

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 digitally-recorded session of an interview with Vanessa Lyles by Cynthia Tobar on September 16, 2011 in New York City. This interview is part of the Welfare Rights Initiative Digital Oral History Archive Project.

Vanessa Lyles 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.

CYNTHIA TOBAR: Thank you for being here Vanessa. You can introduce yourself.

VL: Sure. My name is Vanessa Lyles.

CT: Okay. And, I wanted to ask you about your background, your early life and the influences that were brought to bear on you and your family, their education. I'm very interested in what your early childhood was like, the intellectual or spiritual world that you inhabited, that sort of thing. If you could tell me a little bit about that, and you can begin anywhere you like.

VL: Oh, good. I was born in a manger. No, [LAUGHS] I was born and raised in the Bronx, uptown Bronx and hardworking people—my mom was kinda my Shee-ra because she was a secretary for most of my childhood. And, my dad was a musician, and he did maintenance work, so that was like his steady gig and then he performed. And then, my brother became a musician, so my house was literally like, a music studio. There was always a rehearsal of some sort going on. And then, when there wasn't a rehearsal going on, we had our own family performances that used to go on. I played the fan and my mother would sing and my brother would play trumpet and sing and my dad would sing and play guitar. And we lived on the first floor, so we used to have to open the windows because everybody used to sit on the fence and kind of be the audience. So, my childhood was very animated, extremely exciting and very nurturing.

Now, I know my mom said, I used to always say to her, you know, "I'm glad we're rich." And now, she would ask me, "What makes you say we're rich?" "Aren't we?" I didn't know that we weren't, first of all, and I also didn't know that there was anything else other than what I considered rich, which was my life, you know, having my family around me and never having anything that I really needed that wasn't provided. So, I had a happy childhood, very happy.

CT: And, what about your family's background in regards to politics and their education? Can you share a little bit about that?

VL: My dad went as far as high school, and my mom actually, when I was in high school, my mom went to college, which was very bizarre. And then, she went to grad school as I was finishing up high school. So, we were in school together, but by that time, my mom and dad weren't together anymore, so she was kind of fulfilling the rest of her dreams and changed careers and started teaching. So, she retired from teaching and my dad is now deceased.

Politics was discussed passionately [LAUGHS] in my family, but not traditionally now that I have some type of frame of reference. We discussed politics only as it related to us and our immediate situation. We weren't whimsical about it like, you know, we think this person should be doing this or did you hear what happened in that party and these people believe this. It was more personal, you know, just if someone in politics made a decision that directly impacted my family, we discussed that. Party alliances and things like that, we didn't discuss, which is interesting. I never thought about it until now, but no, we didn't do the traditional.

CT: And, can you share I guess I'm trying to somehow trace your journey up to the point where you arrived at WRI in regards to your path towards your education and where you were as a student when you got to Hunter?

VL: Well, everything for me became clear. I started to make my own choices, I guess. High school, I went to music and art, and that was like, amazing, you know, to be doing something that I loved and to know that it counted and that there was actually credit and accolades that go with following your passion was great. So, that was like, the beginning for me. And then, after high school I didn't go right to college. I had a baby, and then single parenthood. And then, I had a job that did tuition reimbursement. So, I went to the New School where I loved. It was like being back in high school. It was so liberating to be at the New School. I got all A's. It was great.

And then, got married, had another baby. And then, single parenthood again with two children. And so, that's when everything kind of—the rubber met the road, so to speak, and I decided to go back to school and I went to Hunter. But, what happened was, I was making decisions, and I decided to get on public assistance because that seemed to be the only way that I could effectively balance school and children and everything else that needed to be done. So, I said, "I'll go on. I'll finish school and then I'll come off." And that's what I did. It was a calculated decision.

So, when I went to get on public assistance, I found myself becoming like this rebel woman. It was so much injustice that was being done every time I went. And I would go there when they opened it, I think at like, 8:30 in the morning. So, I would be there early so that I could drop my kids off at school, go do what I needed to do and be out at a reasonable time. But, I saw people who had their spirits crushed at a desk. I'm still in awe of the fact that there's so many places that are supposed to be servicing people and advocating for them, and they're in these big, wide open spaces where all of your business is just like, screamed. Not even—you can have a casual conversation and everyone is in the next cubicle listening, people walking by with input.

And, the only thing at that time work fair had just started. And the only thing that you could do was collect public assistance and I call them filler jobs, where you would either pick up the trash in the park or go to some type of home health aid job or just things that were filling in positions that obviously the city was at a deficit for. So, they used people in public assistance, much like prisoners where you just kind of fill in for what's missing.

And, they didn't want to have that competitive salary thing going, so it was like work for your welfare check kind of thing.

And then, I needed a letter, and I was at Hunter, and I had read a little bit of the description of Welfare Rights Initiative. And, I was put in contact with Dillonna Lewis. So, I went to see her just to get a letter. I had no idea what Welfare Rights Initiative was. I didn't have anything other than that little paragraph that I read in the catalogue. And, when she said it was a course I'm like, "A course?" You know, because I was living the welfare thing. When I was on public assistance they were like, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Well, I'm going to go back to school." And they looked at me and they were like, "Oh, okay, so you're going to go get a two year degree." I'm like, "No, I'm going to get a four year degree." And they said, "You can't get a four year degree on public assistance." "Can't? Why not? You know, what is that about?"

And, I started to read. And like, I'm entitled to go to school, and I'm going to go to school and I'm not going to go to a two year school, I'm going to go to a four year school. And, I think at that time, yeah, I did, I had my associate's degree already from New York Technical College, and I was going to go to a four year school now. So they were like, "Well, no, you can go and be a home health aid, or you can go and get a clerical position. These are the things that you can do." And they had a list of positions that I could have like, kind of on a sheet. And they're like, "Okay." I'm like, "Well, this isn't going to work."

So, I went to the job readiness program at public assistance and I took a bag of quarters at that time. I had a pouch. And they were doing job readiness, what to wear on an interview, and how to update your resume. And, I was in the hallway on the phone calling, seeing what could be done about me going to school. And, I was given the number to this lady who said, "Just fill out a CUNY application and put all your choices." And I just had one choice—Hunter. And she's like, "Well, you have like"—I've had like, 12 boxes that could be filled in. I said, "Look, no, I've done my research. I want to go to Hunter." She's like, "What if you don't get accepted?" I had never thought about not being accepted. Music and art—I only wanted to go to music and art. I only applied to music and art. There was no what if I don't get accepted.

So, I did the same thing, and I was accepted to Hunter. So now, I'm still with public assistance going back and forth to these appointments to update and make sure that you're still doing what you need to do. And, I hear other people saying they want to go to school and being told the same thing I was being told. I didn't have that formal education, but I had enough knowledge to know. I would tell them in the next cubicle, you know, "You could go to a four year school if that's what you want to pursue. You could do that." And it started like, this little movement. So, by the time I met [DELANA?], I was just ripe. [LAUGHS] I was ripe. I wanted to go and picket somewhere. I wanted to go and stand on a soapbox and it just ignited this thing in me of how dare you? You know, these are real people with real lives.

And, of course, Dillonna was a doll about everything. I got the letter, and I got the opportunity of the lifetime just through that, you know, through meeting her. I signed up for the class and became part of the cohort, and my life and my views have changed forever. That was pivotal for me, but that interaction was pivotal for me.

CT: And around what time, what year was that taking place when you were right around the cusp of you joining Hunter and getting accepted and joining WRI—90's or 2000?

VL: 90's.

CT: Yeah. And the workfare program was just starting. Can you explain a little bit more about this letter they were asking you to provide? How does that work out?

VL: At that time, when you were on public assistance, you needed a letter from your institution kind of outlining what you're doing, so that they could justify you going to school and collecting benefits. And so, I knew that I would need a letter just about—well, every semester they kept really close tabs. So, every semester, and I didn't want to have to go from pillar to post to try and track down someone and explain everything all over again. I wanted to see if there was a place that handled that because I knew that I would need it over and over again. And, I was a little disenchanted. [LAUGHS] I was asked to do an interview for someone at *The New York Times*. And, she came to me and she said, "I understand that you are attending school and that you're on public assistance and that you're a single mom. And, I wanted to just kind of get an idea of how that is for you. I wanted to publish a story to kind of like, tell your story."

And, I was honored, and we went through the process. We went through the interview. It was a very nice interview. And then, she called me and she said, "I just have some details I need worked out." "Excellent. Okay, let's do that." "Okay, so, what I need to do is add some body to the interview. So, I wanted to know like, over the time when you were married and transitioning, was there a time like, when your husband abused you or beat you or was there something in your childhood where you were abused or neglected or something that is going to add some volume and depth to the interview?" I'm like, "No, I told you what my story was. That's my story. There were no incidences of abuse, and that's really it."

So, she kept calling back. Like, "If you think of anything, let me know." I'm like, "Well, there isn't anything." And then, she would come and just kind of approach it from all different angles, try to get the same thing. The story did eventually run, but it was very interesting to go through that process, so that made me a little leery of people and sharing what was going on in my personal world with outside people because I didn't want to be misconstrued myself. So, by the time I got to Dillonna I was pretty like skeptical and reserved and just kind of at my wits end because I was fighting alone up until that point. And trailblazing, now I know it was trailblazing.

So, by the time I got involved in WRI and started to do the advocacy work, and start to help to work on policy and just become more aware of how politics played the part in

people's personal lives on a different level, and was asked about that to do an interview with Maureen and some other people that were involved in the WRI. And that article ran also, but it was such a different perspective. [LAUGHS] It was like, "Yes, this is my story. This is my story." It was so refreshing. So, that time was great.

CT: Can you tell me more about that interview you did with WRI?

VL: Yeah, there was a point where the work that they had been doing to get people's work experiences to count toward—if you wanted to go to school. Okay, if you're a single mom with children and you were attending college, then you couldn't very well attend college and go do the other thing that they wanted you to do, which also collided with a lot of parents being able to take their children to school and then go and work their work assignment, their WEP, they used to call it, their work assignment, and then go to school.

And so, what WRI was working on at that time, which was a focused effort to get your work study to count toward your work assignment for public assistance so that you wouldn't have to be split in all different directions, so the article kind of came out of that victory of now finally, you know, single parents who were going to school could work work study and have that credit count toward their WEP assignment. So that there were people that were just coming to school going, "I can't do that because I have a WEP assignment and if I don't go to my WEP assignment, they're going to cancel my benefits and then where am I going to be? And, I have no income and I'm going to have to drop out of school."

People were dropping out of school because they had to do WEP assignments, so that victory is where that article was born from, so I got to share how being able to be in school and just be a student and take care of my children and put myself on a better playing field for being in a position where I could be self sustaining in that way, where I could have a job and take care of my children and be credentialed to do that.

CT: Fantastic.

VL: Yeah.

CT: You mentioned before how before WRI you had this inclination to be a trailblazer, and it made me wonder whether you had any history of activism before the WRI and before your experience in public assistance? And, whether up until WRI?

VL: Yeah, you're bringing up all types of pivotal moments, Cindy. Like I said, my childhood was very happy. I got to see a lot, a lot. I got to learn a lot. And then, when I finally got to an age where I was pregnant, then decision making became different for me, and I go to church. I'm a Christian and I go to church. So, my beliefs and what I live and my faith, they're not an appendage. They are like, where everything is born. So, when I went to church and I spoke to my pastor, my pastor said to me, "Oh, I appreciate you coming to speak with me. I wanted to address your pregnancy and I wanted to tell

you that”—this may not be a literal translation, but what he said in essence was, “Your sin is visible, and the sin of the person who you conceived with is not. Therefore, you must rejoin the church.”

What? Can you explain that to me again? What do you mean? It takes to people to have a baby. If I’m having a baby or because I’m having a baby out of wedlock, got that, got that. Need to rejoin the church? Nah, got that. Okay, fine. That’s not something that strikes like, a chord in me. But, only me? How does that? And, he didn’t come up with anything scriptural. He didn’t come up with anything other than, “Well, that’s just how it is.” And those words drive me bananas. What do you mean that’s just how it is? And, that was like, ping! It was just like, “Okay, that’s it.” You know, and so I got other deacons and elders and people and what—explain this to me. And, my mom was like, “You know, here you go.” She’s seen it in me, and she cultivated it in me, but she didn’t know it was going to kinda come up like that.

So, she basically was like, “Well, if this is what you need to do, then just go ahead and do that and just kind of work from within.” I’ve never been one to from within a system. It just doesn’t work for me. So, that was kind of like, my loud arrival into that’s something that needs to be attended to. It needs to be addressed directly. Again, these are people that you’re dealing with. This isn’t a concept. This is a person who’s going to give birth to a person who is going to teach this little person what it looks like to have faith, and how to have a community that is supportive of you. And, what is that going to look like if this is where we’re starting this journey?

So, that is a moment that stands out where I was like, “Okay, I definitely feel different from the people around me.” And, if there are people who feel the same, they’re not speaking. They’re not addressing it. Everybody’s just going along to get along, and that has never been my M.O. So, when I got to public assistance, it was similar. It was a similar feel. Like, people felt trapped, and people were railroaded into doing something that wasn’t going to ultimately serve them. And, I felt, you know, so I helped as many people as I could on my own. And, some people caved and some people were like, “Well, yeah.” You know, so I didn’t know that there was something that was already created to help. So yeah, that’s—

CT: And the support that you offered other people in addition to the support that eventually—I mean, this is a fascinating segue. I want to explore this further. With the deacon and challenging this deacon, how did that end up working out? I’m curious. Did you get any support from the church at that time? And then we’ll go back to the WRI, but this is—

VL: That was my coming out like, “Oh, she’s a rebel. She’s one of those.” However, I had enough years of worshipping at this particular place where they knew that I was not to be ignored. They couldn’t pass me off as some person who didn’t understand who god was, and didn’t have a respect and a healthy fear and reverence for god. So, they couldn’t discount that. So, they had to take me and everything with me and consider all of it. So, I

did rejoin the church, but my baby's father also rejoined the church, and it changed the way they looked at it, at least.

I don't know what they did for people that came after me. I don't remember anyone else that was pregnant rejoining the church. People who had gone away would come back and rejoin the church, but I think they kinda shied away from it, from that point forward, and it became sort of like, the emblem for my life from that point forward. Like, I became the choir director, and I would have five people at choir rehearsal and 25 people on Sunday morning at service. So, I said, "If you don't come to rehearsal, then you can't sing on Sunday." So, I had five people on the pulpit singing from a choir that had like, I don't know, 40 voices. And so, I got called in the office for that, just similar things. And he's like, "You know, I wanted a full choir." I understand that. So then, you need to be speaking to your choir and letting them know what a commitment entails, what it looks like because if you're going to be under me and you're going to rehearse, then you sing. You don't rehearse, you don't sing unless you want to hire someone else to teach the choir, which of course, you have the right to do.

And he's like—so, on Sunday morning I had the five people and he would say, "Well, if you're on the choir and you're here, come up and sing." He did that one time. I said, "Okay, so you did that, and we had the 40 people," 'cause they all show up on Sunday. And I said to him, "Now we're going to meet, and if you want to have me as a director of the choir, then you need to know that if the members don't show up on Saturday, then they can't sing on Sunday. And what will happen is, if you call up people who were not at rehearsal to sing, I will sit down." [LAUGHS] And it was like that pretty much. I mean, people would take it with the grain of salt and laugh at me a lot, but they knew that they weren't going to end up just sweeping things under the rug wasn't going to work, and we would really need to handle it a different way because I was relentless. [LAUGHS] I was relentless.

And, I felt that way about public assistance, is this thing. It has such a stigma attached to it. I was just tired of the whole sorted thing. I know who I am, and I know that my source of income has nothing at all to do with who I am as a person. Now, there may be other underlying factors that contribute to how I got to where I am. However, can you just treat me like a whole person, and then get to know those things? And, if they're things that need to be addressed, then we can do that. But, can you not just look at me and go, "Oh, you're one of those." That just drives me crazy, or, "No, you're not entitled because you're not like me."

CT: And, upon your arrival and your involvement with WRI, the kind of activism that you were involved with, maybe you can talk a little bit about that, how long you were involved with WRI and what sort of actions you participated in helping WRI?

VL: Oh my gosh. That was the great awakening. WRI has been very instrumental in helping me develop, even to this day. And I say that not for the reasons that one might think. I say that because I went to WRI. I went through the classes, which were a plethora of things that were interconnected to creating wholeness. You know, everything from

creative writing, public speaking. And, we went to Albany. It wasn't just, this is welfare reform and this is what we're doing and we need bodies to go to Albany, this was about creating wholeness. It was about creating an outlet for people who had been struggling and fighting and just trying to stay above water. And then, there was a place where we could come and kinda [SIGHS], we could exhale and just be, you know, for that time. And, we all looked forward to it.

And so, when we went to Albany, it was yes, Vanessa, you have a voice, and you're going to make appointments and you're going to speak. No, you hire people to speak. No, you're going to speak. And then, I began to speak speak. Like, they would have me speak at poverty conferences and different conferences and places and they would go, "Oh yeah, we want you to speak." God. And I didn't have a fear of speaking publicly, it's just who would be interested in my story because my life had been nobody really wants to do anything with you because you're not working, you don't have a job? People with a job have things to say. People who are not working really don't have anything to contribute. And so, that was a great way to help me.

And then, after, I think, oh yeah, I met Liz Kruger, and she said, "Walk with me." I love her. And so, we would walk. We were walking the halls, and we were talking, and she's like, "Nobody here likes me 'cause I'm always that person." She was me. She was me. She was a public figure and me. Oh my god. So, she was very refreshing, and I never forgot that, which is how I came to present to her at this past year's ceremony. It was very near and dear to my heart. I didn't.

After I graduated WRI, I was still in school. I still wasn't quote, unquote, working in the traditional sense. And, they just kept at me. You know, Linda and Maureen and Dillonna and they were just keeping me kinda connected. And I didn't graduate school. I left school my last semester, I left school. And, they just kept connecting. And even when I didn't want to be connected, I would run into Dillonna in the street. "Hey." It's like, "God." "Come and speak, come and speak." "What do you mean, come and speak?" I still had that thing like, I'm not that success story that went and I'm at a Fortune 500 company and I'm coming back to speak. I'm still trying to find out who I am and what it is I'm purposed to do.

And then, I would just go speak and tell them I'm still learning who I am and what I'm purposed to do, which was right on the button for a lot of students who felt like they needed to be accomplished in a certain way in order to matter. So, over the years, I have spoken to classes. I've lost touch for a couple of years, and then been reintroduced, but it's a check and balance system that is a lot stronger than being an alumni from a school or being in a sorority. It's that bond is very positive and ever present. You know, so I just graduated this year. I just got my degree this year. I had one class that I needed to complete, and I completed that class. So, speaking this year at the ceremony was wonderful. And, I spoke to the class this year too.

Those were wonderful because I've learned that my journey is still significant, and that no matter what I'm doing in terms of work, which is defining for people in our society,



what you do is very much interpreted as who you are. And sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't. So, I've finally made peace with that, with who I am and my journey. Yeah, I made peace with that now.

CT: And your children, can you speak or share or if you feel comfortable sharing how they've experienced what you've been going through, the highs and the lows, and your involvement with WRI? Have you seen any effect it's had on your family throughout your...

VL: My life has become the life of—I see, read and hear a lot of stories of people who have helped people at great sacrifice. My children growing up with me have had to grow up with great sacrifice because I didn't just raise my two children. I raised my two children and I had several adopted children—one of which is still living with me now. And, in raising other people's children—because these aren't people that are formal adoptions, these are people that literally came to me and lived with me and their parents are still around and in contact with me and said, "Here, take my child." Or, their child came to me. And after a couple of years, they had to say, "You're helping me raise my child. Wow. Take my child." We'd come to the same conclusion. I ended up with them. And so, my children have watched me interact with other people, and my children's friends all say, "Your mom is like, the coolest. She's like, the best mom ever." And my children are kinda like, "Well, yeah, I guess." You know, and then their friends would come in and end up in a room with me and they'd be like, "Ma, can I have my friends back?" It's like, yes. Have your friends. But that was again, it was at a great sacrifice.

So now, we are exploring that. My daughter fought tooth and nail to kind of be separate from me, you know, like, "I'm not just like my mother." And now, she's just like me. [LAUGHS] She's just like me. She's at school. She's upstate at Oneonta. She started a bible study group, which went from three people to 15 people in just one sitting. She started on open mic because she said, "I don't understand why in a college town if we want to express ourselves we have to go to the pub. Why do we have to go to the pub?" So, she got someone to sponsor her open mic, and she has all these flyers circulating the campus, and she's there. She's there, and she's still making peace with the part of it where it's like, you're just like me. But, we're moving. We're moving. She's seeing and she's acknowledging and she's asking for my advice without asking for my advice, which I give without giving it. You know, we're getting there.

My niece, who I also raised, and she moved away. She moved away in an attempt to, again, make herself a family so she can prove that she was doing things right. After living with me it's like, well, you do what you do and you know better, that's when you do better. We recently got back in contact, and we're on a similar journey. My son is working and living on his own with his friend. And, we just got back in contact. Boys are different. He just stopped reaching out, so I went this past Sunday and I just kicked his door in. "Hi, I'm downstairs. Come get me." And they took me to breakfast, and we talked, and he was like, "Do you want to come up?" And I'm like, "Thanks." And went upstairs. It was messy, but it was livable messy, and I told him how proud I was of him and how I see a level of maturity in him that wasn't there before. And he's very, very

creative and he's by far one of the most intelligent people I've ever met. And he told me he wants to go back to school. So, I could see the effects of nontraditional raising of children, giving your children a voice to speak.

I have this funny story about how my parents used to call me and they'd go, "Vanessa, did you do X—no, Vanessa, you did X, Y, Z," which would be something that I did. And they'd say, "Why would you do something like that?" And I would go to explain it and they'd go, "Shut up. Someone is speaking. We are speaking to you." "Didn't you just ask me why I did what I did?" Okay, so I'm standing there, and then the next time I'm like, "Okay, I got it." "Vanessa?" "Yes." "You know, we called you in here because you did X, Y and Z. Why would you do something like that?" So I stood quiet. "Answer us. How dare you not answer." I was like, "You know what? I don't know how to play this game. It's not working for me."

So, in raising my children I tried to be conscious of the fact that they were little people with their own mind and their own spirit and their own voice and try to cultivate that while guiding them sometimes firmly, sometimes loosely. And, as anyone who does research, you do all of your quantitative and qualitative crunching numbers and spin everything. I'm at that point. The study is done. We're just getting all the data together to see how they actually turn out, and how they actually relate to me. I tried to ask my son that question. He didn't come clean yet. That's what I'm working on. I see it. I think they're wonderful people. I think they're wonderful people. Yeah, and my adopted children included. I gave them something from myself that seemed to help them, and wonderful results. Everybody is a success, but again, not maybe like people would quantify success. They're successful because they're happy and they're whole. That was my whole thing.

CT: And after WRI, how long were you involved with WRI, and can you talk about your time after WRI or during, or are you still constantly involved with them? I mean, you did speak at the WRI gala. Maybe you can talk a little bit about that.

VL: After my cohort finished, I had this feeling like, "Okay, it's done. There were Dillonna sends out gazillions of emails, so there were plenty of opportunities to reacquaint myself, but again, that was the error where I was like, "Well, let me get myself together." Just like—I had a premonition that once I graduated school I would be able to pick my job, and that's exactly what happened. I was speaking at a multi-faith luncheon with I think it was an imam and a priest and a Protestant minister and a Catholic—it was really bizarre—and me—really bizarre. And after that, people came up to me with business cards. And then, the premonition came back, and I laid them out and I'm like, "Wow, I get to choose." And, that's how I got my first job after graduation, which was really great.

But, I always felt like I needed to do more, so that I would have more to give when I went back to speak or to be. I wanted people to be the best that they could be wherever they were, and all of my past experiences with that were people who were accomplished in a certain way. I now know that's because that's what people picked. WRI never did that.

They wanted to hear from you and hear what you're doing and where you are, so that people are on different levels in their journey, and everybody can relate to where you are in yours. So, I didn't formally do anything over the years to stay connected with them, but we just always happened upon each other. [LAUGHS] We just happened upon each other every couple of years or so.

CT: And, one of the many benefits that WRI, being involved with WRI, in regards to like, opening those lines of communication within their ranks, and then also outside their ranks, like, how did that affect your perspective of people with different political inclinations like conservatives and right wing folks? How did it affect your perspective on politics after your involvement with WRI?

VL: Politics was something that was removed from me. When I got old enough to have my own opinions and party affiliations and try to find—at that point I felt like as a responsible person who was at the age where I could legally vote, I started to find a party that would best embody my views, and I didn't. I registered as a democrat. I hardly ever voted democrat, and I thought that your party affiliation should be consistent with the way that you vote. And then, I just felt like there was no choice, that there was really only one party, and you just kinda picked from this very slim pool the lesser of the evils, if you will. And then, I went a couple of years without voting. I just was like, what difference does it make? [LAUGHS] You're no better than you. I just felt like it just didn't make a difference. And then, I became an independent, which sounded good, but you're still faced with the same choices. You're faced ultimately with the same choices. And I felt uninspired and disenchanted with the whole system.

And so, being attached to WRI showed me that no, what you feel still matters, and your vote still counts and your morals and the things that helped to shape your path and where you go and where you are politically are very much needful things, and they are to be considered. They are to be discussed, and just like your faith, they're a part of who you are. I didn't think of it. It took me back to my childhood where things were personal again. You know, where I'm like, oh, okay, okay. It reconnected me in a way that I had disconnected totally, especially after Albany, when you go see person after person. Some of the representatives—we went to see senators. Some of the senators were too busy. The Congress people, they were too busy, so they sent a representative to speak with us. Some of them were very savvy and were very gracious, but I always felt like if you made an appointment, you should keep the appointment. And, if you couldn't make the appointment, then you should not have had the appointment, especially because I went to my representatives, people that I was their constituent, and that I needed to hear where they were coming from, and they weren't able to meet with me.

So, I got that too, you know, there are people who really have a heart for people, and they really want to make change, and they really are not shying away from systemic change and things that need to be done. And, maybe I can't do it all, but maybe I could do a piece of it and develop this. And then, the next go around, maybe somebody else can pick it up, or maybe I can pick it up in another way. Those things, those views and those types of people I hadn't been introduced to that hadn't been my experience with

politicians. So, it made it human and doable for me again. You know, I didn't feel like this guppy in a shark tank. [LAUGHS]

CT: Well, segueing from the political aspect to the leadership aspect in WRI, could you describe your vision of leadership before becoming involved with WRI, and how it was affected by your role within WRI and after WRI in regards to the role of leadership? You allude to that, especially with your experiences, but I'm wondering, how can you describe it specifically? They're training you to be a leader in your own life almost it sounds like, and then advocating for yourself.

VL: Absolutely. There's a parallel that just came to mind. I'm divorced and about to get married again. What I've learned about marriage now is parallel to my view of leadership prior to WRI and my view of leadership now. My view of leadership prior to WRI consisted of a leader is someone who has accomplished what you have yet to accomplish. A leader is someone who is effective in that they're able to be leaned upon and looked up to and they are empowered to empower you—leadership is that. It's that thing. It's like, follow the leader. It's like, the leader embodies the things that you are trying to attain and you follow the leader. And that is an effective leader. A leader is someone who, if you are off a little bit, they can kinda help to guide you back to where you need to be in order for whatever it is that the leadership is leading to be accomplished. That's not it anymore, for me. That's so far from what a leader is to me now, and I know that because of my journey. My personal journey has now intermingled, intertwined with my faith journey, which lets me know that a leader is someone who can lead without even speaking.

A leader is someone who can delegate responsibilities and empower people without overpowering people, who can develop character without stripping character, who can help you in a multifaceted way, and not just this pigeonholed goal that we may have, that we've been put together to accomplish. A leader has to be open in that they need to be able to relate to people multilevel. A leader is just a really good follower, now I know that, follower meaning someone who is true to form, someone who will do what needs to be done in order to cultivate people, people. And, that's what a leader is now, and that looks a lot different depending upon the situation and depending upon the forum you know that you're in. It's much different now at the same way with marriage.

Marriage now is partnership. Marriage now is your ability to cultivate yourself and be able to be transparent in who you are. And that, in and of itself, helps the other person feel comfortable developing. It's about developing, it's not about arriving. [LAUGHS] You know, it's about the journey, not the destination. It's all about that. Leadership embodies that for me now. And I now know, and now, that's why I've made peace because it's not getting to a certain spot. It's about how are you where you are right now? Yeah, that's WRI helped me with that a lot.

CT: At the end of the day, how would you, what degree of impact has WRI had on your life and your own way of thinking? It seems like you've been answering that question throughout, and just, absolutely...

VL: Over and over, over and over it has helped me. I went to school because I genuinely loved being a student. There are people who thrive in that atmosphere. College in particular, people would always tell me, college is very much different from high school in that there's less structure. If you don't do a paper in college people don't care because you've paid your money, and now you haven't done your paper and it's on you. It's a waste of your money and your time versus all the people who are invested in your education up to high school. But, music and art was very liberal.

There were certain things and privileges that you were afforded if you were a good student, then you could do a lot more music because you've mastered the basics. If you were failing at the basics, then there was things that you were limited in musically. And we would die if we couldn't do music, so we just did study groups all night long. We would be in the staircase with our books spread out because we would have this test and we needed to do this rehearsal, so we would all go in and just make sure that everybody got what they needed so that we could all be together and do music. It's like that for me in that school was this place where people came from all different backgrounds, all different cultures, all different beliefs, and they came together just to learn. And, each person didn't even realize that they were contributing to the life of the next person, even more so than the professor.

The classes where the professor tried to be stringent were the ones where I learned the most because they would, "Stay here, stay here, stay here." And it just kept getting bigger than them. And, that was my experience all through school. So, to be able to have WRI directly with no other purpose and goal except to make sure that I have what I needed—wow, wow, to accept me just as I am at this particular moment knowing that I could be very different 10 minutes from now. My circumstances could change. My view could change. Something could happen. And, no matter where I was or am in my journey, they embraced me no matter where I am. And, I know that that comes from a support base that was knitted together over time, trial and error, what works, what doesn't work, what do people need? How can we improve the constant tweaking of the program is part and parcel to the constant tweaking of our lives. It's something that's organic now. It's something that's like, this organism. It's not just an organization. It's an organism where people come and they feed and then they feed, they get red. So, that's what it's become for me. It has impacted every facet of my life in some way or another.

There was a time when Melinda used to come when she was starting out her organization, and she would ask us like, "What do you want? And, where are you?" How does this relate to you starting your organization? It was that same model of where are you and you matter and your input matters and your thoughts matter, just as they are right now. You don't need to do anything to them. And, WRI has been that consistent thing for me. What are you seeking? Where are you now? What makes you whole? What's missing? And they just come in and they go, "Okay." It's like a big hug every time. It's like, "Okay, come and get your hug." And it could be something like, "Okay, we're going to go and we're going to call this congressperson in support of this particular thing." It still feels like a hug. Come and speak to the class. I do moan and complain about it. I go. It's still a hug. You know, and what do I do after I speak to the cohort? I hug everybody. It's this

thing that is a lot bigger than the founder and the co-founders. It's morphed into this beautiful place where people can be themselves and then be re-introduced to the world and feel like there's a value add.

CT: It's so eloquently put, but any final thoughts before we end?

VL: So, you have made yourself a portion of this value add thing, and contacting me, it felt exactly the same way as when I was asked to speak or do a forum or call a person and describe how welfare policy has impacted me. It's an honor, and very much a privilege, to be asked questions and to be a part of this piece of this organic organism, approached with such sincerity and refreshing outlook. Let's put it all together, thank you.

CT: No, thank you.

VL: Thank you.

CT: Thank you very much for sharing your story with us, and with me, thank you so much.

VL: You make it so easy. [LAUGHS]

CT: Thank you.

VL: You make it very easy. Thank you.

CT: Thank you, Vanessa.