukes.

JT: What is your married name?

KL: That is my married name- my maiden name is irrelevant.

JT: When were you born?

KL: A long time ago.

JT: Do you have any children?

KL: I have one child and one grandchild. (Sighs) I don't know how this is relevant.

DC: Where did you go to school and how were your experiences with that?

KL: Simmons College and the University of Connecticut School of Law. Simmons was in Boston and the law school was in West Hartford, Connecticut.

DC: How were your experiences?

KL: The experiences were normal and uneventful.

DC: What was your major in college, and why did you choose that?

KL: Education, no liberal arts available at Simons.

DC: What was your job when you got out of college?

KL: Didn't have any real job- summer jobs that were temporary, because I went from college to law school- so it was only a summer job.

DC: What made you decide to go into politics?

KL: Uhhh- I actually decided to go into politics and law school when my father introduced me to the mayor at age 8 or 9. I probably should include in that that my parents came from Albania and it was a country that was governed by a dictator and people were citizens were not allowed to come or go out of the country. The letters we received from our relatives were redacted so there was always some government official who was reading the mail before it left and read the mail when it came in, and censored parties. And my godfather who was in this country decided that he missed his family, so went back. When he--when he lived in Albania he realized that it was too oppressive--when he tried to leave they threw him in jail as a political prisoner. So there was that kind of abusive political power that made me think that we should do something about it. Yeah, plus you know, human beings for what they are can happen anywhere. [Pause]

DC: Okay. Where did your political career start? What was your first step?

KL: I ran for school committee in 1979, I've been in politics since then. I was elected my first time out served in 1980 and a two year break so it's about 30 years.

DC: How did you feel about the impact throughout your political career?

KL: Don't know what the impact is. You know? How do you know whether there is one person where you made a difference ? You don't know. Other people have not pointed it out to you. I'm told I am an independent voice, I'm told that I stopped abuses from occurring or escalating, I was director of Civil Liberties Union before I was elected.

DC: Did you like being the mayor?

KL: It was an overwhelming task for a ceremonial position. So I ended up working 24 hours a day and negatively impacted on my practice- and it has been difficult to recover since then.

DC: So we can count on you not being mayor again?

KL: No, no it's not that I wouldn't do it again. It's that unless you realize how much time consuming it really is, you shouldn't do it.

DC: What did you think about this past election, and did it end up the way you wanted it to?

KL: Well the last election really impacted -- really was an election that I was disappointed in. In that, I think the Democratic Party -- I've been a registered Democrat all my life -- I became a Democrat when I was in college -- that party really attacked the status quo and was active in the civil right. It has strayed from the party that I knew when I registered. And now instead of becoming the oppressed, it is the oppressor, and one party rule in Massachusetts. I think it is detrimental to the state. There are no checks and balances because the Republican Party is so weak and so the election reflected that.

DC: So were you happy that Obama won?

KL: I never thought the Republicans were going to win that election. So that was irrelevant and we are in Massachusetts. Massachusetts was going to vote overwhelmingly for the Democratic candidate. The only thing I was disturbed at was that Scott Brown was unable to succeed in his election.

DC: How did you feel about Elizabeth Warren becoming the first women senator in Massachusetts?

KL: Well, you know the point was she was a hand-picked candidate who had no real ties to Massachusetts. Certainly didn't even know how to spell Worcester right once before she ran. And was a machine created candidate and a media created candidate, I didn't think she had any real ties to the state, and her first and second press conferences indicated that my first impressions were right when she said she was going to ask Harry Reid what she should do and she had no idea what kind of committee she wanted to be on. She never thought about serving as a senator, she only thought about being a candidate to stop Scott Brown and she was being used for that purpose and I guess she didn't mind it. I really think any candidate, man or woman, regardless of their party affiliations should have a reason, a real reason for running.

DC: So as a future hopeful politician myself, what would be some pointers you would give me?

KL: Being a candidate and being a public servant are two different jobs, a candidate has to be a public relations person and the product you're selling is yourself. One of the unfortunate rules of politics is, as I've learned, is that you can say anything when you're campaigning and it doesn't have to be true. So you have a situation like a Harry Reid saying that Mitt Romney hadn't paid taxes in 10 years, totally untrue, but some people believed it and there are no sanctions for saying those kinds of untruths cause the Supreme Court Times case public personality says everything's fair game unless there's malice attached to it and its difficult to prove malice, so basically it's a free for all. And as a campaigner if you don't understand you will be the subject of that -- to those kinds of attacks. You're not going to be able to function, and now we have technology as part of the dynamics for bloggers can get on, be anonymous, and say the most vile, vicious, malicious things about the candidate and --or a public servant -- be able to repeat it over and over again. I had one person that's been doing that to me for the past 10 years. Calls up the radio stations, goes on blogging, a vile person, but he gains stature by attacking me.

DC: Is he a regular citizen or is he a regular-

KL: Yes, he's a regular citizen. He lives just around the corner from me as a matter of fact. Started attacking me, never met me. But you have to understand, that once you throw your name into the political arena, you're public property, and if you don't understand that, and can't accept it, get a nice 9-5 job. So public service means another thing other than promoting yourself, you have to know how to solve problems and meet the needs of your constituents. That doesn't mean you're not always campaigning, but it means that you have to shift your attention away from headline grabbing. Some politicians are always going to be headline-grabbing. The unfortunate truth is that if you don't [?] about yourself other people will do it, and they will steal your ideas, so it's a constant dilemma.

DC: What made you want to affiliate yourself with the women of Worcester?

KL: Have you looked in the mirror? You know that's my answer. I always had to deal with when I had made up my mind to go to law school, I had my guidance counselor in high school tell me it was not a good idea, my college guidance counselor tell me it was not a good idea, the associate dean at UConn [University of Connecticut] told me I was taking up a spot that was more appropriate for a male to be in, I was going to get married and have children and wouldn't practice anyway, and when I went to look for a job, recruiters basically said the same thing. So it was constant fighting against stereotypes. Then I became a local -- first thing I did when I came to Worcester was sue the city. I sued the registrar of elections who happens to include the city clerk -- it's funny how nothing changes [under her breath] -- and on behalf of a woman who now is very prominent, one of the nonprofit agencies, because the registrars would not allow her to vote unless she used her married name. And there was no requirement in all 50 states that a woman, just because she was married, had to change her name. And so that was my

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first experience, in Worcester. I had joined the ACLU legal panel and then I became the director of ACLU, which was a relatively short period of time but, about two years, because then I decided to run for office on the school committee. I also initiated the Status of Women Advisory Committee with the City Manager office in Worcester. [I was] the first chair, so I think it was just a battle to deal with those stereotypes. A woman, in order to prove herself, had to think twice as hard as a man, you have to keep plugging away at people and be persistent.

DC: How do you feel the view of women has changed since you grew up to now and what is your view of women in the media?

KL: Okay, two questions.

DC: How do you feel the view of women has changed since you grew up to now?

KL: The view has changed because of the participation of women in the workplace and in politics. Although, Massachusetts for being such a liberal state is has not elected a women as governor. The only woman that was elected as senator, I think, didn't do it on her own merits which was unfortunate. But I guess victory is victory and the state legislature still has too few women as senators and reps, there is still a way to go. Although women have been appointed judges to a great extent and the number of women in law schools escalated tremendously and when I went it was 5% of the graduating class, now it's easily half.

DC: Do you think it's definitely improving?

KL: Well, you know it's a mixed blessing. I know I did a paper when I was in college about Russian women and their participation in the workforce, in medicine, and in law- and the conclusion of the paper was that when women entered these fields, the value of the profession decreased. The income generated decreased because it was not that women were replacing men, it's that they were added into the pool which made a difference in terms of the number of people who were practicing in either profession, and the income that was generated because now the number of people in each profession stretched out so that the income was reduced. So it's a mixed blessing. I haven't done any research on how that's affected practicing law or medicine in the United States because too many other issues have complicated that kind of measurement. The changes of medical insurance and Obamacare obviously is going to change that. And I think when we allow advertising for lawyers that also made a difference, to what extent? I don't know. I have not read any literature of that kind. That indicates that the same conclusions or the same ends resulted here, as in Russia 30 years ago.

DC: So your view of women in the media? How are they portrayed today to compare years ago?

KL: Well for a while I was impressed. Now its getting -- but I think it's the -- it's a general tendency on cable T.V. and a regular [interrupts] Can you hear with all that noise in the background?"

DC/JT: Yeah, yeah. [Laughter]

KL: What the heck are they doing? [Referring to the noise outside]

DC/JT: [Laughter]

KL: If we see a tree come through the window...

DC/JT: [laughing]

KL: There is a general, I think, dumbing down of the behavior of characters on the T.V. shows, the comedies, the cable access. Wives of Atlanta, the California- no the Jerry Skinard – no what's his name?

DC: Springer?

KL: Just that people are less disciplined, more emotion, more irrational behavior, more bad habits... it's just across the board. And women are starting to look like bimbos and I'm just not impressed. But I can't say that the stereotype is just related to women. I think in general standards, courtesies, protocol, have all given way to outrageous behavior, attention grabbing behavior and in order to stick out as a celebrity or reality star, depends on how hard you try for attention. That means you have to do something that's foolish, humorous, dumb. So I think women have been caught up in that also.

DC: Do you think, as a political issue of the war on women will continue to be a political issue in the future?

KL: Well I think that was a contrived issue guaranteed to a stereotype in the Republican Party. Roe v. Wade and the issue of abortion, I think, is too big to attack. Like Obamacare, it's just an established principle and one a small group of a party is not going to change it. Southern right-winged extremists is not going to change what happens and some Republican politicians, in order to -- their favored thought that they needed to gather support even though it may have been temporary support -- they fell into the trap and plus, let's face it, the people who are running tend to be a generation that thought differently, and was raised differently. The next generation of politicians whether they are Republican or Democrat are going to get by that, but it was an interesting tactic to avoid discussing our foreign policy and our fiscal issues that are really more important. The social issues, gay marriage, abortion, those are issues whose battles have been fought over and over again and nothing is going to change.

DC: Do you think in the year 2016 Hillary Clinton has what it takes to become the first women president?

KL: You know the other thing predictable about politics is it's unpredictable. I don't know. I think that the next four years are going to be so crisis driven, that it's likely that a Democrat will not succeed Obama. It will have to be a younger Republican that is a little more conservative and the question is, will it be a Latino Republican, somebody who reflects the changing demographics, a black republican? I don't know. And or a woman. But I don't know if, if Hillary Clinton is going to be the candidate. Only because some of the problems that we are dealing with now, will be haunting us in four years.

DC: Why do you think women really haven't been given the opportunity to run for President?

KL: I think because the political parties are so ruled by older strategists, consultants, older money and that stood in the way of the ability of a women to run. Now when we saw this Elizabeth Warren race it was interesting because she was not the first candidate that's been plugged out of obscurity and been thrown into a race for Massachusetts, and won because of the party machine. And the Democrats have access to the teachers union as the -- these are all organizations that have a membership place who identify their jobs being linked to electing candidates, so therefore, they know that there's a connection between their well-being, their future, and whoever they can get elected. So when you have a Democratic party that is so well number one with money, number two with people, and number three with elegances that put a party in place, you can pluck a candidate out of obscurity. First what they did was Deval Patrick, who was a black male -

DC: That's the Governor right?

KL: Yeah. Who was an attorney, never ran for office before, never had his own constituency, we didn't know who he was, but the machine got him elected and because a main street media was the [Boston] Globe- or whoever- in Massachusetts no longer reports the news, but, acts as a public relations arm of the Democratic party, and supports candidates who don't have to pay for that, political ads, because the political board- the way stories are placed- the way headlines are written, before the poll, after the poll. A sample they did- a story on Elizabeth Warren- and Scott Brown. They showed Scott Brown with a picture that he posed for Cosmopolitan -- so they showed him naked from the waist up. Now that obviously is going to impact the dignity and the respect that should be accorded to a U.S. Senator, and belittles him without having to say a word. Putting that picture in could instead damage you with many number, many voters. So it's that subtle, clever kind of news placement, so called news placement, not news- but newspaper placement that can damage a client – candidate --or hold them back. So you have a situation where a political party can pluck a candidate -- a politically correct candidate – out of obscurity, get them elected to office and then own them afterwards. So I expect, unless the governor goes for the Senate's seat now occupied by Kerry- and they

have, and the Democratic party wants to get somebody elected it's going to have to be a Hispanic candidate because that's the only demographic that's been missing so far. So we'll see. I don't know if it'll be a women, it'll be interesting to see if it will be a woman or a man because they already relieve themselves of the obligation of putting a women in because they got Warren in. What was the question? [Laughter] I forgot.

DC: Oh umm-

JT: If women will be in the political parties?

DC: Will Hillary Clinton be a candidate? I think this is our final question. What do you think needs to be done for women today and in the future?

KL: Well the basic thing is, if women are not in places of -- whether it's a CEO in a corporate setting, which is the biggest figure so far facing women -- or sitting as a judge or a state legislator or a senator or on local boards, and School Committees or Board of Selectmen or a women elected president- we could get a black male. See the race was between a black male and a white woman, when Obama -- the white woman lost [Hillary Clinton] So there still is a bias there. So when that hurdle is overcome, I think-

DC: Do you think it will be soon?

KL: No I don't think so.

DC: So you don't think Hillary Clinton will be -- if she were to run?

KL: Rightfully, she didn't win the first election for president that she was in; I think she would have done a better job.

DC: I disagree but...

KL: Well you know it's like when you're dealing with Congress, you should at least talk to the members of Congress, not like sending an email saying, "Come over into the White House." and talk about this. You don't go on radio and T.V. and say those guys in Congress are no good. There's a lot of doors- there's a common sense thing you learn, in government, it's like Ronald Reagan ... [thinking] in any event, they didn't let political party get in their way of solving problems, and Ronald Reagan -- and I was never impressed with him before he got elected. It was after he left office that I thought he was better than I thought he was -- never hesitated to, you know be one of the good ol' boys to try and communicate. So sitting there and being a crybaby saying they won't cooperate with me. Isn't that impressive? You know you have to grow into the job and understand that you're always doing this together and you're going to together. Don't go crying over to the media and on the radio every Saturday morning and saying they are bad guys, they're not. They all have differences of opinion you have to just, you know, knock heads

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together. You know? So that's why I have been disappointed. Especially when the ambassador was killed and goes on a T.V. show and says, "Well, it's not optimal." If a Republican president ever said that the newspapers would be right down his throat. And they couldn't say anything, so blatantly offensive and improper. Anyway, so much for that I hope that there's growth in the second term.

DC: I think there will be.

KL: Couldn't do it in the first term. I have real doubts, but anyway.

DC: That was our final question.

KL: Okay.

DC: I appreciate this interview.

KL: Was that an hour or less than an hour? Okay.

JT: Thanks for making time for us.

KL: Okay.