

Interviewee: Eve Rifkah  
Interviewers: Elizabeth L. Blasser and Nicole Marotto  
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**Abstract:**

Eve Rifkah was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1948. She graduated from Canton High School and did not go back to school until she decided to get her Master's in Fine Arts from Vermont College. Although Eve moved around a lot when she was younger, she settled in Worcester, Massachusetts during the year 1983. She began writing on and off again while a teenager, but did not take up writing full time until her later years. While in Worcester, Massachusetts, Eve worked with the *Telegram & Gazette* for 17 years. She eventually began to teach Writing and English Composition college courses at Fitchburg State, Worcester State University, and WPI. She wrote a proposal to run a workshop in the Women's Center of Abby's House and volunteered there, teaching poetry, and eventually got a woman's poetry published. She stated "I was able to make a book for her. And she had a reading at Abby's House, and a lot of people came, and she sold books, and, I mean just miraculous what this did to this woman." Eve also started a non-profit organization called Poetry Oasis and a literary journal called *Diner* which also positively impacted many poets' lives from around the world. In addition to discussing her volunteer work in Worcester, Massachusetts, Eve also reflects upon her life from a child through adulthood, discussing family, marriage, religion, political activity, and health. Eve emphasizes the importance of her work, especially her two new books. Eve stresses the impact reading and writing had on her life; the two elements which brought her where she is today.

**EB:** So, first question.

**ER:** You're going to have to speak louder okay?

**EB:** Mhm.

**NM:** Did we hit record?

**EB:** Mhm.

**NM:** Okay.

**EB:** What is your full maiden name? And, if applicable, your married name?

**ER:** My maiden name did you ask for?

**EB:** Your full maiden name.

**ER:** Maiden name, Eve Maureen Bravman.

**EB:** Have you ever married?

**ER:** Twice.

**EB:** Could you give us their names?

**ER:** I married when I was 19 and my name was Eve Jostedt at that time, quickly divorced in a few years, married again when I was 50 to Michael Milligan. I changed my name a year after my first divorce to "Rifkah," which is my Hebrew first name.

**NM:** Oh that's interesting! Can you tell us what that means in Hebrew if you know?

**ER:** Rebecca.

**NM:** oh ok.

**ER:** Yeah.

**EB:** That's pretty. When and where were you born?

**ER:** I was born April 1, 1948, April Fool's day, in Boston, Massachusetts.

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

**ER:** I have one son who is 42.

**EB:** Do you have grandchildren?

**ER:** No.

**EB:** What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with? Family backgrounds?

**ER:** My background is Russian Jews. My grandparents were born in Russia and immigrated here in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But we are non-religious. I'm not religious.

**EB:** Okay, can you tell me about your parents?

**ER:** My parents oh, they graduated high school. My mother was a very dysfunctional person. My memories of her are very unpleasant. My father tried hard. He was an artist. Although he was really thwarted from his aspirations by my mother who was very jealous of everything though he did do art his whole life. Particularly portraits. When I was growing up he did a lot of portraits on commission sort of you know, an extra sideline job. ( \_\_\_\_\_???) doing portraits and pastel. Yeah he worked as a blue-collar laborer his whole life as the last part of his life as a cutter in the fabric industry, clothing industry. His father was a cutter. He was good for -- he took me to the art museum a lot when I was a kid. And that was very, very important in my life and I didn't realize until I was grown up that partly because he loves the art museum and he loves art and partly it was escaping my mother -- it was not a place you would go. But for me, these constant travels -- mostly to the Museum of Fine Arts, but occasionally to the Gardner Museum and the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge [Massachusetts]. But those are rarities. It was mostly the MFA [Museum of Fine Arts] because he loved the impressionist and the Dutch Flemish artists. Which was the only thing we saw in a museum [laughs] when I grew up. Wow, there's a whole rest of the museum! He had no interest in it so we didn't go there. But you know, as a result of that, one of my books came out of that experience of going to the museum and my father telling me stories about artists and models particularly Suzanne Valadon which is what one of my books is about -- her life. And me in parallel lives with her so I got a book out of that childhood.

**EB:** Yeah!

**ER:** It was a hell of a childhood! But I got a book out of it! [laughs]

**EB:** Did you find yourself to be closer to your father or mother?

**ER:** Oh absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah.

**EB:** Which one were you closer to?

**ER:** My father. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think we were born hating our mother.

**EB:** Do you have siblings?

**ER:** I have two siblings a lot younger than me. One is 10 years younger and one is 12 and half years younger. It was worse for them growing up, even though I thought my childhood was bad- it was really worse for them because my mother for progressively more and more mentally ill and unstable.

**EB:** So you were the oldest?

**ER:** By 10 years, yeah.

**EB:** Did you enjoy being the oldest? Did you wish that you were closer in age to your siblings?

**ER:** When I was a little girl I wished I had, you know, a sister or someone I could talk to whereas ten years different they're another generation and we really didn't have that.

**EB:** Mhm.

**ER:** Yeah.

**EB:** Do you have any childhood experiences that really stick out in your mind when you think- when you think back?

**ER:** Mostly the positives ones are going to the art museum, reading my father's art books, trying to draw, watching my father draw. But watching my father with models I think was the most important aspect of my childhood, and doing a lot of reading. I was very much an outcast, outsider type. I didn't have a lot of friends. So I think from third grade onward I lived inside of books.

**EB:** Mhm.

**ER:** Which, yeah, I was educated that way.

**EB:** Yeah.

**ER:** I have a great literary education just from the time I spent reading books.

**EB:** Mhm. Where have you lived during your life?

**ER:** Excuse me?

**EB:** Where have you lived during your life?

**ER:** During my life- well, I grew up in Dorchester [Massachusetts] until I was close to 13 and the family moved to Canton, Massachusetts, the suburb south of Boston. And I was there until I got married at 19 and moved to Weymouth [Massachusetts] then Quincy [Massachusetts] then Boston [Massachusetts] again. I lived in California briefly. I lived in Winchendon [Massachusetts] for a few years-that's a no place land. I came to Worcester [Massachusetts] in 1983. And except for a few years living in North Brookfield [Massachusetts] in the middle, I'm still here in Worcester [Massachusetts].

**EB:** You've lived here since?

**ER:** Pretty much since '83 except for three years.

**EB:** Mhm. Do other family members live in the area? In Worcester?

**ER:** Not in Worcester. No, my youngest brother is in Plymouth [Massachusetts] and the middle brother is in Newton [Massachusetts].

**EB:** Okay. What challenges do you think Worcester faces?

**ER:** Worcester?

**EB:** Uh huh.

**ER:** Say that again.

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

**ER:** The government.

**EB:** Government.

**ER:** We have a very corrupt, ignorant government that keeps Worcester very much backwards. You have no concept of what's important in regards to education and in regards to environment. I was at a zoning board meeting where the zoning board's members said, "if you want trees you don't live in Worcester."

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**EB:** Ha!

**ER:** I mean come on now! Trees are an important part of our air quality! Worcester was once voted as the city with the most trees, once upon a time. And here is this guy saying trees aren't important and he is our zoning board. This is the level of ignorance that we have here.

**EB:** Yeah.

**ER:** It's disheartening.

**EB:** So have you seen any like major changes in Worcester over time that you've lived here?

**ER:** Well, since I have been here, one change that bothers me is the lack of art galleries that used to be here. There were some really -- "Grocery Gallery" was one, "Terri Priest Gallery" was another. The shows they had at the Worcester Crafts Fair, which I think they are starting to have again there now. It was a great loss. It was a loss because no one bought art so galleries, you know, quickly went out of business. Well, Terri Priest was here for a long time but she eventually closed up because she couldn't make sales. Because people don't buy art in Worcester. And that's very sad. Things that I see changing is more judgmental (??). Right now, a lot of new restaurants have turned up in the last few years and some of them are really good but most of them are pricey. They're definitely are for the younger, more affluent crowd, and so there's a lot more there going on. The music scene is very varied so there is some very lively music scene. My husband is a musician; I know a lot more about that. So, I regret the loss of the art community and I'm thankful for the rise in music community. So you know, it's a mixed bag.

**EB:** Are there any distinct characteristics that you think makes Worcester the place that it is?

**ER:** For me personally, it's the availability of really inexpensive cultural experiences. Particularly Clark University with their theatre department. They have an absolutely top-notch theatre department. And you can go see a well, performed, well directed play for five dollars. At Clark! You can't beat that! So that is wonderful. And your various things have happened on campus here, at Assumption, you have d'Alzon, poetry readings, and art galleries exhibits here, and you have the free concerts. I went to the concert yesterday at the chapel.

**EB:** Mhm.

**ER:** That was incredible! It was wonderful! And it's free! And it saddens me that students don't take part in what is right here. On your doorstep. Yeah. But you have great lecture series you have. Not as much music happening here as used to be but then all the campuses are

cutting back due to budget cuts. And that's very hard. Yeah. People need to realize -- people beyond the college community -- need to realize what is available to them and make use of it.

**EB:** Right, I agree.

**ER:** Yeah. So. Yeah. Cause it's there.

**EB:** Take advantage of it.

**ER:** Hm?

**EB:** You should take advantage of it!

**ER:** Absolutely.

**EB:** So, what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been in general, from your viewpoint?

**ER:** I don't have the foggiest idea. Really. Well I have been here since '83 but I tend to be very isolated and the community that I am in is literary, particularly poetic community. It is very narrowly focused into that. So what other women's experiences are in Worcester outside [of] the people that go to Abby's House, where I volunteered, I don't know.

**EB:** So moving on to education, where did you attend school?

**ER:** I have an MFA [Master's in Fine Arts] from Vermont College, creative writing program. Then I graduated in 2002. I do not have an undergraduate degree. I graduated- I went two years to a community college after high school, and I didn't graduate. I did graduate high school in '65.

**EB:** Did you enjoy high school?

**ER:** No, I hated high school.

**EB:** Why?

**ER:** Because I had such a dysfunctional family.

**EB:** Mhm.

**ER:** And I was so handicapped with shyness. And insecurities. Due to my background that it made it very difficult so I was very warped when it came to socializing and I was very different I just wasn't into what people my age were into, which was rock and roll, The Beatles, fan clubs, teased hair dos. They had teased hair! That was horrible to me! That people did-they would stand in front of the mirror doing this stuff making this helmet around their heads, going after boys, which I wasn't into being a predator. So I was-I listened to classical music and jazz. I didn't get into a popular cultural scene until folk music came in and suddenly I could listen to what other people my age listen to.

**EB:** That gave you more of an ability to connect to them?

**ER:** A little bit, a little bit. But I was you know, older I was going to, you know, college for a couple of years which I was very isolated there. I met the man who became my husband and got pregnant and got married- in that order, and spent years of my life, you know, being uneducated – unorganized education, education. I was really better educated than a lot of people who went to college in my time because I read non-fiction, I read history as well as science fiction and novels and everything else. You know, I had a really broad reading interest. I was really into anthropology I read tons of anthropology. So I was educated. And I knew I was intelligent. But when you're living on welfare, when you're working blue-collared jobs the world treats you as though you must be ignorant. And that is an assumption. Whereas if you have a college education it is assumed you must be intelligent. Of course both are wrong. Yeah. I can't tell you how many Ph.D.'s (Doctor of Philosophy) I know who are really ignorant people. Along with ones who are truly, truly intelligent people. It just a stereotyping a way a person fits educationally and financially and how people are treated. You know, we talk about people in the Mideast are treated today, we talk about how blacks are treated, we talk about how gays are treated. But there is never a discussion on how people who don't have formal education, how people who work those part-time or blue collar or underpaid jobs, how they are treated and growing up fighting this is hard. And I was raising a child.

**EB:** That must have been difficult. So do you think that your challenges in school were more socially or academically?

**ER:** Social.

**EB:** Social?

**ER:** Yah I did fine academically.



**NM:** Which high school did you attend? I know you moved around a lot.

**ER:** Canton High School. Yeah.

**NM:** Okay.

**ER:** Yeah I was in eighth grade. No, I was in -- yeah, eighth grade when I move to Canton in the middle of eighth grade in February. So I went through four years in Canton High School.

**NM:** Okay.

**EB:** So, after you finished your education what did you see as your options?

**ER:** When I got my MFA?

**EB:** Mhm.

**ER:** Well considering I was in my 50's, at the time I graduated I was still working for the *Telegram & Gazette* part time. So I kept on that until I was laid off in 2004. Because it was, you know, an okay paying job. No benefits of course but also at that time I was married so there is less anxiety and stress taken off of me about having to survive, after I got married when I was almost 51. So life was easier at that time for me. When I finally got laid off from the *Telegram* due to technology changes in the department I worked in did not exist anymore, I was a compositor and all that's done on computers now. I was ecstatic, yeah. I worked for 17 years. I could never get a full time job. And all that time I was a part-time reporter for 10 years I stopped that to begin going to school. So it was a good job to have while being in school full time for two years and when I was laid off it was like, "Oh time to find a job." Yeah particularly when the unemployment went up. And it just happened to be in the right place at the right time where I was able to connect with a teaching position at Worcester State --then College, now University -- as an adjunct. So actually it was very interesting because when I got my Master's, and my job availabilities are part time, insecure, no benefit jobs where right now I'm making less than I made working at the *Telegram* but I must be an intelligent person huh?! Because I'm a professor! Isn't that cool? I mean I think it's cool when students call me, "Professor Rifkah!" But at the moment I'm unemployed, although I might be getting a job at Assumption for spring semester.

**EB:** Oh!

**NM:** Ah!

**ER:** Cross your fingers! [laughs]

**NM:** Do you know what you would teach here? And also what did you teach at Worcester State?

**ER:** At Worcester State I taught English Comp [composition] which is called “Writing One and Two”, at Fitchburg State, where I also taught and called I think, “Writing”-something else, at WPI [Worcester Polytechnic Institute] where I also taught, and at WPI I taught Modern American Literature, which was a lot of fun. And I just finished a course there, Introduction to Literature. Which was a gas! I loved that- I loved teaching at WPI even though it’s marathon seven-week terms. So today is my last day. Hopefully I’ll get an Intro to Lit [introduction to literature] course here. I know the openings they have here are four classes of Comp [composition] and two are Intro to Lit [literature]. So I’m really hoping I get Intro to Lit and I’m hoping to get a job but yeah, I mean, I’m not wild about teaching Comp but there are worse things to do. It is so important! I think the problem is that students don’t realize how important it is to speak and write well. And how that reflects on who they are particularly going out looking for jobs.

**EB:** That’s very true.

**ER:** Hm?

**EB:** That’s very true. I agree.

**NM:** So going back just a little bit, you mentioned you worked for the *Telegram & Gazette*, how did you get that position? What made you get that position?

**ER:** I saw an ad for a part time job. Pay was decent for part time work. I was not working at the time. I had lost a previous job I had. So I applied for it. And there I was the next 17 years. Never thinking that the job would last 17 years. I mean at that time there was talk about eventually they were going to computerize. But it took that long. Good for me!

**NM:** Did you have any social support networks or mentoring that was important to you?

**ER:** In writing, yes. Absolutely. Particularly for the last 13-14 years. That and, when I began writing again, I wrote often on since I was a teenage where I would have a few years of writing and a lot of years of not writing and also doing a lot of art when I was younger. And the art sort of faded out as the writing took home. But somewhere around 14 years ago or so I started writing again and got involved with John Hodgkin’s poetry workshop that at that time was in Shrewsbury [Massachusetts]. It was a lot of work going to that. I was in there for maybe nine

years and up until then it was really good for me to keep me motivated to keep me going and working. And at that time is when I applied to grad [graduate] school after my husband got into graduate school. And I looked at what his fellow students were doing- fellow classmates were doing and I go, “These students don’t write better than me. I can do this.” So I did. So I applied to schools and went to the one that accepted me. Fortunately not the one my husband went to. That was good.

**EB:** How many schools did you apply to?

**ER:** I only applied to two, Bennington [Vermont] and Vermont College. So, I wanted some place I could drive to. And at that time there were only, I think, three low residency MFA programs in New England. I mean, today it is well over a dozen. I mean, that’s how much MF-low residency programs are really growing and becoming the corner nail salons. So, I was limited to where I can apply. I liked some of the people I knew that were teaching there. Bennington rejected me and Vermont College accepted me so there I went!

**EB:** Was there one you wanted to go to more than the other? Or was it just...

**ER:** I don’t know. My husband was accepted to both and he picked Bennington and he started school six months before me and it turned out in retrospect, once I started, I knew that it was much better for the two of us to be in separate schools. We’re just so completely different socially. He was very much social butterfly, outgoing kind of person in those days and I would’ve been a hamper to him. So, so it was good we went to different schools and I could (\_\_\_\_???) live my own isolated life in school. [laughs] I went to school in Montpelier [Vermont]. Montpelier [Vermont] is gorgeous! In summer sessions, I would get up at six, go for a three-mile walk, it was beautiful. And would come back for breakfast, and feeling good because I was just out in the air on this three mile walk up into this real old cemetery that I would go hang out in and come back and you know, sort of do my own thing.

**EB:** You were happy!

**ER:** Hm?

**EB:** You were happy!

**ER:** I was ecstatic the first day I was there. I’m in graduate school! Wow! Me! No undergrad degree and here I am! Going to get a Master’s!

**NM:** How did that come about, you deciding to get your masters without an undergraduate education?

**ER:** You have to send in a work sample, you need letters of reference of people who know your work - and in those days it was easier. I don't know if they still accept anybody without an undergrad degree. I have no idea. I think they are cutting back in that at the time I was there.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** So you know I was lucky it was the right time where I could get in just based on the quality of my work.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** But you know it's a writing - should be on the quality of your work.

**NM:** Right.

[Clears throat]

**NM:** So what influenced you from the beginning when you first started to write, what made you decide to start writing?

**ER:** My first husband wrote.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** And when I first met him he was writing a short, short stories and he was writing some poetry and under that influence I started writing poetry.

**NM:** Nice.

**EB:** Yeah.

**NM:** Did you ever do any work together?

**ER:** Nope.

**EB:** Nope.

**NM:** Okay. What does writing mean to you?

**ER:** It's important to me to be a creative person, whatever that entails. And for a long time it was visual arts with drawing, and painting, pastels, and the writing sort of started coming into it. Mostly because I read so much the language, words, were so important to me. Even when I was still involved in art, it was the names of colors that I'd liked. It was almost like they were hymns.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** Holy words, (\_\_\_\_???) and the sounds of the names as well as the visual color themselves and so there was this merging of language and art and I was doing, I started doing fabric art which was wall hangings and quilts and clothing and it cost a lot of money to do that and I didn't have money, and it was hard getting it to galleries and when I did, I think I sold one piece in my life in a gallery. Which looking back was my best piece.

[clears throat]

**ER:** But it was hard keep feeding money into it and then you have the stuff you have to store and what do you do with it?

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** So eventually writing took over. (\_\_\_\_???) all you need is paper and then a computer and

[sneeze]

**EB:** Excuse me.

**ER:** And it became easier and with a computer it became so much easier to rewrite

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** and to print out and to send things out. So the whole thing of starting off and sending work out, and sending work out, and sending work out, and doing that (\_\_\_\_???) that until I started getting poems accepted in journals and this year my two books came out this year.

**NM:** Oh! Can you tell us the names of your books?

**ER:** One is called Outcasts: The Penikese Island Leper Hospital 1905-1921.

**EB:** Wow.

**ER:** And that's based on historical documentation. Fact on Penikese Island which is out off of Cape Cod [Massachusetts] where there was this tiny leper hospital and just doing research and finding the names of the patients, where they came from, and creating persona poems. And giving voice to these people who were voiceless, and educating people into something that barely anybody knows exists, you know, Massachusetts had a leper colony? Nobody knows that. Even people who live in the area they don't know it.

**EB:** Mhm.

**ER:** And what it was like for these people to be isolated in this little barren rock of an island, with, you know, (\_\_\_\_???) the houses, and (\_\_\_\_???) from Penikese [Massachusetts] and knew what that had to have been like. For them, you know, being stranded from their families and friends and these people came from all 31ish walks of life - they came from all over the world but were living and working in Massachusetts the time they were diagnosed. So there were people here with - they all spoke different languages and they had different beliefs, you know,

they were Christians, they were Jews, they were Confucius, they were Buddhist. I mean, all these people on this little teeny, you know, half-mile by quarter-mile - try to imagine that!

**EB:** That's small.

**ER:** That's a tiny bit of land and when it was (\_\_\_???) So I spent three and a half years really focused on doing research and writing that book. And trying my damndest to get it published and did not get it published. And then I proceeded to write the second book called Dear Suzanne which is a novel in verse about the artist model Suzanne Valadon, that I mentioned previously, she was (Pierre-Auguste) Renoir's favorite model. The lady in pink dancing with the man in blue and his big painting Ball of Bougival at the MFA which goes back to my father and taking me there. My father, standing in front of this big painting and the little girls - it was this really huge painting, and saying this is Suzanne Valadon. She's a model with a name. And that's important. Not anonymous.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** (\_\_\_???) And she's the mother of Maurice Utrillo. I knew Maurice Utrillo, a post-impressionist (\_\_\_???) like it's worth very much. But you know, okay, he did not tell me she was an artist. I did not know she was an artist until one day walking up Highland Street and seeing this yard sale and there's a print of a painting by Suzanne Valadon [chuckle] that I bought. Wow. So I started doing research and finding all this wonderful art she did. And being engrossed in her life and learning all that about her life and the parallels between my life and her life, it just kept coming up and coming up. So the book morphed into being [clears throat] a little more than half by personal poems

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** in the voice of Valadon. And people around him, Dagar (ph), Eritz Ati (ph), who she had a, a brief affair with the composer, and my voice in letter poems, prose poems, written to her that are just dated from times of my life are parallel with her and dealing with being a model, and dealing with being a single mom, dealing with two marriages, and it's just poverty. She was born in absolute poverty. Her mother was a laundress. She had no father. And in rising out of that she'd become a celebrated name in Europe. And it was just awesome. Yeah. I know I'll never gonna be a celebrated name in the U.S., or even Worcester! But you know, but I do have two books out, so you know, (\_\_\_???)

**EB:** I think that's great. I think that's a great accomplishment.

**ER:** Mhm. Considering my background absolutely!

**EB:** Yeah.

**NM:** Yeah.

**ER:** You know, if I did this 30 years earlier I'd be a full-time professor now. But I didn't. But I like where I am right now.

**EB:** Yeah.

**NM:** That's good! You did come a long way.

**ER:** Mhm.

**NM:** So we know that you've worked outside of the house, of course you've had the job at the *Telegram*, you, you were a professor, and you do write, in terms of housework, how did you divide housework between you and your husband? Did he help you?

**ER:** It's, it's equal.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** We both do housework.

**NM:** That's nice.

**ER:** Mhm.

**NM:** In how have you balanced the different priorities in your life? Responsibilities, and roles, and interests?

**ER:** How do I divide my priorities? I don't, I don't know right now it, when I'm teaching my priority is teaching, and that's what I do, whereas I'm doing (\_\_\_???) or grading its - have to do this weekend, and when I'm involved in a book that is what I'm doing.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** So my priorities are just what I'm doing at the moment. I want to start another book which I sort of started a year ago, and just faded away from it so I wanna go back and start doing more research.

**EB:** Mhm.

**ER:** Particularly now I know I have three months of open time. And perhaps the rest of my life. I don't know. You know it all depends if I get a spring job. But I, I wanna focus on these three months of doing a lot of housework, and doing more research and trying to work on that, if not every day, a lot. Yeah. I realize my priority is going the gym five days a week. Yeah, so I do that. Because I wanna still be walking,

**EB:** Yeah.

**ER:** Moving, yeah. Mhm.

**NM:** So how would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path?

[laugh]

**NM:** And the benefits associated with them?

**ER:** Benefits are really psychological. How I feel about myself, how I'm perceived by those around me

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** which is very important. Yeah. I have accomplished something that I think (\_\_\_???) look at my books, I think my books are really good! 'Cause that's me. I just lost my train of thought.

**NM:** That's okay.

[laugh]

**ER:** Come back with the question again.

**NM:** You want me to reread it to you?

**ER:** Yeah.

**NM:** How would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path and the benefits that are associated with them?

**ER:** (\_\_\_???) Well I have psychological benefits are the most important. There are no financial benefits. If anything, I'm in debt a great deal. Through my writing that I'll never make back. So, so there's no financial rewards. I spent over 1,000 dollars trying to get the two books published by entering contests. That was a failure, until I finally found two presses willing to take it outside of contest. But, you know, it's - you send stuff off - it costs to get the books. I have to pay 60- this is to poets in general. You have to bind the book for 60 percent of cover cost. Out of those that you buy, some of them go to people for book reviews, or to try to get readings in places, so those are giveaways. The ones that are sold in bookstores, the bookstore takes 60 - takes 40 percent.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** So that's giveaway. So the profit that comes on what's left that are sold doesn't even go into buying new books when you run out, y'know. So I mean, your hope is to keep even, and right now I'm not doing that.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** I hope to. I get five readings in May so, in, in, what's the next month, November, so maybe I'll break even by the end of the year, so yeah, no financial reward. Hard to get readings.

**NM:** But you think it's worth it?

**ER:** Yeah.

**NM:** Yeah.



**ER:** It's worth having done it. Absolutely. I mean I just feel better about myself and writing poetry and reading poetry in front of people was a tremendous change in my life. I was the shyest person in creation. I was so shy, that I could not read one of my poems out loud in an empty house with only the cat who didn't give a damn. [laugh] (\_\_\_???) That cat would look at me, yeah, oh, and walk away. And I couldn't do it. You know, I'd open my mouth and no sound would come out. And it started off where my boyfriend at the time started reading my book, my poems at readings, and it wasn't right. It wasn't the right sound.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** So I had to do it myself. And y'know I began with the stomach clench, and the nerves, and the paper rattle, and now, it's wonderful! I can get in front of people! I can perform. I'm a really good reader! I hope you ladies come to my reading on November 19 here at d'Alzon.

**EB:** We'd love to!

**NM:** Yeah!

**ER:** And I can get in front of a classroom! And it's okay and I'm comfortable. And I can talk to my students. I can listen to them and I could never have done that if I didn't start reading my poetry in front of strangers.

**NM:** That's a big transformation!

**ER:** Mhm!

**NM:** Okay. So were gonna move on into the politics and community involvement. Do you consider yourself active politically?

**ER:** Not at the moment. I have been politically active in the past, going to demonstrations, rallies, and the last rally was at 2004 I think? Quite sure. It was around then at the women's reproductive freedom rally in D.C. [District of Columbia] where many people showed up. That was the last time I did anything really actively aside of an occasional send an email to something. But younger days, yeah, anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, rallies, did a lot of that. Some anti the Iraqi War, and doing some rallies there. Very leftist sort of political activity.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** But now, it's like, it seems to be going so backwards that I feel like I can't do anything, that's gonna be of help. So I need to focus more into what I'm doing for me.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** Let the younger generation do this.

[laugh]

**ER:** Y'know, That's what they're for.

[laugh]

**NM:** We'll try! Have you been involved in the volunteer community work, doing any types of volunteering in Worcester], or during your younger years?

**ER:** Worcester. My Worcester days and doing volunteering before I came to Worcester. Yeah, a lot of volunteering work, I wrote a proposal and got a grant to run a writing workshop for women at the Women's Center at Abby's House, the center for homeless women.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** And I did that for a year and put together a chapbook for one of the women there who wrote lots of poetry and I got that printed with part of the grant I got that, that paid for having that printed, which made her day! I mean it, it's so awesome to see this woman who is ill, and mentally disturbed, and diabetic, came from this horrific, horrific background, and I thought mine was bad! Darleen's was so much worse and what she went through and the abuse she went through in her life, and here she is, y'know, living in a little studio apartment that she's able to do with, what do ya call it, funding, and she's on disability, and I was able to make a book for her. And she had a reading at Abby's House, and a lot of people came, and she sold books, and, I mean just miraculous what this did to this woman.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** And it made me so proud! Being able to do that. I ran a wonderful poetry venue for seven plus years in Worcester where I brought in nationally known poets.

**NM:** Mm!

**ER:** From around the country and some from Europe. I had one from Greece, one from France, one from England, who came and read plus really supporting the wonderful poets that are local poets. It was not a democratic thing. I had an open reading, where that was the democratic part, anybody could read. When I picked someone to be a feature, it was because I thought their work had value, which had nothing to do with if they were published or not. Yeah, I wanted to bring in different voices to Worcester to be an educational ..

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** ..sort of format so people who were interested, seriously interested in poetry could come and hear these different voices, as well as giving a, a place for, for people to read their poetry in front of other people for an extended length of time and to get feedback, and to watch how their work changed over time during that seven plus years. I ran a, through my organization I created a non-profit organization called Poetry Oasis Incorporate, which was the umbrella over the reading series called Poetry Oasis and also the umbrella over a literary journal called *Diner*, which went for seven years and I think there were 10, 10 issues out of that. The last two years a 250-page issues.

**EB:** Mm!

**ER:** Incredible! Incredible! Journals and with astounding work from around the world, within it as well as local work. Unfortunately, we just couldn't get funding and I couldn't get help doing it, and I was like doing it by myself, and it was, I can't believe how I had time to do that!

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** And work, y'know, how did I do that? I was going to school! I was working! But y'know I'm really proud. I mean I can look at them now and I'm just really proud of having done that. And it was all labor of love.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** And I never got a penny for doing any of that, and I didn't expect to.

**EB:** Yeah.

**NM:** Yeah, Would you consider the greatest accomplishments through creating your non-profit organizations and your other organization?

**ER:** Okay. Poetry Oasis' greatest accomplishment was in the support of Poet Laureate of Worcester, Gertrude Halstead and my own personal work was I took her poems, but she's not computer literate, and she typed on this little portable typewriter, and I typed her work into my computer and started sending it out and started getting accepted. I put together two book manuscripts and was able to send them out and get them published

**NM:** Wow.

**ER:** For her. And through that she became Poet Laureate. As I did all the leg work and she deserved it. She's an incredibly gifted writer. And she's now 94 years old.

**NM:** Wow.

**ER:** And what, what Poetry Oasis did, was create [clears throat] excuse me, a performance with video, accompanying video, where we hired a composer Mauro DiPasquale, who's director at WCCA Channel 13, local cable in Worcester, who's an incredible composer. Who would've thought, and hired people, a singer, an alto vocalist, and pianist, Olga Rogach whose , has a fan club to no end here in Worcester, remarkable pianist and, I can't remember her name, Ni, Nigra (ph), Chrissy (ph), Nigra Chellice (ph) at Worcester State, and so he hired these people and had this incredible packed performance, first here at Assumption, and then we did it again at College of the Holy Cross and hired a professional movie maker

**EB:** Mhm.

**ER:** to film it as well as filming interviews with Gertrude, and having Gertrude reading her own work and talk about her life that was interspersed with the performance. There's a copy in your library.

**NM:** Oh!

**ER:** The movie's called "Memories like Burrs," and her books are in your library too.

**NM:** Okay!

**ER:** (\_\_\_???) It was just doing that for her, and having it such a success. I mean that was, that was awesome. I mean that made Poetry Oasis worthwhile.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** Sure. (\_\_\_???) that's an experience. Mhm.

**NM:** So we know that you aren't really practicing any, your religion right now, but, what made you come to that? Were you ever religious when you were born, or was it something that just faded over time, through generations?

**ER:** No, my father was one of those people who attended show on high holidays. A high holiday Jew. So, and I think he did it because his father did it, and to do it with his father, and I went along, and I loved going. I loved going to synagogue as a child. I didn't believe a word of it. I would read that - the translations, and I'd go, [slaps hands together] "I don't buy it." It was when I was real young. But the sounds, the music, my God, I loved Rosh Hashanah! I loved going to Colnidrah (ph) services, and hearing the shofar played. Wow! I mean, it was a language so filled with music. It was very inspiring. I think religion is important for sense of community, and connectiveness.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** But I sort of believe like my father believed that Judaism swung back into people's lives because of (Adolf) Hitler and the murder of twenty million people where suddenly people who were not religious at all were saying "it must be important to be a Jew." Why would they do this? I mean, Judaism as a religion was really dying out at that time except for the ultra-Orthodox. And they were very small communities and pretty small communities today. But now you have the Conservatives and the Reforms and they're the extended community. Yeah. It's okay. I mean I can't go to services now.

**NM:** No?

**ER:** I've tried. And it just doesn't do to me what it did when I was a kid.

**NM:** Not the same?

**ER:** Mhm. Yeah.

**NM:** So we're gonna move on to health. How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

**ER:** Yeah, I had extensive back surgery three years ago. So that definitely affected my life, going towards back surgery 'cause I was in so much pain and it limited what I could do physically and I loved to walk and, and just, you know, a few months before surgery we, we

were able to do a writing retreat in the Azores. Were in the tiny, gorgeous, gorgeous island, which is a volcanic mountain! I just wanted to keep walking and walking and I was in such pain and it was so hard.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** And coming back and going through surgery and told that I shouldn't work for a month and I was back teaching in two weeks.[laugh] You know it's not full time work. I had to have people drive me to my jobs, you know [laugh] for, for the first month. That I was able to do 'cause I had a brace - you're not allowed to drive when you have this big body brace. So that affected me for a while. Right now I have arthritis, and if I don't keep exercising I know I'll be in pain.

**NM:** Is the arthritis in your back?

**ER:** Yeah.

**NM:** What did you need the surgery for? If you don't mind us asking.

**ER:** Herniated disc. Sciatica. So I had discs removed and a spacer put in.

**NM:** Okay.

**ER:** Mhm.

**NM:** What about your son, or your husbands, did they have any health issues as well?

**ER:** As far as I know my son doesn't have health issues. Or at least he doesn't tell me.

[laugh]

**ER:** My husband has some health issues, particularly because he's bipolar. But mostly it's the stress from his work that creates more problems and health issues.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** His bipolar is pretty much controlled with meds.

**NM:** Right.

**ER:** Mhm.

**NM:** What are your experiences in accessing quality, affordable healthcare?

**ER:** There's no affordable healthcare.

**NM:** No?

**ER:** No. Every year we pay more and more for health insurance and we get less and less and less. So right now we have a 3000 dollar deductible which is what we pay out of pocket along

with co-pays. Healthcare costs us a lot of money. And it's getting worse and worse and it covers less and less. And that's true for all of America except the upper class.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** It's gonna get worse when Medicare, Medicare costs a hell of a lot of money. Yeah.

**NM:** Is that a change you'd like to see? To have it be the flip-side, have it be more affordable?

**ER:** I want universal healthcare! We should be like the rest of industrialized world and supply healthcare for everyone. And it will be so much cheaper for the government, for individuals in the long run, and everyone would have good care instead of having thousands and thousands of people with no care at all, or people who have no care simply because can't afford it. Yeah.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** When I think about going to a doctor, do I have to come up with the twenty dollar co-pay? I think about, should I do physical therapy, when my doctor suggested it last month for shoulder problems? And I decided no, it's twenty dollars every time I go, I can't do that. You know?

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** So I have to do it all on my own.

**NM:** Okay.

**NM:** Whose health are you responsible for besides your own, if applicable?

**ER:** None, just me.

**NM:** Okay. So, I'm just gonna ask you a few extra questions, we were going through before. How would you define success in your life?

**ER:** My success is in what I did for other people, particularly Gertrude Halstead. My success is being founder and editor of *Diner* and Poetry Oasis and running the reading series. My success is giving Joanna Santos (ph) her grandmother.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** She's granddaughter of one of the lepers on Penikese Island, and through my writing, she got to know her grandmother

**NM:** A...

**ER:** That she did not know before. And that's - it still brings tears to me, God.

**EB:** I just got goosebumps!

**ER:** All this time!

**NM:** Yeah.

**ER:** You know – like wow! Y’know, and she sent me photographs of her mom, and her mo, the three children, one being her father. She bought books for all her kids and her brothers. It’s just, y’know, its, (\_\_\_???) long distance she’s in a small town called Antelope, California, just through emails. And she sent me this big packet of stuff, and her uncle’s obit., there was a child born in the island, which was her uncle, and he lived to be in his 90’s. So she sent me his obit[obituary], she sent me photographs, and hopefully next year I’ll get to actually meet her in person.

**EB:** Oh yeah?

**ER:** Yeah. And she’s gonna come East, in, I think in June. I’m really, crossing my fingers (\_\_\_???) come, you know?

**EB:** That’s really good!

**ER:** You know? ‘Cause were due for a lot of hugs.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** So just, y’know, this relationship between this previously unknown woman - and because of my writing - how that’s made an impact in her life. And of course, the effect it made on my life - doing the writing.

**NM:** Mhm. Based on your life experience, what advice would you give to other women today and in the future?

**ER:** [laugh] Oh my. Don’t give up. Read a lot. Read as much as you can. Get out. Be attune to nature, particularly if you live in a city.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** Try to (\_\_\_???) it out, and, and know what nature really is. ‘Cause you don’t in the city. And our whole culture loses so much by not being aware of nature and trees. When you look at this campus, there’s beautiful trees and it’s really nice. But inner-city people don’t have that, and it’s a great loss. Yeah, go to parks - whatever it takes to get outside. Try to go to school. If you can’t go to school read. Yeah.

**NM:** Nice.

**ER:** School’s not the be all end all, but today you cannot get any sort of job unless you go to school. And whatever it takes to do that, whatever funding you need, you gotta do that. ‘Cause otherwise you don’t stand a hope. It’s gonna get harder and harder. Population is growing and growing and growing, there’s more and more competition for everything. And so you gotta just strive to be on top.

**NM:** Do you feel you have a legacy?

**ER:** You know I read that question and I thought, tah! That's a laugh. My, my initial response was, sure, "Who the hell am I?" But, yeah, I do have a legacy. I did these books, *Diner* affected so many lives, some people who'd never been published before were published for the first time in *Diner*. I mean that was amazing for them!

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** Yeah, and the people I had read, my commitment to the writers of Worcester, I mean that was a legacy! Poetry Oasis was a legacy. May not be doing much now but it had a great history. Yeah, so sure it is a legacy. I mean, yeah. In five years will it be forgotten? Sure. But right now, yeah. [chuckle]

**NM:** So now that we're working to tell a fuller story of the history of women that has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

**ER:** The history of women. Talk to people at Abby's House. Get their level. Not just, y'know, people who have striven and made great changes in their lives, you can say I did, everybody's important. All women are important. So do that, get a cross ray of people who are technicians, blood lab, blood lab people. Yeah. What are they doing in their lives?

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** There's so many important things to be done.

**NM:** Right.

**ER:** Mhm.

**NM:** Is there anyone else you would suggest we talk to?

**ER:** Patty Youngblood, who's working right now with the Sudanese people doing great work with them. And she's also a fine poet. I heard her read last night at a gathering in Holden [Massachusetts]. So, fine poetry, she's now retired. Yeah, sure. I mean what she's done in her life- if you haven't done Judy Ferrara who's an artist and writer living in Worcester [Massachusetts]. Do her, she'd be a really interesting person!

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** Mhm.

**NM:** Well, we'd like to thank you

**EB:** Yes thank you so much!

**NM:** For letting us do this interview with you. It was very inspiring,

**ER:** Thank you!

**NM:** See from...



**ER:** Thank you!

**NM:** How you've grown over the years. So that concludes our interview.

**ER:** Mhm.

**NM:** So, yeah!

**ER:** Interview Darleen, I can't remember her last name-the one I was talking about

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** From the Women's Center at Abby's House. If you call Abby's House you can get a contact for her. She is such a Renaissance woman, and 'cause she writes and she paints and she sews, and, I mean she's at the bottom tier of our society.

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** And then if you haven't done Annette Rafferty who is the founder of Abby's House. I mean she's still kicking going strong.

[laugh]

**ER:** When I first met her she was a nun.

**NM:** Wow.

**ER:** She quickly dropped out of that. She created Abby's House. Yeah, so yeah going from that background and years of being a nun to being the founder of this incredible institution and it has helped so many women and children in Worcester [Massachusetts].

**NM:** Mhm.

**ER:** Yeah. Mhm.

**NM:** Thank you!

**EB:** Thank you so much!

**ER:** You too!