

Interviewee: Wilma Sanchez
Interviewers: Maureen Ryan Doyle and Charlene L. Martin
Date: March 24, 2011



Abstract: Wilma Sanchez was born in Puerto Rico where she lived with her father's family until the age of six. At that time she began living with her mother and she describes episodes of neglect and sexual abuse. In this interview Wilma explains how she began using drugs, became involved with men who sold drugs, had two sons, was diagnosed HIV positive, and had a relationship with a female friend. Eventually her drug habit led her to prostitution and a jail sentence. Wilma entered a drug treatment program and overcame her drug habit. She earned a bachelor's and master's degree and became a licensed addiction drug counselor helping others to overcome alcohol and drug abuse.

MRD: We're going to begin with this standard paragraph that we begin each interview with. 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. So Wilma, thank you very much for your help with this project, and do we have your permission to tape this interview?

WS: Yes, you do.

MRD : Okay, and your name is Wilma Sanchez. And today's date is March 24, 2011. So Wilma I would like to begin by you telling us some things about your early life; your family, what your childhood was like, where you went to school, any of that that you would like to share with us.

WS: Sure. I was born in Puerto Rico. I was born in Hato Rey and then I was raised in Caimito.

MRD: Could you spell both of those for me?

WS: Hato Rey is spelled H-a-t-o, and that's one word. And then Rey is R-e-y.

MRD: Okay.

WS: And then I was raised in Caimito, C-a-i-m-i-t-o.

MRD: Thank you.

WS: And the reason for that was because when I was born, my mother wouldn't take me. So my grandparents, my father, and my aunt were the ones who raised me until I was six years old. I

was a...My father's family lived in the upper part of Caimito. And my mother's family lived in the lower part of Caimito, so I had all my family there. And I was there until the age of six with my grandparents, my aunts, and uncles, and animals were always around. And I always played in the... because it was in the country, you know, we used to play in the woods with my cousins. Basically, I was raised mostly with my cousins, not my brothers and sisters. When I was six, my mother came. And I don't know, she made an arrangement with my father. My father refused to give her any money unless she would raise me. So at the age of six I went to live with my mother and my father also.

MRD : Do you remember how you felt when you were six years old and your mother came to get you?

WS: At first it was very confusing because my cousins all had their mothers and fathers. And I always wondered, "Where was my mother?" And I used to hear comments. My aunts at that time about how my mother didn't want me, and how she had given away all her kids. When I went to go live with her, I was still very attached to my father, because my father was basically my mother and my father.

MRD : So your father had been in your life as you were being raised by your grandparents. He had been present there?

WS: Not all the time. When I went to live with her, she used to work in a bar in Puerto Rico. I can't remember the place. I think it was ????. And every now and then when my father had to go to work, she would take me with her. My mother was more like, gee I don't think she had a clue what it was like to be a mother, you know now that I think about it today. She was more...she was very flirtatious. She was always flirting with someone. While one of her friends would keep me entertained playing pool, she was over there by the bar because she was the bartender, flirting with men. And sometimes one of the guys would give me a dollar. And there was a pharmacy right next to the bar and I would go in there, and with a dollar you could buy a toy in those days. And that was my prize for being a good girl. And my father, because of everything that was going on, he drank a lot. He was an alcoholic and he was a workaholic. He made sure that he provided for his family. So, we traveled a lot. The first state that I came to in the United States was Manchester, New Hampshire. I was actually...that's where I learned how to speak English. I went to school in Manchester, Beech Street School.

MRD: Now how old were you when you came to New Hampshire?

WS: Something like six, six and a half.

MRD: Okay.

WS: Right after my mother came to live with us.

MRD: So you came here with both your mother and your father to Manchester?

WS: Yeah, we used to live on Townhouse Road in Manchester, New Hampshire. My father used to work at Security ????. My father was a mechanic engineer, electronic...And he was really good at what he did. He was a very smart man. Through the years he taught me a lot. So I went to Beech Street School all the way up to sixth grade. And I used to love it there. It was peaceful. It was quiet. Every year my father would get vacation from work. But the funny part about it is that he wouldn't take the vacation. He would take the vacation money and give it to my mother, and me and my mother would go to Puerto Rico. She would drop me off at my aunt's house and I wouldn't see again her until it was time to come back here.

MRD: Do you know where she went during that time?

WS: Oh yeah, she was hanging around with her male friends. ???She would come around to my aunt's house with different men and these men flirted in front of me and my aunt used to get mad and tell her not to do that anymore. But my mother was my mother. And I remember one time when we came back...when we went back home, my father asked her what we did, and if she had any fun. And then he asked me, "Did you have fun with your mother?" And I told him no, I was at my aunt's house. She dropped me off there. And she threw her hand across the table and swung at me because I wasn't supposed to say anything. So every year it was the same thing, go to Puerto Rico, stay with my aunt, which was okay with me because I would be with my cousins.

MRD: Mmm

WS: And I used to have fun with them. It was a lot more family-like than being at home with my mother.

MRD: Was there tension between your mother and father about what went on in Puerto Rico?

WS: Somewhat, but my father was very much in love with my mother so he accepted that behavior. I don't my father was ignorant to what was going on. I think he knew. And I think that's why he used to drink so much. You know, sometimes he would get up at two or three o'clock in the morning. He was on call 24 /7 from the factory. And they would call him up and he wouldn't even come home until night. And his way of trying to earn or win my mother's love was by giving her various gifts, you know. And for instance, in those days the refrigerator with the two doors came out. And my mother wanted one, so my father went and bought her one, then the big color T.V., the square box one.

MRD: Sure, uh huh.

WS: ...came out and she wanted one of those. And he went and got it. Everything she wanted, he got her. She didn't have to work a day in her life since the time she used to work in the bar. My father provided everything. And I used to hate it when he used to go to work.

MRD: Why?

WS: Because I would have to stay home with her and I would have to do things for her. Like, for instance, after I graduated sixth grade, my mother left my father for another man, aside from the fact that she had been seeing many other men in that time. See...let me back it up a little.

MRD: Sure.

WS: When I was young, when my mother took me with my father, she used to work at the bars. When I was a little girl, I want to say that I was almost seven, she used to...we used to live in this little place, Caimito. My father got her a house and he would go to work and in the mornings this man that lived up the hill from behind the house used to come down the hill and would talk to my mother. And he would give my mother something. I can't say it was money. It was something. You know, today I strongly believe it was money. And my mother would call me outside. So I was always watching her to see what she was doing. And then she would call me outside and tell me to go with the man. And I would go up the hill with the man up to his house and he would put a plate of Oreo cookies, a little small plate, and then he would put milk. And then he would pick me up and put me on top of the counter. He would tell me to have some and then he would grab the plate and the milk and walk me to a little shed behind the house. And he used to molest me when I was a kid. And to this day I hate Oreo cookies. I'm not having Oreo cookies because of that. And that used to happen, I don't know, numerous times during the week. And I never told my father. I never told anybody, any adult, anyone older.

MRD: Why do you think, looking back, that you wouldn't have told?

WS: I think because my biggest fear was...One day it was New Year's Eve and this is before we went to New Hampshire. My father was drinking, my mother was having a few drinks, and the neighbors came over, and I don't know what happened. And my mother gave them some bags, some bags of cement, I don't know. It was all confusing. All I remember is that my parents got into an argument. And my mother used to take advantage of the fact that my father was drunk. So, she threw a drink in his face so he threw his drink at her. Then she kicked him. And in Puerto Rico the houses are made of cement. He hit his head with the edge of the wall of the cement and he split his head open very badly. They had to call the ambulance and I remember the cement that his hair was still stuck on the cement. The police came and everything and my father even

on the stretcher from the ambulance he kept telling the police that it wasn't her fault that it was him who slipped and fell. And my father ended up with 42 stitches from that. I thought I was going to lose my father. So yeah, after that, no I wouldn't tell. Because I was Daddy's little girl.

MRD: It must have been very frightening for you to see what happened before your eyes as a small child.

WS: Yeah, yeah. I think that's when my father wouldn't say anything. He just accepted everything that my mother did. But when, like I was saying, I graduated sixth grade and my mother left my father for another man, I remember this man's name was Angel Bon, B-O-N. And I hated this man in those days because I couldn't accept the fact that my mother had left my father. My father was homeless. He was sleeping in the parks. I used to make my mother give me bowls of food so I could take it to him and??? This was when I was 12 years old. Everything that happened when I was 12 years old, everything.

MRD: What else happened when you were 12?

WS: Right after that I was on a...this recorder, I'm looking at it, it used to be those square recorders with the mike in

MRD: Sure

WS: ...you remember you could carry it like that and it about that long. And I was in the living room, and I used to hate it because these men would come home from work, and my mother and him were locked in some upper room and have sex. And I could hear the noise from the living room. So, I used to get mad because I kept thinking about what my father was going through. Meanwhile, while they were having fun, I was on a tape recorder and I was talking to God. And I was asking God to please take this man that I hated him, I hated him so much, I wanted him dead. No lie, it was a Thursday, I was watching that program, on that show San Francisco Street and found a knock on the door. Once I opened the door, my mother was in and I called her to come out. It was my sister-in-law. Freddy who was my brother's best friend, and I think it was Manuel, the other person. No, Louie, I'm sorry. And when my mother came out, they told my mother that my brother was dead and he had just drowned. My brother was 18. You see, my brother had just recently come into our lives. He wasn't too fond of my father and every time he used to get angry, he would, you know, hit me because he was under the impression that I was the lucky one because I was the only one that my father raised. He didn't know that my mother didn't take me until I was six years old, and that there was an agreement. I didn't understand any of it.

MRD: What do you mean, agreement?

WS: An agreement that my father would support her if she would raise me.

MRD: Okay.

WS: I found this out after I got older.

MRD: Okay.

WS: Ever since then, I've never said I've hated anybody. Part of me felt like it was my fault. So my mother left my father when I was 12 My brother dying when I was 12. I went to Puerto Rico to stay with my father 'cause his family sent for him. And I went with him. It was like all I had. After we buried my brother, I went with my uncle 'cause he came from Puerto Rico to the funeral. Then I got a phone call and my father said, "Your mother wants you to go and live with her." My mother had moved from Manchester, New Hampshire, to New York in the Bronx. And I was supposed to go live with her. Imagine a kid being raised in Manchester, New Hampshire, going to live in the Bronx in New York.

MRD: A slightly different culture.

WS: Very much. I didn't want to go, I didn't want to go. My father enrolled me in school and everything. She gave me the sad story that she was alone, that she had nobody, and my father had his whole family, you know. So I ended up going there.

MRD: You did?

WS: To New York. Yeah. When I got there, we ended up moving to Manhattan and I went to Junior High 52. I went there in, wow, the fights I used to see there with sticks, chains, I used to see a kid be taken on a stretcher every day from the cafeteria because somebody had poisoned them or put speed in their food or something. It was, it was like a horror movie, you know? I was in New York for the blackout. And that was 1976 or '79. Yeah, I was down there. My mother didn't know how to read or write. She ended up leaving that man, Angel. So I was glad, but then came many other men. Every time she wanted something... She had a man in the supermarket who supposedly was her friend, one at the Spanish store, the convenience store. She had another one at the meat market, Lopez Market. And every time she wanted something, because she didn't know how to read or write, I would have to write the note. I would have to deliver the notes.

MRD: And how old were you at this time?

WS: I was 12 and a half, almost 13. And I was... at that age I was already built. You know, I had a body. And these men used to touch me and I would tell them no. They used to tell me, "Don't tell your mother because she is not going to believe you. And if you tell, I'm going to tell you're

lying.” And then one time we went to Queens, was it Queens, New York, and you had to cross a bridge to a friend’s house. And we were at the Spanish store, Dominican store, and my mother was starting to flirt with this man. I was only 12 and a half, almost 13, but I was always watching out what she was doing. My mother was real sneaky. And she was making an arrangement with the man from the store because the man wanted to send for his brother from Santo Domingo. He needed to marry his brother with a citizen in order for him to get his green papers. And I don’t know how this came out, but my mother said that he could marry me. And the deal was, the man was going to give her \$5,000, half of that when we would get married, the other half when he would get his papers.

MRD: And you were 13 at the time?

WS: Almost 13. So, a lot happened when I was 12. I ended up running away and calling my sister in Lowell, Mass. And I told my sister what was going on and I ended up telling this friend of mine, if you would take and save me and my friend, wish I knew where she was today, her name was Diane. And I would have to take out the garbage, I would have to iron her clothes, I ironed her boyfriend’s clothes, clean the house. I was the maid. While my mother...my father kept sending her money. And I would take out clothes in little bags with the garbage. Because the garbage was downstairs in the basement, my friend would meet me and take the bag to her place. She would hold my clothes until I could build up a suitcase. And she was the only one who knew I was going to run away. And I left. When I got to Lowell, I had saved up a few dollars here and there, my mother threatened my sister with sending the police after her. And I went on the bus and gotten back home. I ended up having to come back home. I didn’t want to get my sister in trouble. So, when I went back home, she asked me why I ran away. I assumed, I assumed that if I would tell her that she would be, you know, would be regretful and do something. And what she said to me was, “You’re lying. I am going to go ask them, and if they tell me you’re lying, I’m going to beat you.” She got dressed. She got all pretty. She went out. To this day I really don’t know if she really did go. All I know is that she came back and she said that I’m lying, that I embarrass her, and she beat me. So, I ran away a second time, but this time I wouldn’t go back. I ended up going over to my ex-brother-in-law who lived in Lynn, Mass. And I lied. I stayed there with his family and his sister. He was like a brother to me. He took care of me. Nobody knew where I was. Nobody.

MRD: So your mother didn’t realize that you were with this member of the family?

WS: No because he was my sister’s ex-boyfriend. He wasn’t really like...

MRD : Okay.

WS : So he just knew what was going on and what I had gone through because he had been to my mother's house. And he offered to help me if I ever wanted help. And I did and I don't know how long I stayed in Lynn, but I did. Then I ended up going back to Lowell and my mother was still looking for me. Mind you, it was \$5,000 she was going to gain. And supposedly she had sent a private investigator. I don't know if that was true or not. The point was that while I was still a virgin, she was going to keep looking for me. So I ended up being with this man. We grew up together when we were kids, with my brother and that. We even went to school together and my brother always used to tell me, "I don't want to ever see you with him."

MRD: Now why would he say that?

WS: Because, I don't know, because he was always getting into trouble. Well, I ended up getting with him and I didn't love him. I only did it because I wanted a way out.

MRD: Because you thought if you were with him, your mother would stop...

WS: She did. She did. She stopped, you know. I asked her if I could get my papers so I could finish school. She refused because she said that if Welfare was to find out that I was no longer in school, then she would lose her assistance. Being with this man was one of the biggest mistakes because I found out that he was an alcoholic. So here I am a teenager, a kid, I was smoking weed, I was doing mescaline, I was drinking alcohol, and we were partying every weekend.

MRD: And how old were you at this point?

WS: I was 13, 14. I ended up getting pregnant from him. I ended up getting pregnant at the age of 15. I had my daughter December 23, 1979. So, that was the best date of the whole thing. But every weekend, no lie, every weekend I had a black eye. Because I was a kid and he wanted me to cook. And I didn't know how to cook. My mother never taught me how to cook, she only wanted me to clean. So, he would come home and if the rice wasn't done right or if the potatoes weren't cooked right, he threw them against the living room wall. And I would get beat up. He would go every weekend to the bar and because of his mouth, he would always get beat up by men at the bar. And he would come home and say it was my fault.

MRD: Then take it out on you.

WS: Yes. Yeah. So I stayed in this relationship, this insane relationship, for five years. And in 1981 I ended up having a motorcycle accident with him. From an accident he had, he bought a motorcycle and we were at a club. We left the club. He didn't want to drink because he didn't want to ruin his bike, and we were at Lawrence, right next to the 24 hour store in South Lawrence. The light turned green and I told him to go ahead and he was going to take a left. And

this drunk driver ran the red light and hit my right leg. It didn't hit him, it didn't hit the bike, it hit my right leg. And the pressure from the bumper and shock absorbers on the motorcycle broke my leg and my leg was just hanging and the bones were sticking out.

MRD: It sounds extraordinarily painful.

WS: It was. It was. And the worst part about it was that because I had been drinking at the club, when the ambulance got there...but the thing that saved my leg was that there was a nurse coming out of the 24 hour store and she took the police officer's stick and I don't where she got it, but those gauze to wrap, and she connected my whole leg until the ambulance came and they took me.

MRD: That was very kind of her.

WS: Yes, very much so. And the helmet saved my life. Other than that and I would have been dead. But when I got to the Emergency Room, they wouldn't give me anything for the pain because I was under the influence. So after that I was in Lawrence General Hospital for three months. Three months with a Hoffman device which was six bars going through my leg with screws holding my bones together. They had done operations. I don't remember the rest till I woke up and saw all these metal pieces on my leg. I was in a room with six beds. And I remember my daughter used to come with my mother-in-law. And my daughter used to play with everyone in the room except for me. She was only two. It was very painful. I remember calling my mother and asked her to come see me. And she said that she had too many bills to pay. So she never came. When I got out of the hospital, from the lawsuit money that he got, he got \$17,000. From that lawsuit money he bought an extra living room set, an extra refrigerator, an extra stove, so he had two of everything in the apartment. It was so crowded. I was hopping around with one leg in a place that was so crowded. I couldn't even carry my little girl. Thank God she could walk. My sister-in-law lived upstairs. They had prescribed Demerol for the pain. And the only thing I used to do then was...I used to smoke marijuana and I wasn't into heavy drugs. And when I got out I found out one day that I was in real severe pain. I went to look for the pills that were on top of the refrigerator and the bottle was empty. And I was in tears and I was pulling my hair and oh my God, oh my God, and he showed up. He saw me crying and he said, "What's wrong with you?" And I told him and then I saw him take out a needle and a bunch of baggies. And that's when I found out that he was shooting up heroin.

[Tape needed to be turned over.]

CM: There we go again. We're back in action.

WS: So anyway after that...I don't know what he had to...until this day I don't know what he did, but the police were looking for him. And he had sisters living in Connecticut, so he packed up his stuff and went to stay in Connecticut. And I stayed where I was with my daughter.

MRD: Now this was in Lawrence where you were?

WS: In Lowell

MRD: In Lowell at that time.

WS: That's where my kids were born. And while I was in Lowell, he would call from his sister's house and if I wouldn't pick up the phone when he called, he would end up using cardboard, making a sign saying Going to Lowell, Need a Ride, and he would hitchhike all the way from Connecticut to Massachusetts. He would show up at home and ask me where I was. It didn't matter if I was in a doctor's appointment, at the supermarket, he would beat me up because I wasn't home to pick up the phone. And I remember in those days I had a Dodge Dart. I used to have to drive all the way to Connecticut with my left leg while my right leg was on top of the seat, and my little girl in back in her car seat to go see him because if I didn't, he would come all the way to Massachusetts and beat me. It was a vicious cycle. So anyway when I got the money from ...the attorney knew what I was going through. He was really good to me. He always told me, "Get out. Get out while you can." Doherty, Attorney Doherty. He was a sweetheart. He called me up, he told me that he got the money. He told me, "I'm not letting him know. Come down, sign the papers, and get out."

MRD: Now this is money that you received because of the accident?

WS: Yes.

MRD: Okay.

WS: Because the guy was drunk. So, I ended up taking out money for his mother. I remember I left her a \$500 check because she was good to me. She did what my mother didn't do. You know, and I left her the car. I left her the title of the car for her. I gave my sister some money and I packed everything and I told my sister, you know, my brother-in-law this and that, "Empty the apartment." And I just left with my daughter. I went to Puerto Rico. By that time I had a cast. Imagine being in Puerto Rico with a cast in the heat. It was hot, but, but my family, you know, my aunt and all fell in love with my daughter. My aunts were always good to me. They knew I had a disease, an addiction, because I had been using. But in those days it wasn't so severe. I didn't realize, I didn't think I had an alcohol problem because I resented alcohol because my father used to drink. But when I got to Puerto Rico my excuse was that it was hot so I used to

drink. Anyway this man went crazy looking for me up in Lowell. First thing he said was, “ What did I do?” ??? I stayed in Puerto Rico for a while. I was able to have them take the cast off. It took me a year before I could walk again. When I started walking, I wanted to find a job in Puerto Rico. I could not find a job in Puerto Rico. Mind you, I was bilingual. I could read and write English and Spanish. I couldn’t get a good job, because I didn’t have a high school diploma. They wouldn’t give me a job. So in the three years that I was in Puerto Rico I couldn’t find a job. So, money started going quick. I had \$37,000 but money started going quick. And because we used to party at night, I realized it was time for me to go back. So I came back to the United States with my daughter. I did get to baptize my daughter, threw a big party down there. My cousin, who I consider my sister because I was raised with her, she baptized my daughter. I came back to the United States and I used to go party every weekend. Every weekend was the same. Got a job. But it was that vicious cycle. I was constantly trying to numb my feelings. You know, I was always drinking or smoking or taking mescaline. It was always something. I started working at this factory, JoAnn Fabrics. And I used to work the graveyard shift, the third shift. And I met a Colombian guy there and he used to sell cocaine. I tried it, so every night he would bring me cocaine and I would sniff it. And I used to run four machines and I would ask my boss if he would watch my machines while I would go to the bathroom and powder my nose. I wasn’t lying, except that it wasn’t makeup. It was funny. That went on.

CM: About how old were you then?

WS: I want to say that I was 18 by then.

MRD: Where was this at this point? Were you back here?

WS: In Lowell.

MRD: In Lowell, okay.

WS: I went back to Lowell.

MRD: You did, alright.

WS: Yeah. Then [pause] I ended up getting in a relationship with my brother’s best friend, who happens to be my son’s father today. His name is Freddy. And [pause] he was a big time drug dealer, and so drugs were easy to find. I remember he would...he had lots of connections and [pause] I don’t know if this is a good idea to say, but you know reality is reality, and in those days he had a few cops from Lowell and they would come to the house. And I remember the first time he walked in the door with a cop, because I used to hide the stuff, I got scared. And the first thing I said was, “My God, Freddy, are we busted?” He looked at me and he says, “No, this is

my friend. Go get the stuff.” It was weird. And the man was in his uniform with the badge and everything. It was really weird. I was just a kid, you know. And I remember, he spilled a little bit of the cocaine and the cop was like licking it. It was ironic. Well, anyways that didn’t last too long because he was a drug dealer and he was having sex with a bunch of other women. He was paying them with drugs. So he had...while I got pregnant, he had another woman pregnant at the same time. So my son has a sister who is only a month apart, same age, you know, only a month apart. So it just seemed like my whole life was always getting hurt. And I ended up in this relationship with my best friend, who was a female. Let me tell you something, there’s no difference, man woman, there’s no difference. It was a vicious cycle. You know, her parents weren’t supposed to know, but then they found out in the long run, because she entrusted to me that her father was sexually abusing her. If she wanted to go to the store, she would have to make love to her father. If she wanted to stay over my house, she would have to have sex with her father. And it got to the point that that made me so sick that I told him, “I know. So before you have it with her, who happens to be your daughter, do me, but don’t do her. That’s disgusting.” And I’m not saying it’s justifiable, I just couldn’t stand it. That was her own father. My father was nothing like that. Anyways, we weren’t...I was still working at JoAnn Fabrics. I was in the closet with this person. Nobody supposedly knew, only him. And one day I came out of work...no. My son’s father came and he found me with a hickey. You know when you’re young, you’re ignorant. And I had a hickey and he saw her sleeping with me and he managed to ????. He got mad and took all the furniture ????. So I ended up moving in with my sister, but I was still seeing her. And one day I got home from work in the morning, because I was working the night shift, and they told me that they had left. Her parents had taken her. So I felt lost, you know, my best friend, the only person that I could talk to was gone. It was my first experience of being a widow. And, I don’t know, I felt like my whole world had ended. So I went on a binge. I remember that day so clearly. I came home and this man named Victor said to me, “I know what you’re going through.” And he was shooting up in my sister’s bathroom. Mind you since that time that I did that with my daughter’s father I never done it again. And he said to me, “If you’re my true friend, you’ll try it.” He was doing cocaine. And I was in so much pain I said, “Go ahead, do me.” And that was it. Then I went into JoAnn’s where I was working, but every little money I would make, I would make it for the drugs. I had my daughter and I had my son, but I was neglecting them, you know. Then her parents came and got me and took me to Connecticut to get me so that I would get better when they found out what I was doing because they loved my kids. Aside from everything, they loved my kids. And that was the worst thing that could have happened because down there I met people I should have never met. I met this woman named Dacey and she taught me the ropes, she taught me how to work the streets.

MRD: Now how did that come about, Wilma?

WS: My disease of addiction had progressed from one day to another. The minute I shot up that cocaine I fell in love with it. So in order to calm down from the cocaine, I met this guy who told me to do heroin, you know, it'll bring you down. So then I started doing the heroin. It just one thing escalated, one thing after another. And her parents found out that I was going out on the ??? and they came and got me. They came to get me so they could help me. They got an apartment down there and everything but it just didn't go the right way because she was getting high with me. They just didn't know it. And then she introduced me to people in Connecticut and

MRD: This is your friend, your best friend?

WS: My partner, whatever, yeah.

MRD: Okay.

WS: It's just...I wasn't working, I didn't know Connecticut, I was new, and from the people she introduced me to I met this woman named Daisy who showed me the streets and taught me that you need to stand here and look pretty and somebody will pick you up. And I was scared and she says, "Don't worry." As a matter of fact, I went the first time...I went with her and she taught me how to pick up tricks. I ended up prostituting. My disease was so powerful that I would sit my kids in somebody's stairs in a three decker building and I would say, "Don't move. Watch your little brother." And I would wait until somebody would pick me up and when I would drive up past them in the car, I would say, "That's my daughter." I would go to where I went to and come back and take them home. I'm not proud of this. But that was my life then. My life went down the hole, it just went down the hole. So I ended up moving to Florida with my sister. Move to Florida, geographical cure. So I went to Kissimmee, Florida. The kids were going to school. My son loved it down there.

MRD: How old were your children at this point? Were they school-age or junior high?

WS: I want to say that Louis was about six and Tammy was 11. Tammy is five years older than him. 'Cuz he was born in '84. A lot of things happened that I didn't know. When we got to Kissimmee, Florida, I was working at a motel, Colonial Motor Lodge, and then I was also working at a supermarket called Piggly Wiggly.

MRD: That's a chain.

CM: You know that because you lived in the south.

MRD: I lived in the south. I know this.

WS: I was working two jobs, I was maintaining. I was trying to support my family. I was still smoking weed, but I'm not justifying, I was more stable. Until one day, this man comes to me and says, "C'mon let's go for a ride. We got on the bike and went for a ride and he said to me, "I want to go see these blankin' guys. ???????" I said to him, "What's that?" And he said, "That's crack." I said, "What does that do?" And he explained it to me, only two dollars. Two dollars, wow. Went home and fell in love with the stuff. [This part of the transcript is omitted by request of interviewee.] So my partner again sent for me and her parents, so I ended up going to Lawrence, Massachusetts. It didn't matter where I went. Everywhere I went, I took myself. My life got to a point where living in the projects with my kids, things got worse. DSS (Massachusetts Department of Social Services) came into my life, and you know before... When I was in Connecticut, that was in 1981... I'm sorry 1986, and this is when HIV [Human Immunodeficiency Virus] first came out. And it used to be called GRID, which was a gay-related immune-deficiency virus, right? And they were killing the gay men in New York with that. I remember her uncle came to Connecticut to live with her parents because they were killing them. She got sick one day. We ended up going to the hospital and a couple days later, a week later it was, they came and they told me that she had HIV. We had no knowledge. If from all the things that we were doing and all the running around, one time we ended up in this hotel room because of this drug dealer... was going to get robbed by these teenagers. He gave me a gun, gave her the drugs, and took us to this hotel. And I remember when we were doing coke [cocaine], and she got mad because she couldn't inject herself and she put the needle down. And I was doing lines really fast. So I looked at her needle and saw that it still had the chemical substance inside the needle. I picked it up and I injected her blood plus the chemical into my body. So since 1986 I injected somebody's blood in my body who is HIV positive. I knew but I didn't want to know. And I ended up getting really sick. I ended up going to Puerto Rico and my family just went crazy. My father, oh my God, so devastated, his little girl, you know. Then down there in the hospital they found out... I went there April Fool's Day and the day after I ended up in the hospital. I ended up with Hepatitis B. They did an AID's test. They gave me a number and I threw it away. I didn't want to know. So soon as I got better,

CM: Just giving her a time warning.

MRD: We have 15 more minutes.

CM: More like under ten.

MRD: Under ten, okay, alright.

WS: Anyways, just to make it all short. After all of that happened, when I was in Lawrence and DSS took my kids away, I was so desperate that I wanted to die after being raped so many times,

being sexually abused so many times. I begged God to please help me. And I wanted to die or to take me back to jail. I ended up in [Massachusetts Correctional Institution] Framingham. I ended up December 3, 1993, sentenced December 10, 1993. I did Christmas, New Year's, my birthday, all those wonderful holidays in jail. I was going to be paroled February 14 and I went back and I was so scared 'cause I didn't want that life again. And I told the Parole Board, "I don't want it."

MRD: Wilma, what were you in jail for?

WS: I was in jail for prostitution. Because the judge was so tired of seeing me. Every time I kept getting worse and worse, never for drugs. But regardless, no matter which way you look at it, it was still bad. I was desperate, so I started calling places. And I remember O'Brien, the c.o. [correctional officer] telling me I was crazy 'cuz I didn't want to leave. So I was looking for places and I found out about Faith House, that's located here in Worcester. I went to Faith House, after I had the interview with Harris. She came and picked me up the day that I was discharged which was April Fool's Day. And I went to Faith House and unfortunately I didn't graduate, I didn't complete the program, because my behaviors were still there. I ended up leaving there after three months because I wanted my kids. I thought I was going to get my kids. Bottom line is that I ended up relapsing because I got into a relationship before I even got my recovery. And that was in '95. In '96, after six months of relapsing, I got clean, I went to Spectrum. And I remember going to DSS, fighting for my kids and this man who worked at DSS, right in downtown, said to me, "Why do you want your son if you're going to die? You've got HIV." His name was Michael Roy. This is one of the reasons I came to work in the field of Human Service, 'cuz I couldn't understand how somebody could be so cold. Anyways, I worked at Spectrum after two and a half years of getting clean. I said that I wanted to go back there because that's where I got clean. My director, Karen Baker, said to me, "You know what, Wilma? If you go for your G.E.D., I'll give you a dollar raise." She made me a case manager. I went for my G.E.D. and I passed in 2001. I remember that Diane's husband helped me pass the math. Anyways then like I said, I started training all these people. I knew the job, I knew it from the back of my hand. They started becoming my boss. And I was mad. And a friend of mine told me to go to school, go to college. I went to Quinsig [Quinsigamond Community College] for a little bit. That was so slow for me. And I couldn't do the night shift after work. So I ended up going to Springfield College. I went there for a Bachelor's. I got my Bachelor's in 2007.

MRD: In what? Is it in Human Services?

WS: Bachelor's in Science in Human Services, yes. And I just couldn't stop there. I kept going. Unfortunately everything I do, I do to the extreme. [laughter] I kept going and I got my Master's in...I finished in 2009 and graduated in May, 2010. I got my Master's, and through the process I

did the program at Westfield State College to become a certified counselor, the C.A.C. program. I got my LADC I, licensed addiction drug counselor.

MRD: Licensed addiction drug counselor.

WS: Yes, I am. You know in all these years that's all I've done. I educated my kids and I'm HIV, and I've been living with HIV for 25 years this coming April first, April Fool's Day. And if I don't tell you, you'll never know.

MRD: You look the picture of health.

WS: I'm healthy to this day. Thank God.

MRD: Congratulations

WS: And I'm going on 15 years, June 30, clean.

MRD: Congratulations.

WS: That's my aunt's birthday, the lady who raised me. And it's just a miracle that it happened to be on her birthday. And not too long ago, last year right before New Year's, I called my mother and I asked her why. I just wanted to know why. Why would she leave a little girl six years old with an old man? She knew, and I asked her. And she first started screaming and said, "You're crazy. You're out of your mind." I said, "You know what? I remember all these things. I remember you taking their word and you coming and beating me up. I still remember the day you asked me." And all she said to me was, "If you never ever want to call me again, then don't." She didn't say she was sorry. You know, but in these years that I've been in recovery, I've lost my best friend, my father, my mother. He was my life. And I graduated and I went to school and I did it all for him. ???????? I did it for him. He gave me the hope, and the program, of course. And I love what I do, love helping people, it's my passion.

MRD: What exactly do you do in your work?

WS: I am a clinician, a substance abuse counselor at Habit and OPCO. They have right now approximately 66 patients.

CM: And where is it that you work?

WS: In Fitchburg, Habit and OPCO, located in Fitchburg.

MRD: Can you say that name again? I just want to make sure that I get it.

WS: Habit and OPCO.

MRD: Okay.

WS: I love what I do. I just have a passion. I don't know, I guess God knew what He was doing. I have a passion and a way of talking to people that motivates them. I've been pretty good. I have had some sad stories, people that go back out and they usually get to me. But I don't give up. They didn't give up on me, why should I give up on them? They just hired ...they called me back from a place I used to work at part-time, and they offered me more money, so that I would stay at least two days a week after work. So I started there yesterday. I told them I couldn't go today because I had this, and so I'll be doing Wednesdays and Thursdays at the ?? Clinic in Dudley. And that's where I'm at. What you've heard is just a partial part of my story and my life. It's no story, it's my life, reality. Sometimes it makes me sad, but it makes me happy to know where I'm at today. My goal now is to write a book.

CM: Fantastic.

WS: That's my goal, that before I die, I want to write a book. I think it would help other women who have got themselves in similar situations.

MRD: And to know that if you are going through hard times, it's okay, and it can be turned to good.

WS: You know the funny thing is before my father died, I went to Puerto Rico to see him. I wanted to surprise him. And he was so happy.

MRD: I'm sure.

WS: And he said, "You see, you see. I told you my daughter was up there. I told you." And he was all happy and he ran upstairs and he brought down this bamboo thing, which I still have that I have to have framed. And it's like a sheep dog and in between the sheep dog, there's this little baby, a kid, a little kid, sitting down. And under it, it says, "Don't quit," in Spanish. You've heard that?

CM: Heard it.

MRD: Yeah.

CM: Now I think it's so...

WS: And it's ironic because he gave that to me just before he died. I have it right next to my bed. When times are rough and things are happening, then I look at this picture. Because when he died, it was Monday and I was working over at Spectrum [Health Systems]. I called him in Puerto Rico, I used to call him every night. And he wouldn't pick up. Tuesday, I was off and I went to take my son to work. My son at the age of 16 was working part-time 'cause I taught my kid be responsible, you know, and I called my father and my son said, "Ma, he's probably with a girlfriend. Leave him alone." Around three o'clock there was still no answer. I called my family. And they went Wednesday and they called but no answer. He lived down a little road and there was no answer. So I got mad and said and I just felt in my heart, "Why didn't you break the door?" So they went Thursday morning and they called Thursday morning. Then my uncle picked up the phone. My uncle saw him dead, he sounds just like my father. And I got all happy for a minute until my uncle said, "Wait a minute. It's your uncle Freddy." And he told me...I left to...my God, that's right. Oh wow, it was on a Thursday too. [short pause] I'm sorry I just realized that. It was on a Thursday, like my brother. I ended up going to Puerto Rico because nobody else could identify the body but me, the only one he had was me. But anyway, my father had two older kids, but none of them were there. And then my mother has...or had five kids total. I was the smallest one. I have a sister till this day I don't know who she is, where she is.

MRD: Really?

WS: Her name is Jacqueline, that's all I know.

MRD: How do you know?

WS: My brother, the one that drowned. My brother, Georgie, I...we got reunited in 2004. He found me. Yeah, we met, and he... I adore him. I don't know for some reason...I had a little bit to do with it and he went to school and got his Associate's [Associate's Degree].

MRD: That's great.

WS: [smiling] Yeah, he's doing good, and also trying to stay clean.

Tape ends.