

Interviewee: Katherine Mangsen  
Interviewees: Laura Kuchar and Terri Whelan  
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Overseen by: Prof. Carl Keyes, Assumption College

**Abstract:** Katherine Ericka (Johnson) Mangsen is a funeral director at Nordgren Funeral Home here in Worcester, MA. She is the only child in a Swedish and Norwegian immigrated family. She had lived in Worcester her entire life, but she now resides in Holden, MA. Katherine went through all of her primary schooling in Worcester as well. She went to the College of the Holy Cross for her Bachelor's Degree in Political Science and Religious Studies. After she got married to Curt Mangsen and had children, she went back to college and attended Mount Ida College in Newton, MA for her degree in Funeral Directing Services. She has dedicated her life to making people feel better in times when all there is, is sadness. She is a motivated and strong-headed woman, making sure that no man tells her that she is not able to do anything she puts her mind to.

**LK:** I'm Laura Kuchar. My partner Terri Whelan and I are here with Katherine Mangsen today on March 26, 2012. 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 Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics/community involvement. We want to focus today on your life experiences. Thank you for your help with this important project! Do we have your permission to record your oral history, Katherine Mangsen?

**KM:** Yes

**LK:** Okay

**TW:** All right, so what is your full maiden name and if applicable your married name?

**KM:** Katherine E. Ericka my middle name is Ericka, Johnson Mangsen.

**TW:** When were you born?

**KM:** November 9<sup>th</sup> 1964.

**LK:** Have you ever been married, and what is the name of your current or previous husband?

**KM:** Yes, we have been, married for 25 years. And my husband is Curt Mangsen.

**TW:** Do you have any children?

**KM:** Yes, I have five children.

**TW:** Wow that's a lot.

**KM:** [laughs]

**LK:** What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

**KM:** We're Scandinavian. So my dad was Swedish and my mom was Swedish and Norwegian.

**LK and TW:** Oh wow.

**LK:** Tell us a little more about your parents.

**KM:** My dad actually came over—my parents were older when they had me. I was born in '64, and my dad was born in 1913, so he was in his 50s when he had me, when I was born. And my mom was 42 when I was born, so I felt like a lot of people would say, "Are these your grandparents [laughs]?" But I was born in Worcester. My dad was born in Finland and came over on a Russian passport actually, and he went through Elis Island actually...

**LK:** Oh that is cool.

**TW:** That is really cool!

**KM:** Yeah, and he died in 1976, and my mom was born here, and her grandparents bought a house when they came over from Norway, and we still live on the same property...

**LK:** Oh that's cool.

**KM:** ... in Holden. So yeah, so we have a lot of generations since they came over here. And she died in 2011.

**LK:** Do you have any siblings?

**KM:** No, I am an only child.

**TW:** So have you lived anywhere else during your life?

**KM:** Now I live in Holden, but it's right over the line, but Worcester, I was born in Worcester. I went to Indian Hill School for grammar school. I went to Forest Grove Junior High for junior high, Burncoat High School in Worcester and then Holy Cross College in Worcester. And now I work in Worcester. [Laughs]

**TW:** What was the neighborhood you grew up in like?

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**KM:** I grew up on Chevy Chase Road, and it was a nice little neighborhood off of Brattle Street, in Northern Worcester. And we were your typical everybody in the neighborhood knew everybody else. You'd go outside after breakfast, you'd play in the summertime until lunch, you'd go in and go back outside. Everybody was outside; there was like a big gang of us. And I find when I am working here I find people that I knew growing up that are still in the area.

**LK:** Was your neighborhood off of like a really busy street? Or was it kind of secluded, so that everyone was...

**KM:** It was kind of secluded. The street is a lot busier now. I remember when we were little we used to go sledding in the street. [laughs]

**LK:** That sounds fun! [laughs]

**KM:** Yeah, so it was not busy, that we could go sledding.

**TW:** So what changes have you seen in Worcester over the whole time you have been here?

**KM:** Definitely, it has gotten more populated. I would say the whole transition in downtown Worcester, with the Galleria and, which... it was the Outlets then the Premium Outlets and now it is nothing. I think it's definitely going to be an improvement, because I think they tried to put that up to gather people more downtown, and I don't think that worked. So I am glad to see that they're kind of to go back to the old fashioned model. I'm seeing a change in people's ethnicities I would say, since you asked about ethnicities. Whereas people who used to live in the city are moving to the towns now, and other ethnicities are moving in, I would say.

**LK:** What distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is, do you think?

**KM:** I think everybody in Worcester, I swear, knows somebody who knows somebody. It seems like a little town atmosphere, but it is the second biggest city in New England. So you can always find people you know, it is amazing. You can say I know so and so and they'll be like, "Oh they're related to my brothers, uncles, cousins." I know my mother-in-law said she went to Alaska one time and she still met someone from Worcester...

**TW:** Oh that's really cool!

**KM:** So that's the thing about Worcester is that people know it and love it and it's this kind of little quirky city that its own head Kennedy\*\*(?)

**LK:** Well we're freshman in college, but I've only been here, really living here, for this year, and I know people at school, who live around the area, and when we are, you know, are downtown like walking around, they're like oh, they always see people that they know, even though they

live like a town or two away, everyone seems to know everyone in this general area. It's really cool.

**KM:** It's kind of like a little town in a big city, and it is kind of quirky, in that I don't think it gives itself enough credit. I don't think... I think if Worcester has so much more potential. I think with the right... the city manager... I went to a luncheon the other day, and I think he is on the right track. He's trying to get Worcester out there as far as people giving it a lot more credit. We have so much history here, and we have so much to offer, and I think we kind of just sit back and let the rest of the world go past us. [laughs]

**TW:** What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

**KM:** Recently or in the past...?

**LK:** I guess in the past and present. I mean since you've lived here your whole life.

**KM:** Since I have lived here... Well I know that the biomedical field and especially UMass [Medical School], has a great opportunity for all, both men and women, and to make contributions to not only the area but also to the whole world. As far as women, I'm trying to think, was Abby Kelly Foster, I think she was from Worcester? Or I know that there's a...

**TW:** I think we talked about her once.

**KM:** Yeah, I think she made quite an impact with women's rights and women. But as far as in my experience, I know when I was at Holy Cross there were actually more women in my graduating class than men, and I know it was a really big deal at Holy Cross during the 70's, to have women start to go there, because it used to be an all men school. I have seen other high schools that used to be all men turned to men and women. So I think women are now obviously more accepted to be educated and in careers. And I know being a funeral director, it used to be very strange to have a women funeral director, but now people tend to prefer, at least in this practice, to deal with the women.

**LK:** Yeah, I can see how that would happen.

**KM:** The personal, I don't know the nurturing...

**LK:** I definitely can see that. Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

**KM:** When I graduated from Holy Cross in 1986, then I got married and then I started having a family. So I had all of the kids before I went back to work, as I call it my second career, being a mom was my first career. I found it difficult to find a job, and that was back in the 80's. I did a lot of temping. And I found they said, "What's your experience?" And I said, "Well I've been to Holy Cross for four years." "Well you don't have any experience." So you had to kind of start at

the bottom even though you had a four year college degree. Once I had the experience of being a mom, and got a little older, I went back to school to Mount Ida College and got my Funeral Directing Degree. And now I feel a lot more welcome into the business world, and I don't know if it is my maturity, my age, my experience, my career path that I chose, but back then I didn't feel like I had as many opportunities that I have now. But I just wanted to be a mom and that point, so...

**LK:** How did you...you said you went back to school to get your degree?

**KM:** Yes.

**LK:** But how did you come into this?

**KM:** My husband's family started it in 1910, so I married into it.

**TW:** Oh wow, when you said this was your second degree, what did you get your first degree in?

**KM:** My first degree is a bachelor from Holy Cross in Religious Studies and Political Science.

**TW:** Oh wow

**KM:** And actually I use my Religious Studies Degree a lot in dealing with different religions when we deal with burying them. So even though way back when I got the degree I'm still using it today.

**TW:** That's convenient

**LK:** It still works, that's great! How do you balance the different priorities, responsibilities, role and interests in your life?

**KM:** I ask for a lot of help! My older daughter, who actually wandered in here, helps, 'cause my oldest is 24, and then I have a 21 year-old, a 16 year-old, a 13 year-old and an 11 year-old. So the older kids help with the younger kids and my husband has been a funeral director for over 30 years.

**LK:** Oh wow.

**KM:** So we kind of flip-flopped jobs, whereas I was at home and until I went back to school I had the kids and he was working here. Then I went to back to school and now he's at home. He does work a little bit, but I love being out here and working. So we kind of, and carpool of course with other friends and neighbors.

**TW:** Has this always been here on this property or have you or you said...

**KM:** It started in 1910 on Belmont Street below Memorial Hospital so where 290 [Interstate 290] goes through. It was taken over by eminent domain for the highway to go through. So they built on the property here in 1958.

**LK and TW:** Oh wow, that's a long time, great.

**TW:** Let's see. How would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path?

**KM:** I would say the professional, as far as dealing with death and dealing with grief and grieving people, it's tiring. At the end of a really big funeral, it's emotionally exhausting to see people sad all the time. But the more I do it, the more I can almost remove myself from it. When I first started, if somebody was crying, I'd be crying with them. But then you realize that you need to be their support, because you're there for them, you're directing them and you are leading them with the process. So with the more experience I got, and after being schooled I realized, "Yes, you want to cry, but you need to be strong." And so you...it's just... it's like a ministry or a calling. So and I would say that my kids do have to understand that we can get called out day and night, holidays, weekends, there are no times that death doesn't happen. And they're just really understanding because they don't know anything else. What we told them, too, is that the person whose loved one passed away isn't coming back, but we'll be back, you know, in a couple hours.

**LK:** That's a great way to put it.

**TW:** How do you consider the benefits of the job you have chosen?

**KM:** I consider it like a ministry to help serve people through the worst times of their lives. And my dad passed away suddenly when I was 11, and it was a horrible experience being an only child, and it was my first experience with death. And I don't want anyone else to go through what I did, so I want to make it better for them. So, I took a negative experience and I'm trying to make it positive for people, make it comforting here when they come in. We have a toy section for kids. We know that people don't want to be here. So we try to make it as comforting as possible instead of the old Lurch at the door, the whole Addams family atmosphere of old funeral homes, forget it. No.

**LK:** [laughs]

**KM:** That's how I think it's more positive.

**LK:** You also said you have a religion degree. What role has religion played throughout your life?

**KM:** Oh, very, very important, very spiritual. As far as, I was brought up Lutheran, went to Jesuit college and you know learned the Catholic traditions. While I was at Holy Cross I learned

Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and I just think that all traditions should be accepting of other traditions so just by knowing the other traditions and the pitfalls where say one tradition would say, “We’re right, you’re wrong.” No, we all work together. We all believe in a God, some other being. I’ve even dealt with American Indians...

**TW and LK:** That’s cool.

**KM:** ... where they believe in spirit mother, or spirit earth or whatever. And you open to all those things and serve them because death is constant.

[**KM**’s phone starts to ring]

**KM:** Oh, sorry

**LK:** No problem.

**KM:** Everybody has births and deaths...

[**KM** silences her phone]

**KM:** Sorry. Everyone experiences no matter what religion they are, birth and death. And you can’t get away from it. So, the traditions might be different in how you bury your dead and what religious ceremonies you go through burying your dead doesn’t change the feelings you have. So I use religion in... we accept which tradition you belong to whether it’s Christian or... we don’t really do Jewish people but I have learned a lot about the Jewish religion, but they tend keep to their own Jewish funeral homes. But you are still mourning, and you’re still human, you still have the same emotions, regardless of your religion.

**LK:** Right.

**KM:** So it’s very all encompassing.

**LK:** Oh, that’s great.

**TW:** That’s cool!

**LK:** What major historical event in Worcester has occurred during your time here?

**KM:** Hmmm, well I know the Smiley Face was invented. And it’s funny because with the Smiley Face we actually buried in that family.

**LK:** Oh, really?

**KM:** (laughing) So when the sister of the guy [Harvey Ball] who invented the Smiley Face passed away, it was “Wow, that’s pretty cool.”

**LK:** That’s cool.

**TW:** That’s really cool!

**KM:** The other thing was we had buried the last surviving, one of the last surviving people on [the] Titanic.

**TW:** [gasps]

**LK:** Really?! That’s so cool

**KM:** It was really cool. And she was this little old lady who was like three or four when she was on Titanic. And her brothers and Dad passed away during the Titanic, I mean it was a disaster.

**TW:** Oh wow.

**KM:** And she lived right here in Worcester.

**LK:** Oh really?

**KM:** And when she passed away it was amazing. The news media were hounding us, and it was very...different. We had all these Titanic Society people were sending flowers, I didn’t realize it even existed.

**LK:** Yeah.

**KM:** So, we’ve dealt with her. I’m trying to think of other historical things just in the city. When presidents come now and again for commencements. I’m trying to think, I wasn’t around when Kennedy was shot.

Everyone: [Laughs]

**KM:** I’m too young for that. I remember where I was when the Challenger blew up, I was at Holy Cross. And of course I remember where I was when 9/11 happened.

**TW:** Mhm

**KM:** And the firefighters in the big fire died [Worcester Cold Storage fire on December 3, 1999] -- six of them in a big warehouse fire. We served two of the families.

**TW:** Wow.

**LK:** Oh, wow.

**TW:** This is going to be more like general stuff, but how do you define success in your life? And how had this definition changed over time?

**KM:** Helping people, being a good person. I think success when I was younger was how much money you could make and how big your house was and how many cars you drive. And now it's definitely not that. It's just being a good person, and helping others, and making a difference in somebody's life. It doesn't matter how much you have or what you have.

**LK:** Based on your life experience, what advice would you give to women today and in future generations?

**MK:** To not listen to the old rhetoric of men saying you can't do this and you can't do that. You can do whatever you want to do and you can have a career and you can have kids and you can do it all. And that everyone is equal and don't let anyone stand in your way. And of course always think outside the box. At Holy Cross that's the big thing. Think outside the box. Don't take no for an answer, always question everything.

**TW:** That's good. Now that we are working to tell a fuller story of women that has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

**KM:** I think their struggles are important to include because I don't even... I'm not even aware of all the struggles like people getting the right to vote. And women were just possessions, way, way, way back and I don't want the women of today to ever forget what the women back then had to go through. I wanna even learn more about it myself.

**LK:** Well, I think that's concludes our interview.

**KM:** Excellent!

**LK:** Thank you.

**TW:** Thank you very much.

**LK:** Thank you for everything.

**MK:** No problem, you're welcome. Do you want my business card or anything?

**LK:** Yeah, sure.

**TW:** Yeah, sure. We'll take that.

**LK:** We can add that into our presentation.

**TW:** Thank you.

**KM:** You're welcome.