

Interviewers: Jordan Doucette and Caitlin Reilly
Interviewee: Lori Welch
Date of Interview: November 12, 2010
Location: Emmanuel d'Alzon Library at Assumption College,
Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcribers: Jordan Doucette and Caitlin Reilly



Overseen by: Dr. Maryanne Leone, Dr. Carl Robert Keyes; Assumption College

Abstract: Lori Welch was born in Manchester, Connecticut on April 1960 and later moved to Holden, Massachusetts in 1990. She was the first in her family to go to college and she pursued a career in dental hygiene, worked at the Gale Free Library, and later worked at Cigna Insurance analyzing dental fraud. Mother of three girls, and wife to Richard Welch, her life is dedicated to stressing the importance of education to future generations. With her charismatic and personable traits, she provided fantastic aid to the poor with her involvement in the Wachusett Food Pantry, also working with the Roger Williams Parent Executive Board, and helped students in various activities with her daughters' school. In this interview, Lori discusses the struggles she faced growing up, the steps she took to balance family life with her schooling and career, her view on the definition of success and happiness, along with her own personal experience of how the status of women in Worcester has changed over the years. She reflects upon the hopes she has for women in the future, advocates women to dream and discover what they're interested in, to think outside the box, and defy the social norms society has created.

JD: So before we start, we have to ask you if we have your permission to record you.

LW: Yes, you do.

JD: Okay. Alright, so we'll be talking about your connection with Worcester, and then just general background, your education, your political or community involvement, your health and involvement with that, and then work related questions.

LW: Ok.

JD: So, we'll start with your general background. What is your full name, including your maiden and married name?

LW: Lori Ann Stepanek Welch.

JD: Can you spell Stepanek, just so we can spell it right?

[Laughs]

LW: S-T-E-P-A-N-E-K

JD: Where were you born?

LW: Manchester, Connecticut.

JD: Oh, I'm from East Lyme.

LW: Oh very good!

JD: Yeah. Have you ever been married?

LW: Yes, I'm still married.

JD: Okay, and what is your husband's name?

LW: Richard Welch.

JD: And what... How many children do you have? Or do you have children?

LW: Three, I have three. Three girls.

JD: And, what are their names?

LW: Kelly, Shannon, and Cory.

JD: And how old are they?

LW: Kelly is 22, Shannon is 20, and Cory will turn 16 in two weeks.

JD: And what culture or ethnicity do you identify with?

LW: Caucasian.

JD: Okay. Any specific family background? Irish? Italian?

LW: Oh, let's see. Polish and Czechoslovakian.

JD: Okay. And, can you tell us about your parents?

LW: My mother's name is Carol, and she has a Polish background. Then my father's Donald, and he is...his family is from the Czech Republic.

JD: And what did your parents' education consist of?

LW: Oh, both were blue-collar workers. My mom was a secretary. My dad went to school later on; after he was married. He got his degree from UConn [University of Connecticut] in Recreational Management, and he was a Parks and Rec. [Recreation] director in Watertown, Connecticut.

JD: Okay, and do you think that had any effect on your education?

LW: Oh, definitely. I was the first one out of all my family to go to college. That was really important for my dad to get me into college. He worked like two jobs, and I ended up only going to a community college, which doesn't sound like a lot, but back then it was a big deal.

JD: Still good.

LW: Yeah. So he was very proud of me. I think he was really proud. I think also being a girl, because I grow up pretty, blue-collar kind of family, where you just went to work in the factories, and that's all you did. You didn't really do anything more than that. So, we were sorta breaking the norm. My father was a little bit of a rebel that way. So anyway, it seems so silly now, but back then it was a big deal.

JD: Yeah. And, were they strict parents? Easy going?

LW: My mom was pretty strict, but my dad – he was a free-spirit. He's still a free-spirit. He's a lot of fun.

JD: That's good. And, were you allowed to date when you were younger or anything like that?

LW: No, my mother was very strict and she did not like my husband at all, but my dad -- my husband went to Columbia [University] in New York City, and my dad used to sneak me on the train on the weekends, and he would tell my mom I...

JD: Aww

[Laughs]

LW: Well, yeah. He said I could go see my husband. Well, I was dating him at the time. 'cause he really liked my husband a lot, and so yeah, I guess we sorta like dated in secret for a couple years until I got married. And my father was a big -- he was cute. He just said your mother is very strict, very Catholic, very prim and proper and -- y mother has changed a lot over the years.

It's sorta nice to see. She's loosened up a lot. Back then, oh yeah, being the oldest girl, too, that was sorta tough, too.

JD: Okay yeah. And where have you lived during your life?

LW: Pretty much. Well... Manchester, Connecticut where I was born. Then Southington, Connecticut, Watertown, Connecticut: that's where I was for my high school years. Went to college, just a community college in Farmington, Connecticut. And then after I was married, Stamford, and back and forth to New York City. Back to Connecticut. And now up here in Holden for the last 20 years.

JD: Okay. What was your neighborhood like? Just like general... like general neighbors you've lived in? Like middleclass?

LW: Yeah, pretty much. Maybe like lower middle class growing up. And now probably more upper middle class in Holden.

JD: And, how old were you, or what year did you arrive in the Worcester area?

LW: I was 30 years old. It was 1990.

JD: And you live in Holden, now?

LW: Mhmm.

JD: Okay, do any of your family members live in the same area?

LW: My... my oldest daughter, my 22 year old, lives at home with me. And then my 16 year old lives at home. My middle one lives at Villanova, down in Pennsylvania.

JD: What challenges do you think Worcester has faced in the recent past, and like what major events do you think have shaped the city?

LW: Well, I think it's a really misunderstood city. I think people drive through it on the highway and all they see is those ugly buildings, and they think that it's like, who would... I mean I know that's how I was growing up. If we ever went – we didn't vacation a lot 'cause my dad worked a lot in the summer – but the couple times we went to Maine, oh Worcester was like, "don't get your car stuck here."

JD: Yeah.

LW: And I was like mortified when my husband accepted this job in Worcester. I was like “I cannot believe that we’re going to be here.” And I think it’s a great city. I think it’s got a lot of treasures that people don’t know about. I think that if you just go through certain neighborhoods, like even this neighborhood were Assumption [College] is; it’s a terrific area. I think...

JD: It is beautiful.

LW: It is beautiful! I think -- you know, I love going down to some of the old houses. I go to the Worcester Historic -- I have a good friend, who is on the Worcester Historic -- Preservation Worcester, excuse me, and we go through all the old houses. So we’ll see some of the ones on Massachusetts Avenue. Oh, those are so nice.

JD: Mmm yeah.

LW: And yeah you know, we have Higgins Armory. I mean, I don’t know, the thing I feel the saddest about the downtown doesn’t seem to be to sustain any kind of store front. I mean we had the Galleria. You girls were too young to remember that. And that sorta went downhill. They tried and it just seems to fail. I think Hanover [Theater] is a good thing. I’m glad to see that, but it’s still not enough. I wish there was more restaurants. I mean, we have ten colleges here, and I think the hardest thing is that it’s not a very college oriented -- I mean if you go somewhere other areas, there’s a bars and this and this. We have Shrewsbury Street, but not really... I wish I could see more of that development. I just think would be sorta cool for the college and community kind of symbiotic relationship.

JD: Do you see any distinct characteristics of Worcester? Like, how would you characterize it?

LW: Well, I think for a long time it was like this working class city, but I think there are a lot of professional people here that I see now. The other thing, I also laugh, I call it the biggest small town. So many people I know in Holden, grew up in certain neighborhoods in Worcester, and they’re still very loyal to those areas. Are you a Tatnuck person? Are you a Burncoat person? It’s just so funny how they still... It’s a small town mentality where everybody is pretty loyal to whatever area of Worcester they grew up in, and they still maintain the relationship, even though it’s a city so... and so that’s what I call a small town city.

JD: What do you think women’s experiences in Worcester have been like in general?

LW: Well, I know the history of it. I know like the whole voting thing, and I know... know we were pretty cutting edge for a while. [Laughs]

LW: But as far as what I find, myself -- I think, and having three daughters --I think they're pretty lucky living here. We're a pretty liberal family, and I think that the nice thing is that my girls pretty much feel that they can try and do anything they want here in Worcester. I don't think there's any, at least I don't feel that there's a lot of discrimination toward women here. I think women get a lot of respect. I mean we have a lot of doctors that are women, lawyers. I know that one of my plumbers, she was a women so that was sorta cool, too.

[Laughs]

LW: But I think that it's a nice pretty, that they're valued more than just for their looks, or you know, I think it's more, what are you doing... I think it's a great opportunity area, I guess. That's the best way I can put it.

JD: Okay. Now we're going to move on to your education.

LW: Okay

JD: Where did you attend school?

LW: Let's see. I went to Tunxis Community College in Farmington, Connecticut.

JD: Okay and, what kind of educational program do you pursue, like...

LW: Dental hygiene.

JD: And, did you graduate?

LW: Yes, I did. Yes, I did. And I just went back to school last year to Salter and got my degree for Business... It's like Business Support Program is what I ended up doing. So I went back to school after a million years. [Laughs]

LW: So that was sorta interesting.

JD: What challenges have you faced in your education?

LW: For dental hygiene, I went to school for it, and I hated it the moment I went in. I couldn't tell my father I didn't like it...

JD: Oh no!

LW: Because he had worked so hard to get me in there. So I sorta plugged along, and got my degree, and worked for a couple years, and haven't really gone back since. So, that was probably the biggest challenge. I just didn't like it. And I also wish I had gone away. I think I have a lot of

mistakes in my life, very few regrets, but one of my biggest regrets was never going away to like a four-year college. I should have done that. I should have probably worked a little harder myself, but at that time it just wasn't there. Then going back this time, for Salter, it just being the old lady in the room. Kids are just so much younger. They know how to do all the computer programs. That was a big challenge. And, who do you sit with at lunch. That was the other big challenge. So...[Laughs]

JD: What do you think the benefits are of a four-year college, and being away from home?

LW: Seeing what my daughter -- I have one daughter who graduated from Roger Williams and a sophomore at Villanova, I just saw them change as people. I think they grew to be a lot more confident, self-confident, a lot more aware who they were, that's really important. I think that the biggest thing is that I gave them a foundation, but without me or my husband, they sorta discovered themselves. When they were home... like I said, my poor 22 year old who's at home now, I said I'm still gonna treat you like you're 16, which she hates.

[Laughs]

LW: But, like, I think that it's important to go away. I don't think you can discover yourself unless you really on your own. And I think college is a -- it's a pretty safe environment for the most part, and I think it gives you a lot of opportunities, especially a liberal arts education. It gives you a lot of things to just try. I don't know how your high school was, but where my girls went to high school, it was like they were put in a box. They had very little room...

JD: Yeah.

LW: ...just 'cause they had to do so much, to try things. And then, all of a sudden, they go to school and "you can try this, you can try that," and they never knew that they liked what they liked. So that's what I really liked about college.

JD: How do you think girls in your educational background... How do you think girls were treated in school?

LW: Well dental hygiene is pretty much a predominately female environment. We did have one poor guy. [Laughs]

LW: So it was, again, sorta like the way nursing was. I think it was stereotyped that girls just go and be dental hygienists. So, I had no problem.

JD: Did you... did you have any goals or plans after completing school?

LW: I just wanted to get married and have kids, which I did.

JD: And, what kind of support network or mentoring was important to you during your education?

LW: I had this one wonderful professor Kristina Gat... Oh boy! I can't remember her name. I thought I could remember her name! [Laughs] Gattoko. Kristina Gattoko. And she was great. She was really took me under her wing, and she was my mentor, and I... We had to do a lot of community service. We had to go out into inner-city Hartford, and work in a lot of free-clinics and a lot of nursing homes. So, a lot of times she would pick us up and drive us here, and we got to do a lot of one-on-one. She was just somebody I really respected, and she believed in me. And I think that was really important to just have -- all you need is just one person sayin' "you know what, you're doing okay." You know, and that's all it takes for you to just give a little bit more, and she was that person.

JD: Do you feel that education is important, particularly to the female population?

LW: Oh yeah! Definitely! Have you read *Three Cups of Tea*? [Laughs] It's like our mantra in our house. I just think that to get anywhere, you need, not even the piece of paper -- a lot of people say you need the degree, I just think it gives you so much -- like again what I said, it's the self-confidence, the awareness. I think that, especially now it's getting harder to get jobs, and we're becoming a global society, where you can't just rely just on what happens here. You have to have understanding of what's going on in the world. And, if you don't, you're gonna be left behind. It's gonna be a lot harder. I think things are gonna change, and I just think the way to do that is education. And if you... Yeah, I'm a stay-at-home mom, I think there's a lot of important things that way, but I also think too that it's just really that you do what's gonna be good for you because you never know what's gonna happen in the future. You can't always rely on a man to take care of you.

JD: Mhmm.

LW: You have a lot of freedom if you have the education.

JD: Okay, we're gonna move on to work. Do you work outside the home currently?

LW: No.

JD: Have you worked outside the home for... for wage?

LW: Yes.

JD: What did you do?

LW: I was a dental hygienist many years. Then I worked for Cigna which is an insurance company. I analyzed dental fraud. That was a lot of fun. I liked that. [Laughs] Then I had kids. Then I went back and I was a hygienist for a while. I've also worked at the Gale Free Library here, a couple times on and off. I always seem to be in libraries. I do a lot of volunteer stuff, too. I'm the Parent Executive Board at Roger Williams, and I've been doing that for a couple of years. And, the food pantry, and I also do a lot of stuff with the schools. And you know, I'm busy instead I don't get paid now. [Laughs]

JD: Do you feel that your educational background has helped you in your field of work?

LW: Mhmm.

JD: What has this work meant to you, like on a personal level?

LW: Well, the hygiene part, probably not all that much. (laughs) I wish I could say that it was better, but going back to Salter was a lot because it gave me – I just knew I wanted to go back to school, and, well, I wanted to go back to work but I didn't have the skills that I needed, and I also didn't want to go and put in four years because I'm older, so this is a great opportunity to go for a ten month program to get the skills I needed. I needed to do the education, I needed to get what I needed in a short amount of time, and then go out, so I think education is very, very valuable. Have I gotten a job yet? No, I've gotten a lot of rejection letters, but I'll keep trying. [Laughs]

JD: Well, we wish you luck with that. What are your primary responsibilities in your home right now?

LW: Everything.[Laughs] Oh, let's see, I take care of the – well, you know, pretty much run the whole household. My husband travels a lot, so I'm – it's almost like missing a mom. But, yeah I mean my kids are older, so it's not as crazy as it was when they were little so I have a lot more opportunity for me. But it's pretty much just, well my youngest – making sure she's - I'm a taxi service, just making sure she's getting here and here and here. That kind of thing.

JD: I know how that goes. Do you share the housework? Does everyone have their own chores?

LW: Pretty much. I-I think I do most of it, but they – my oldest daughter does all her own laundry, she usually – she's in and out so much that she does everything on her own. My youngest one, well she's a little bit – we call her Princess Head. [Laughs]

LW: She's a little bit spoiled and I have to get on the stick a little bit more on her. Sometimes it's easier for me to do everything.

JD: Has the type of housework you've done changed over your children growing up?

LW: Mmm, yeah, it gets easier. You know, you don't have to do as much there, and you can tell them to do a lot of things and they can follow through with it.

JD: Has there been a difference in priorities, or things you need to get done?

LW: Mhm, um, when they were really little I realized very early on – it would drive me crazy because I plan, unfortunately I am an anally retentive first born, and I like to have everything in order, and it would drive me crazy because I'd say, "Ugh! I'm gonna exercise on these days and do this and do this. Gonna do this and this and that." And once I gave it up, my life was so much happier. So I was wanting to just take every day as it comes, and not plan too much because when I plan, it never works out. I have to be flexible, so that's probably the biggest change in my priorities. I just be - I'm flexible. If it works out that I can clean one day, then great. If it doesn't, it doesn't. It's not a big deal. It's just, you know, no one's gonna care if the house is a mess or not.

JD: You obviously plan on going back to work, right?

LW: Mhm.

JD: Was this your original intent after having children? To go back to work?

LW: Mhm, and I did a couple part-time jobs. Like I said, I worked at the Gale Free Library on and off, and that was great. I really, really enjoyed that but it wasn't enough hours, and it wasn't enough responsibility for what I wanted to do, so that's why I went back to school.

JD: Did your husband have any involvement in this decision?

LW: He was great, he's again, I think he's very pro-education and he really thought that I needed to go back and get the skills, 'cause I kept saying, "Oh, I can't do this, I can't do that." And he said, "Well, let's just look at a different program. You don't have to go to a traditional college. You can go and – there's a lot more opportunities for people my age."

JD: What type of work does your husband do?

LW: He is the CEO of a travel agency in Massachusetts.

CR: Do you consider yourself active politically?

LW: Pretty much, yes.

CR: Have you been involved in volunteer or community work?

LW: Mhm.

CR: What kind of groups did you work for or with?

LW: Well I was on the Pantry Board – the Wachusett Pantry for many years. And, I did that. I also did, what else did I do? Well I was on the Roger Williams Parent Executive Board. What else did I do in town? It seems like I'm always doing something. I mean, probably a lot of it was just me doing stuff with the schools, stuff like that.

CR: What led you to join them?

LW: I think just 'cause I can't sit home. [Laughs]

CR: What were the organization's main goals or what was their purpose?

LW: Well with the food pantry of course, it was to feed the hungry, so that was a big thing. With the school projects like right now, I'm very heavily involved in Upstage and Tempo at the high school. And Upstage is my daughter's theater. And so, we'll do all the plays, and then this morning I was schleppin' away with ten things of hotdogs and pretzels, and you know a million things for the football game tonight. So, we run sets for the football games to raise money for the music department up at the high school. So that's what I tend to do, and it fills me up for most of my days.

CR: How much of your time is spent with this community work?

LW: Oh, most of my days. [Laughs] I'm always running around for somebody. I have the time, so I get the phone calls. Last night I was doing costumes for Magical Dinner, which is a musical thing they put up at the high school. So I did that, and so pretty much I'd say three times a week I either have a meeting or doing something with the school.

CR: That's a lot of dedication. What would you consider the group's major accomplishments?

LW: Mostly fundraising, making money for the groups that we're in.

CR: What role has religion played in your life?

LW: Oh, a very big role. I'm Episcopalian, I go to St. Francis in Holden and it's a really nice church. It has a nice group of people, and they do a lot with Mustard Seed. I think it's just

helped me be more grounded and very community active. It's funny, 'cause I even noticed your shirt, the St. Augustine on the back. You know, my daughter goes to Villanova which is sorta funny because even though it's a Catholic – well Assumption is a Catholic university too -- it's still liberal enough where it's open minded where she gets to think for herself. I mean, we raised our girls to think that we want spirituality to be a big part of their lives, but they should be able to ask questions, and be able to disagree and be able to wrestle with their faith because that's part of how you come to terms. If you're just told blindly, then you're not gonna learn and it's not going to be a big thing.

CR: In the health aspect, have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

LW: Oh, well yeah. I'm just getting old. [Laughs]. So, you know, just little things, it's just when you get older you get tired, your body doesn't work as well. There's stupid little surgeries you have to go for, so yeah, I try to walk. I walked a real trail this morning, so.

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

LW: Oh, this is interesting because for the first time, I had to pay a hundred dollar co-pay for a prescription of mine, and I was like, "Oh my goodness! How long is this prescription for?" And she said, "15 days." And I said, "Oh my goodness." So, hitting – I mean, all of a sudden it's changed a lot more, and I'm finding it's not as affordable, whereas before it was a lot more affordable, and I'm thinking, "Oh my goodness." We have a pretty good health plan, so I can only imagine people that don't have – what this is costing them. So, it's – that's a big chunk. That could be – I could go out for dinner for that. [Laughs]

CR: Whose health are you responsible for besides your own?

LW: Oh, my husband and my kids.

CR: Has that impacted your daily life?

LW: Oh yeah. Yep, you know, last week – my daughter is having a surprise 16th birthday party for her at our house. And she got sick for two days! I couldn't do anything! [Laughs] And I had to take her to the doctor, and I was like, "You're ruining my time!" [Laughs]

CR: Well, now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women than has been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include in the future?

LW: I think when I sort of touched on before. I just think that you know, women should be able to choose what paths they want to take, and what paths they want to go on. I think the main thing is, don't be afraid of self discovery. Try something, take a risk. I think that we live in exciting

times where women are not put in boxes anymore. They're not just told, "You need to be a housewife and stay home." You can do both. You can be happy, and you know, it's sort of exciting. You can stay at home, you can work, but even if you do, you know, there's always those book groups. You know, it's sort of funny – I gave my daughter for graduation this year, she was a journalism and art/architecture history major, and her favorite artist was Michelangelo, and I think it's called Cara- Oh, I can't remember what it's called in Italian, but it means "always learning", and I think that's the thing that I want my girls to always know. Never stop learning because it doesn't matter how old you are, there's always something new to learn, and if you close your mind off to that, you're going to miss a lot of cool things in life. So that's what I would say.

CR: Do you have any hobbies, or do any regular leisure activities that take you outside the home?

LW: Mhm, I love Calligraphy. I go to the Worcester Art Museum, which again is another jewel we have here. It's so cool, isn't it so great?

JD: I can't wait to go there. My grandmother and I love art, so we can't wait to go there.

LW: Do you? Oh, yes, and on Saturday mornings I think it's free. So, but you guys can probably go free anyways, because you're probably students. But they have great classes, especially for something like that. I'm the kindergartener of the group, but it's just wonderful women, and again, women helping women. I do that. I also do yoga at the Y, twice a week. It's a women's class that I do, and I'm very bad.[Laughs] And then you know walking – I like to walk a lot. Like the rail trail, I like to walk with my girlfriend a couple times a week, especially since you know, it's been so nice this fall. We've had a pretty good fall, so that's been good.

CR: How did you get through the rough times?

LW: I have the best husband in the world.[Laughs] And really, and my pug. I have a good dog.

[Laughs]

LW: And my kids. They're really good too. They're – they're really good.

CR: What kind of thoughts keep you going?

LW: I don't know, I guess, you know, just – I guess I try and be really grateful for what I have. It's hard to be grateful because believe me, I can be the biggest complainer. One of my friends would say, "I don't want you to solve my problems, I just want to complain." But I think that's just one of the parts of being a woman. So I guess I just feel lucky a lot of the times. I have a

great husband, and a nice family, and I like to travel and do different things, and just see what tomorrow's going to bring.

CR: How do you define success in your life?

LW: Well, I'm going to steal this from my daughter. When my daughter was in high school, she had to meet with the guidance department, and the guidance department said, [Knocks twice on table] "Do you know what you want to do when you grow up? Because we want to put you in whatever." And she said, "I know exactly what I want to do!" And they said, [Gasps] "You do?! Well what is it?" She said, "I want to be happy." And I love that, and I sort of steal that and I think that to me is success. I think if you have peace of mind, and you have health, and you have happiness, you have everything. You know, because you can have many years after your degree, and you can live in a big fancy house, but if you don't have your health then you're not happy. It's – you know, I think that's the whole thing. It's like trying to find – and it's not that you're going to have a Pollyanna kind of look at life. There's going to be bad things, life isn't fair. You know, that's the other thing too, and it's sort of scary, but that's the truth. But I figure if I'm on this journey, and I only have X amount of years to live here, I want to make it as fun as I can, and see what happens on the other side.

CR: Do you think your definition of success has changed over your years?

LW: Yes, because initially I think it was all about, "Oh, you know you have to have the degree and all this." And it's easy to get caught up in it, you know especially with a lot of the women in my neighborhood that buy the Coach pocketbooks, and you know, have all that kind of stuff. Or, those – some friends who are lawyers really work hard and that's great for them, it wasn't for me. I used to look at them [as] more successful than me, but now I don't look at them as successful. So it's sort of, I think I've thawed out over the years.

CR: Do you have any other regrets about the choices you've made in your life?

LW: Like I said, that was probably my biggest regret, not going to the four-year school. Like I said, I've made a lot of mistakes; very few regrets, and that's probably one of my biggest regrets ever.

CR: Do you feel like you have a legacy?

LW: Oh, I don't know, maybe my calligraphy. [Laughs] Maybe the girls will love that. I did ask them one day – I'm getting to the age now where a lot of my friends are losing their parents, and it's sort of interesting because they go to divide up the stuff and for some of my friends, it's just tearing their families apart. And I said to the girls one day – I said, "Do you guys want anything

when I'm dead?" And they said "Nah." [Laughs] So okay, that was easy. Yeah, I don't know. I guess my legacy I hope it's, I just hope I'm leaving for the good girls of the world I guess is my best thing.

JD: Alright, thank you so much for being interviewed!