Rebecca Young Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: Okay, so let me just introduce us to the tape recorder. It is January 29, 2002. I am sitting here in Boston with Rebecca Young, and the interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. So usually, to begin, if you can, just tell me briefly about your childhood. You can start with where you were born.

Rebecca Young: Yes, sure. I was born in New York City [on] February 19, 1964. And I'm an only child and lived with my parents first on Staten Island, and then in the Bronx until I was five, and then in Queens.

JR: Did you have other family nearby? [inaudible]

RY: Yeah. My father's sister, my aunt and uncle, and cousins were the family that I probably spent the most time with. They lived in Manhattan. I actually have a cousin who has the exact same birthday as me – same day, same year, so we used to have joint birthday parties. My grandparents on my father's side were still alive when I was a child, and they lived in Brooklyn, so I used to spend some time with them. On my mom's side, my grandparents had died before I was born.

JR: Were your parents both from the New York area?

RY: Yeah, they were. They both were. My grandparents were all from Europe. Both my grandfathers were from Warsaw, Poland, and one grandmother from Russia, and the other one from Germany.

JR: And what kind of work did your parents do?

RY: Well, when my parents met, they were both artists. My mother did various kinds of art. But primarily, she did a lot of work in paper-mâché, and she actually did a series of

caricatures. She grew up on the Lower East Side of New York, and she did a series of caricatures of people from her neighborhood when she was growing up in the '30s. So, there was the Ukrainian lady, the gypsy, and the Italian woman, and actually, a number of those pieces are owned by the Brooklyn Museum. And so when my parents met, my father was also an artist; he was a sculptor. But my father had a lot of – well, see now I'm thinking, do I want this on tape? What do I care? [laughter] My father was chronically mentally ill for my – well, the whole time that he was alive after I was born and before I was born. And so when they met, he was an artist, but his employment situation sort of came and went, and by the time that I was born, I don't ever really remember him holding down a job, sort of being able to do that.

JR: So it was your mother that's the primary breadwinner?

RY: Actually, we were on welfare the whole time that I was a little kid. And then, when I was seven, my parents got divorced, which was a good thing, and I stayed and lived with my mom, and I'd see my father on weekends. And we were still on welfare.

JR: Were your parents active in their communities?

RY: That is such an interesting question, I mean, because it never even crossed my mind. Not at all. I sort of feel like not in any way, which I really never thought about before. I think they actually lived a fairly isolated existence in a lot of ways. I think my father because he was mentally ill, and then my mother because she was somewhat controlled by my father. So she had her small circle of friends, who were all artists, but beyond that, not much.

JR: I just ask that question because I've discovered that so many of you that I've interviewed come from families where people have this kind of history [inaudible]. So it's been interesting to kind of – I mean, certainly not everybody, but it's been interesting to see some families where people see themselves sort of continuing a legacy, then in

some families where people are really reacting against, and cases in between. And it's been interesting.

RY: Yeah.

JR: How would you describe your family's politics if you have a sense of that?

RY: My mother, I mean – I think my political sensibilities come mostly from my mother, who was very liberal. And I remember being a little kid and her telling me stories about FDR from when she was much younger. I think that also part of my sense about politics came from being on welfare and sort of from watching what that was like for my mother and for me. So she was very liberal. My father, I probably – I don't think in my whole life I ever had a political conversation with him. But there were enough things said from time to time that I think he was really conservative politically, except that he always, on sort of gender issues – I always had the sense that he thought I could do anything. So in that way, he was liberal, but beyond that, I mean, I bet that he was a Republican. [laughter] And then other family members – well, I had an uncle, one of my mother's brothers, actually was a union organizer, and I always knew that my mother was really proud of him. He actually died when I was a kid of lung cancer; he was a big smoker. But I always knew that she really just adored Uncle Willy and thought that the stuff he did was really great. Beyond that, I mean in terms of other relatives, I probably don't even know that much, and certainly didn't when I was growing up.

JR: Right. Also, as a kid, it's hard to –

RY: Yeah, to pick that stuff up. Yeah, although it wasn't at all hard to pick up from my mother, that was really clear.

JR: What schools did you attend? Did you go to a public school [inaudible]?

RY: Oh, yeah. I went to PS 135 in Queens, and then I started at the local junior high school for seventh grade. And then, actually, at the end, towards the end of seventh grade, my mother died, and so when she died, I moved to Virginia because I had a first cousin who lived in Virginia who had agreed to let me live with her. She was much older than me; she was nineteen years older than me. And so then I went to the local middle school, and then I went to the extremely overcrowded local high school.

JR: Where in Virginia? Was this like the DC part [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]?

RY: Yeah, it was northern Virginia, and my cousin worked for a government agency. But it was – there's the part of northern Virginia that's right outside of DC that's actually – well, not only economically nice, but people are just relatively thoughtful and interesting, at least some of them. [laughter] But we were a little further south than that in a county – we were actually in Prince William County. I remember when I was in high school just being so shocked because a bond issue came up about the library, and it wasn't supported. I just thought, “How can you not support the library? Who are these people?” [laughter]

JR: Seems pretty benign.

RY: Yeah, I thought so.

JR: Not so controversial.

RY: Yeah, but anyway. So, I finished high school there, in the largest graduating class in Virginia my year, 965, and then I came up here for college. Went to Harvard undergrad and then got my Master's in Public Affairs at the University of Texas, and just graduated from Boston College Law School last May.

JR: Congratulations.

RY: Thank you.

JR: I actually was – I just ran into a friend of mine who's a third year now at BC, Polly Crozier, that I interviewed. She was like, oh –

RY: Oh, yeah! I know Polly –

JR: She's so great.

RY: She's great too. Oh, that's so neat. Oh, that's really neat.

JR: Yeah, it was really nice.

RY: How's she doing?

JR: She's good.

RY: Yeah? Neat. [laughter]

JR: So, now I'd like to hear a little bit about how you identified Jewishly growing up and into the present.

RY: It's interesting because when I was a little kid, I felt very strongly identified with being Jewish, and it was important to me, even though I had essentially no Jewish education. I think somewhere along the way, my parents sent me to Sunday school, or whatever day of the week it was, [laughter] some kind of school at the local temple. I went once or twice, and I just hated it. So my mom said I didn't have to go back, so I didn't, ever. But it was still really important to me that I was Jewish. And when I was a little kid, I wanted to be an artist because my mom was an artist, and I used to draw a lot. I still have these drawings that I did with Torahs all over things and lots of Stars of David.

And being Jewish was really important to my father in a sort of paranoid, crazy way, but I think that still, in a certain way, had a kind of positive effect on me. And I definitely felt going to New York City Public Schools that, on the one hand, there were plenty of other kids who were Jewish in class with me, but nonetheless, the school was sort of so obviously Christian, even though it was a public school. So at Christmastime, we sang Christmas carols, and I really resented it even as a child. I remember just feeling like, "I feel left out. Those aren't my songs, and I don't want to sing about the little baby Jesus." So then, well, then after my mom died and I moved to Virginia, it was a whole other situation because there were no Jewish kids at all. So not only were celebrations at school all about Christmas but there just wasn't – I mean, I met kids in high school who had never met another Jew. So that was an interesting experience.

JR: What kinds of things did you do at home?

RY: That were religiously oriented?

JR: Or culturally Jewish. I mean, just how was it –

RY: I have to say –

JR: – expressed to you that this was –

RY: Yeah, it's a good question because I can sort of name all the things we didn't do. I'm trying to think of what we did do. I mean, we didn't go to temple, not even on the high holidays. We didn't celebrate the Sabbath in any way. What did we do? Well, we celebrated Chanukah every year. And I really thought until I got to college that Chanukah was the most important Jewish holiday. I actually remember the moment when someone who was Jewish informed me that that wasn't the case, and I was sort of like, "What are you talking about?" Of course, it is. Very embarrassing, in retrospect.

JR: Well, it makes sense in America; it sort of seems that way.

RY: Yeah, yeah. So, honestly, other than that, maybe there were other things, but I don't remember them. And then once my mother died, and I moved in with my cousin, although she was, in fact, Jewish, she – well, she didn't practice any religion, but to the extent that we celebrated anything, it was clearly Christmas. There was a Christmas tree, and we gave Christmas gifts. And then a couple of years later, she got married to a guy who was Christian, not in any church-going sort of way, but he was nominally Christian. And so the whole time, from thirteen to eighteen, I actually went to church a lot because I had all these friends who were Christian, and I'd go with them. And there certainly wasn't any synagogue anywhere that I knew of to go. I guess the other thing that kind of happened with me in that time period in terms of my own perspective on God, if not Judaism, was that I, in a sort of childish way, when I was thirteen, and my mother was sick with cancer, I did the bargain with God. "If she lives, I'll believe in you. If she dies, goodbye." [laughter] So she died, and I was true to my word. [laughter] And so I went through a period, and really for a long time, where not only did I really not believe in God, but I felt very distant from being Jewish and intentionally so. So people would say, "What religion are you?" And I would say, "Well, my parents were Jewish." But I didn't want to claim it. And that's certainly how it was even all the way through college and, well, all the way through my twenties. But in my early thirties, I really started to feel differently, I think, for a few reasons. I mean, partly, I had my first Jewish boyfriend, and he really was very strongly identified with being Jewish; it was important to him. He went to services on the high holidays, he wanted me to go, and so I did. And although at first, it felt very alien, really, I mean, because I had never gone, I actually started to like it. And I also started doing some reading around the same time, and kind of started to feel like, "Huh, isn't it interesting that these things that I'm reading about Judaism, they really feel like me, actually, that this feels like it clicks with my values and my perspective on the world." And I almost wondered whether somehow subliminally – I don't know – when I was a kid, I had made those connections or not.

JR: What kinds of things felt resonant to you?

RY: Certainly the emphasis on education, and on learning, and on questioning, and that questioning is a good thing, as opposed to the sort of blind faith that some other religions tend to espouse at times. Also, I think the importance of looking at the world and your role in the world as [if] it's part of your job here to try to make the world a better place. And I think that from a pretty early age, I really felt that way. So it just really felt like it resonated with me, and so I did a little bit more study, not that much, but a little bit more. And now I'm at a place where I really actually would like to find a Jewish community to be part of, but I have my own conception of what I'm looking for, so I'm still looking [laughter] to see whether it's out there or not.

JR: What do you think you're looking for?

RY: I'm looking for – I think I'm looking for a community where the politics aren't really divorced from – at least from the values that underlie the religion, and that they're expressed in ways that maybe aren't so easy. So, I'm looking for a congregation where not only do people volunteer at a soup kitchen, which is a great thing to do, but where they're willing to take a stand on an issue that some people might disagree on. I'm looking for a congregation that maybe does anti-death penalty work, for instance. A place where they're willing to say, "You know what? This is really what we believe, and maybe not everyone does, but we do. And not only [do] we believe it, but we're willing to actually take some action to do something about it." But I also think that part of what I want is something that's not so completely secular that it doesn't feel religious at all. Well, so I'm looking. [laughter] Searching.

JR: Well, it's hard to find the right kind of – it takes time. Do you see your activism as being related to Jewish values?

RY: I definitely do, although I didn't start doing the work I do because I made some connection in my mind that it related to Judaism in any way. But now, I definitely feel like there's a relationship in terms of – well, in various ways. Partly that my own experiences

as a kid, feeling like I was kind of part of a certain minority group, make me feel a connection to my clients that I might not have felt otherwise, that the standard white woman might maybe not make. But so many folks who are in prison come from – well, certainly, almost all of them come from impoverished backgrounds, and a disproportionate number of them come from racial minority groups. And so I think that's a certain kind of connection. And I also think that in general – I'm trying to figure out how to word it. I guess I do really feel like mostly because it so happens that I've become interested in this kind of work. It really is my job here to try to make it better and to try to improve a system that I think is flawed grossly at its core. So the whole idea of repairing the world, I think that's kind of infused in what I feel like I try to do every day. So, I guess in those ways.

JR: So, tell me about your experiences [and] how you got involved in prisoners' rights issues.

RY: Well, the original story about how I got interested in the stuff was that when I was thirteen years old, actually a few months after my mother had died, I saw this made-for-TV movie called Kill Me If You Can, and it was based on the case of a guy named Caryl Chessman, who was on death row in California for twelve years and was ultimately executed in 1960. And Alan Alda, who was my hero from MASH, played Caryl Chessman, and it was just a very powerful movie for a bunch of reasons. Partly because it was a very compelling story, partly because it was Chessman, partly because my mother had just died, and what it means to kill someone was really very much in my mind and in my heart. So I saw this movie, and I got really interested in the death penalty. Chessman had actually written a number of books while he was on death row. He was not your typical death row inmate, so I somehow found his books and read them, did a bunch of research about his story, and wrote a paper about him in high school. And when I came to college, really the thing I most wanted to do was I had seen that Harvard had some kind of volunteer program where you could actually go into prisons and do

volunteer work with prisoners, and that was what I wanted to do. So that was the first thing I signed up for. And for my first three years of college, I did that. I volunteered at Framingham, which is the state's women's prison, learned a ton, and had ultimately mixed feelings about it. I had been very naïve in many, many ways, unsurprisingly, and so my whole idea that almost everyone in prison is innocent; they all just had bad public defenders. [laughter] I discovered that's probably not quite the case. But nonetheless, I felt, seeing it almost firsthand, that the way they were treated in prison – whether they had, in fact, committed the crime or not, the way people were treated was just not the way that I thought any human being should be treated. And so I volunteered at Framingham. Then I actually took a break from doing that stuff and volunteered at a state mental hospital for a year because I was thinking about becoming a clinical psychologist, and I thought I should see what that would be like. And at the end of that, I decided I didn't want to be a clinical psychologist. [laughter] And then I wound up doing volunteer work at various other prisons in Massachusetts. After college, I spent a little bit of time working at a consulting firm, about six or seven months, and then while I was doing that, I was continuing to do volunteer work on prisoners' rights issues, having moved from the direct service piece that I was originally doing with women at Framingham, to looking at policy issues and saying, “Boy, this system is really troubled.” So I worked at the consulting firm for a while, and then left there and wound up volunteering more than full time for about six months with a new prison reform organization that was just forming in Massachusetts at the time. It was called CURE; it was the state chapter of a national organization.

JR: What did CURE stand for?

RY: It stands for – members of CURE – none of us are happy with what it stands for, but it stands for Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants, as in those who err.

JR: Interesting.

RY: Yeah, you can see why; it's like, they were just desperate to come up with an acronym. [laughter[

JR: Yeah, work backward from there.

RY: Yeah, pretty much. And that was an amazing experience. I mean, it was the first time I did any lobbying. I kind of learned how to do some basic legal research, and I worked with the woman who was forming the chapter, who is still one of my best friends, Dorothy Briggs; she's a Catholic nun and had actually started doing that kind of work – she was an artist, but had started doing that kind of work because she met a prisoner and started visiting him over time, and sort of had the same reaction to the system that I did, that, this place is a mess and something ought to be done about it. So we worked together just a zillion hours a week and learned a bunch along the way. And then I moved on from there and did a bunch of things – started law school, left law school, worked at Harvard. So a whole bunch of different kinds of things, but all connected, actually, to criminal justice, either doing research, or writing, or advocacy, and really loved it. And somewhere along the line, I started thinking, “Oh, a person could maybe do this for a job. Maybe I don't have to do it as a volunteer forever.” So, I can't even remember what the original question was.

JR: Just how and why you got involved with this kind of stuff. So it sounds like your interest in this issue led you to your professional work rather than your professional work leading you to this issue.

RY: Right.

JR: So tell me about the project that you're doing now.

RY: It is called the Rapid Response to Brutality Project. It's, luckily for me, being funded by the Open Society Institute, which is a foundation created by George Soros.

JR: [inaudible]

RY: Really?

JR: So, it's great. They do so many things.

RY: Yeah, it is great.

JR: They have so much money.

RY: Yeah, he's a very generous man and, luckily, wants to work on the same kinds of issues that I do. So the whole idea of the project is that in Massachusetts, as in most states, all states, prisoners get brutalized by correctional staff on a fairly regular basis. You know, undoubtedly, it's not as bad in some places than in others, but there's actually no national data that counts that, so it's hard to even tell beyond anecdotal information. Mass. Correctional Legal Services, where I work, is the legal services agency in the state that provides civil legal services to prisoners. So for many years, we've been hearing from prisoners who were assaulted by correctional staff, and over the years, the organization has litigated some cases and won some cases. But what winds up happening as a practical matter is that they're very lengthy and expensive, and certainly, at the start, very uncertain whether you're going to win or not. Even those cases where we won didn't feel like the system really changed afterward, which is clearly what we want to do. Not only get compensation for the person who was hurt but not have the same thing happen again. So what the organization decided to do was to try a different tack on the litigation, and instead of doing big, full-fledged civil rights cases in superior court, which is the higher-level trial court in Massachusetts, instead to try to do more smaller cases in district court, in the hope that there would be such a volume of them that that might have some deterrent effect on guards. The idea of my project was to try to do something about the same problem, but short of litigation. So what I do is every time we hear from a prisoner who's been assaulted by a correctional officer, or more likely hear

from someone else informing us about the assault, I go out and interview the prisoner within forty-eight hours of learning about the assault. I bring a camera, which is allowed by regulation in Massachusetts, and photograph any injuries that the prisoner has. I try to do some follow-up advocacy with the medical staff if they have injuries that aren't being treated. I'll contact a family member if they want me to let someone know what's happened to them and various other kinds of advocacy to try to provide some services to them. The idea being that perhaps if someone who's a lawyer, who's collecting evidence with a camera, shows up at the prison really quickly after these incidents, that'll send a message to correctional staff, to the Department of Correction, that they can't do this stuff with impunity, that in fact, the outside world is monitoring them. Someone cares enough to be there, and that someone just might sue. And so sort of in conjunction with the litigation that we're doing, but yeah, we're hoping that it'll have an effect. The original plan for my project was that it would be operational at all of the state prisons in Massachusetts, of which there are many. I started with Walpole because that's one of the maximum-security facilities, and it's the facility from which we had probably heard the most complaints in the past. And I started accepting intakes for this project on November 13, 2001, and I probably thought that by now, by late January, I would be going to other facilities as well, which I'm not because Walpole's been keeping me busy. And that's a sad testament to what's going on. So, I think, in terms of the project, it's an experiment. It was actually suggested to us by prisoners who said, "We really think if you just show up, they will take notice." Something similar was tried in New York State, and I talked to some lawyers there who said that they did feel like they've had some effect. So, to some extent, this is a replication of what they did, but in a somewhat more concerted way, and it's an experiment to see can we have an effect on that problem in this way. So at the end of – my project will go for two years. At the end of that time, one of the things that I'll be doing is putting together a report on prison brutality in Massachusetts, and that'll be a point – and probably before then – where I'll be able to have some sense of does this seem to be having a positive effect on the problem.

JR: That sounds great.

RY: Thanks.

JR: So on a daily basis, do you –? I mean, how often are you then going out for these kinds of visits?

RY: I'm probably there once or twice a week, is what it sort of winds up being. Not surprisingly, the department seems to not be entirely happy with my presence there, so it can often be difficult just to gain access to clients. Especially because I'm bringing in a camera, so even though there's a state regulation that allows me to do that, every time I go, it's an issue. It's frustrating, but it hasn't actually affected the frequency with which I visit at all. So I have made every visit within forty-eight hours except for one, when we got the intake late on a Friday, and it was a three-day weekend, and I was there Tuesday morning. So, that's kind of how it's been going so far.

JR: What role would you say your work plays in how you define yourself?

RY: I'm smiling because I'm thinking about a conversation that I've had with other people in the office about how important it is to not have your entire self-esteem rest on the success of your work, which you're not completely responsible for, and you should get your self-esteem from somewhere other than your work, and all that stuff.

JR: As someone writing a dissertation, I'm right there with you.

RY: Yeah. [laughter] But I have to say, that said, I may be striving toward that model, but I think a big piece of who I am is I'm a prisoners' rights lawyer. It's interesting; having just graduated from law school [and] having just been sworn into the Bar on Friday, I am very recently a prisoners' rights lawyer, and I have to say I really like that. I guess I feel like prisoners are understandably a group of folks that not that many people have at the top of their agenda, but I really view the work that I do as human rights work. And so

whatever people may or may not have done to get into prison, it was pretty irrelevant to me, and I feel like it's really important that people who do care about this kind of work do it and that they don't allow bureaucrats and administrators to deter them. So I think that a lot of the way I see myself comes from the work I do. I think in a good way – hopefully, in a good way, I do derive part, at least, of my self-esteem from the work that I do because I feel like I do stuff that really matters and that's really worth doing and worth spending your time on. I mean, if I had to say what my calling is in life, if I figured that out, this is it.

JR: Yeah, but that's priceless for whatever it means in terms of not compartmentalizing life, which can have its pluses and minuses.

RY: Right, right.

JR: What are the greatest challenges for you?

RY: Well, I mean, I think one of my frustrations – on the one hand, I'm saying I really like the fact that I'm a prisoners' rights lawyer, and I do. At the same time, I'm learning how limited what someone can do in this position, how many limits there are on what someone can do, even if you're a prisoners' rights lawyer, and this is what you do full time, more than full time. So, that's one real frustration, is just feeling like – I don't think I was entirely naïve, I don't think I just believed that I would walk in here and suddenly everything would be fixed, but I did think that it wouldn't be quite this hard to make progress at least on small things. But it does feel pretty hard. So that's frustrating. And then I think the other piece that's been hard is that, as a practical matter, every client I see is someone who was just beaten up and is basically a victim of a violent crime. So I visit people on a regular basis who have black eyes, bruises, and the occasional broken bone and who are understandably scared, sometimes angry. Although they certainly – no one has ever directed that toward me, but understandably angry at the circumstances they find themselves in. And who have so few resources available to them to do anything at all about it. I mean, it just occurred to me within the last couple of months in

a very sort of practical way – I just never thought about it before – that prisoners, at least in Massachusetts, and there are around 22,000 of them in the state, and county facilities, have no access to law enforcement services. So if you are a victim of a violent crime in a prison, you can't call the police, literally, because they're not on your list of people you can call. Probably, even if you did call, it's unlikely that they would assist you. So, there's not law enforcement services available. There aren't services available that might be provided to other victims of violent crime, and people are in a situation where their victimizers have constant control over them for sometimes decades. So sometimes, what I take away from that is that it's just very sad. It's just a terribly sad situation. I think that's partly the challenge for me as a new lawyer. Not new to the criminal justice system and not new to working in prisons, but new to being in this role is figuring out a way to keep doing this work without becoming overwhelmed by just how very sad it is. So, those are probably the biggest challenges.

JR: Have you found any specific challenges because you're a woman?

RY: That's an interesting question. Well, in general, in terms of the way I'm treated by staff – I am treated very cordially and appropriately, and prisoners are the same. Again, there are just practical situations that come up that can be a little strange. So if you think about what I'm doing, I'm going out and meeting with someone who doesn't know me in a situation where there are fears on their part that perhaps someone is listening in on our conversation. They're telling me about this recent, very traumatic event, and I'm taking these photographs. And it's one thing if their face is injured, but people get injuries all over their bodies. So far, as I said, I'm only at Walpole, so I'm only working with male prisoners, and just being in the practical situation of having to say to someone, “I can photograph the injuries on your torso. But you're going to have to lift your shirt. Are you comfortable with that?” It's not the situation that they teach you how to prepare for in law school. I have to say that all of my clients have dealt with it really well, and thus far, it's been fine, but it's a little strange. Other than that, I speculate sometimes and wonder

whether if I were a man coming in with a camera would they treat me the same way? I have no idea. They might very well. They might not. I don't know.

JR: What is it like for you to take a stand on these kinds of issues in your community?

RY: I'm smiling because I sort of feel like it feels great because I feel so strongly about what I'm doing that – I both feel so strongly about it, and I feel like it's so infrequent that these kinds of issues are really brought to light that I just feel great about any time I have the opportunity to do it. In fact, I was thinking just a few weeks ago that I should really try to do some fundraising for my project. I've worked with organizations in the past and done fundraising. I used to be the Director of Citizens for Juvenile Justice, and I did fundraising there. I've been on boards where I've done fundraising, but this is the first time that I actually think – I haven't done it yet, but I think I'm going to just feel completely empowered about it and not have sort of the reluctance about, oh, I hate to ask people for money. Because I just feel so strongly that the stuff that's going on is so wrong in anyone's book, and efforts to do something about it are so important. I'll be doing fundraising for my project. But I really mean all the work that this agency and other organizations do to try to improve conditions in prison, that – well, that I feel great about telling people all about it in a loud voice. [laughter]

JR: Has your community been responsive to [inaudible]? Or how have they responded, I guess, is really what I'm asking.

RY: Yeah. I guess that sort of leads to the question of what I even consider to be my community. And certainly, my personal community, my circle of friends, and my family have all been very supportive of the work I do and very interested to hear about it. I've had the chance to do a little bit of talking at my alma mater, at BC, to students about the work I'm doing, and similarly got a really nice reception from them. But what I'd really like to do, and sorting out how to do, is to be able to shine much more of a spotlight on these kinds of issues in a much more public way. So time will tell what a response I get.

JR: I was just asking because one of the things that we've realized about the women who are being honored this year is that all of you work basically in your home, as opposed to some years we've had people who have traveled abroad and done work in Bosnia, and different kind of things, which is in some ways a different kind of work because it doesn't necessarily have to – although obviously for everyone it's integrated into life a certain way, it can be very separate from the things you do with the people you know, and the people who you work with, and all these kinds of things. So it's been interesting to see if anything comes up that's different for people who are working right where they are.

RY: Right.

JR: And obviously, it's not like, your work is in prison, so it's a little bit – there are fences between the two, but there's a lot of overlap also with your profession.

RY: Right, definitely.

JR: What's been most rewarding for you about this work?

RY: Well, definitely, the best part is the connections I've made with my clients. I'm getting choked up. [laughter] Sorry.

JR: [inaudible]

RY: Yeah, I think definitely the best part has been working with my clients. A lot of the prisoners I meet with are in what's called the Departmental Disciplinary Unit at Walpole, which is a unit for prisoners who have committed what are deemed to be serious violations within the prison system. And they are sent to this unit explicitly for punishment. They're in isolation all the time. It's essentially a sensory deprivation unit. There's no window in their cell. The door of the cell is steel. There's just a slot in the door through which they get food. Really, the only contact they have with other people is

the guards who will escort them to the shower or to recreation. Five days a week, they're supposed to get out for an hour, alone, always alone, in what's essentially a dog kennel to recreate. And people can be sent in, and a number of my clients have been sent to that unit for ten-year sentences, which –

JR: Wow.

RY: Yeah, you sort of think about wrapping your mind around infinity. It's hard for me to wrap my mind around ten years in the DDU. So when I meet with them, a lot of times, I imagine it's been a very long time since someone has even shaken their hand. And when they meet with me, they're handcuffed and shackled, so their hands aren't entirely free, but I always shake their hand when I meet them and shake their hand at the end. They certainly have expressed a lot of appreciation that I show up. I like to think that the fact that just someone treats them with respect, sits across from them, and listens to their story does a certain kind of good, although arguably not nearly as much good as stopping the violence. So the connections with them are definitely the best part of the job. And then the other great part of it is that I have really wonderful colleagues, and I just feel incredibly lucky that I get to work with these people. It's a bunch of people who essentially share the values I have that are most important to me and who have devoted, in many cases, almost all or great portions of their professional lives, and in some ways their personal lives, to doing this kind of work. And that's terrific. So those are the best parts.

JR: How do you think your contributions have affected others?

RY: Well, partly, maybe I just said a little bit about that. I like to think – and there's no way to measure it – but I like to think that the working relationships that I have with my clients are of some value, even though it's not measurable in any way. I like to think that they really know that somebody out here actually cares about them and is paying attention to what goes on and is going to keep showing up. So hopefully, that's had

some effect and will continue to have some effect. Certainly, time will tell whether this effort actually deters guards from assaulting prisoners, but it certainly has been noticed by the Department of Correction. They're certainly aware that I'm doing this, and I take that to be a good thing.

JR: How has your activist work affected you?

RY: How has it affected me? Well, you know, I have, at times in my life, had jobs where the work that I was doing didn't fit a hundred percent with what I believed in, which I found very troubling at the time, and even after the time. [laughter] And so the fact that I just so believe in what I'm doing, I think, in a lot of ways, has had a really good effect on me. Because I sort of feel like there is no doubt in my mind that this is the best use of my time at this point in my life, that I can't imagine anything else I could be doing professionally that I think would be a better thing to be doing right now than this. So that feels terrific.

JR: Have you had any role models?

RY: When I was younger, a child, I think I was more conscious – I wouldn't have called them role models, but I was much more conscious of having role models. I remember as a kid – well, certainly, absolutely thinking of myself as a feminist and feeling the women's movement was really important to me, and looking to people like Bella Abzug as my heroes. So I think that there were some people like her, sort of famous people, who I perceived in a certain way to be role models. And then I think, in a much more sustaining way, even now, many years after she died, I think I always saw my mother as a role model. Despite our financial situation and all kinds of other things, I really saw her as someone who was very strong, who spoke her mind, stood up for what she believed in, and managed to maintain her dignity with those welfare workers who wanted to treat her like shit. I think that was great for me. It really showed me that whatever other people do, if you know who you are and you know what you believe in, that's really all you need.

That and the willingness to kind of stand up and say what's right.

JR: This is sort of a vague question, and no one's really had an answer for this yet exactly, but I'm just asking people about sort of what their plans are for things they might like to do in the future.

RY: Yeah, it's funny; people ask me that a lot because this is a two-year fellowship, and it's going to end in August of 2003, and I have to say, most of the time, I just feel like I'm so busy doing my job, I don't have any idea what the next job will be. I think the first thing I want to see is – I'd like to get far enough along with this project to sort of see, does this work? Because if it does, then I want to see that it continues and perhaps it gets expanded to other states. If it doesn't work, then I'd like to think of something else to do about the same problem because it's just so very clear to me that our tax money oughtn't go to professional thugs. That's just not the way the system should work. So I would hope to be able to figure out a way to be doing prisoners' rights work for a long time to come.

JR: Have you been involved in other activist kinds of causes?

RY: Yeah.

JR: Not that you need to be. I certainly don't mean to make it like, “What else do you do?”

RY: No, that's okay. I have, in various ways. I've done a lot – well, this is related but different. I've done a lot of anti-death penalty work in Massachusetts. I was on the board of Mass. Correctional – not Mass. Correctional, that's where I am now – Mass. Citizens Against the Death Penalty for about twelve years and did a lot of advocacy as a part of that organization to try to keep the death penalty out of Massachusetts. I don't know. This is not such a recent thing. Years ago, I was much more involved in women's issues and pro-choice activism, which is still important to me, but there's only so many hours in

the day. There have been a bunch of different things. I was very concerned years ago about apartheid in South Africa and did work with an organization of Harvard alums who were trying to get the university to divest.

JR: I remember that.

RY: Really? Yeah. I did some work on kind of more general poverty issues. I used to live in Jamaica Plain, and when I lived there, there was an organization, the Jamaica Plain Area Planning Action Council, which provides all different kinds of services for lower-income folks, and so I worked with them. I've worked over the years on various political campaigns, usually losing, usually supporting those really great underdogs who didn't win, but we fought a good fight. [laughter]

JR: Yeah. Yeah, I know how that is. Let's see. This is one thing that we've started to ask because we like to have a section on the website since people are basically inspired by the stories we put up there to have a way for people to think about to get advice from the Women Who Dared about their tips on how to get involved. So what would you suggest for women who want to get involved in their communities?

RY: That's interesting. Well, probably the most important thing is to figure out what the issue is that really moves you and that you're passionate about. And I think sort of by chance for me I wound up seeing some movie and then so many years later still feeling just as strongly about this stuff as I did when I was thirteen years old. But I think that's the first piece, is sort of looking around at what's going on in the world, either far away or not so far away, and reading, talking with people, and exploring and sort of learning about different issues and trying to sort out, what's the thing that I really believe in, that really motivates me? And then, while you're doing that, and once you figured it out, it's really important to talk to people who do that kind of work. Sometimes people feel reluctant to do that. They look at people doing what they might want to do someday – and I'm guilty of this myself – and feel intimidated, think they're so busy, they wouldn't

want to talk to me, and most of the time, people love to tell people about what they care about. I know I feel that way. Over the years, various people have talked with me about different kinds of criminal justice work. I just love doing that, partly because it's fun to talk about what matters to you and also partly because people who do this kind of work want to see new people with energy and enthusiasm come in and do it too. So I think that's really important. This is sort of general advice that I should take myself, and so should we all, but that you can work it at so much for so long, so hard, that you let the pieces of your life fall by the wayside, and that's obviously unwise, if for no other reason because then it detracts from your ability to do this work. So try and keep some – not just balance, because I've kind of been telling myself for years, well, you need a balance, and then I finally decided not only do I need balance, I actually need just fun. [laughter] I really need stuff that feels like a total, complete break. So, what I have started doing recently is I decided that what's really good for me is getting out in the woods, and so I'm doing this thing where now, regularly, I am going hiking, or I just started cross-country skiing or something that just feels like totally not this.

JR: Yeah, that's what a friend suggested to me about my dissertation. She was like, "You have to plan something fun every day." And I was like, "Something fun every day? How could I possibly do that?" She's like, "Well, it doesn't have to be something big. It could be something [for] fifteen minutes that's fun, but something that's just for yourself and that doesn't have to do with your work and all that stuff." It's hard, actually, surprisingly.

RY: It is. No, I know, it's really hard. Especially if you're a pretty driven person and you're used to working all the time. I've gone through points in my life where I had to make a list, like, "What do I actually like to do? What would I consider fun?" Then I have to write it down and keep the list, or else I'll forget. [laughter]

JR: It’s kind of crazy, but I know what you mean. It's very easy to get caught up, especially when you work on something that's important to you and that's never-ending.

RY: Right.

JR: I think it can be very hard to [inaudible] other things. But the burnout factor is huge in this kind of work. That's basically the end of my questions. But if there's anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to tell me about, this would be the time.

RY: I don't think so. I think that was so thorough.

JR: Great.

RY: Yeah.

JR: So, thank you very much.

RY: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]