Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Joan Sweeney
Interviewers: Lindsay Baker and Kathleen Viola
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Abstract: In this interview Joan Sweeney discusses the significance of the events of 1969. Joan was born in Brooklyn, New York and is the only daughter and oldest child of Martin and Brenda Sweeney. Joan is a very passionate, determined, opinionated woman who has used her interest in politics to make a change in the world. She was the contributing editor to Fitchburg State’s school newspaper, The Cycle, and was in charge of cultural programming for the Student Government Association (SGA). Joan is quite the entrepreneur, as she has traveled the world and taken on various professions. In this interview, Joan discusses her personal involvement in the student protest movements of the late 1960’s. She emphasizes the importance of social awareness. As she states, “I would have to say one of the other influences for me, while I was here, and I can’t credit the school with it, was coming increasingly to understand the relevance of context … the context a person lives in, and how that influences and shapes any of us, the context of what the country is you live in, and what’s going on with your own country, and then increasingly appreciating the role and behavior of a country in the global community.” Joan says the experiences she went through with her group while attending Fitchburg State “prepared us to be part of the bigger world.”

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LB: What was life like at the college while you attended?

JS: Well, it had sort of a mix of aspects to it. For the first couple of years, until the war started with Vietnam, Cambodia, Fitchburg State was protected in some ways, not really swimming in the larger context socially. It was a very white campus. I can’t remember knowing more than one or two, if that many, students of color. The faculty was overwhelming white and male, much more male. There was one sociology professor, Dr. Browning, who was a black man, who was very good at his field and he had probably some of the most interesting classes that I took because he really focused on contemporary issues as well as the basics of sociology. So the things that were starting to happen with the civil war rights movement with some of black activism and protest movements were things that were discussed. That was the only place I can remember being exposed to that and there was a group of us. The first couple of years, and actually throughout my four years here, but particularly the first couple of years it seemed like the dominant influence on the campus was the fraternities and to a lesser extent the sororities, but particularly the Mohawks and the Fenwicks. It was like a clan of guys. Who was better, who was this. It shaped so much of their identities that I remember thinking it was kind of silly. There were a couple of other women and myself who didn’t want to pledge any of the sororities but thought it might be interesting to have some sort of social way to connect. We decided that we’d start our own--that we’d be different and so we ended up, and I have no idea where we got this
name, we started something called “The Neopsylons” (?), Greek for something, which over time degraded to be very much like what it was trying to not be like. By sophomore year, I think it was, I had gotten involved with student government very actively and with the school newspaper, *The Cycle*. That, combined with what was the growing protest in the anti-war movement, really felt like more what my education was about. I had increasingly less interest in some of the class stuff. I did okay, I mean I got my work done, but it just wasn’t connecting for me.

**LB**: What motivated you to get involved? Was it the current issues that were going on?

**JS**: I think it was a combination of the current issues and that I wanted and needed more of a sense of active learning. The issues were important, as far as I was concerned. It was frustrating for the group of us that were very involved with student government and with *The Cycle* that those issues didn’t seem to be showing up in our classes. We had, you know, we had professors who it felt like lived in a bubble. The campus academic politics amongst them was what I have since learned having taught courses at a number of places over the years--the campus politics among the faculty were pretty standard and ridiculous in terms of what they thought was important and it just felt so disconnected from what was going on in the larger world. Browning’s class, the sociology class I made reference to, was a noteworthy contrast. There was a history professor, I think his name was John Clark, and his wife taught here too, and I’m blanking on her name--he made an effort to have his classes be more relevant but that was largely what I can remember. There was something about the vibrancy of what was happening with social movements, more progressive politics civil rights issues. It fed for many of us, or not many but the group I was connected to, almost a hunger that got satisfied the more we learned and the more we connected to it. I was involved with a man who was at school in Cambridge at the time and so was frequently in town and seeing what was happening on other campuses, and I think that was hugely important for me, just getting some perspective on “oh, everything isn’t like what’s happening where I’m in school at Fitchburg.” A number of us just decided to try to bring more of that into our own student lives and onto the campus and it was particularly the anti-war issues. It’s sort of like, how can you not pay attention to this? This is too important, this is too big, you know, how can we be quiet?

**LB**: What were your primary responsibilities in terms of the SGA and *The Cycle*?

**JS**: I was on the editorial staff of *The Cycle*. John Antonelli, who was the editor in chief, really ran the paper. It was a very democratic, collective group and so we collectively decided on stories and focuses and who was doing what with primary stories. *The Cycle* became a vehicle for us to try to bring more of what were contemporary social political issues to the attention of the student population. With the SGA I was responsible for cultural--what we called cultural events. What that meant was that I had a budget from the SGA each year for cultural events and had a small committee, and we collectively talked about and got to decide who we were bringing [to campus].

The year that was probably the most noteworthy and that got me in a bit of hot water with the administration of the time was the year that we brought Bill Beard, who at the time was
considered radical or certainly somebody who was causing quite a commotion around women’s reproductive rights and birth control. He was getting sued just raising issues that needed to be raised but that weren’t popular. The black and civil rights movements were very present and so I had also reached out and got the regional head of the Black Panther party to agree to come as one of our speakers. There was a lot of that being done [in cognitive psychology] by a woman named Doctor Jane Houston, and her husband Doctor Robert Masters. I had her come as a speaker. The musical offering that year was rather a departure from the music we were listening to. It was a performer called Olatunji and his group was Olatunji and the Drums of Passion. He is probably closest to what nowadays we’d call “world music.”

That year really crystalized a lot of stuff with the lawsuit that we did with The Cycle, and some of this some sort of social activism. Jim Hammond was the president at the time. In addition to what occurred with the court case, he was very bothered by my selection of cultural events and twice called me into his office, very upset and wanted to know--especially with the black panther I was bringing--if I would be responsible for the riot that was going to happen on campus, and I was smart-mouthed and rather flippant at the time and said, “sure.” There was no riot. We were just so focused on what we felt were principled stances. With the cultural events I was trying to infuse some exposure to things that weren’t really as present in the curriculum. There was nobody either in History or in Social Science who was teaching much about civil rights. Having provocative speakers seemed like a righteous thing to do.

KV: Wow, that’s something you feel very strongly about.

JS: Absolutely, and it felt--I would say it was more than even just feeling strongly about it. It almost felt like a social responsibility. Particularly where this is a teacher education institution, probably even more so at that time. Young people were being prepared as teachers who would go out into urban environments with no real--there was no multicultural education at the time, there was nothing that really prepared people to understand how different the lives of the young people who would be their students had been from their own lives. That was part of why the work of Eldridge Clever that we excerpted in The Cycle felt so important. Here was a voice that was trying to reflect to white society, this is what it’s like to be a young black boy in a public school, where there is nobody who looks like you, there’s nobody who comes from your kind of background--what the impact of that had been for him. While we couldn’t change the composition of who is admitted as students and who is here studying, we thought we could at least add a facet to what people were learning about and thinking about and talking about, and so that was a lot of a motivation.

KV: How did your views compare to others--friends, family, community?

JS: Some of us, not all of us, not all of the SGA were what I would think of as more politically progressive. We were probably marginal, and different in our views. The bulk of the campus population didn’t necessarily share them. We did start getting better participation and attendance at some of the anti-war rallies and things like that that we organized, but there were people on campus who thought it was horrible, that I would upset Jim Hammond, who was much esteemed and revered. I respected the man in many ways. He was a decent good person, but we just had
profoundly different views on certain aspects of things. We were probably more like students on many other campuses where there was more student activism. I mean, if you look back at those times that was the era where we had Kent State and the marches. At most of the larger, especially Boston schools, there was a sense of activism, student involvement in civil rights issues, student involvement in other protests, student involvement in anti-war stuff. We were quite different from many or most students here and felt more kingship to some of those other places.

KV: So, it was kind of a domino effect in the sense of being influence by movements elsewhere.

JS: We were definitely influenced by those movements. This was all pre-Internet, so it wasn’t like we could quickly go online and Google something, and find out what was happening at Brandeis or Harvard or BU [Boston University]. Things were hard copy, things were exchanged by literally traveling, bringing copies of things, so that it was by our standards now-a-days much more primitive. The group of us that were activists here at Fitchburg State was oriented to not just the campus, and not just what was happening in classes here. It’s what would be considered boundary spanning [in organizational psychology]--the importance of permeating more closed or different systems. You need people who are spanning the boundaries of organizations, whether it is students, faculty, whatever. The Internet blows everything open. Back then we didn’t have that and so, literally, traveled to get exposure. John Antonelli and I got sent, I think it was by SGA, to represent The Cycle at a college newspaper conference in New York. An experience like that was incredibly important, because you all of a sudden had newspapers from colleges all over the Northeast, and you had some understanding of what other students--you know, how do they think about editorial policy, how do they think about what stories get priority, what kind of things are they thinking and writing about? To me, with anything in life, if you don’t stretch beyond your own immediate circumstance and experience it stunts your learning and stunts your growth.

LB: I actually wanted to bring up this question. Were there any consequences for the group?

JS: That’s a very good question. Well, one consequence, but it was more consequence of choice on my part, for me, was that I didn’t graduate with my class. Because I spent so much time with the student activism and the federal court case, sitting in court in Boston, I graduated a semester later, the following January, then I would’ve. I was fine with that. My parents were upset, but I was fine with that. John left and did not finish his degree. He did not get kicked out. That was a choice to leave. I think part of what--this wasn’t a punishment type consequence but it was a real consequence--part of what occurred for a number of us was it really sharpened our sensibilities about the importance of education that’s relevant to what people are experiencing or want to experience in the world. Not that some of the classics in humanities are unimportant. I am a firm believer of that. But there needs to be a balance, there needs to be some way to connect up what we’re learning about--that hadn’t felt particularly present with many, if not most, of our classes, so we kind of created it for ourselves. I was never formally sanctioned. We didn’t have riots. I didn’t get suspended or anything like that. None of us did. There was faculty that said things to us that were complementary, and it made us probably more stubborn and more resolved to pursue what we’re interested in. I would say that consequences can be both negative and positive. For me, on reflection, the consequences were overwhelmingly positive.
KV: And that kind of goes with, you know, your involvement with these cases …

JS: Hmm!

KV: Did that particularly influence the direction of your life?

JS: Yeah, it did, I think. Although, I didn’t choose to go on to law school or something like that. I think it had subtler influence, and I think it was as much an influence of what was happening in the context of my college education. Those were very heavy times—the significance of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movements. I mean, I was getting tear-gassed down in Washington. It was that important to me, and, for me, it felt like, how could you not participate? This is a larger than life thing happening. I will not and I cannot put my head in the sand. For me, the influence was a life-long concern about, if not passion for, issues of fairness, issues of justice. The work that the department that I had created, that was grant funded, out at UMass Amherst when I was in graduate school—the focus of our work, what we got grants related too, was gender and race equity issues, in schools, in the economy. Those are issues of justice to me, social justice, economic justice. So the context that I was swimming in when I was an undergraduate here was enormously influential. I think that layered on—I mean, I came from a family where I was encouraged to learn, I was encouraged to read, I was encouraged to think. My dad was a huge supporter of education. It was not a negative thing to have arguments when I came home. You know, respectful arguments—to discuss things, to argue, to talk about fairness, things I was learning. The basic values that I had been taught growing up had to do with fairness, decency, and treating people civilly. There was never an issue of violence here with the protests. It was always raising issues. People weren’t running around, you know, bashing people in the head, or throwing rocks or anything like that. There was none of that aspect to it. It was always about what felt ethical, what felt right, whether there was justice to what was happening in various ways, and that tracks in my life to this day.

KV: So the principles and beliefs instilled in you at a young age from your parents--

JS: That certainly influenced what I was curious about and open to while I was in college, and then the experiences I had with my extracurricular activities, shall we say, became just layered on that. It amplified some of those early values. There was a spirit amongst those of us who worked on *The Cycle* and some of us on the SGA of tremendous cooperative, collaborative, effort. It wasn’t an ego trip. John Antonelli is probably one of the most unassuming people you could ever meet, and yet he is the first-named party in what is one of the biggest [school] first amendment cases. When we researched stuff to do for the panel a year or two ago here at the college, turns out that the Antonelli vs. Hammond case is one of the most frequently cited cases on Lexus Nexus. We all looked at each other and kind of went “we had no idea what we had done.” So, it was an almost moral issue. And I don’t mean moral in the sense of moralizing, but rather moral in the sense of ethics, integrity, personal integrity, and social integrity, which are for me the foundation of any sort of social justice, and fairness, basic decency and fairness. It just kept layering and the more we pushed off and learned more about what was happening elsewhere, the more it just amplified and emboldened in some ways our resolve.
LB: What do you think was the most important thing to come out of the time period? Do you think that things, times, were different after you graduated, after you left?

JS: That is a good question. I am honestly not sure. I remember being discouraged that we hadn’t had more of an impact as far as really broadening the numbers of students who were politically engaged and activists. Frankly, for a number of years after I left I didn’t want anything to do with the place because I was disappointed. I don’t know if that is really a fair judgment but that is how I felt. There were only a few faculty members, and I could probably name them on one hand if I really taxed my brain, who stepped up and supported students who were getting more politically involved, trying to be more socially conscious. I think too many we were kind of a nuisance and rebel-rousers and that was okay with us. The impact may have been most profound on us as individuals. I don’t know, we certainly weren’t--it wasn’t an effort to try to create institutionalized change. We knew that we would be leaving. There were a couple of people who were involved that were a year or two behind us, but we were much more focused on the content, and as I said, it wasn’t a group of people who had big egos. So we weren’t, you know, trying to make a splash for ourselves or needing to be visible for this or whatever. It was the content that was so compelling. I honestly don’t know how much impact there was on the place other than selected individuals.

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