

Interviewee: Jasmine Jina Ortiz

Interviewers: Haley Guenard, Kaylee Kelley, and Erin Laverty

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Worcester Women's Oral History Project

Overseen by Professor Carl Robert Keyes, Assumption College

**Abstract:** Jasmine Jina Ortiz was born in 1979, and raised in New York City. She comes from both a Latino and an African American background; her parents are both from the Dominican Republic. She moved to Worcester, MA to attend Clark University as an undergraduate. She earned an MFA from Pine Manor College. Since then, Jasmine has taught at Quinsigamond Community College and Becker College. She also works for Keller Williams Realty as a realtor. Through her work at Keller Williams, Jasmine has been able to increase the number of Latinos buying homes and commercial property in Worcester by a significant amount. She has also done a lot of volunteer work throughout the city over the years, especially work supporting the rights of women. She was a recipient of the *Worcester Business Journal's* 40 under 40 Award in 2016. Jasmine addresses the role of women in the Worcester community in her interview: "I don't know if I can speak for all women generally, but I can speak for myself. ... For industries where women can actually do very well financially, we're still not as represented as I would like." Through her teaching, real estate agency, and volunteer work, Jasmine is pushing to make a difference in the lives of women, especially women in Worcester.

**KK:** I need to say this part. Okay, so 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 1850 National Women'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 experiences with whatever you're going to talk to us about in this interview. Thank you for your help with this important project!

**KK:** Okay and do we have your permission to record your oral history?

**JO:** Yes.

**KK:** Okay. Okay, so what is your full name, including both maiden name and married name if applicable?

**JO:** Okay, so my full name is Jasmine Jina Ortiz. That's no married names.

**KK:** Okay.

**JO:** That's just a full name for now.

**KK:** Alright, and when were you born?

**JO:** I was born [ ] 1979.

**KK:** Okay, and have you ever married?

**JO:** No, I haven't. I've never been married.

**KK:** Okay, you can ask now.

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

**JO:** Nope, I have no children.

**HG:** What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with? Family background?

**JO:** Well my ethnicity is I'm Latina. And my parents are from Dominican Republic. And racially we're mixed, so I guess we are considered biracial... black and white, at least my particular family. But, that's the major—I guess for U.S. definitions of ethnicity, but it's a little more specific than that but just for now.

**KK:** And then if you wanted to just tell us about your parents, anything—you don't have to go into huge detail, but...

**JO:** What in particular about them?

**KK:** Where are they grew up I guess?

**JO:** Okay, well they grew up both in the Dominican Republic. My dad came to the U.S. when he was nineteen. My mom came when she was about twenty-five. They both were raised in I guess what would be considered like a rural area, countryside.

**KK:** Okay.

**JO:** Small villages. They went to what we would call like country school so like their schooling would be in the same like building like K [kindergarten] through eight. They would go to high school, like in a separate like institution—you know, school building. My dad is retired now, but he was a taxicab driver for over forty years in New York City. He worked for a private company called Hybridge which serviced pretty much all of upper Manhattan in New York City. And then different boroughs, Brookline, Bronx. And before he came to the U.S. he used to do similar work in his home country. But he was a truck driver like a cargo truck driver where he would go from like different villages and cities to where they were importing exporting goods and stuff like that. So that's when he was a teenager. So, he started doing that. And then my mother went through

vocational school on the island and she is a professional hairdresser. And she owned her salon for a while and then she went independent and she retired of doing that and also working for a company called Alexander Doll Company, which was a U.S. company. And they had a factory in New York City in the garment district and also in upper Manhattan and so my mom was one of the hair designers of the dolls. They were high-end dolls. They don't—that company got shipped out to China. So, they left—they left the U.S. I want to say in the late 1990s like ninety-eight—around that time—ninety-nine. So then once they closed that factory then my mom just took a little earlier retirement from that, but she was working for them doing that for about thirty years.

**HG:** Okay.

**JO:** And that was all in New York City, that's where I was born and raised.

**KK:** Okay, so that kind of leads into the next question. Where have you lived during your life? Did you grow up in Worcester? Or do you live in Worcester now? And in what neighborhood?

**JO:** Okay, so I came to Worcester for college. I came when I was about eighteen and I went to Clark [University]. I've never been to New England prior. I was born and raised in New York City. So, it was a big shocker and she—my mom didn't want to even drop me off actually. She was like are you sure you want to come here? She was a little bit disheartened. When I came to Worcester? Twenty years [ago] and the city looked very different than it did now.

**KK:** Yeah.

**JO:** And so, she kind of didn't want to leave me there. It was in the Main South neighborhood where Clark University is. And so, I stayed on campus for about four years and near campus for I think my last couple. Senior year was a little off but near the campus still. It was more like off campus housing. And then after that I stayed in the same neighborhood and I started working as a teacher. And I've been in education and then got my graduate degree and my MFA—my master's of fine arts in creative writing, and so I'm writing books and teaching at the college level now, teaching mostly English courses and literature and comparative courses and things like that. So and I've been doing that. At the college level, I've been teaching for about six years. And then when I first started my career I was teaching K-8 for about nine years—nine or ten years.

**KK:** Okay, and then the next question. When you first got here, what was the neighborhood like generally in Worcester?

**JO:** Where I ended up staying and living, it was in the Main South neighborhood and it was very much so dilapidated. In terms of the main streets, the area's off the main street. There was hardly any development, it was hardly—very few small businesses and it was mostly locally ethnic businesses. Now you see a little bit more of variety. And you see more development in terms of housing. A lot of vacant buildings. There weren't as many people when I first came. So there's

definitely been a lot of change. There also used to be a nursing home facility for a while and then it... then it was abandoned. And I believe the Family Dollar sits there now, which is around the corner of Main Street and main—so, if you go downtown in the Main South area, you see a lot of different developments now that weren't there before, because they were very much so, a lot of vacant lots and not as many people.

**KK:** Yeah. Okay, let's see, so we kind of got.

**HG:** Yeah.

**KK:** Where do other family members live like in the same area as you or around?

**JO:** I'm actually still the only one that lives in New England.

**KK:** Really?

**JO:** Nobody else lives in Worcester. My family are very much so New Yorkers.

**KK:** Yeah.

**JO:** So, my entire family, all of my siblings, extended family, my nieces, nephews, my great nieces and nephews. Everyone pretty much lives back home in New York City.

**KK:** Yeah.

**JO:** So, I'm the only one here. But, there's definitely much more of a growing community here of more people more people becoming more urbanized and I feel like I think for people who are coming from other cities they want more people to be more metropolitan. When I first came here, my mom was very hesitant dropping me off, because there weren't too many people and there wasn't economic development or commerce. Especially when you're coming from a city where there's...

**KK:** Yeah.

**JO:** ...always something going on and stuff like that and the fact that everything was closed very early in the downtown. Some of it has changed now, having more college students down there, but it could be even more, you know, more college activity downtown, but that was the major thing it was kind of empty. People weren't going down there, that kind of thing. And not too many pedestrians. The fact that everyone drove was a big—is a big detriment. But yeah, that's pretty much the major ideas.

**HG:** What challenges do you think the city still faces? What would you change about the city?

**JO:** Well, definitely I think the city could have more pedestrian friendly ways for people to walk. To have other alternatives besides using a car. That would be more viable. I know that they are trying to expand the public bus transportation, but I think by having trains—by having other kinds of transportation. Trolleys or something would be great for the city, maybe expanding those options. Encouraging young people in the city if they don't have other options that are feasible for them when they get out of school. I know young students are on budgets and things like that. Maybe can't move to a big city—bigger city, because it's more expensive. So maybe making it more attractive, because it's still pretty feasible to live in Worcester as a mid-sized city still. You can still make a living and have a decent life style.

**HG:** What changes have you seen in Worcester over time?

**JO:** There's definitely been more economic development, definitely less vacant buildings in the neighborhood at least ones where I live, I've seen a growth of population. Definitely a lot of different people of different backgrounds in the city than there were 10 years ago or 20 years ago and people coming from other major cities, coming here, that makes a big difference than just having people that are just from the area being more monolithic and homogeneous. So, I think that's changing the face of the city too. And also, increasing of small businesses.

**KK:** And then, what distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is, in your opinion?

**JO:** The characteristics that makes it unique?

**KK:** Yeah

**JO:** Good question.

**KK:** Tough question.

**JO:** Well, I think it's, I think for New England, I know it's very common to have many cities in New England to have colleges, so I don't think that in and of itself will make it unique, but I think the fact that the location is very central to other cities, and the fact that there is a growing economic shift, and people being attracted to the restaurant scene, people being attracted to the housing for colleges and different activities for young people. I think that's where it will make it more unique. The more it becomes more attractive for young people, and also even for older adults to make it more feasible for them to be able to retire.

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

**JO:** Good question. I don't know if I can speak for all women generally, but I can speak for myself. The experiences all depend on what industry people are in. If you're in education you see a lot of women in the field of education. Now, if you're in business, and I'm also in business as a realtor, you see women who are realtors, but you don't see that many who are broker

owners, you see some, but many are still men and also when you're looking at realtors who are in, let's say, a commercial field, which is mainly male dominated because there's more money involved. So, I think for industries where women can actually do very well financially, we're still not as represented as I would like to, in those industries.

**KK:** And then, you said you went to Clark in Worcester, right?

**JO:** That's where I did undergrad.

**KK:** Okay, did you go to a grad-- like school beyond that too?

**JO:** Yes, I went to grad school.

**KK:** Where did you attend grad school?

**JO:** I got my master's in fine arts through Pine Manor College, and that's in Chestnut Hill, outside of Boston.

**KK:** Yes, what were your challenges in education?

**JO:** Which one?

**KK:** You can generalize, you could do just undergrad, graduate, either one.

**JO:** Yeah, I think my challenge, for like, for education, I actually didn't have that many great challenges. I had pretty good opportunities that I took advantage of coming from New York City, we had a regents, a New York regent's diploma, so that's what I got when I came over here. And I came as one of—one of the top applicants into Clark, so you know, I was pretty much—I had a pretty full tuition scholarship when I went over there to Clark and I was very fortunate for that. I also had opportunities to study abroad, and do research, and do things of that nature. So, I took advantage of that. I would say for education to definitely take as many advantages of different programs and opportunities for young women. It really can make or break your decision making, or your career wise, sort the things you would like to do with life, and stuff like that. So, I would encourage other young women to do that. For grad school, I definitely encourage grad school if you're going into, let's say, a field of the humanities, or social sciences, to get a—the highest graduate degree they can in their field. Many times that would definitely give them a higher percentage rate of getting a better salary in your field. If I could encourage more women and girls to go into STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics], I would definitely do that, and if they want to get their doctorate degrees, I would do that definitely.

**HG:** Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

**JO:** I don't think I'm finished with my formal education, so I think I'm going to have to finish my own doctorate here. But in terms—what would I recommend do you say or?

**KK:** I think it's like options as in moving forward, like job opportunities. Do you feel like you had a lot or were prepared to enter the workforce? I think.

**JO:** When I came, it took a while to get a job, and I think for most undergrads it will take within the first year.

**KK:** Yup.

**JO:** To do that, unless you start a year before you graduate, to do the job search, but yeah definitely opportunities, but you have to definitely be creative about those opportunities, and look into different areas that you wouldn't normally apply for. And also your network of people, your spheres, family friends, recommendations from them of places, and companies that would be very helpful for your career goals, that's really—resources are a key. I think so.

**KK:** Yeah, that kind of goes into the next question of what support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

**JO:** Definitely mentors. Mentors are very important as you begin your career, but as you advance in your career and let's say you really want to advance into a company and want to be a senior level, like an executive, things like that, you would need a sponsorship. And a sponsor is a person that has been in the high-level position that, let's say, you want to achieve at some point in your career soon, and that person not only would necessarily serve as a mentor, but also fund opportunities for you.

**KK:** Okay.

**JO:** So, I think a sponsor, you know, you have a lot of women that talk about mentorship, but a lot don't talk—not as many are talking about sponsorships, and I think as you advance you need not only a mentor, but a sponsor.

**HG:** What was your very first job?

**JO:** My very first job? You mean when I was a teenager?

**HG:** Yes

**JO:** I think it was working at a bookstore, as a bookstore cashier. Something like that, something book-ish. I know that for sure.

**KK:** And then, what other jobs have you had, and what do you do now?

**JO:** What other jobs have I had besides teaching, and that is what I do now still, at the college level. And I'm also a realtor, which I thoroughly enjoy, although it is stressful at times, but I still, I love being in business, I love connecting people to resources, and doing deals, and sales, and things like that. And then, your other part of that question was?

**KK:** It was what other jobs have you had, if any, and what do you do now?

**JO:** Yeah so that is pretty much what I do now, those are my major jobs. And also being a writer. I do get paid to do readings and also when my—I do get royalty checks when I sell X amount of the books that I've published.

**KK:** And then, how did you come to do this work? All of that.

**JO:** How did I come to do that, it is morphosis, I don't know how I learned it. It wasn't necessarily planned out this way I think it was out of necessity that I became a realtor because in education teachers are still very low—low, not paid as much as they should be in education in general, so being a realtor gave me more financial freedom to do that, so that's how that ended up. And then writing-- I've been writing since I was an undergrad, and you know my formal training with grad school was with MFA, and creative writing. That's pretty much most of my training, is in writing, and getting into the writing and publishing business.

**HG:** And, what has this work meant to you?

**KK:** I think teaching, being a realtor, and a writer.

**JO:** What is this? It means that I work a lot in the community. Definitely in business, I work a lot in the community. A lot of different small businesses, small business owners, buyers, sellers, I help a lot of people with their properties. And in terms of education, I'm always, again, in the community, and working with now, my college students a lot and going on field trips and doing these kinds of projects like you guys do.

**KK:** What were slash are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework and child care?

**JO:** Right now I'm just trying to take care of my apartment, and myself. Which is a lot some days.

**KK:** And then, how have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles, and interests in your life?

**JO:** How do I balance them?

**KK:** Yes.

**JO:** Definitely a time tracking, what we call time tracking and—and it's definitely a technique in time management where you time block your days. So, a certain amount of hours is dedicated to your job, a certain amount is dedicated to yourself, and so forth. So that's a good strategy too.

**HG:** What do you think are the pros and cons of the path you have chosen?

**KK:** Or multiple paths.

**HG:** That too.

**JO:** The pros are that it's definitely a flexible schedule. Okay, I don't have a nine to five, although some days could be seven to seven or ten to ten, which is fine, because I'm by myself as a single person, but even I've heard also women who are married that have families that having a more flexible schedule is good I think. That's why there's women who own their own businesses and our education allows them to have that little bit extra time with their loved ones and things like that. But at the same time is that what happens is sometimes—some jobs like that you have a shift in pay. You might not get paid as much as let's say you're in corporate America and you're working 80-100 hours a week which is what my sister did for a while.

**KK:** Yeah, and how do you feel about the choices you made in your life and do you have any regrets?

**JO:** I think by doing it all over again I would have started grad school a little bit earlier... would've gone straight—well not necessarily straight, but I don't think I would've taken as much time off between undergrad because I took about seven years off in between. And I think I would've pushed through a PhD faster.

**KK:** Okay yeah... and do you consider yourself active politically?

**JO:** Yes, I think so. I definitely vote. I definitely volunteer for campaigns. I have a friend of mine named Linda Parham who is running for city council last year, and I was helping her with her campaign. I definitely donate to different campaigns especially if I know women are running. I definitely donate my time and services as well so, yeah I think I am.

**KK:** Awesome, that goes into our next topic. Have you been involved in volunteer or community work and if so what groups did you work with?

**JO:** Okay yeah. So, I've been on the board of Women in Action which is a non-profit. I am also a volunteer with American Heart Association, so I'm building a team to do a heart walk in May with them. And even at my broker job where I work with Kelleher and Williams we have a care game so this year we are going into Columbus Park School which is an elementary school here and we will be helping them paint their walls and do some renovations so we definitely are going

to be helping them. It will be a group of realtors and such out there helping them. So, there's definitely a couple community projects that I am involved in and volunteer. And in my chamber of small business owners, we share a lot of resources and do a lot of networking. And I also financially support our education program we have in the chamber where we give scholarships and grants to children to do small projects—in fact, we are having an award breakfast tomorrow.

**KK & HG:** Oh awesome.

**JO:** Yes.

**KK:** So, what lead you to join with this organizations or the many you are a part of?

**JO:** I think being community minded and involved has always been a value for my family. Back home my mother works closely with the Democratic Party. She was a treasure for her chapter and she volunteers for her congressmen, state rep and senator she volunteers her time. We all have volunteered, my siblings too in different ways and organizations. We always have reached out even in school, even when we were little in school.

**KK:** Oh, awesome.

**JO:** Yeah, we always did community service since we were little in our church and stuff like that. Yeah...

**KK:** Okay great and then what are some of the organization's main goals that you worked for?

**JO:** Most of the organizations that I support are geared towards empowering women financially empowerment social, those are the usual the areas I care most of and support.

**KK:** What are some of the main programs and organizations you work on to support? I think you've mentioned a couple already.

**JO:** Yeah, I think I've mentioned a couple already, I've mentioned the big ones I've been a part of.

**KK:** Yeah, definitely okay so what role has religion played in your life if any?

**JO:** I think it definitely does play a role—I mean I am a Christian—I try to encompass those values in my work every day. You know, care for the poor and show compassion in my work every day so I take that definitely to heart while doing community service and helping others. And those are some of the values that I was definitely raised with and very conscience of helping the sick and others.

**HG:** Have any health issue of yours or your family impacted you or along the way?

**JO:** Good question. Not personally, but my mother had a brain tumor so she survived that. My dad had prostate cancer and survived that. I myself right now am okay. I don't have any major illnesses or anything like that. So my siblings are pretty young, some are older, but everyone's pretty healthy and okay you know.

**HG:** What are your experiences in accessing quality and affordable healthcare?

**JO:** Well, I think right now I'm okay. I have the health care through the Mass Connector so that seems to be helpful right now for me

**KK:** Whose health are you responsible for right now besides yourself anyone else's?

**JO:** Nope, just myself right now.

**HG:** And how do you get through tough times and what keeps you going?

**JO:** Definitely being resourceful—definitely counting on the help of loved one's, faculty with family members, people in the community that would be able to help me—say I was in a situation of financial, physical crisis or social situation that was that difficult that would be first step of getting resources and information

**HG & KK:** That's awesome.

**KK:** How do you define success and has that definition changed over time?

**JO:** How do I categorize or how do I define?

**KK:** Define.

**JO:** Success has a lot to do with resilience. Not letting setbacks get to you and just once you have a setback think of a way that you can move forward and find solutions or a plan B of sorts. If there's a setback how do we come back and move forward despite a situation.

**KK:** Based on your experience what advice would you give to women today and of future generations?

**JO:** I'd definitely give women today advice to continue to move forward with their personal goals despite what could be going on around them and to not to lose sight of their purpose, whether professional, personal, or family goals. To continue to be encouraged and to not let discouraging individuals take control of their minds. The loudest voice that should be heard should be theirs.

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

**JO:** Definitely include ways women have made—different innovations that women have established that is very important to detail those things and record those things.

**KK:** Is there anyone else you suggest we talk to? There might not be.

**KK:** Yeah, well—probably someone connected to Worcester to...

**JO:** Yeah, absolutely. Well my friend Ednesa Rivera is on the board of the American Heart Association and she is doing a lot of initiative on Latinos with heart disease. And she would be a great resource to use and interview. She lived in Worcester for many, many years and she has her family here and knows many people here in the Latino family.

**KK:** Now these are just extra questions. This is an interesting question what major historical events in Worcester occurred during your time here and did they impact you personally if so expand?

**JO:** Yeah, well the fact that I saw at least two, three city councilors that have been women that's great. The number of city council members has greatly increased. That's great. Also on the school committee there's many more politicians coming out and there's many more women running for office than ever before now. So I see that major change in the city as well.

**KK:** Alright! I think that's all we have. I don't think we have anything else just want to make sure.

**KK:** Thank you so much for meeting with us!

**JO:** No, thank you, girls!