

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 digitally-recorded session of an interview with Melinda Lackey by Cynthia Tobar on January 27, 2012 in New York City. This interview is part of the Welfare Rights Initiative Digital Oral History Archive Project.

Melinda Lackey has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

[starts at 0:00:00]

Cynthia Tobar: Okay, so we're ready to begin. Thank you for being here. Would you please introduce yourself?

Melinda Lackey: Melinda Lackey.

CT: Great, and your role with WRI?

ML: I was co-founder and director for 10 years.

CT: I wanted to ask you about your background – your early life and influences, your family and their education. I'm very interested in what your early childhood was like; the intellectual and/or spiritual world you inhabited – that sort of thing. Tell me a little bit about that and you can begin anywhere you like.

ML: I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri and was a very serious ballet dancer from a young age and that's what brought me to New York. When I was 17 I graduated high school early and moved to New York, to dance. How this path ever led to the WRI start-up is that my family comes from poverty. My ancestors came over during the potato famine, from Ireland. And I think that the culture of my grandparents and the environment that I grew up in informed my religious upbringing which later informed my spiritual life – and informed my commitment to offer whatever gifts and resources I have been given to people in need. So beginning when I was 17, I would say, I sort of started my own adult life. As soon as I came to New York and saw so much suffering, saw people in the street freezing and hungry and I had never been exposed to that where other people just walk by and ignore them or just get used to it and tune it out. And when you first come and the first time you encounter that, it's like how is everybody ignoring this? And so I worked very seriously as a dancer until I was 28 – that was all I did; that was my entire life, my entire world. For classical ballet dancers, that's how you live – you have a very, very narrow world

and you just eat, sleep and drink your practice. And it wasn't meaningful to me. It was how I made a living; it was my entire identity; I didn't really speak much – I had only learned to express myself through movement from a very young age so it was not easy to quit doing it because if I would no longer be a dancer, then who was I? My identity was completely tied to that, plus I'd have to learn how to speak. So I went to Hunter College – I'm leading you up to WRI which is what I assume you want to hear. I was burning to learn about the world beyond the ballet mirrors and really excited about going to school. Didn't know if I'd be able to handle it because I hadn't been to school in like 11 years. So I enrolled in a piano and a writing class at Hunter and figured let's just test the waters. I loved it. After that enrolled full-time in every semester and ended up doing a B.A., M.S. and the five-year program in the Social Research Program and just loved every minute of it. Graduated Valedictorian. Who knew? I maybe had one class that was kind of a drag and all the rest of it I just couldn't get enough of it; just absolutely loved it. Before I took that turn (to start college), when I was doing musical theater and films and commercials, I would have down time and I would do volunteer work and I realized over time that the volunteer work was much more meaningful than my work as a dancer. I was only doing my work as a dancer because it was what I had always done and it was who I was. So that's what began the transition and just a deep feeling that I have so many blessings and why would that be except for the purpose of sharing what I have with other people. So I figured if I could get a Social Work Degree, maybe I could get paid to do volunteer work, paid to do really meaningful work and earn a living at the same time. So that was an impetus for going to college. So along the way early on I got into the Hunter College Honors Program which was a wonderful – I'm sure it still is – just a wonderful thing for me and was able to do an internship every semester of my entire five years at school, both undergrad and graduate. So for a returning student as we're called, it was a great opportunity to explore a lot of different approaches to social change; a lot of different ways that people try to make some part of the world a better place. I got to be in different environments where people are taking different approaches and sort of test my skills and develop skills and see what do I have a feel for, what do I enjoy doing. And so that was just a great opportunity to start a new life in which I decided I'm not going to have an identity that's tied to any profession except learner. I'm going to be a learner from here on out – that's who I am. If I need a title, I'm a learner. So through a first internship... Should I just keep going?

CT: Whatever you're comfortable with. Yeah.

ML: I don't know if this is what you want, but you want my story of how I came to do WRI?

CT: What you're doing is just fine, absolutely. Whatever you're comfortable with.

ML: So through a series of internships I worked on different approaches to HIV. I wanted to do this because I had lost so many friends in the theater community to AIDS. I got to try case management; I got to try on the street education and activism. At that point, I was really interested – rather than improving my ability to help people get over a broken system, I wanted to look at why is that the system is so broken and where does that happen? Where does that begin and how is it perpetuated? So through sort of just asking around with that line of inquiry, I ended up in the Manhattan Borough President's Office doing an internship where I had heard about a small group of women living with HIV who were caring for children or partners, but were meeting in this political office for their support group, of all places, which is a long story – how that came to be, but the Manhattan Borough President (Ruth Messinger) was a social worker and she had some social workers on her staff, one of whom was facilitating the support group I encountered that wanted to start a multi-service support center. They wanted to create a GMHC for women basically. This was back when nobody knew that women were affected by HIV, that women could contract HIV. It was a deep dark secret that nobody talked to anybody about. If you were affected by it, you didn't talk to anybody. So these few women had found each other and this was a real safe haven – this monthly support group. I came in as an intern, and on the first day was told “they want to make a GMHC for women; this will be your project. What are you going to do first?” So I was just handed a start-up—the opportunity to take an idea from barely a concept to a vision, to a plan, raising funds for it, building a community of support behind it and launching a new organization. So that was a tremendous learning experience over four years and we created Iris House based in East Harlem. I learned a lot about how to do a start-up and about how to facilitate a space that allows a lot of voices to be heard and elicits the best of each contributor for the shared mission. And I saw all of the challenges around fundraising and connecting with different sources of supports. I wore a lot of hats but my most important role I saw was to make sure that the core group of women who really had conceived this - that they didn't lose control or they didn't become the token women with AIDS on the board – that they would still drive the defining and implementation

of this dream. It was their project. I worked invisibly, behind-the-scenes to help them realize their dream. And so I worked on that for four years until we opened the doors and then I stepped out and started my Masters Degree the same day. (I wrote my Master's thesis on the meaning of participation for the core group of women who led that project.) So next I did an internship where I was like the resident biographer on a study the CUNY commissioned—an evaluation of the programs that were designed for low income students at CUNY. At this time CUNY was kind of under fire from the city and having to justify its investment in low income students. So they commissioned an assessment and evaluation of some programs that hadn't even existed for a year yet – it was really too soon to have learned much about their effectiveness. But I was assigned to spend a summer interviewing women at CUNY who were using college as a pathway out of poverty and women who had gotten a degree and had gotten off Welfare. The women I met just blew me away. They were so inspiring and they had really good ideas for changes that could be made that would make it less difficult to be in college as a way to get off Welfare. They had good questions and doable solutions, like “Why are face-to-face interviews with the Human Resources Administration always held during final exams week? Why is it that we have this tremendous conflict where we either are going to go into a face-to-face to keep being able to eat and pay our rent or take our final exams and get the semester accomplished?” Those kinds of things are not... you don't have to move a mountain; you just have to get the right people in the room to have a conversation and have dialog and come up with something that will work for everybody. So their ideas became a list, became a concept paper and I kind of went around town with this list and all this inspiration from all these women and looked for who is working on this, what organizations are working on this and how are different people approaching it, who's interested in it. And one place I went by was the Center for the Study of Family Policy at Hunter where Jan Poppendieck was the Director at the time and she had been doing a lot of work on Welfare reform. One of the projects at the Center was involved in the Welfare Reform Network and they were at least trying to keep connected to the pulse of what was happening, what the current debates were. And she was interested in having the Center do more than that. So she made it possible in a college to start something new, which is not easy to do in an institution – to make change. WRI would never have happened if not for her interest and her ingenuity to get it done. So we started Welfare Rights Initiative – that concept paper, that list of great ideas became the core of a new organization that would provide college credit for students to learn about the Welfare system that has so

much impact on their lives and learn basic skills to gain a voice in the policy decision making that affects them. Through that study during my internship that was commissioned by CUNY to evaluate its own programs, that's when we learned that there were I think it was 12% or 13% of the student body were students supported by public assistance.

CT: What year was that?

ML: I would guess around '93 and because that's confidential information, no one was aware until the time of this study that the Howard Samuels Policy Institute at CUNY Graduate Center – Marilyn Gittell – was in charge of this study. And she is also the source that when you were in the WRI class, you knew that was the source, that was the only research that we could draw on. So that's when we learned that there were, I think it was 26,000 students on Welfare at CUNY, which is tremendous; it's like kind of mind-blowing because they're invisible. They don't go around shaking hands and saying, "Hi, I'm on Welfare." Nobody had any idea that so many of the students in each classroom were struggling so much to be there, probably walking there and really, really there against all odds. It was very challenging to be in school and having to fight the Welfare system for the opportunity to stay in school. Nobody was ever asking to have their tuition be free or to be paid to be in school, - just for access. Just let me have the same access to work hard to get a degree that anyone else has. That was our "ask."

CT: As an observer of life at Hunter at that time, as a biographer for this project, could you describe for me a little bit about what the conditions of poverty for students on Public Assistance were at the time you were there. And was there any other form of support system in place – government or non-government sponsored – help available to students at the time?

ML: Well, the programs that were available were the ones we were evaluating; they were kind of on the chopping block. There was a program called Reach, the Seek Program had been around for a long time and another one I think called Access. One of them provided lunch money for a brief time for students on Public Assistance; one of them provided transportation reimbursements and that made a big difference in the ability of students to be in school. But they didn't last long; they got defunded. From the time that we started WRI, over the next year, more than half of those students were forced out of CUNY to do Work Fair. That was the big time of Welfare reform "ending Welfare as we know

it,” and these students were targeted as the most able-bodied population that, if put into a Work Fair program, might give the Work Fair program good numbers and have it look successful. So the people who had the best shot of actually getting off Welfare, even students who were a senior in college, were being forced to stop and take these Work Fair positions which at the time were exclusively working for the Parks Department or the Sanitation Department. And it was supposed to be training for work but most women know how to clean bathrooms. They weren’t learning any new skills and they were having to quit something that would actually set them up, give them a real shot at being able to get a job that would provide a living wage and health benefits - health benefits was the big issue. Of these 26,000 students, 90% of them were women and most of them were single mothers and healthcare was the biggest stumbling block to getting off Welfare for a single mom. A lot of young people will say, “Well, I’ll go without health insurance; I’ll just be careful and hope that nothing terrible happens.” But if you have kids, you can’t really take that risk cause there’s just too many risks. So that was the hardest thing – the only reason people couldn’t get off Welfare was what would they do for health benefits, for healthcare? Unfortunately, it no longer became allowed for you to be in college if you were on Public Assistance. Instead you had to be doing I think it was 35 hours a week of Work Fair which made it impossible again for a single mother to do 35 hours a week cleaning bathrooms in the park and taking care of your kids and all of the work you have to do to fight with the Welfare system to try to get your check and they couldn’t remain full-time students. And then if you’re not a full-time student, you can’t qualify for Financial Aid so it was kind of a bind. So they were dropping like flies. Within a year I think about half of them were forced out of school and within a couple years it was way more than that; it was down to about 6,000 students left. But during that time we started this community leadership program. In the first semester the aim was to provide an introduction to the history of Welfare policy and the current debates at the federal, state and local level so that you would start to really learn about these policies and the bigger systemic issues out there. And I think the most important thing that happened at the very beginning of the program was just that it created an opportunity for women to find each other and break the isolation. So because nobody fathomed there were 26,000, for any woman who was support by public systems, she figured she was probably the only one and she wouldn’t tell anybody. So when they found each other, it was just – as it always is in any issue like this – it just helps break the stigma and then people can get together and they hear each other’s stories and they start to realize there are issues

out there that are bigger than me -this isn't all my fault. People had internalized all the bad things they hear about women on Welfare and so they started to realize that these problems that seemed so deeply and uniquely personal were actually not; there were bigger issues at play. And their harsh life experience gave them expertise that was missing in the decision making that frames those policies. So that's a real transformation to take that leap, that shift in how you see yourself and how you see the world from believing that you're the reason for the world's problems; you're the reason for poverty and to instead realizing you've got some experience and expertise in fact that needs to be shared. And that if people understood how incredibly committed you are to getting off Welfare, how you want nothing more than to be self-sufficient or self-sustaining for your family. And if they knew about the obstacles that you were encountering each day, exactly the nature of those obstacles, maybe some of those obstacles could be removed. So some of what happened with WRI in the beginning just was organic and it just evolved. We had the intention that this leadership program would be two semesters and in the first semester you learned the policies and you learned the skills and you learned some values that we sort of spoon-fed. We said that three values were core to our work: dignity, democracy and self-determination. And even though you kind of hear that as a little abstract and you can talk about what does that mean. But in the second semester students were invited to do an internship and to staff up this organization. So they realize now that they are still students and they're here to learn, but they're the driving force of this strange little community-based organization that's housed in a college but is more community-based than it is university-based. So in the second semester students learned what it means to be value-based as an organization because then you embody those values and they guide how you behave together; how you work together as a team; how you communicate; how you coordinate action. And that's a powerful learning experience to actually work in an environment where there is a shared vision and shared values and a commitment to the dignity, democracy and self-determination of all the participants. So that's when a community organizing dimension bubbled up because the students did internships. We initially placed students out in the field in internships and then after the first year we realized let's be the internship here, so we brought everybody back in. I think that actually happened during the first year. It happened when we almost lost our funding. We had all our eggs in one basket in terms of funding to get through the year.

CT:

And by what time... what year was this by this time?

ML: This would have been '95 I think, or '96. And a grant didn't come through that had been pretty much promised, verbally promised. So we were looking... turning under every rock, "Is this an opportunity?" We were just completely scanning the city for what are we going to do, where are we going to get some funds quick so that we can keep this thing going. This was our first spring semester and that's when we learned about NYPIRG (New York Public Interest Research Group) and its long history of organizing students to vote. We learned that a percentage of the student activity fee would go for programs that are doing good things for students. So we ended up diving in and creating a campaign and pulling all our students in from these carefully placed internships that we had identified and built relationships with all the different organizations. We brought everybody back and said we're going to learn how to do a campaign. In about three weeks' time we have to get 1,200 signatures on this petition from students who want to have this thing called WRI on the ballot. We needed the student body to vote to increase their student activity fee to support the Welfare Rights Initiative. So Maureen Lane was in the first class and she took up that charge and made it happen – she and many others – but she in particular, threw herself into that. They did classroom presentations all over the school for two or three weeks which took a lot of courage for somebody supported by public assistance to walk into a classroom and say, "I'm on Welfare and we're starting this really great project that is gonna promote access to higher education for more families and we'd like you to support it." That took tremendous courage and she led the way and she inspired a lot of other students. She modeled – this is how we can do this. You just take a deep breath and you march down that auditorium hall and you get up there on that stage and – we're in one of those big lecture rooms – and here's what you say. And she just did it over and over and over and over. And other people would go with her, and then after they'd do it with her three or four times, they would do it on their own. They got just enough signatures and then had about two more weeks or something to make it very visible and drum up a lot of interest and votes and got it passed. That then created what almost like functions as an endowment. It created a permanent, perennial, renewable source of income for WRI that assured that WRI could at least have one staff person, one full-time and some part-time people. So that was a wonderful victory for our students in their first year to tackle such a big challenge and succeed.

CT: If we could backtrack a little bit in regards to the early days of WRI – the formation of WRI – how do you recall feeling about

being in the initial group that thought of this brainchild that you came up with – this idea, this list of concepts and suggestions of women that you had interviewed and men that you had interviewed and then reaching out to the Hunter Center for Family Policy. If I'm incorrect, please correct me. Can you tell me what your impressions were of the people that you met and who you thought were the key figures in helping feed into this notion and what would ultimately become WRI? Can you talk a little bit about that?

ML: The people at Hunter?

CT: Hunter and people outside of Hunter who helped you form WRI as it ultimately became WRI. I guess in regards to that first leadership class and the building blocks that went into the formation of it.

ML: Well, I mentioned Jan Poppendieck – she was central. Another person was Mimi Abramovitz – she was on the... actually I think she was a co-founder of the Center. I think Mimi and Ruth Seidel had co-founded the Center for the Study of Family Policy. Mimi was just extremely committed to this project and still is to this day, as are Jan and Ruth. Ruth was on sabbatical that year so I didn't meet Ruth until we were up and running for a while because she just wasn't there. But as soon as she was back, she was there. And the three of them and then some other people on the faculty, Joan Tronto from the Political Science Department; Mary Lefkarites from the Health Sciences Department – those are the first people that come to mind. Joan in particular and over the 10 years that I was there, there were different Chairs of the Women's Studies Program and they were pivotal – each of the different Chairs that were there, particularly when the leadership program had been running for three or four years. When we got it started – the only reason we could offer it was that our Faculty Advisory Board – the people I'm telling you about – were again really creative and industrious and said, "If you want to start a new course, it could take years to get it approved. But what we can do is create an independent study opportunity or a service learning opportunity." Jan was very interested in service learning and doing all kinds of great things around service learning. So the students in the first year class were able to get credit on an individual basis with one of the faculty members who sponsored their independent study. So we had a curriculum, we had a reading list, we had a really rigorous, very challenging two-semester program. Our students said it was the most challenging class they were taking; the most demanding, and that's how they got credit. Once we had this

going for three or four years, the Faculty Advisory Board wanted to get it regularized – make it a regular part of the Women’s Studies Program and the Political Science Department, so that was a big, important milestone also that Joan Tronto was especially helpful with in Political Science - in both departments. So then we had a course number and students would know and could see it in the listings so we didn’t have to work quite as hard at trying to make it visible. Students would now know that it’s there as an opportunity, it’s something else they could register for. That was an important step.

Also, the Welfare Reform Network (now called the Economic Justice and Social Welfare Network, I think). It is sponsored by the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, located on 23rd and Park. WRN – Welfare Reform Network – was – still is – a central information/advocacy/activism clearinghouse. There’s a monthly meeting that WRN holds and people from many, many social service agencies that are providing direct services related to poverty, plus advocacy organizations and the legal service organizations and some grassroots participants would all come to this monthly meeting. It was always on the first Tuesday of every month in the morning and so it was a big group of people and that was the place to go to find out everything new in the current debates at the federal, state and local level. And it had a committee for federal, city legislation, childcare issues, domestic violence issues, grassroots issues. This coalition was a big factor in WRI getting started. I would go to those meetings every month and became aware of how much all of the advocates – professional advocates, including legal advocates – longed to be able to work alongside the people they were advocating for. They would rather be advocating with rather than advocating for. So when I would go there and talk about this idea of Welfare Rights Initiative, there was just so much warmth and support and encouragement and that was also a big factor. There was kind of a community that was clearly going to not only accept, but support and encourage Welfare Rights Initiative to get going. And so as soon as we started Welfare Rights Initiative, we started a Client Empowerment Committee at WRN, which was the first time there was a committee that truly was populated by people with first-hand experience of Welfare. So a lot of our students – that became their internship in the early years... our student leaders became the driving force of the Client Empowerment Committee. They really brought the voice of students at CUNY to this broader network that was working on city and state level issues.

CT:

And how did you select the students for these internships?

ML: How did we select the students? I'm trying to think how - did we select the students in the first place? We had a mailing list; because of that research study we had a list of addresses for the students who were supported by public assistance and we sent out a mass mail. That's what we did. It was anonymous; I don't think we had their names associated, but we sent out just a kind of vague, "We're starting this new program. We wonder if it might be of interest to you. If so, please come to an open house on any one of these three nights," kind of thing.

CT: What was the response?

ML: It was tremendous. I think we had three different nights and we just had people walking in, a constant stream of students coming in. I can remember when Maureen Lane walked in the door the first time. She looked really apprehensive, like – even that took real courage to walk into a room where somebody has told you, "We're going to talk about Welfare; wonder if you might be interested." So they're kind of coming in like, you know, "There's gonna be a course that I can take and then I could get college credit to gain a voice on these issues and learn how to be an effective community organizer - this kind of sounds too good to be true." You saw a lot of apprehension. But in that room in those first open houses, we had a round of "check in" for people to introduce themselves to each other and that's when we broke the ice. Just finding each other makes all the difference in the world, realizing that you're not alone.

CT: Let me ask you – these first formative years of WRI – how did you notice in the early years -like tweaking the course – whether you noticed its mission evolve or change over time – any reflections you have on that?

ML: We're constantly tweaking the course. Every class was so different, very surprisingly different and we were trying to model in the course the same way that organizations can be effective and how they work together and how they make change in the real world. So if you have people come in with different talents and skills and energies and passions than you were expecting, you just shift everything and you follow those strengths; you build on those strengths that are in the room. So every semester was very different because we had different talents and energies and motivations in the room. I think that something that students appreciated being in this program was that they got to recognize their own gifts and strengths, that maybe they were overlooking or

minimizing or just not having an opportunity to think about because their lives were such a battle, you know, just to survive. And I think that's what the program did for a lot of students – it provided a mirror and said, "This is what we see in you," and we kept articulating it over and over and over until students saw it in themselves and owned it. And in some cases that could take years depending on how much you've internalized the stereotypes and the feeling that you have about yourself. And so one thing I remember about the early years of WRI was I've always felt like I'm a patient person, but it really took tremendous patience to build shared leadership. The other thing that happened once we got the funds to continue and make it through the first year – we were immediately able to hire three students to join the staff. And so now we had another venue for modeling our values, for embodying what we believe in in the way we worked together. I wanted us to function as a team and to have everybody have equal input and full participation and contribution to the decisions and essential decision making. This required a lot of patience to just keep hanging in there until people stepped into their potential in those roles. And over a five or six year period, it went from me feeling that it took a lot of work to have a staff meeting to me feeling that I am so honored to work among these peers. By the time I left WRI, in ten years, I totally had peers. It was completely a level playing field and that's what we cultivated. I think that's the most valuable thing that WRI accomplished while I was there; everybody knew it was a level playing field. And everybody had that experience of going from A to B and they knew how to replicate it. So any one of the people in that ecosystem – wherever they go, they're creating an ecosystem just like that, which is tremendous.

CT: And do you have any reflections on who were the initial team members when you started forming your first team?

ML: Well, they were students who were most ready to step up; who were the most enthusiastic in the course; who jumped into their internships and did more than was asked of them. They weren't struggling to meet deadlines; they were going over the top. It was clear who they should be. They self-identified.

CT: Maureen was one.

ML: Maureen was one. You want to know who they were?

CT: If you care to share.

- ML:* Another was a young woman named Lizette Colon, who's not at Hunter anymore and I think Beatrice... Beatrice Lopez wasn't in the first group but she was in the second generation. Maybe after Lizette left Beatrice came in, I think. That's all I'm remembering at the moment. Michelle Rivera gained a lot of courage and also stepped up to the plate; it was inspiring to see her leadership over time, too.
- CT:* And in terms of, I guess organizing for Welfare Rights advocacy in New York City, were there some constraints in terms of what you can do as someone who didn't have that background in welfare or what you saw from other people who were involved in the formation in regards to their background as academics?
- ML:* Well, I would say that I was kind of fortunate to not have an affiliation so I wasn't limited by my role as a scholar at Hunter in the way that I would have been and I wasn't affiliated anywhere, so I could just be in a position of bringing together the different affiliated groups and facilitating a space where they could all bring their gifts to the mix and create a whole that's bigger than the sum of its parts, which I think also was helpful to get this project going because it was... I mean just coincidentally, as I reflect on it, coincidentally, it was a good thing that we were oddly rooted in a university-based setting, but not funded by the college. CUNY hadn't decided to support this program and we had to rely on external sources for funding. Our students had one foot in the door where they go to college and their other foot in the community where they come from. This positioned WRI to be very effective because all of us – whether students or myself – were able to be a bridge builder. We were in the bridge; we weren't positioned with the haves or the have-nots or the university or in an institution or a community-based organization. We were really in the bridge between them and we tried to function that way; we tried to recognize that as a strength and look at how can we benefit from this, what does this do for us. It gave us a lot of freedom and perspective to be able to observe what everyone else can do and what they can't do; what the limitations are. We supported students to expand their views. This helped the students be able to shift their perspectives and appreciate different viewpoints. Often the initial reaction is anger, when you bring students together and they learn about these external structures that are limiting their life chances; there's a lot of anger that they want to express. And I think we were able to help students see in each other, to become observers, observers of their own behavior, observers of each other and expand. My belief is that is ultimately the only change we can make in this world. We can't change systems; we can't change

anything outside of ourselves. The one thing we can do for sure is change the observer that we are. That is the most powerful change that anybody can make. It's not easy to change how you look at things. But as soon as you change how you look at things, you see opportunities that you didn't see before. So for a student who comes into a program like this and sees herself as a victim and everyone else as the perpetrator and is very angry, there's a lot of opportunity to expand the observer that you are and begin to perceive a lot of other reasons that people are doing what they're doing and making the decisions that they're making and to not personalize it and just to not look at things from a "how does this affect me," but more "what can we do for the wellbeing of a lot more people." So I think our whole program was kind of uniquely positioned to be able to have a bigger perspective than a lot of other organizations could have. Or that any one of our partners could have on their own because we came together, we benefitted from each others' viewpoints and positions and worked together in a way that kind of tapped a lot of different resources.

CT: And I guess going back to the work that WRI was doing in regards to empowering students to be advocates in social policy, how did the rest of the state, the rest of the country view Welfare Reform in the role of college as a legitimate form of work-related activity? Did you face any form of reluctance from state and local politicians in setting up non-punitive Welfare Reform laws?

ML: At that time Welfare education was not at all valued as a pathway out of poverty. Nobody would argue that it's a good thing to get an education and that an education will get you a degree that will help you qualify for a better job, and not only that, it will help you expand your sense of who you are and your sense of possibilities. Nobody would deny that. But there were other forces at play, one of which was to "end Welfare as we know it," to move people off of Public Assistance; reduce the Welfare rolls; cut spending on Welfare. And so people in college were just the surest way to make these new policies successful. If we get these folks that are thriving in school and get them to do Work Fair, we're gonna get this done quick and we're gonna be successful. So I think everyone understood that but it meant that the only way that students could stay in school was if they knew that, in fact, they have rights to be in school. And again, having internalized the stereotypes, most women would go to their Welfare officer and be told, "You can't be in school," and they'd say, "Okay, I know. You're right," and they'd kind of walk away with their head hanging and, "I knew that was too good to be true. I can't go to school." So we had to get to students one-by-one and say, "No,

what they're doing is actually not legal." There's still a law on the State books and that was the law that allowed this Reach Program and Seek and the other programs. There is still a law on the books that says you can be in school, but you have to know that and you have to advocate for it because otherwise, the Human Resources Administration caseworkers who are telling you you have to quit – they don't know any better. They're just given their directives in this big bureaucracy so if you don't know, it's like anything else these days. You have to go to bat for what you want. So that's why we started this program with CUNY Law School. We had friends- through Welfare Reform Network and Legal Services and the Legal Aid Society - who were full life committed – to trying to represent students and help them fight for their rights. And there were not nearly enough lawyers to serve all of the people who needed to know... who could stay in school if they had an attorney, if they had legal representation. We worked with the attorneys for a couple of years on different approaches. For example, what if this attorney from Legal Aid leads a workshop and so at least there'll be 20 women in the room at once working with you instead of one-on-one. They were very flexible and very interested in every different approach we took to having their services reach farther, but it still wasn't enough. So then we thought, hey, CUNY Law School – it's right here at CUNY and they have law students and internships. So we went and got directed to Stephen Loffredo at CUNY Law School. He was immediately receptive and excited about this and said, "Absolutely. We have clinics that work on other issues. Let's create a Welfare Clinic, a Welfare Law Clinic." So that became a really key partnership early on that then trained... We also wanted to get social worker interns in there if we could so that the approach to working with a "client" would be more empowering for the client. In other words, everything we were teaching students was about being there with students and kind of shining their light back at them until they owned that light and would do things for themselves. Law students, however, are trained to serve the client. "We're going to do this for you; we're going to get it done." And we wanted to see - how can we influence a little shift there because this whole program could be even more useful if it's more of a partnership rather than a law student serving and a person on Welfare receiving. So we worked with that and Stephen led his law students. He understood the value of what we were aiming for and he built that training in for the law students to function more as partner. We're going to solve this together. And that allowed us to reach thousands of more students than we otherwise would have because we had a number of law students (I don't remember how many law students each semester in the early

years) but they each were working 20 hours a week on this. We quadrupled the legal force of people that were qualified to provide legal representation in fair hearings for students. This is kind of all coming back to me because I haven't been involved in a long time, but that was exciting!

CT: With the works that he built, WRI was bringing together a lot of people. Were there many people meeting for the first time and crossing boundaries in the sense around [race] and experience? Was there a way in which these conversations were new or different conversations?

ML: I think a big thing there... at the time of the work on the state law, I was trying to move out of Welfare Rights Initiative. I was there an extra two years longer than I wanted to be, not because I was eager to go somewhere else, but because I wanted WRI to be staffed and driven by the students who it was designed to serve. And it took two years longer than I had hoped it would because of the funding piece. And this is something I possibly could have done better earlier, but I sort of tried to protect WRI from the challenge of fundraising, so I would do it after hours. I would do it as kind of the extra full-time job on the side that nobody knew about sort of thing because I didn't want this growing little movement – all the momentum they were gaining to be lost. I wanted our students to do advocacy and to build relationships, and not go out with their fists raised, but instead to go out and seek to understand the other person's perspective and be moved in how you perceive what's going on and come to a shared understanding and a shared agreement – what could we do together that would be good for you and good for me. That was the way we were training students to coordinate action, to build community with people, to find common ground and work together on common goals. And I didn't want to interrupt that and have people kind of, "Well, we can do our mission for this amount of time and the rest amount of time we gotta raise money." So the last two years – that was the last thing I had to transfer: "So now you gotta learn how to raise money and we want to do it in a way that you can still lead with your mission and not your fundraising appeal." But I wanted to make sure they were financially capable of handing this, meeting the budget every year and staying on good footing financially. So during those two years while I'm transitioning, I'm just putting the last pieces in place, getting this foundation just strong enough that I can step aside and it will realize its full potential. That was when the State bill came up that became our next really major campaign.

During that time I was really, really lucky to get a fellowship with the Kellogg National Leadership Program which had selected 38

people from all different states for a three-year fellowship that was very self-driven – you would define what you wanted to work on – it had to be something you’d never done before. You couldn’t work on something you already knew how to do so if you submitted a proposal and it was kind of easy to write and you were just going to kind of keep on doing what you do - but do it better - it would get rejected. You had to do something that you do not know how to do –a tremendous gift to be directed in that way. And it had a year of international travel, looking at different approaches to social transformation in different parts of the world with encouragement then to bring back tools and inspiration and models and look at how you could adapt them for application here. So during that time I was very influenced by the work of John Paul Lederach who coined the concept of conflict transformation as opposed to conflict negotiation or debate. And the idea of conflict transformation is that in crisis is opportunity – in any crisis there’s opportunity. We know that usually change happens when we hit rock bottom, when something horrendous happens and then it opens up a space for us to say, “Well then let’s do this.” Sometimes we have to reach that crisis before we’re willing to change. So I was kind of armed with some new concepts and theories for how to transform conflict into opportunity and a lot of good training in how to facilitate and participate in dialog that is not conversation and it’s not debate, it’s really about drawing the other person into a space of discovery and being in a space of discovery together – coming together with an intention to be moved and to understand the other person’s perspective better than you do now and to find common ground to have dialog at the level of your values, not your position so you’re not just kind of fighting for your position. But what is it that we really value where we do see eye to eye and what does that suggest about this issue that we’re fighting about. So everything that I was learning I was teaching at WRI and that became the approach that we... it became our quest to practice dialog with legislators who we typically perceive as not seeing the world the way we do. We wanted to practice it with our allies first, with the legislators that we think are friendly and on the same page and then practice it with people who are completely opposed to everything that we’re for. That’s when we’re going to learn if we’re learning how to build common ground with unusual allies, with the perceived “enemy.” And so that became pretty much our internship that year – that’s what our learning goal was – let’s practice getting to know people what we don’t understand and what we disagree with. Let’s try to see it the way they see it; let’s try to get a sense of how they see things and invite them to get a sense of how we see things. And see if in the mix of that we can find something that we’re for that we can

pursue together. So out of that ideal the plan to invite some upstate conservative Republican legislators to take a tour of CUNY emerged. Senator Ray Meier who was the Chair of the Social Services Committee became the target. This was an upstate conservative Republican Senator, Chair of the Social Services Committee, with a lot of power. What if we try to build a relationship with him rather than just go up and lobby and say, “We wish you’d do this,” and not get anywhere, let’s try to actually build a relationship. So Senator Tom Duane who was here in New York and “a friendly” helped to make that possible. He deeply understood what we were trying to do; he takes the same approach in his work – kind of building bridges across the political divides and a lot of other divides. Senator Duane helped get Senator Meier to agree to come to New York by offering him tickets to see *The Lion King* – that didn’t hurt – and he kind of co-hosted the whole thing. Our students, Maureen Lane in particular, just drove this thing. But a lot of the students participated and they were stellar. We hosted a lunch in the President’s conference room at Hunter and he arrived that morning saying, “Well, I’m only going to be here til noon. I don’t have much time,” and kind of looking at his watch. And by the time we got to lunch, he wouldn’t leave. We set it up – the whole thing was designed as a dialog with students telling their stories and inviting him to tell his story and using inquiry, “What do you think about this,” and “Tell me more. I don’t understand how you see that. Could you tell me more?” And we all learned a lot about each other and there was just a wonderful, wonderful feeling in the room. He didn’t want to leave and from then on he was a champion of Welfare Rights Initiative. He actually championed it and he literally championed the bill in the Senate that the legal attorneys we’d been working with had crafted, and he got the Senate to unanimously approve it, which was amazing.

CT: And how does this, I guess this time you spent with investigating ways of reaching out and transforming dialog to conflict transformation in regards to your notions of leadership before WRI and after WRI, how has that changed or transformed?

ML: Well, that’s a good question. Before WRI in my experience with the start up of Iris House, I’d seen what happens when you just create a space for people to find each other and to make that leap from surviving to thriving. And at WRI we had a different structure and a different intention and we really saw that the students could lead the organization and completely step into every opportunity that was provided. In terms of your question about leadership, I don’t think my concept changed. When I first

designed the curriculum at WRI, I had read everything under the sun about leadership. I hadn't taken any classes on it, I wasn't connected to any resources; I was just fascinated with it. And it was really interesting when this Kellogg Fellowship came up years later, "the Kellogg National Leadership Program." I was looking for money for WRI online and this popped up when I looked at the Kellogg Foundation. I was like, "Wow, a leadership fellowship." I thought how cool and I could actually maybe connect with other people who are interested in leadership. That was the only reason I applied and I didn't even know that I'd get to travel all over the world. I didn't even know. So I used to wonder about leadership and I always – from the experience at Iris House, even more so at Welfare Rights Initiative – felt that community leadership is the key. It's a model of shared leadership, in a community that is actively eliciting the gifts and strengths and different viewpoints. You want as much diversity of viewpoint as you can get. And trying to draw all that together and hold those differences and creative tension, it's like you strike a match – the tension is what makes a flame. When you can hold different viewpoints in creative tension, something will emerge that is better than what either side had in mind. But both sides have to be committed to listening for that; you have to know that it's there and we just have to listen for it and we have to look at what can we do to hasten its emergence because it's there. That's like listening for the collective wisdom to emerge. So I was very big on that and still am. But since WRI I have come kind of full circle back to realizing the importance of individual leadership also and that for my own experience I learned the value over many years of developing capacity to serve a greater good; developing capacity to support a team and to be an invisible leader which is what I personally excel in. This is a leadership that's invisible. The goal is that if I'm successful, no one will know that I even had a hand in it. They will all feel recognized for what they did and they'll be proud of it and gratified and they'll want to do more of it and they won't realize that I did anything. That's the kind of leadership we taught at Hunter pretty much. I mean totally. When I say pretty much, it was sometimes implied and not always spoken, but that's what I modeled and that's what the staff at WRI – that's what they do. You can see that. But I also realized that you have to also be willing and able to step out in front of that team when necessary because different situations call for different types of leadership. So ideally, you need to be a leader that is comfortable in your own skin, committed to the greater good and focused outwardly, not on yourself so that when an opportunity emerges, you can be flexible and you can step into whatever role you're needed to fill to serve the potential that's waiting to happen. And with that, what I

mentioned earlier about learning that the only thing we can change is ourselves. I didn't know that when I first started Welfare Rights Initiative. I was like, "Oh, I want to change these systems." And when I first became involved in the start-up of Iris House, I wanted to find out about these systems that are creating all this stigma and keeping women from accessing basic healthcare. And it's not that I don't have an interest in changing those systems anymore, it's just that I realize the best thing I can do is to be all of who I can be. It's to work on myself and my ability to be flexible and able to step into different roles, to be just as happy being a follower and just as effective as a follower as I am as a leader. And to constantly be telling myself that whatever I think is true is just one way of looking at it. There are a million ways to look at anything and what I want to always do is to gain more perspectives. That's the only thing we really can change and it's the only thing that will ultimately change the world is when we're all open to see things differently.

CT: And I wanted to ask you - what was the overall impact of spirituality on your decision to form WRI?

ML: The impact or the role? Either one?

CT: The impact. Yeah.

ML: Well, maybe I'll try to hit both. For me, my whole life is an expression of my spiritual belief or my faith, my sense that we're here for a purpose, that I want to be here for a purpose. I want to commit myself to having as many people as possible recognize the light in them. So my whole life is structured as an expression of my faith. I mean, it's all I live for is to serve to the best of my ability. And some of that has a psychological underpinning for me in that I grew up in a dysfunctional environment and was in a role of being the parent to my mother at a very young age. And my suffering was her suffering. Why does she have it so hard and I have it so easy? I think since I couldn't ultimately help her with her various challenges, the limitations that I was aware of my whole life while she was living, are probably something I'm still playing out in every other part of my life. I'm still trying to be helpful in ways that I couldn't help her. But it was a great learning for me. It's been a foundational learning experience. So that's how it forms... that's how spirituality forms what I do. How it impacts what I do comes back to the thing about leadership. It's that ultimately all we can do is model the change that we want to see in the world – whatever it is that we believe in, we can't just go around being angry, complaining that it's not there or blaming

other people that it's not there or wishing that it were there and fantasizing about it. The one thing we can do is be it, just become it. Model it; live it and that's a totally spiritual practice; that's a practice of being present and aware.

CT: And at the end of today, how would you characterize the impact of all this work on your own life, kind of already paralleling what you just said, but any other thoughts on that?

ML: The impact of this work on my life?

CT: Yep. The work at WRI and before and after as well, with your work after WRI.

ML: I think for me I'm just learning, I'm just always learning and realizing how radically much I don't know, and I love that. I love discovering whole blind spots that I had before like places where you thought, well that's a dark place and there's just nothing there; it's dark. And then you're at another point in your life where suddenly see that it's dark but it's full of stuff, you know? There's so much more to be discovered and to become aware of. So it's just been a learning experience. I felt so fortunate to have these opportunities to learn and contribute.

CT: Great. I think we're done. Any final thoughts?

ML: I guess not.

CT: Okay. Thank you so much.

[End of Audio – 1:16:07]