

Interviewee: Heather Mangione  
Interviewer: Kiki Romanik and Kelly Dorandi  
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**Abstract:**

Heather Mangione was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1985 and is currently 32 years old. She moved to Worcester in 2009 to attend Clark University, pursuing her Ph.D. in developmental psychology. Post graduation, Heather gravitated towards community development, looking to create change for those around her. As an advocate for the LGBTQ community, she quickly recognized the lack of a social scene, founding a group called Airspray. This monthly event held at a bar in downtown Worcester has successfully filled that gap for the residents of Worcester. In this interview, Heather stresses the importance of being an advocate for change and to, “Just keep pushing on because if you live under the radar or invisibly, who’s it for.” She goes on to say, “We are all connected in one community in one world. It’s really important for people to hear your story.” Heather’s message shines through her work, and it is grounded in the idea of owning who you are, and creating the change instead of waiting for it to happen. Heather dives into the struggle she has faced in her life, and ultimately how these experiences have driven her passion and shaped her into the woman she is today. She then explains the good, the bad, and the ugly in society today, ultimately with hope and longing for major change in the future.

**KR:** First I just have to ask, we want to ask your permission to record the oral history, for you, Heather, on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

**HM:** Yes.

**KR:** Great!

**HM:** I agree.

**KR:** So what is your full name?

**HM:** Heather Francis Mangione.

**KR:** Where were you born?

**HM:** Brooklyn, New York.

**KR:** When were you born?

**HM:** 1985, I'm 32.

**KR:** What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with? Your family background?

**HM:** I am 100% Italian.

**KR:** Tell me about your parents.

**HM:** How long do we have? [laughs] Both of my parents were also born in Brooklyn, they both currently live in Staten Island. They moved there about eight years ago. And they both come from very working-class families, relatively low-income families, and very uneducated families. And so that really was a huge gap as I progressed towards my Ph.D.. So my mom comes from a very big family and is basically estranged from all of her siblings at this point. My dad had one brother and my dad was also a mechanic for the NYPD for his career. He has been retired for about 15 years now, maybe more. Anything else in particular that might help?

**KR:** That is all very interesting, I'm sure we will touch back on that later.

**HM:** Yeah

**KR:** So, since you didn't grow up in Worcester, when did you move here?

**HM:** I moved here in 2009, to attend Clark University for my Ph.D. in developmental psychology.

**KR:** Where do you live in the city now?

**HM:** I live in Main South on Downing Street, right across from Peppercorns and the art building for Clark is right across from my house too. And I have lived in the same apartment since moving here. I love it. And I love living in Main South, its actually very, very similar to the Brooklyn, New York that I grew up in, very neighborhoody, you know your neighbors and like I live with my landlords downstairs, like separate apartment, but yeah.

**KD:** Cool

**KR:** Have you seen any changes in Worcester over time since you have been here?

**HM:** Yeah absolutely, so it's been eight years, I'm sort of embarking on my ninth year in the city. When I moved here it felt very, very different. There have been significant changes in the economic development of the city, in particular, things to do and access to figure out how to do them. Places to go, restaurants to go to, I don't think Nu Cafe was even open maybe a year, for example where we are sitting. So many things and small shops and restaurants have opened up since living here. I kind of came here and I knew a little bit about Worcester before I came here

but it wasn't—I went to college and did a master's in psychology at SUNY New Paltz [State University of New York]. It's like a little bit upstate New York. Beautiful little town, loved it, didn't want to leave. I was dating someone at the time, didn't want to leave that. But I knew that I wanted to pursue higher education and Clark was the program that I got into really. It was the best choice and the best fit, and I sobbed when I moved to Worcester because it was just so different, and I didn't know anybody here. I knew that it was really going to create a huge gap for me in comparison to my family. You know, like I am a first generation college student and I didn't even know what challenges I was going to encounter with that along the way, but I felt it. I was nervous about it. And yeah, there was a significant gap the first year and it was just noticeable right away as I was coming out as gay around that time in my life so that was a huge transition that was going on as I was moving too. And I moved here and it was so hard to find the LGBTQ community.

**KD:** Yeah.

**HM:** ... completely. There was Worcester Pride as an access point if you like, how do you find that, you google stuff.

**KR:** Yeah.

**HM:** And that was it really. There was a couple or groups, like a parent and families group called P flag which is a national organization and I went to one meeting but it just wasn't what I was looking for in terms of parties and communities and people.

**KD:** Yeah like having fun in college.

**HM:** Yeah yeah! Exactly, and so over time I think maybe three or four years down the road after I had like made friends, got to know people, and turns out I ended up being friends with a lot of owners of bars and restaurants in the city, many of whom went to Clark, and also chose to stay in the city. My friends and I decided to start the group called, the LGBTQ community called Airspray in the city to fill that gap for people. So when either you're new to the city or moved here, you're in college, you're looking for something outside of your school, there is something now. So we run monthly parties at a bar called Electric Haze, for the last 4 years.

**KR:** Wow.

**HM:** It has been wildly successful; we have over 200 people every time.

**KR:** That's very cool

**KD:** That's so great!

**HM:** [laughs] Yeah, it's been amazing in terms of engaging. It wasn't just me that was having that experience of wow, Worcester is great and really interesting, but there could be so much more here.

**KR:** Yeah.

**HM:** So yeah, it's been an engaging sort of the 21 to late 30s crowd, which is a hard sort of young professional after college group to engage. It's really been totally amazing to change from someone seeking out resources to someone providing resources for hundreds of people [laughs].

**KD:** Yeah so true. To add to that, were there any challenges or like discriminatory events that like happened to your group of friends or you personally that like during those years you were trying to build this or, you know what I mean?

**HM:** Yeah, totally. There actually, it's actually a good thing to be able to say that there wasn't anything major discriminatory or hateful at all. I think the one thing my friends and I always would question what could potentially happen. Like are there going to be people outside of a bar protesting us or something. But it has never been that way. Actually the city has been incredibly supportive and very open to any changes or work that we want to be doing. And like I've gotten all sorts of awards and Clark University gave me an award for community development.

**KD:** Wow that's really great.

**HM:** Yeah! It's interesting too because it's not obviously what I thought my career [laughs] ...

**KD:** ...like would end up.

**HM:** ...would be, yeah exactly, yeah. I thought I would just be a professor and call it a day you know. But it has changed significantly so I am really glad to say that there has been very little push back. I think Worcester has really come a long way historically I know that. And it's been a learning experience for me because it still is a fairly conservative city. And the surrounding areas around as well are fairly conservative. But I think by the fact that we live in Massachusetts and there's a lot of structural situations and policies in place that have been in place for a long time.

**KD:** Yeah.

**HM:** Being a member of the LGBTQ community here is very normalized. And I don't want to generalize that statement. But it is much better here than other states. Also the history of the first Worcester Pride parade in the 70s I think was interesting to think of where we have come from and where we are now. It was literally I think something like five gay men walking down in front of city hall with paper bags over their heads...

**KD:** Oh wow.

**KR:** Wow.

**HM:** Yeah it's just crazy.

**KR:** It's crazy!

**HM:** Yeah you know we collaborate a lot with Worcester Pride which is amazing and they are amazing and like this year in particular was one of our biggest parades and most supportive and the festival gets thousands of people, it's amazing.

**KR:** Very cool. What were your previous jobs leading up to running Airspray?

**HM:** Sure! So I was in my Ph.D. program for six almost seven years, and that's a full time job. So not only are you going to school, but you're teaching and doing research for the university. And in my case the psychology department. Full time. So that was the majority of what I was doing for the time I was in Worcester. And during that time I, because of the work I was doing with Airspray, realized that what gave me passion and energy and life, and I loved doing the work that I was doing with Airspray, and like organizing and the very varied events planning kind of work. And mobilizing and energizing a community that was really ready to go. So at the end of my program I decided to totally switch careers. And focus on the non-profit sector particularly in Worcester. And I landed at the United Way of Central Massachusetts. So I have been there about a year now. I am a community relationship manager there, so we focus on all parts of the organization, both the fundraising and community development side. Our mission is connecting resources and people in their community. Yeah, connecting people to resources in their community. [laughs] So what that looks like is we fund smaller non-profits in the city and in Worcester County through multiple grant cycles. And we raise five million dollars every year.

**KD:** Oh wow.

**KR:** Wow!

**HM:** Yeah, yeah yeah! It's through workplace campaigns so like Assumption College. I'll be someone who goes into the college and talks to faculty, staff, and administration, to talk about the good work that the United Way does and ask them to help support us through payroll deductions like two dollars a week. So it's a national organization, and locally we have a chapter in Worcester.

**KD:** Oh cool!

**HM:** It's been amazing yeah.

**KR:** Let's see, we will come back to work and everything.

**HM:** Sure.

**KR:** But do you consider yourself active politically?

**HM:** Yes, I guess in a way in that I'm—so I do all the things that a citizen should do perhaps voting and elections and local elections in particular. I'm registered to vote in Worcester. But it's interesting to think about in the context of being a woman, because I have no interest ever in getting into politics right. Like I find it to be an incredibly exclusive boys' club in that the work that I can do and the energy that I can put into more formal positions perhaps of like running for city council or higher up or state wide stuff. I just don't see the kind of change that I could really enact in that way that would be—it's just so bureaucratic.

**KR:** Yeah.

**HM:** Yeah, and I think a lot of women, because it's just so hard to access really feel that way across the board. And I give women in particular in politics like the greatest props and respect and I mean [Sen.] Liz Warren like what [laughs].

**KD:** Yeah I know I love her!

**HM:** It's crazy! You know to hear her experience and many other countless women everywhere around the country and the world and even in local Worcester city government. Women that are in high power positions are just banging their heads against the wall. It's just so hard. So what I do is I try to go in the more civic engagement route by sitting on boards in the community and enacting change in that way. And I would say that I am very focused on grassroots political organizing and on the ground, in the neighborhoods, in the community, in that way.

**KR:** It seems like in the world of politics today, you're right; it's so hard to reach as a woman, especially with this past election.

**HM:** Right.

**KR:** And all that came up around that election.

**HM:** Yeah, it's really discouraging I think for our entire generation.

**KR:** Yeah, it's hard to see how we could change it if we are all so discouraged, looking at it from afar without wanting to be a part of it.

**HM:** Exactly! Yeah, there was so much hope at that moment just a year ago in November and to see so many women—it's so emotional—get so excited. I mean mothers who never turned out to

vote. To be so radically just you know conquered by—it was a terrible, terrible reminder of how much more work need to be done.

**KD:** Yeah.

**KR:** Yeah, we felt so close.

**HM:** Yeah no I mean, and who knows what truly did happen right, it just doesn't make sense, of what the hell happened. It's awful [laughs].

**KR:** It still feels like it didn't even happen, it feels unreal, still.

**HM:** Yeah, I'm very interested in seeing you know like Hillary just recently came out with a book. The most recent book. [Loud background noise]

**KD:** Yeah, yeah.

**HM:** Literally it's called *What Happened*. Right? Or something like that. You know it truly is just a reminder of the power that capitalism has and it took me a really long time to wrap my head around what is going on in our country. How extremely difficult it is, not only for women but for working-class people out there, and where the money is held and the power and I'ts got to change and it's going to take a really long time.

**KD:** It is.

**KR:** Yeah definitely, go ahead.

**KD:** So bouncing off that, you say you have seen a transition in women's society, or would you say we have kind of moved backwards from what we, from the women's movement and all we have accomplished.

**HM:** I think there is a lot going on that is really complex. I definitely even in my own lifetime have seen significant change and long-term change continued forward in women's rights. In equal pay, women getting out there to vote, and mobilizing their communities. But I think it's really difficult to see forward in the future. I think [President Donald] Trump's win was a huge step back for our country and for rights for everyone across the board. So I think that will absolutely, even if it's just four to hopefully not eight years.

**KR:** Oh my god.

**HM:** Yeah they are predicting that he will win again if he runs, and he will run. Yeah I mean it's, which is insane to think about.

**KD:** It's sad.

**KR:** It's a joke.

**HM:** But it is a huge step back, especially because we were building with [President Barack] Obama and everything. Just the momentum was so strong.

**KD:** And with Michelle [Obama] for four years.

**HM:** Specifically with Michelle! So I think what will continue to happen—I was actually really energized by something I heard this morning on, there's a podcast called the Nancy podcast. It's just a new and young and refreshing take on LGBT issues and rights, and they mostly interview people that are in the forefront of organizing and activism in the community nationally and internationally. They interviewed first lady Chirlane McCray who is married to Mayor Bill de Blasio in New York City, and I knew she was cool, but she's like really cool. She—I had no idea—so she sort of like with bisexual invisibility—so she's married not only to a man but the mayor of New York City [laughs]. I had no idea but in the 70s when she was 24 years old wrote an article titled “I Am a Lesbian” like I am a Black lesbian, for Essence Magazine, which is one of the top Black magazines in the country. Groundbreaking for the community and for the Black community. And what does that mean for the fact that she is married to a man now, and that kind of invisibility. And I was so jazzed. She is on this major project now in the city, mobilizing and organizing LGBT youth in the city. Like very specific progress and like really cool things are happening and like having a trans youth job fair in the city. So I think that what is going to happen is that cities and at that level states and city government are absolutely going to have to and are already doing the work that should be picked up by the federal government or is going to be. So it's a really important time in our history and in our lives not to be incredibly discouraged, but to move your efforts and energy elsewhere. And to really educate yourself on what's going on in your community as opposed to the national government.

**KR:** What do you think have been some other major changes like that? Some other major events that really changed the course of either women's rights or the LGBT community for you?

**HM:** Sure. So personally, I think also I'm always really reminded of the radical feminist phrase, “The personal is political,” in that we always are engaging in political rights and activism just by virtue of living as marginalized groups. As women, as queer people, whatever, I think for me getting active in the various dyke marches I have participated in, [laughs] it has been very powerful to see communities and people who look like me and are like-minded and often that I don't see in my visual sphere.

**KD:** Yeah.

**KR:** Yeah.

**HM:** Sometimes I like to play the game of spot the other queer person in the room. [laughs] I often lose. There's often not—you know, Worcester is a city that loses a lot of people who identify as LGBT to major cities because there is not a huge night life here. If you grew up here, its very often, "Oh, I want to move to New York City because more people are there, in whatever shape." So for one year I participated in the Boston Dyke March on their planning committee, where I learned about organizing in that way. And I have attended the New York City Dyke March a few times. I should send you this picture that they took of me recently this year—I'll find it—that got into Gothamist Magazine.

**KR:** Oh I've heard of that!

**HM:** I have a tattoo under my arm, well in my armpit that says, "Fuck the patriarchy." [laughs]

**HM:** And the photographer was like running around the parade.

**KD:** And you were like, did you get it did you get it?

**HM:** And I was like I have something that you need to see.

**KR:** Oh my god.

**HM:** And I like don't shave so it's the greatest photo ever.

**KR:** That's amazing. [laughs]

**HM:** Yeah, I think that those are moments I wish were more frequent in my life because if I could ride that feeling of being part of something so much bigger, whether it's a dyke march or the Women's Rights Movement March in DC or in Boston or around the world, I think those moments are so so important to go forward. So I think those moments of visibility, whether its Black Lives Matter, or any sort of radical or political organizing are the cruxes in which I've seen change happen in my lifetime. And I think that trickles up and down to policies changing. Whether its Title IX for women to be able to be involved in sports or what's regulated at colleges now in terms of sexual assault and rape. Equal pay for women, our voices on the streets translate into national policy changes. So yeah.

**KD:** Speaking of change, do you feel like the word feminist or feminism has altered its value and its perception because nowadays personally I have friends who are like, "I'm not a feminist," you know what I mean? So like what are your views on that?

**HM:** Yeah, so it's really interesting and actually a faculty member at your college—not your college, shit—at Worcester State. [laughs]

**KR:** Yeah close enough.

**HM:** This professor just started teaching at Worcester State and did her dissertation on the question of, “I am not a feminist.” But you know that is the sort of thing that’s happening now and it will often be dictated by like if like Taylor Swift said something like that in an interview. And it trickles down, young women are looking at the news and engaging in the media and creating their own identities and thoughts. It’s you who is out there. And if people are not rallying around one common goal or issues of feminism, what does that mean? So I think it’s really layered in the way that feminism is playing out now. And I am looking forward to seeing what that looks like for young women, as everyone gets a little bit older. Because there’s also sort of this washing out of the term feminist. You know when Target sells a shirt that says, Feminist. Or that it says it’s a good thing that Beyoncé wears a shirt that says feminist on it.

**KR:** Yeah.

**HM:** Is it buying into the levels of capitalism that border on unhealthy and are washing out the movement? I come from a particular perspective of someone who is still young. What would someone who was involved in the women’s liberation movement in the ‘70s—like is that an atrocious thing when you see a picture of Beyoncé wearing a t-shirt that says the future is female? The capitalism of the movement and I mean in my own understanding of the history, so there’s feminism at many levels, and who can access it. So the women’s liberation movement in the ‘60s and ‘70s was largely white, fairly wealthy, educated young women. And only as time progressed did it include people of color and folks who identify as LGBT and even in my own intersection of all of that as a queer woman or identified lesbian, historically I learned a lot about lesbian separatism.

**KD:** Yeah.

**HM:** You know do we just get the hell out of here? Why do we engage with any men who are going to put us down and say our love is not appropriate or real or I mean there are still to this day, they are called women’s lands or lesbian separatist colonies that are very active but also very much older, many older women like in Georgia. I know one in Georgia. [laughs] You just get so frustrated with the world around you, including your own families sometimes, who don’t accept you, and you just get the hell out. I mean I say that to myself sometimes. But do you stay and fight? I think that our generation whether it’s the history that I’m talking about in the LGBT movement, women’s rights in general, young women today across the board, do we translate what we learned about in second wave feminism and experienced in second and third wave and really bring it forward. And can we bring folks that, as we stand on the shoulders of giants that came before us, can we help them understand that the work that they did breaking down different barriers and different glass ceilings, knocking on them at least you know. I think the thing that confuses older folks that I speak to the most is the concept of breaking down gender barriers and gender norms. That’s going to be a really long fight and yeah it’s really different than what conversations were happening even 10, 20, 30 years ago.

**KD:** To cut you off, do you think you would have been as successful as you were, 20-30 years ago, or do you think it would have been way harder for you?

**HM:** I think it would have been way harder for me.

[Friends of Heather walk up and interrupt conversation.]

**HM:** Yeah absolutely, absolutely, there's no question because even 20 years ago I don't remember. In Massachusetts, I think what I am doing is really important in Massachusetts as opposed to Montana. I mean there are more people here who for a long time have understood and accepted even just the one policy of same sex marriage changes everything. I mean there are still, I literally saw on the news today, in Michigan there's a lawsuit that a same sex female couple was denied the right to adopt a child. So they sued and the ACLU is involved.

**KR:** Wow.

**HM:** It's crazy, it's crazy how that translates in different states and the legal policies that allow people to live their lives.

**KR:** Yeah. What are some of the things that drive you to keep going even with all the roadblocks you face, even with the gaps between different generations and not really everyone understanding and being on the same page? What drives you to get to that?

**HM:** Sure, two levels, I think the support that I have really been able to get along the way, whether that's friends mobilizing and just saying like this is the greatest, you have to keep doing this, like don't leave Worcester because that obviously has also been a question as I was applying for jobs to. What does it look like if you stay and fight and do the work here and continue to grow what you're doing? So that support from friends, and also like I said the city of Worcester, to the level of the city manager who is super supportive for these kinds of projects and initiatives to happen in our city and sees that it is a thing that will encourage young people to move here because we need young people to move here and live their lives. And also very personally, when I came out to my dad, four years ago, he—and we previously had a fine normal parent relationship—he lost it and did not accept me.

**KR:** Wow, I'm sorry.

**KD:** Wow.

**HM:** Super shitty, super, super shitty. And if that is going on in I guess it was 2014 or whatever, that is unacceptable for a father to say horrible things and basically kick me out of the house like I never have engaged in my own home in the way that I used to. That is totally not ok. Even if it's, I don't know where it came from for him, I think it is his own internalized fears of himself you know.

**KR:** Yeah.

**HM:** In that case, in that moment, I chose to tell him something about myself, and I didn't have to. You know I could have lived the rest of my life living a lie, pretending and avoiding a conversation that needed to happen, but because of what I did, it was the catalyst for my mom to divorce him.

**KR:** Wow

**KD:** Oh wow.

**HM:** And I think it was a really big learning experience to share that story with others and to give people hope that the most important thing to live your life is to just live authentically with yourself and [chokes up] it's hard. It's hard to do that. But when you're supported by a community too.

**KD:** It helps.

**KR:** That's really powerful. It's sad to me that people project their own insecurities on people who are obviously doing something that is so important to them.

**HM:** Yeah.

**KR:** And for you to make the decision to come out to him takes a lot, and for someone to put that down and to not accept it, especially their daughter.

**HM:** It's crazy. I have hope that he will be able to come to terms with his own life and family and what the idea and definition of family is in that way. I'm certainly not cutting him out of my life completely; I think that it really changes when a state or a country makes policies that are more accepting, right? I actually—I very intentionally chose to wait to say anything until New York state had also agreed to do same sex marriages and that DOMA [Defense of Marriage Act] was passed. I think that that makes a huge difference in every bit, when it's in the media, when it's accepted, and there's still so much more. Twenty years from now we will hopefully not be talking about same sex bathrooms.

**KD:** Yeah.

**KR:** Yeah.

**HM:** And all gender bathrooms, it's just such a silly thing that you know, we will hopefully look back and say you know—you can talk about that with any civil rights. Like 50 years ago, African American rights and workers' rights.

**KR:** I think we will find that change. I'm hopeful that we will because even learning about what's gone on in the women's rights movement and women not having those rights just 20 years ago, and we look back on it now and we can't believe that women.

**KD:** Like for instance, Oprah Winfrey when she first started out had a huge pay gap compared to her co-host.

**HM:** Yeah! [laughs]

**KD:** And that wasn't even like, that was like 20 years ago, not even. So it's just insane to me to look back and be like wow.

**KR:** Yeah! And we look back and we would never accept those ideals, and with African American rights too, we would never look back on that... we look back and think, "How could we have done that?"

**KD:** How did people do that?

**KR:** And I think that will be the next change that we look back and say, "How could we not have same sex marriage, how could we not?"

**HM:** It's so interesting when you look at the visual markers of what that change looked like in history. So like if you go into city hall in Worcester, there are still doors that say women's entrance and men's entrance. Or female employees and male employees. In city hall. You couldn't just erase that?

**KD:** You couldn't just take it off?

**HM:** Get that out of here. Laughter. It's like this whole conversation and fight with the statues that are getting taken down now.

**KD:** Yeah, I actually wrote a paper on that. About how offensive and like, kind of like, Robert E Lee. There is a school named after him. And people are like, "I want everything about him to be erased," but then you're like, "But he did good things for the school." So it's just like sticky situations too.

**HM:** It's really complex.

**KD:** What advice do you have for anyone who like is in a similar situation as you were, like that is a woman? You know what I mean?

**HM:** Oh my gosh, [laughs]. Just push on!

**KD:** Yeah.

**KR:** Yeah.

**HM:** It's just don't question and don't wait. Think about what the right time to say things and to make sure that you have a supportive community behind you to hold you when it's hard. But just keep pushing on because if you live under the radar or invisibly, who's it for? You know you save yourself and your life and you can live your life and be fine. But that's just one life. And we are all connected in one community in one world. And it's really important for people to hear your story.

**KD:** I agree completely.

**KR:** I agree. I don't have any more questions!

**KD:** Well thank you so much!

**KR:** Thank you so much.

**HM:** No thank you! This was so fun! Do you have any I don't know follow up?

**KD:** I mean we got a lot of information!

**KR:** Yeah we got a lot of information! Very eloquent too!

**HM:** Oh thank you!

**KR:** No thank you!