

Interviewee: Sharon Farrell
Interviewer: Sarah Ainsworth
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A: This is Sarah Ainsworth interviewing Sharon Farrell on Monday, March 29, 2004, in the oral history office about her role as a non-traditional student. First off, can you tell me when and where you were born?

F: I was born in 1950 in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

A: What about your early schooling? Since we're going to be talking about the rest of it, tell me a little bit about that.

F: When I was five, my mother moved my brother and I to Boston. She was working at Mass. General Hospital as a nurse's aid. I went to St. Joseph's School in the West End of Boston for grades one and two. After grade two, the city tore that section of the town down to make way for apartments for doctors from Mass. General, so the West End was a tenement neighborhood, much like the North End. So that part of history sort of disappeared in 1958. It was a great place to live; I remember it.

A: Was that a Catholic school?

F: It was a Catholic school, right, St. Joseph's. I think it was on **McClain Street**, but I'm not 100 percent sure. We lived on **McClain Street** across from the school, so yeah, [I guess it was], and I went there for grades one and two. When we had to move, my mom moved to Dorchester, Mass., which was part of the city but not in the city proper, and I went to another Catholic school, St. Kevin's. I was there until I graduated from eighth grade. After St. Kevin's I went to Monsignor Ryan Memorial High School for Girls taught by the Sisters of Charity for high school, and I graduated in 1968.

A: Can you tell me a little bit about your mom and what she did for a living and what kind of education she received?

F: My mom had a high school education. She had me when she was eighteen, so she stayed home and kept house for her father and three brothers because her mother had died when she was only eleven. It was just me, my mom, my grandfather, and three uncles. My uncles were only ten years older than I was. She was going to have my brother in 1955, so she decided to move to Boston because her sister had moved up there and started a family, so we moved in with them for about six months in 1955. Then my mom got her own apartment on **McClain Street** in Boston, [and] she was a nurse's aid. She worked at Mass. General till I was twelve, so that would be 1962, and she had my brother Joe. She quit work then and stayed home. She went back to school for her bachelor's degree in 1970, so my mom's a non-traditional student, to say the least. So she got her degree at UMass, Boston, probably, I think, 1974.

A: So she was in her forties when she went back to get a degree.

F: Yep, she was thirty-nine when she went back.

A: Do you know why she decided to go back?

F: Yes, because I was a hippie and giving my mother all sorts of problems, and she decided if I could go to school, she could too. Don't ask me to explain that thinking, but she went back. I dropped out of school, and my mom went back to school, so it was kind of an odd thing. After she got her degree—she graduated summa [cum

laude] from UMass in 1974—then she went to Simmons [College] and got her MSW [Masters in Social Work] in 1977. So she's had an interesting career. Even though she started late, she ended up with a twenty-five year career, which is what I'm hoping for too. She just quit work last year, in fact she's down here with me now and it looks like she'll be in Florida with me indefinitely.

A: What type of work was it that she did after she got her degree?

F: [She was a] social worker. She worked in a couple neighborhood agencies, and then she went to Bridgewater State Hospital in Massachusetts, and she was, I believe, chief social worker. The criminally insane of Massachusetts are sent to Bridgewater, so that's where she spent the last part of her career. So [that was] interesting work.

A: Were you and your mom ever at school at the same time, or did your mom go back right after you quit?

F: No, we weren't at school at the same time. I went to Boston College right after high school, and that's basically where I dropped out of. I went two years, then I went back my third year, but I just stopped going to class and took withdraw and failings. So I had never looked at my transcript until I applied for grad school and [I] realized how bad it was.

A: What influenced you to go to Boston College after you graduated?

F: They gave me a full scholarship, I was Catholic and the nuns approved of it, [and] my mom was thrilled. So basically I went there because it seemed like the right

thing for an Irish-Catholic to do.

A: What did you begin studying?

F: [I began studying] history, but in 1968 when I went to Boston College, women were not allowed in the school of liberal arts. You could either go to the school of education or nursing, and the only way I could get to take history classes that were interesting was to say I was going to teach high school, and then I was allowed to take history classes in the school of liberal arts, it was actually arts and sciences they called it. That was the only way for me to get to take history classes I liked was to say I was going to be a secondary ed teacher, which of course I really didn't want to be. I never wanted to teach high school, but it was our way of working the system. So yeah, I left in 1971, and I still don't believe they had admitted women to arts and sciences, though I'm not sure at what point they did. But I know when I went it was either nursing or education; no liberal arts. It's a Jesuit school, so we just took it for granted in those days.

A: Did you have an idea of what you wanted to be?

F: I wanted to teach college history. So eventually, that's where I'm at now, trying to teach college history. So I've done a great big circle in my life.

A: So tell me a little bit about Boston College and why you didn't finish the first time.

F: When I went to Boston College, I was very sheltered. [I was a] typical product of Boston's Catholic schools. I started getting interested in politics and alternative lifestyles, I'll put this delicately, and getting involved in the whole counter-culture of

the 1960s and things like that. So I was really much more interested in politics, [the] anti-war movement, Socialism, and things like that than I was in my schoolwork.

That's really why I dropped out, just because I was so busy going from demonstration to demonstration. I didn't have time for class. I went back for the first semester of my junior year, then I just dropped out and got a job, and by 1972 I was married.

A: What job did you get after you dropped out?

F: I had a variety of jobs. I worked for someone who made independent movies. He would get brilliant ideas and we would write them down and type them for him. That was one of my odd jobs. I worked as a waitress in **Brigham's**. I worked as a waitress in **Liggitz**. I worked at Mass. General for a short time on dispatch. We would carry messages and transfer patients throughout the hospital. I worked doing public opinion polls. [I] just [did] a lot of really weird little jobs. There was really no rhyme or reason to my life at that point.

A: When you got married, were you still on the same path? Did you have any intentions of going back to school eventually?

F: When I got married, I've never really changed. My politics remained pretty much the same. I still participate in demonstrations and things like that when the big ones come up. So my politics have always stayed radical, but I did get married. I was madly in love, so I got married in 1972. I was twenty-two years old when I got married, and I stayed home for many years. I stayed home as a wife. Then I had my

first baby in 1975, and when I had her, I started thinking, wow, if anything happens to my husband, I won't be able to support her. It's [a] totally from the gut reaction to having a baby and that sense of responsibility. So I went back to school and I got my bachelors in 1977. I graduated in May of 1977 with my BS in social work because I decided not to go back for history and I didn't want to teach grammar school. I went for social work because I figured if anything happened to my husband, I could get a job working in the welfare system or something. I went for a trade because I had this baby and I felt responsible. So I graduated in May 1977.

A: Was this from Boston College?

F: No, it was from Suffolk University, it's a small liberal arts college on Beacon Hill. [It's a] very nice school. It's more famous for its law school. My husband actually taught law at the school, so I went because I got in for free tuition. So there was [a] practical reason for going to Suffolk. Then I had my second child in November 1977, so he was with me when I graduated, sort of.

A: Could you tell me maybe if you had any sort of culture shocks re-entering the university system after having a child and being married and being a few years removed from that?

F: In 1977 it wasn't that bad because I wasn't that far out of it. I just really had a very no-nonsense attitude; I was just going to take the classes I had to take, get the degree, and be finished and finish off my family and go on with my life. To me it was just like business, it was my job. I just went to school, took the class, [and] did the paper. I

think also, because it was a trade, my whole mind set was different; I wasn't involved emotionally with it at all. It was just not enjoyable. And really, because I had a baby at home, I just went for classes; I didn't get involved in anything at school. I just did the class and went back home, so there was no time for any kind of emotional response to anything. It was just cut and dried.

A: What about your first time at Boston College? What kind of involvement did you have? Were you very involved?

F: When I went to Boston College, coming out of a Catholic high school where everything is very regimented, even though Boston College certainly wasn't like Boston University, there was still a lot of freedom. I found that exhilarating. For instance, when I was a senior in high school, the book Lord of the Flies was very popular. We actually had to get permission from the principal to read that book and take it out of our library. So coming from that kind of atmosphere where even reading a novel is so regimented, I found college just absolutely thrilling, which is probably why I went so crazy and just got involved with all this crazy politics and stuff. It was a whole new world opening up for me. I mean in those days, we couldn't even go to certain movies. Before I'd go to a movie, my mom would check and make sure it was okay with the church that I go. I really led a sheltered life until I went to college, and even that was kind of sheltered because it was a Catholic college; it was a small college. I sort of found my life experience on my own.

A: At Boston College did you live on campus?

F: No, I lived at home for my first year, and my second year I lived with a bunch of friends on **Commath** in the Austin section of Boston. It was basically a big old commune.

A: How did that effect having the new freedom of college and yet still living with your mom?

F: My mom was a Democrat, but very Republican in her thinking. We were having a lot of problems because I told her I wasn't going to go to church anymore. In fact, I had decided not to go to church when I was sixteen, so she had a nervous breakdown because she was sure she was going to go to hell because of what I decided to do. So we weren't getting along. Now we get along fine because mom got radicalized when she went to college, it's a trip, but in those days she was very rigid and very conservative. So when I went to college and started doing all these rebellious things, she went slightly crazy. Also, I got arrested a couple times in demonstrations [and] it was very hard for my mother at that point. I'm sure she must have been embarrassed. Then my family was so conservative and so rigid that it was very embarrassing for her to have a daughter like me. I was the antithesis of everything she was supposed to have, so those were rough years.

A: Tell me a little bit more about when you said your mom went to college and she got radicalized. How did that happen?

F: Well she went to UMass in 1970 and she took an English class, [and it was] the same thing that happened to me going to college, where you had new ideas

available and all kinds of academic subjects opened for us. It was the same for her. All of a sudden she just started thinking outside of the box, and basically, I converted her from being very pro-Vietnam War to being very against, so that at one point when I got arrested, my mom yelled at the cop who called her up to tell her I had been arrested, demanding to know if I was alright and to make sure they hadn't beaten me or anything. So she came a long, long way in a year. It was just a great time.

A: You've protested against the Vietnam War, and what other causes did you protest?

F: I protested the first time when I was fifteen-I marched in the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Boston-[but] I can't remember the group; it was something like Young Catholics Against Segregation or something like that. It was a Catholic sponsored Civil Rights thing. So that was my first, and I was involved in little things like that, but I was only fifteen so there was a limit to what my mom would allow. She wasn't really very happy about me marching in South Boston either just because she was afraid for me because **Southy** is, and still remains, a kind of tough neighborhood.

A: Let's go back a little bit to your next time at college. I wanted to know about your experiences fitting in with younger students there, which obviously you were there just streamlined—get a degree—but what about in your classes?

F: Well, it was a lot easier for me because it was just all business, so I actually did my schoolwork and had my papers done. I enjoyed it more because I was a little older, [and] for some reason things came easier to me. I actually got a B in biology, which

is something I never thought I'd do; science was always my weakness. But going back, I think I took that my last year, so it must have been 1976/1977 year, and it came to me. I just think that's one of the benefits of being older. It was not the great mystery that it might have been seven or eight years before. So I enjoyed that. I didn't get into any kind of social life; I was older than the other students, I had a baby, so I really had nothing in common with my classmates. They would get angry at the professor for giving them a low grade, and I was doing okay, so I wouldn't participate in these little ruckuses. I didn't have any social life at school.

A: What about your actual experience getting admitted to the college? How was the process of admissions and getting your transcript evaluated?

F: Well, that was a little embarrassing because my husband was teaching at the law school, so I had to go and see the director of admissions for an interview and bring my transcripts from Boston College. He was very nice to me, but it was pretty clear that something happened, but they accepted me. Of course there were things I had to make up, but other than just the embarrassment [of] saying, well yes, my last semester at Boston College was all W/F's. But it passed and I got in, and that was fine. I didn't have to take any SATs because I had taken them the first time, so they admitted me, probably reluctantly, but they decided to give me a second chance, so it was great.

A: You said earlier that when you studied for different subjects the second time you went to college, that it wasn't a great mystery [and] some things just came to you.

How else had you changed?

F: Well, I changed in that I was married and had a child, so I was not really involved in my great causes and things like that. I had a very sedate life at that point. My daughter was born in February, and I was back in school in September, so she was very young. I really liked being a mother, I loved staying at home, so going to school was just something I was doing as a necessary thing. Really the focus of my attention was on my daughter. It was kind of, not meaningless, but I wasn't really emotionally involved in it. It was just get through it and do it and get done so that I could focus on finishing off my family, which is really what I wanted to do.

A: How did you line up childcare and deal with that aspect?

F: That was really hard because my mom was back in school, so she was unavailable. My husband's mother was a lawyer, and she and my father-in-law had a law office on Beacon Hill, so I would take my daughter to the office. What they did is, they had an empty office on the second floor of the office suite, and they turned it into a nursery. So I would bring my daughter there while I was at school [and] my mother-in-law would baby-sit for her. So that's how we did it. I don't even know if there were any childcare options available to us. I don't think that there were any childcare options at the university. So it was definitely that, and if she couldn't do it, then I had to hire a babysitter. You did what you could; no daycare. So my mother-in-law was very helpful that way.

A: So you were a full-time student and a full-time mom and what other roles did you

have at this point?

F: I was a wife too, and my husband was a professor at the college at the law school, so that involves going to these dinners and all that kind of political stuff. He was also involved, his father and he, with city politics, so I actually had a social life in those days. We'd go to fundraisers and things like that.

A: Did you meet any other non-traditional students in your time there?

F: No, [I did not meet any other non-traditional students].

A: So you were in the college among a sea of people who were eighteen to twenty-two.

F: Yes. Suffolk has always had a night school, so I am sure that there were older students there at the time, I just didn't encounter them because I wasn't working [and] I could take classes in the daytime. But Suffolk has always made a provision for their undergrads who are non-traditional students, [and] I thought that was great, but for me, I was taking class in the daytime with the seventeen and eighteen year olds. It was [a] very weird kind of thing. I didn't feel like I was a part of anything; I was just there. I was the alien in that group. I wasn't as old then as I am now, so I wasn't as alien, I didn't feel as alien as I do sometimes now.

A: Do you think your relationships in class with your other students and teachers was affected by your age being a little bit older than they were?

F: You mean back when I was at Suffolk?

A: Yes, at Suffolk.

F: Well I didn't really have any relationship with undergrads. I didn't have any relationship with other students. I just was in and out. With teachers, I wasn't so old that they were younger than I was, which was really nice, because now some of my teachers are younger than I am, so it's really weird. It was okay. Personally I felt that they liked non-traditional students because we tended to be, as I'm told, more serious, and [we] give them less aggravation than younger students do, or so I've been told. I don't know whether that's true or not.

A: Are there any ways that your age and experience in life at your time at Suffolk made it harder to be a student?

F: [It was] harder to be a student because I was beset by practical problems like childcare. If my daughter was cranky, I couldn't give myself 100 percent to the paper I was working on. My ex-husband was a very traditional kind of 1950s and 1960s guy, and he was no help at all taking care of her. He just wasn't involved, so it's not like I could give her to him at night and say, I have a paper, could you watch the baby. That made my life much more difficult. It was really, really hard having a baby and trying to keep [up], but I didn't pass papers in late or anything. But that was the biggest thing, and no eighteen-year-old, unless they have a baby, is going to understand that I'm typing a paper with a baby in my lap. I did an awful lot of work between midnight and morning because that's when she was asleep. It was tough. I haven't thought about it in a long time, but yeah, it was really tough.

A: The timing of your decision to have a second baby, was that purposely intended so

that you would be pregnant and then [graduate]?

F: Well, yeah, because the baby was planned and I was graduating in May, so we decided that winter to have another baby. So I graduated and I was pregnant. It was part of my life plan to have a second one and then just bring up babies. So I had the security of having my bachelors degree in case anything happened I could get a job. For a long time I was a stay-at-home mom.

A: Were there any additional complications to being pregnant and being a student at the same time?

F: Yeah. I had a miscarriage in between my babies, so I missed about two weeks of school, so that was hard, but I made it up. Then I was pregnant when I graduated. Gee, I don't know, he was born in November, so I must have been pregnant by March, so [I was pregnant] only two months when I graduated. It was not really an issue. I think if I was like six months pregnant it would have been a bigger issue, but at that point you take everything in stride.

A: What kind of outside support did you receive during this time at Suffolk going back to school?

F: [What do you mean by] outside support?

A: Maybe emotional support from family, or were you on your own?

F: I was on my own. My mom was back in school herself. Gosh, she was in grad school, so she was totally insane with her life. My mother-in-law was very supportive because she helped me with the babysitting, and also she really encouraged me to

go and was very supportive of my decision to go back, which was really a big deal and it meant a lot to me. My ex-husband was more or less angry at me for going back, he resented the fact that I wasn't around to take care of him. That was the hard part too, because basically if I ran into a problem of babysitting it was like, well you decided to go back to school, so you figure it out. He was kind of punishing me for doing that. Actually when I went back to school later in my life, the same mind set predominated, so he didn't change much over the years.

A: Tell me what happened after you received your degree. You decided to stay at home?

F: Yeah, [I wanted to stay at home].

A: Then what?

F: I had my son in 1977, and we were living in Boston at the time and basically that's what I did: I was a stay at home mom [and] I didn't work outside the home. My husband worked, so we had a very traditional set up. I'm really quite thrilled that that option was open to me because I'm not certain that it's open to a lot of women anymore. I was able to stay home and be with the babies. I loved being a mother, it was just super, so it was really great for me. And my ex-husband required a lot of care, so it was a full-time job. I'm not certain whether he required more care than the babies or not, but it's possible. But I stayed home until 1984. He decided to quit teaching and open a private practice, so when he did that I was his secretary when he opened up his own legal practice. But I worked at home, so that was kind of

agreeable too. He had an office in the home, and that's how he started.

A: What made you decide to stop being his secretary eventually?

F: I hated working with him—we didn't work well together at all. He was just very exacting and we would fight a lot. I only worked for him for two years and he fired me. He went into a partnership with another attorney and I would work days, and the other attorney's wife would work in the afternoon. As soon as they could afford it they fired us to hire a real secretary. It's always a problem when someone is being mean to you at the office and then when they come home and they want to know what's for dinner. It's like, if I had a particularly bad day, I would say poison. I would not feel like making dinner for this guy who gave me a hard time all morning. We did not work well together at all. So as soon as the business took off, we parted business ways for about three or four years. I ended up going back to work for him in 1989 in the partnership as a paralegal, and that was a lot better because I worked on my own. I took these workshops that they offered for paralegals and things like that and just learned how to do it. It just made a big difference. I was not a good secretary, but I was a great paralegal. I had no training to be a secretary, so why on Earth he thought I could be a legal secretary I do not know, but it was very stressful. I worked as a paralegal until 2000, so eleven years.

A: Did you enjoy your work as a paralegal?

F: Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't. I liked the investigative part of it. I liked putting a case together. I did a lot of accident cases and malpractice, so I enjoyed

sending for the records and going over them [and] making the trial notebook. That was exciting because it's kind of interesting because it's like history, you do a lot of research, putting puzzle pieces together, why this accident created this situation and things like that. So that part of it I really liked, [but] the day to day details are not that exciting. When my children grew up and I started thinking about the next part of my life, I knew I didn't want anything to do with the law just because I tend to be an idealistic person, and I found working as a paralegal to be very disillusioning, to say the least, and I just didn't want anything to do with the law. My ex-husband really wanted me to go to law school and I feel certain I could have done it, but I didn't want to. I was casting about for something to do, and I was going to go get my MSW because I had the bachelors in social work and I thought, well that's what I should do. My son was in school at the time and he called me up for help on a history paper, and I discussed it with him. He said, you know Ma, forget about social work, you should do what you love, do history. It was like a revelation: Do what I love? What a novel idea! So that's when I decided to go apply for a master's in history, and that was sort of the beginning of this whole process that has taken me to Florida.

A: How old was your son at this time?

F: This would have been 1997, so he would have been nineteen or twenty.

A: So he was in college?

F: Yeah. I always give him the credit [for getting me started on this]. As I look back, I

sort of feel like I lost myself somewhere along the line, and that was sort of the beginning of finding myself again; deciding to go back and study what I enjoy and love. It was a great moment, so he gets the kudos for that. Your kids tend to know you very well—they spend eighteen to twenty years with you—so they do know you pretty well.

A: I think that's kind of interesting that your time in college sort of sparked your mom going to school, and now your son did that for you.

F: Yeah, I never connected that. That's interesting.

A: Was there a time that you volunteered? Was that before or after you went back to college to get a MS in history?

F: [That was] before. Once I went to grad school, I didn't have time. I did a lot of volunteer work. I took training programs at Fort Devens, which was in **Air Mass**, Massachusetts. They had a spousal abuse hotline, but honestly in the year that I was there I got only one call because the Army had a very tricky thing. It was kind of good for women because if their spouse abused them they could have them removed from quarters, but after thirty days, if he wasn't back in quarters, they had to leave. So Army women were kind of in a catch-22: it was great on one hand, but if they kept him out of quarters then they would lose them. So they just tended not to complain. I took training with **LUK center** in Fitchburg, Mass., and they just basically taught us crisis intervention. So I got a certificate in that and went to Fort Devens for a year. They had childcare on base, so that made it kind of nice, but

really there was nothing to do, so I quit. I'm not exactly sure of my dates, but probably in 1996, I did another training for National Rape and Assault in Nashua, New Hampshire, and I started working [there]. I worked for them for about three years. We would do twelve hour stints of duty, so you'd work either eight to eight in the daytime or eight to eight at night. If someone was taken in the hospital, usually the hospital would call us and we'd be there if someone had been raped or beaten up. We'd go and help them through the process of reporting it to the police. If they wanted us to stay during the exam we would. So once you went out at night you did not know when you were coming back. It could be like three hours because you just would stay with them as long as they wanted you to. We'd go to court with them and basically just support them through the legal process. I did that for about three or four years; I enjoyed that too, that's good work.

A: That's interesting combining your social work expertise and legal knowledge. I wanted to know, I meant to ask you earlier, if your mom's career in social work, her decision to get a degree in that, if that affected your decision to choose social work to be the job that would eventually support you if you needed to?

F: I don't think at that time [it was because of my mom]. I was really involved with my own family, and my mother and I weren't that close at that time, so no, it didn't early on. It was basically casting about for something I could do easily and get out of school fast. I didn't want to go for education because I'd have to take education classes and it would add to my time. I actually got [my degree] in crime and

delinquency as my minor because I felt that I could work for state welfare, I could get a job as a probation officer, [or] I could work in the criminal justice system. I felt it just opened all kinds of things, [and] it was also the quickest course of action to get me in and out fast. There was really no romance [or] anything involved with it, I just made a very practical decision at that point. I wouldn't have to repeat that much [and] a lot of my credits from BC would count, so there was no what I wanted, what I desired to do, [or] what I was excited about [involved]. [There was] nothing like that; [it was] just in and out.

[end side A1]

A: How long did it take to get your degree at Suffolk?

F: I got through in two years; fall of 1975 I went back, and [I] graduated in 1977. I just went through; there was no slacking, no nothing, so I was done in two years.

A: About how many courses do you think you would take in a semester at average?

F: I think I was taking four, maybe five; I went full-time. The second year I had to do an internship, so that was kind of gruesome too because that just added, I forget how many hours, [to my load]. But I had to do an internship, and I did that over in South Boston in a teen outreach place. It was tough, it was really, really tough. I do not know how I did it, I can't figure that one out, but it must just be that I was younger [and] having energy. It's tiring me out just thinking about it now.

A: Tell me a little bit about deciding to get your master's degree. How did that go, where did you decide to go, and what course of action did you take? Your kids were

in college at this point?

F: Yes, my son was in college. My daughter basically took her college fund to California and decided to be an actress after high school, so I'm not sure where she was. She might have been in California this year, probably explaining my empty nest, because she was getting work as an extra in movie sets out there. She was out there for about a year I think, and I was just sort of thinking, I don't want to keep at this and looking about for what to do with the rest of my life. Getting the master's degree in social work seemed like a natural extension of working at the rape and assault center because that's sort of social work. I think that was sort of pushing me in that direction. Of course by that time my mother had her MSW, this would be 1996 or 1997, so my mom has an MSW, my brother Joe has an MSW, and my brother Richard was in school to get his, and he also went back to school in his forties. So we are the late blooming family, except for my brother Joe and my brother Arthur. Two of my brothers went the regular route, but my brother Tracy and I basically were late bloomers. So after my son said that to me, I was living in New Hampshire, so I decided to go for an interview and talk to the graduate student advisor at the University of New Hampshire, and she told me that I should take a class through the extension. She said that I should do that in the fall, do the application, and so when they were considering my application in the spring, someone in the department would have had me for class and would know me. You could do three classes through the extension and have them count towards your

master's, so it wasn't wasting time or anything. I went with my daughter, so she was obviously there in the summer, so she was back from California, we went to Durham, [and] talked to Lucy Salyer in the history department up there. She told me I should take a class with Janet Polasky because it was women's history and she thought I'd be interested in it.

So I picked up the syllabus in Janet Polasky's office and went over to the bookstore with my daughter to buy the books. I started flipping through the pages of the syllabus and I looked at the books and basically I just had a meltdown and I just said to my daughter, I can't do this, there's no way I can read all these books, and I ran away. I just said, forget about it, I can't do it, and I left. I drove home and I said, there's no way I can read all those books, it's just not possible. Basically it scared me to death looking at the syllabus. I said, there's no way anybody can do this, it's impossible. Grad school is so different than undergrad, and of course that would be my last experience. I just was shell shocked that day. I just went home and then I started thinking about it. I said, well, I really want to, but clearly I can't take this class, so I'll do something simpler and more confined and less novels. So the only class I felt was sort of in the box enough for me to feel comfortable was German history. I really was not that interested in German history, but at least it's from such-n-such a date to such-n-such a date, and it's more traditional.

So I signed up for the German history class and I took that that fall and I did well. It was horrible because I didn't know how to write, I didn't know what he wanted from

me, but he was very patient and so finally I figured out how to write a review for him and did okay. Then for the spring, I signed up through the extension for Gender and Southern History, and I can't remember the other class, but I really loved the Gender and Southern History, and that sort of got me going. I was accepted the next year for the program, so that was the beginning.

A: How did your initial class match up to your past experience, which would have been maybe seventeen or eighteen years earlier?

F: [It was] longer [than that]. The last time I would have taken a history class would have been the fall 1970, because it's the same year I met my husband. So this was 1996/1997, [and] it was just absolutely shocking. I think that for myself I made a good decision to go with the German history just because it was a little more traditional. I think if I had gone into a Gender and Southern History class that semester, I would have been totally like, what are you talking about? The way history was taught in 1970 and the way it's taught now is just worlds and worlds apart. It was all political history when I was in school last.

A: What other differences are there in the way history's being taught from 1970 to the new millennium?

F: Well, history is much more nuanced. We, in say 1968-1970, we had a master narrative of history: these are the facts, you just know how it all goes and you'll be fine. We didn't have women's history, African-American history, [and] American Indians were a footnote. Women historians look back and say it was "white man's

history,” and that’s exactly what it was. So taking the German history wasn’t so very different. This professor didn’t do very much about German women, though he encouraged me to do a paper about daycare in East Germany after the war. So I did that, but still, it wasn’t very different. It wasn’t cultural and social history: studying prostitution, studying women’s work, you know the very fact that women would leave home and how they first found work and developed roles for themselves. This was all totally unknown to me when I was in school the first time. So it’s much more exciting now than it was then.

A: What about the actual process of studying and the skills that are necessary for being back in school? How was that after your break even though you did a lot of work in the meantime?

F: I found it absolutely traumatizing because I had worked as a paralegal for years, and the writing style for that is you put as little as possible in writing because this document might be used at trial so you don’t want to say too much in your legal writing. You have to always be careful what you’re saying, so it was very brief, very tightly constructed, [and had] no details. That was the kind of writing I had done for years, so when I came back to school, writing has been just really the hardest, hardest piece of it. It has been really, really tough. I think that has been the hardest part of it. What we do, I think, and a lot of other students agree, we learn how to write for each professor for each class we take. There’s not a lot of leeway. We learn what they want and we do it. It’s been a trip. I really didn’t learn how to write

until I came here and Dr. Sheryl Kroen, when she gave me back my paper, gave me back a page of written suggestions. She really models writing, and that's when I learned how to write, when I took her classes last year. She's just a tremendous, tremendous academic. That was traumatic. It's traumatic too when you're forty-six and forty-seven years old and feeling like you don't know anything. When I went to my first history class and they used the word historiography, I didn't know what the hell that meant. It was like, historiography, I must be really stupid because I don't know what that means. And the lingo [is different]; you have to learn a whole new language. Things that people who had gone from their undergrad to grad school would just take for granted were just a big stumbling block for me because it was just learning a whole new language. History itself had changed so much. It was exciting. When I was in school in 1970, things were sort of starting to make that change, we were starting to deal with under classes and things like that a little more, but it was certainly nothing like it is now where everybody has a voice. It's kind of nice. I have found it very difficult, and I found UF to be a whole world unto itself. It's my first big school too.

A: So you got a master's degree . . .

F: [Yes], in 2000.

A: From which school?

F: [I got the master's from the] University of New Hampshire.

A: What made you decide to move down here?

F: I got a divorce in 2000, and for the first time in my life I felt like I was free to do whatever I wanted. Of course I wanted the education, but I also wanted a chance to live in a different culture, so I applied for Florida, Arizona, and Washington state. Clearly, I wanted to live someplace different. I was very tempted to go to Northern Arizona because it was in Flagstaff and I'd love to live in the West; it would be nice if I got a job at Northern Arizona some day. So for me it was a choice between Arizona and Florida, and I decided on Florida for a lot of reasons: they offered me a fellowship for my first year, which was very nice, it's easier to get back home from Florida than it is from Flagstaff, Arizona, and I had a friend who was going to school down here, so at least I knew somebody, even if it was just one person, I knew somebody. So that's how I decided.

A: Tell me a little bit more about going and getting a master's degree. How about family support then? You said you had family late bloomers, so what was their reaction to your decision?

F: My mother thought it was great and was very supportive of me going back to school because she wanted me to get out and do something anyway. She just felt I just needed to develop my own interests at that point and not just do something because it's the family business. My kids were both very supportive, and continue to be, of what I do. They're great. I actually got my daughter back to school when I went back. So here we see just a little reversal of that mother-daughter trend. She was working in a gas station after she came back from California, and I suggested she

take a class in something she really liked. I said, just take one class and see how you like it. So she took an English class and she got sucked in. So she ended up getting her bachelor's degree, and now she's in the master's program and UNH. She's an ancient historian. She's not quite as out of her depth as I was going back in my forties, but she was in her twenties when she went for her bachelor's. She's twenty-nine now, she's married, and she should get her master's next December.

A: Did you and your daughter attend the same school at the same time?

F: She got her bachelor's from the University of New Hampshire in Manchester, and I worked on my master's at the Durham campus, the main campus. So we weren't in the same class, though we did have one of the same professors. Of course now she's taking professors I've had because now [that] she's getting her master's, she's at the Durham campus. When she went there she talked to my old advisor, so that was kind of nice because at least they knew her before she came. The University of New Hampshire is just a great academic environment, especially the history department. It was a very hard decision to leave there because they accepted me too, and I'm never really totally 100 percent sure I did the right thing.

A: Since your time in graduate school, how has your relationship with other students and teachers differed from your time at Boston College and then at Suffolk?

F: That's really hard because grad school is different. I have made some very good friends here, in fact, I have a twenty-eight year old roommate this year. She's from Japan [and] she's in the history department too. So my life has sort of broadened

and I've made some very good friends down here, and they are younger because I'm a grad student. So naturally the friends I make in my own department are going to be younger. [As for] professors, Louise Newman is my chair, so I know her pretty well, and Sheryl Kroen, I just really think of her as my mentor down here. So I don't really socialize with them, though I've had dinner and coffee with them. It's odd, you always feel very odd. And also, because I think graduate school kind of infantilizes people—it turns you into a baby; you're always jumping through hoops and taking tests—so sometimes it's hard when you're fifty-three because people are treating you like a baby and constantly testing you. It's difficult; I find it very, very hard sometimes, and not a little discouraging.

A: So are you saying that most of the students in graduate school at this time have enough maturity accumulated that they don't need to constantly go through the ropes and do these things that you're motivated on your own without that?

F: I can't speak about other people. I've met some really brilliant people in this department, but the process of getting to candidacy is in some ways demeaning to us as people. I'm sure that in every department there are people who aren't serious about their work and it's a mistake that they're there, I guess, but I think most of us [care]. We give up a good portion of our life to do this, so to be treated like a baby is kind of insulting—at least I find it so. Don't let anybody in the department hear this interview until I'm out. (Laughing) It's just a fact of life. It's the system, the academic system, that you're constantly tested and stuff like that. But gee, the people I know in

the history department are really serious students. Everybody is going crazy and demented over this test, that test, and they're all serious. I mean, we're all serious people. I don't know anybody who's having a good time and is a graduate student in history. I mean if you can get one social night a week, you're doing a wild and crazy week. All we do is read, and we're deadly serious, and we work. I don't know, sometimes I think it's made unnecessarily difficult.

A: How have the students changed from your time as an undergraduate student to a graduate student, if you've noticed? You're in a different league of students, but if you've had any observations about the undergraduates students. Also, being a TA, you could tell me a little about that too.

F: When I was an undergraduate the first time, it was a very unusual time. Everything was very political, we were going to change the world, so I think that passion is gone. Now I don't really see it as a strong [force]. History is a great place for that kind of passion to be played out, so once in a while I have a very passionate student, but it's a different time. It really is a different time and place. I'm not sure that you can compare 1968-1970 to 2003-2004. It's a different world. I guess, if I was an undergraduate now, and compare my undergrad years to yours, I would say that I would miss the passion of those years.

A: What has it been like being in school at the same time as your children?

F: Actually that's been kind of nice because we all understand what we're all going through. I mean they would have understood, I like to think, but it's been kind of fun

because we'll call each other up and we'll talk about what we're doing [and] we'll talk about our papers. Like my daughter sends me her papers all the time to edit. My son is a physicist, so we don't meet on any academic ground at all, but he'll talk to me about his classes and stuff like that. So I have a really good relationship with my children, I enjoy them, and I like them too, which is really nice now that they're grown up; as people I like them. It's kind of fun because we're all students together. We talk on the phone a lot and we complain about this and complain about that. When my daughter is really stressed about the amount of work she has to do [or] with the amount reading she has to do, she finds it easier to talk to me than my ex because I know what she's going through. I understand what it's like to read every bloody night, and he thinks of it as just being in school, so it's not [that bad]. There's a certain bond in sharing graduate school together because we understand. Like if I say to her, I have to do two papers by such-n-such a date and I'm just zipping through, I don't care what they're about, I just want to get them done, she understands. So it's been nice. As I said, my son [and I] can only discuss generalities because he's like one of these mathematical/science geniuses, but he's going to be a teacher too, so that's kind of interesting. At this point my daughter's thinking about going to law school, but she's not positive. So basically we're all sort of on the teacher track, so we talk about that and we're never going to be rich.

A: Speaking of finances, how have you been able to afford your time here? You got a

fellowship your first year.

F: And I have a TA'ship and also I have rehabilitative alimony for my marriage. I was married for twenty-eight years, so I have that for four years. That ends next May, so I have to be done here and ready to take adjuncts and get my dissertation written. So I'm definitely under a time constraint [and] I don't have a minute to spare. When he asked me how long I needed to get the Ph.D., I just said four years. I should have said five or six because that's more realistic, but I just wanted to get the paperwork done and get out, so I said four. So that's how I'm managing. For my dissertation I might have to go back and stay with him and his new wife while I finish my dissertation, so it's certainly not traditional, but we get along, so that's good.

A: What's the subject of your dissertation?

F: It's going to be gay and lesbian history in Boston during the 1970s. I've talked to my committee about it. At first I was just going to do the 1970s after Stonewall, how the gay community in Boston basically started building community and coming up with a lesbian bookstore, the political changes that happened, but as Brian Ward pointed out, I really need to do the 1960s, and maybe even the 1950s, to say how it was before. So it's going to be a community study of Boston and the gay/lesbian community there.

A: What about other multiple roles that you have now that you're in a different situation in life and back in school again? What roles do you have, and how do you juggle them and then the stress?

F: Well, the stress is huge, that's my biggest problem, but that all comes from grad school. Occasionally something will happen with my kids that'll cause me some distress. My mother is visiting me and she's going to stay with me until April, but she might be moving in with me next year because my brother might not be able to take her. Those are just sort of ordinary things that you take in stride, but really my stress comes from grad school. My kids, other than occasional bumps in life, are sort of set, so they don't cause me any grief. I get along with my family really well. In some ways this is a really good part of my life because all I really am doing is I'm in school and I'm doing what I want to do, so I guess I have to say I'm where I want to be. In spite of all the insane parts of it I'm really, really happy, so I can't complain. There are definitely worse things to do than being in grad school at fifty-three, so it's not bad.

A: Your ultimate career goal is to be a teacher, but what exactly would be the most thrilling thing for you to be able to teach, and where?

F: I think, I mean if I was going to have a dream job, I'd love to teach at University of Massachusetts in Boston. That would be my dream job. I'd like to teach African-American history, women's history, [or] gay/lesbian history; any of those courses would be just super with me. I like University of Massachusetts because there's a lot of working class people in it. I like the location; it's on the ocean, it's in my old neighborhood, and I do love Boston, so I want to go back. One of the good things about living away from Boston is you sort of rediscover how much you miss it and

love it. So that would be really super. I have six million research papers I'd like to do that I never have time to do. I don't have time to do any of my own work because I'm always sort of running to catch up with stuff I need to do for school. I'd like a chance just to get into the archives somewhere and dig in for a couple of months and come up with a paper. Things like that. I know I'll always be interested in discovering new things. You have to love going through old papers and putting the detective story of history together, otherwise you couldn't possibly do all this. I'm really looking forward to getting done with my class work, which hopefully will be this summer. I'll take my last class, and just moving on. My advisor talked to me about what I thought I'd be doing, and I said, well I guess I'm going to work till I die. My mother just retired this year, and she's seventy-two, so I guess I'm just going to go that route and have a twenty year career. I'm just going to keep healthy and keep working.

A: Tell me, I meant to ask, when you moved down to Gainesville to go to school, what was that like entering this new phase, working towards a Ph.D., and living in a brand new place where you know one friend, and completely different from your past experiences.

F: I packed, I had a Ryder moving van, I had my dog, and I remember pulling out from New Hampshire and looking in the mirror at the house as it sort of faded, and I felt really excited because it was like I was going on an adventure. The first day was great, I stayed overnight in Delaware, and the next time I got out of the Ryder van was in Virginia, and I got out and I felt like I was in a blast furnace, and that's when I

knew I was doing something different because the heat was unbelievable. I thought to myself, my God, this is Virginia, wait till I get to Florida. I moved down here in June and it was awful. I thought to myself, I'm insane, I've ruined my life by moving here, I'm crazy, because, oh my God, I couldn't even breathe! I would go walking [and] I would feel like I was underwater because of the humidity. Sometimes I think I'm insane to live here, and other times [I think] well at least I've had this experience. I've gotten acclimated and I don't miss the snow. I found you can have Christmas without snow and it's really nice.

A: So tell me, are there any special challenges that you've faced as a non-traditional student that we haven't already talked about that you think are important to mention?

F: There's the feeling like a fish out of water sometimes because of your age and everybody else is younger, so that's always interesting because what's important to someone who's twenty-eight is not important to someone who's in their fifties. But there are people who are older than I am in the history department, so they probably think that what's important to me is not important to them. Trying to learn a whole new discipline is very disconcerting and difficult. Learning how to write all over again when you're fifty. Learning how to think all over again when you're fifty because your way of constructing analysis in history is just completely different than anything else I've ever done. So you're learning a whole new trade later in life, and it's hard sometimes because you've been successful at what you did before and all of a sudden you're a nothing—not exactly a nothing, but we're nothings. We're sort of

at the bottom of the academic food chain as grad students and TA's, so that's been [hard]. I've had some problems sometimes feeling like, I'm not this stupid, because sometimes you can feel like you're really stupid because you don't know so much. That's been hard for me, and just learning new things has been hard. I'll just slug forward, I guess, because I can't go back. I have to succeed.

A: You've got some good inertia behind you. What do you think the university can do to better meet needs of non-traditional students?

F: This is strictly personal, personally I'd start without those 7:20 classes, because by 9:00 at night, this non-traditional student is done. So I'd get rid of those 7:20-10:10 classes, and that's just a practical thing. I think sometimes I feel that trying to meet the schedule is difficult for me because I'm older and I'm slower, so having to have a paper in by such-n-such a date is sometimes really hard for me. I found taking my qualifying exams to be an absolute nightmare because they're done over twenty-four hours, but for me, as a non-traditional student, that really means six hours, because all I've got in me is six hours a day. I'm not twenty, I can't stay up all night and work on a paper anymore without it sounding like I've had a nervous breakdown in the middle of the night and it's gibberish. So just things like that. I have arthritis, so I can't sit at a computer for more than two hours without being in pain, and if I'm in pain, then I can't really think. I can't take medication because then I really can't think. So you can't deny that there are just physical constraints, and so that's what I think. Somehow it seems like since I came to Florida I suddenly got old and started

feeling these things more. My arthritis was diagnosed down here. So you do get these problems, but for me it's just physical things. I think we bring a lot to the table because of our experience and also because we don't get upset about things that someone who's twenty-eight might. So that's the good side of it, but there is also the fact that I'm not as fast as I was in my twenties. Things are a little more daunting at this age, so I sometimes have to work harder. There's good points. I think that older people [can contribute], especially [in] history, because when they're talking about the fifties and sixties, I remember it, so that can be a bonus. I remember things happening but didn't necessarily know why they happened, so I'm sort of learning why things happened in my life. I was very disappointed to find out that all the hippies and stuff, basically that backlash led to Richard Nixon being elected. I thought to myself, well if I knew that then, maybe I wouldn't have done what I did. So I don't know, I think the physical part's the tough part, and just the physical stamina it takes to get through reading a book a week for each class. But like I said, this is a great time of my life and I'm learning new things, and that's the up side of it. Yes, it's hard to learn new things, but it's also thrilling to learn new things. So all in all, I'm very happy with the decision I made, though sometimes I'm a little lonely. I miss my family, I miss my kids, so I think four years in Gainesville will be just right and I'll be ready to move back. My daughter tells me I'm going to be a grandma in 2005, or that's the plan, so I think I'll be going back at the right time.

A: Congratulations, and thank you very much for this interview. I enjoyed it a lot.

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F: Thank you. Okay, great.