

AR: This is Alexis Rivers interviewing Gwen Webber McLeod on September 14, 2020 as part of the oral history project that is being done through the Seymour Library and Cayuga Museum in a partnership with the New York Heritage site. So Gwen, where and when were you born?

GWM: Yes. I was born in Nuremberg, Germany in 1956. I am the daughter of a career military couple. My parents are Charles Weber at Charles and Barbara Weber. My parents met at a historically black college, North Carolina A&T and married as teens in their late teens, early 20s. And when my father graduated from college, he was a commissioned officer, a Lieutenant Colonel and our family began our journey as a military family in the segregated army.

AR: Do you have any siblings?

GWM: Yes, I do. We are iconically known as the Webber girls. There are four of us. My younger sister Terri passed away in 2003, but we still speak of her in the present because she's very much with us. My oldest sister's name is Misha Cheryl Webber-Aiken. She's an entrepreneur retired from New York State and lives in a beautiful little home in the woods just outside of Buffalo. She's a badass. She's a hunter, farms her own land, rides a motorcycle, a professional ballet dancer. Then my other living sister is Kim Webber-Jenke. Kim and her husband live in Atlanta, Georgia. They own a very high end glassblowing company called Janke Glass, and my sister Kim is a breast cancer survivor. We're very proud about that. And she's also a co-owner of a fitness company in Atlanta called Fit & Fine. She's a Zumba instructor. Then my sister Terri, who passed away, was a speech language pathologist, an SU graduate, lived in Atlanta, Georgia as well and taught in a school district in Marietta, Georgia. And then there's me, I'm the middle child, Gwen Webber McLeod.

AR: So what was life like growing up for you?

GWM: I had a very fabulous life. That set the tone for who I am as a woman today. So as I mentioned, my father started his career in a segregated army. So as a result of that, we traveled extensively. I've lived in every section of the United States except New England, Hawaii and Alaska. I've lived in a state and every other part of the country, and my parents were very intentional about raising us. And when they discovered that they had four daughters, I delivered a speech at the Women's March in Seneca Falls a couple of years ago called *The Accidental Feminist*, because my parents realized that the way to help their daughters to be successful was to make sure that we were highly aware of the world. There was never a day of our lives when we weren't absolutely convinced that we can be anything we wanted to be.

They really made us extremely Afrocentric, extremely proud to be black. So doing this journey, and at that time a segregated America, was two parents who were absolutely convincing us that we could be anything we want to be. I remember talking to my mom about this as an adult woman, and she said, "Well now I'll tell you, some of that stuff I told you you could be I was lying about because a black person nor a woman could be any of those things." But she didn't want to dim our light. She didn't want to kill my dream. If I wanted to be an astronaut in the 50's or 60's, she was telling me I could be. So as a result of that, I really feel like my life as one of the Webber Girls was a great adventure that was combined with learning about the world, claiming

America as my own, believing that it was my birthright to be and pursue anything that I wanted to be, while simultaneously with intention learning that if I was going to become a successful woman, I had to also be a social justice activist.

AR: Did you have any particular family traditions that you can remember from growing up?

GWM: You know, I would say the biggest one in our family was about education, and literally, we were brainwashed to believe that you just went from Elementary School to Middle School, Middle School to High School, and High School to College. I was an RA in a dorm at SUNY Potsdam, and my Junior year, it was final weeks and all the young women on my floor were losing their minds, and I called my mother and said, "It never occurred to me till right now that not everybody goes to college" and she just kind of laughed and said, "You know, the brainwashing took. Get a 4.0 and get those girls together so they get 4.0s too." So I would say that education is a huge tradition in our family, claiming America as our own nation. No matter what the country thinks of us, my parents always raised me to believe that this country belongs to me, therefore it's my birthright to have equal opportunity and access to all of it. And then, subtly and not so subtly, making me very Afrocentric, I would say is a tradition.

I also think understanding money and how it works. My father was a rough and tumble army colonel by the time he retired, and he used to say, "Webber girls, money talks and bullshit walks." And he would say that to us, because what he recognized as he was growing up as a professional is that money, having money, accessing it, knowing what to do with it...that combined with education was going to help his daughters combat racism and sexism. So those traditions, celebrating those things, being very proud of being black, education, creating generational wealth, are traditions that we are now passing on to our children, our grandchildren and my parent's great-grandchildren.

AR: What was your house like growing up?

GWM: It was very interesting, because you know, when you're an army kid, you move every two to three years. So a couple of things that really strike me is it was very high energy, there were always a lot of people in our house, and there were always very diverse groups of people in our house, because that's what military bases are. So if you went to Fort Drum right now, you would see a child that is mixed race, with every kind of combination of parent you can imagine. Well, that started to be my reality at a pretty young age. My parents both belonged to Black Greek letter organizations, so my father is a member of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, my mother is a member of Sigma Gamma Rho sorority, so Black Greek life was always very part of our household, so I was always watching men and women who through their relationship with their fraternity and sorority, were always about the business of public service. It was always about volunteerism. Always talking about, you know, what was going on in the black community and what we need to do about it, lots of parties, lots of fun, and lots of really open, honest, respectful conversation.

Like any family, of course, we've had our ups and downs and challenges, you name it. Sometimes my sisters and I say our story could be a Lifetime movie, but it was really fabulous and it was really designed to make sure that the vision that my parents had for their daughters came to fruition in our adult life. So they were very intentional about what went on in our house. It was like a VIP lounge: if you weren't on the list, you didn't get beyond the velvet ropes, because they were very busy making sure that we were not only physically safe, but that we were psychologically safe. Lots of education tables full of *Jet Magazine*, *Essence Magazine* when that came out, *Ebony*. My father was reading hip hop publications when we didn't even know what hip hop was, just making sure that we were always aware of our culture, and what the cutting edge was, and one of my favorite traditions that I mentioned is connected to this, is that every once in a while my father would have Cultural Enrichment Sundays, my parents would say that. My mother would set the table with normal china and we'd be drinking grape juice and we'd listen to opera. The first time I heard *Jesus Christ Superstar*, my father bought it and made us listen to it and read the lyrics, and we were always thinking like, this is really crazy. But what we now know is that he was grooming us for job interviews. You know, when I was the director of the National Women's Hall of Fame, for that interview, they handed me the wine list, and I knew what to do. I knew I needed to pass that test. But I was so thankful that my father taught me how to navigate a formal dining table, my parents did, and so that's what our house was about. It was like a training center for young black women, and as a result of that, we became accidental feminists. They didn't set out to make us feminist. They did set out to make us strong, confident, proud black women, and because we happen to be girls, being feminist was a residual effect of that.

AR: Did your family follow a particular religion growing up? And do you still follow it today?

GWM: Um, my parents, my father was born into Baptist, Southern Baptist faith and my mother belonged to an African Methodist Episcopal Church. Again, we lived on military bases, so we had Protestant chapels that we attended, but that was another way that my parents were really open with us in that they exposed us to all kinds of religions. So if we had Jewish friends, we went to synagogue, and I think what they were really trying to do was to lay a foundation for us to believe in something, but they weren't specific about what that something needed to be. They exposed us to all kinds of religions so that when we became of age to make a choice, we could choose whatever we wanted to be. So I've attended both African Methodist Episcopal churches, I'm currently a member of Roosevelt Memorial Baptist Church, and a lot of that for me is not necessarily about the theology, but about it being important to me that I'd be in a worship space. That's about my blackness. I spend every waking hour in my company pretty much being the only black person unless I'm in an organization that's about black people. So when I am able to attend church, or attend a church, my preference is to walk into a black space because I don't have to do anything but be black, and praise God for using my life in such a great big way.

I will also say that in addition to the foundation laid by my parents, so I'm very open. Like I look at other religions, I believe in mind, body, spirit things. I have followed spiritual teachers. So ultimately, my personal goal is to leverage my faith to allow me to be a constant manifestation of God's love and light on earth, and to with intent, leave a gentle impression of good everywhere I

go. I use religious thinking, scripture, spiritual reading to create that framework for me as a woman, so that I can go to bed every night being clear that I did what I believe God called me to do. And I absolutely think of my current company, in many ways as my ministry. I incorporated it, Gwen Inc., to allow me to be working in a space that let me do the work that I believe God has called me to do. So I would say that faith in religion, and spirituality is very important to me.

AR: Did you have any hobbies or special interests as a child?

GWM: Actually, I did. My parents, again, exposed us to everything, so if we were curious about it, they paid for the lesson. And as I grew up and was a student at SUNY Potsdam, my undergraduate degree is in Psychology, but I have minors in Sociology, Anthropology and Dance. I actually had enough credits that I could have majored in Modern Dance, but there wasn't a major at Potsdam at this time. And so I would say that dance, like formally, modern dance was a hobby of mine. I also love music, and I love to dance. I always tell my kids tell your friends to come over, I'll dance battle any of them and probably beat a few of them, because I do think I'm fly, hip, and ageless. No, I think I am fly, hip, and ageless. So I love dancing.

I literally love to think, I love to be intellectually stimulated. People laugh when I say that, like, what do you do on your time off? I'm like, think. Sometimes it can be a gift and a curse. But I'm intrigued by the world around me. I'm intrigued by how people engage in the world. I'm always shocked that I only know what I know, but I'm so thankful that other people know what they know, because that's how I get stimulated. I enjoy spending time with women and young women. I'm a mentor and an executive coach to some of the best and brightest women, Millennial women coming up, and I would say I think of that not only as a hobby, I think of it as the historical obligation that it's incumbent upon me as a black woman who's standing on the shoulders of many black women who came before me. I don't think it's an accident that I live in Harriet Tubman's chosen hometown, and I feel like it's my responsibility. Okay, her legacy, the legacy of enslaved women, my legacy forward by staying strategically placed in the lives of emerging minority women leaders and creating pathways for them.

To do that, I founded a not-for-profit, it's called You Can't Fail, Inc. Our tagline is "Because your history says you can" because I meet so many young black women who were telling me sort of like this song on their heart, and I'm saying, "Well, why wouldn't you do that?" And as they start to expose self doubt, as all young women do, because we all are on the journey to finding our self esteem, I always challenged them by saying, "How dare you think you can't do something when you descend from the few African women who made it to America on slave ships, and became doctors, lawyers, the first black woman millionaire? So what do we need to do to get you believing that you can do anything because your history tells you that you can." So I don't know if you would think of those as hobbies, maybe they're more passions of mine, but those are spaces that I spend my extra energy, and I have a lot of it.

AR: Was there any sort of popular books, TVs, games, music type of stuff growing up that you can remember?

GWM: Mhm. Things that influenced me heavily. I mentioned them previously, were always being surrounded by *Ebony Magazine*, *Jet Magazine*, and then *Essence Magazine* was a game changer for me as a young woman. I wasn't seeing myself reflected in popular media, and then to have an entire publication devoted to my head, heart, and spirit and that presented a woman who looked like me as beautiful, and as we navigate the dynamics of colorism, me being a dark complected black woman to see that feature in a public magazine, presented as beautiful and bright, and like every damn thing was life altering for me. I want to be clear that my parents never made me feel any kind of way about being a dark complected black woman. My father actually was three times darker than I am from a color point of view, but they also knew that at a certain point, I would be trying to find myself and so they were constantly presenting images to me, that let me know that being me and looking like me was okay, and that people started creating products that I could use to enhance my beauty in ways that I wanted to. So those African American publications, I'd say were very central to who I am as a woman.

I've read Iyanla Vanzant's book, *Acts of Faith: Daily Meditations for People of Color*. When I was a student at SUNY Potsdam, probably just heading out of college, it was life altering for me. That having something to focus on daily, that allowed me to verbalize and articulate who I really wanted to be as a woman was very nice, so that book really inspires me still. Then, *In the Spirit* was a collection of essays written by Susan Taylor, who was the editor in chief of *Essence* magazine asked us to write a monthly essay that really resonated with my head, heart and spirit. Of course, I love Maya Angelou's books, a lot of Toni Morrison's books have affected me, so those kinds of writings by black women were really powerful in my life.

Two other books, academic books, that were really powerful were, the first one was *When and Where I Enter*. I had the opportunity to be the third Executive Director of the National Women's Hall of Fame when I was 28 years old and very young in my career, and the organization was young, so I was a fit for what they needed and a leader at that time. I studied Women's History in college, I was in that first wave of women that can get academic credit for studying the history of women, and my professor Dr. Judith Gramlin, I was the only black woman in the class, made a point of pointing me in the direction of writings by like Sojourner Truth learning about Harriet Tubman, because textbooks literally weren't talking about black women. I left Potsdam only being clear about one thing, that I would only work for companies or organizations that had a demonstrated commitment to black people and women. So as I grew, and designed my career to allow me to do that, when I was at the Women's Hall of Fame, I was having a conversation with one of our historians, and I said to her, "Why aren't there more black women in the Hall of Fame?" and she said, "Well, because black women weren't really doing anything in the 1800's" to which point I thought hmm, you're interesting. She wasn't a historian selecting the people who went in there much longer, but then I started the search. So *When and Where I Enter* by Paula Giddings is an incredible piece of work that defines what black women were doing in America from 1619 to I think the book published in the late 80's, early 90's. That change was life altering for me, because it solidified my place in the world and it grounded me in this belief that I am historically obligated to pave the way for new generations of black women.

And then another book that I read, that was a compilation; one of the editors, I think, was Val Hooks, was called...I want to get the title right: *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us are Brave*. I think that's the title. It's some play on words. And it was an anthology of essays written by women that I would define as the first black feminist that I ever came across. That, again, was just confirming and affirming for me that the way I was experiencing the world was not, I was not a woman alone in that thinking, and gave me the courage to craft my career solely devoted to only working for people that had demonstrated commitment to black people and women. Those were books that really changed my life.

A final one was *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which was like a big book that was out I'd say in the 70's. That was really about women's sexuality and health and very detailed and graphic, and my mom wanted us to have power over our bodies. So one day I come home and this book is in the middle of the coffee table with *Essence*, *Jet*, *Ebony*, everything else, and I pick it up. When I open it, of course, there's all these diagrams of body parts and all these things about women. I close the book, and she says, "Listen, you really need to know about your body, you need to understand it, you need to have control over it, and you need to understand your sexuality and how to express that in a healthy way. So I want you to read that book, and if you have questions, I'll do my best to answer them, and if not, I'm going to take you to Planned Parenthood." So that collection of information laid the foundation for who I am today.

AR: You mentioned owning your own business. What other sorts of jobs have you had growing up?

GWM: Well that's really interesting, because when I went to the career office at SUNY Potsdam, I said, "I don't really know what I want to be when I grow up, but I'm only going to work (now this is 1974) for companies and organizations that have a demonstrated commitment to black people and women." This was way before the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion conversation was happening, but somehow, I think when you could speak things into existence, and I think when I said that out loud, the universe just conspired to help me have this fabulous career. So my first job right out of college, I was a community educator for Planned Parenthood up in Watertown, New York, and I worked with pregnant and parenting teens and their parents, and I did a lot of community programming around healthy sexuality. I was a sexuality educator: healthy sexuality, helping young girls and their parents understand what to do with their bodies, why it's important to have a gynecologist, helping teen parents navigate being a teen parent.

I was then shortly recruited here to Cayuga County, where I was hired by what's now known as the Cayuga Seneca Community Action Agency. I was probably about 24. My first boss was a black woman named Gloria Griffin. She happens to be my husband's aunt. I wasn't married to him at the time, and she trusted me, she saw something in me that I didn't see in myself, so I was the Director of the Human Services component of her agency. They had been running a safe home program for women who were victims of domestic violence, had received some funding to formalize the domestic violence program. She handed me that grant and that was my first big responsibility here in Auburn: to design, educate the community, and then find the

shelter and hire the staff so that we had a formal space for women living through domestic violence.

I worked there for a couple of years, got that up and operational, then I was the Executive Director of the Booker T. Washington Community Center, from like, I want to say probably about 1983 to 1985. After that, I was the executive director of the National Women's Hall of Fame from about 1985 to I want to say 1988 or so, and then I became a professional Girl Scout. I was the Director of Communications and Development for the Seven Lakes Girl Scout Council, and was among the first wave of black women in the country who were being hired with intention to be part of their...they were calling it a pluralism initiative at that time. So that was the first wave of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion business that I had been experiencing in a formal way.

Then, while I was a Girl Scout, I became pregnant with my second child. I have two children: Ashley, who's 35, and my son Travis, who's now 30. And I was at a meeting and a woman named Melina Carnicelli, who eventually became Auburn's first woman Mayor, approached me to be on the board of directors of what is now known as Leadership Cayuga. Afterwards, she said to me, "Well, what are you going to do after you have that baby?" I said, "You know, I'm gonna probably go back to being a professional Girl Scout, but I want to own a business sometime." And she said, "I'm going to talk to you about that." So she stalked me until she figured out that my baby was about five months old, took me out to dinner, never told me who this other person was that we were meeting with. She wound up being Bevan Angier, who was the woman that actually recruited me for CAP to come to Auburn, and we allowed ourselves to imagine owning a business and the only thing we committed to doing was meeting twice a week to simply incubate this idea and fantasize about what this company could be, and after doing that for about six months, we stumbled upon a client.

Now mind you, we all have high profile jobs at this point, and we went in the underground, took this client on, and it was very successful. Molina left her job and we started a company that was called Treble (T-R-E-B-L-E) Associates. Our tagline was, "You, Your Project, Then Us." We did project management, marketing, branding, positioning work. Then over time, Molina and I had facilitation skills and have done a lot of professional development work, we started a division of the company called Creating Respectful Workplace Teams, and I manage that part of the business. So I left my job as a Girl Scout in 1990, and we thought that it would take us about five years to all get into the company. As soon as people knew we were free to work for them, our company just got flooded with clients. I probably went into the business about two years after we formalized our partnership, and then I've been an entrepreneur ever since then.

So I was with Treble Associates for about four or five years. Then I left there for a while, my girlfriend Lisa Marsh Ryerson, was the president at Wells College when she took the college Co-Ed, and I was her Director of Communications through that process, because when your girlfriends call you show up, and that was a big deal. She needed to have somebody that she trusted highly to manage media for her, and then I during that time, I kept a very quiet consulting practice where I did strategic planning work.

Part of my professional story is from 1995 to 2005. I was in a 10 year, non-stop season of grief that began with my daughter having a very serious cancer diagnosis as a 10 year old, followed by my father winning a historic election up in Watertown by becoming the first African American male to be elected to the county legislator was sworn in. 10 days later, he got a terminal cancer diagnosis, died six months after that. That led into 2001, where my best friend Captain William F. Burke, Billy Burke, was killed in the World Trade Centers, which led into a dear friend of mine getting a dual cancer diagnosis. She died in September of 2003. I went on a vacation with my mother and my sisters, my mom was on the Miss New York State pageant board, so we always went to the Miss America Pageant. Picture that, a bunch of black feminist at the Miss America pageant. We mostly spent our time in the club dancing and having drinks with the cute boys. But um, and then, that November, after that vacation, I was talking to my sister, Terri, and she said she was going to talk to me next week, and the next week she was going to talk to me was December 3, and she died from a cardiac arrest.

So I was building all of these businesses by being completely grief stricken, and after a while, grieving gets very boring. So one of the things that I started doing was incubating, fantasizing about a business that I might want to own someday. I just really thought about it for 10 years, so near the end of my tenure at Wells, my mom just happened to call me one day, and she's like, "How are you doing?" And I was like, "You know, Mommy, I'm either going to crawl to the bottom of my bed and never get out, or I'm going to manifest this idea of this business." That, I think, is the place where I'm gonna suppose to do what I need to do. And my parents were military and relatively conservative, and she says, "Quit your job" and I was like, "What do you mean, like, my kids will eat cornflakes for three meals a day." She says "Now, if I ever thought that one of the Webber girls would die unexpectedly at 45, I would have told her sister to quit her job and do what she wanted to do, too." I was being resistant, and as the universe goes, a former client of mine, someone I hadn't worked for for seven years, starts calling me, and I'm just like, blowing him off, right? Because I'm in the middle of helping my friend take this college Co-Ed.

Finally he calls me two or three times and he's like, "Our employees really want you to come back and do this work." I'm like, "I can't. I'm grief stricken. I'm crazy. I've got this big project." And I had a little strategic planning consulting company going too. Finally I sarcastically asked him, "How much money are you gonna pay somebody to do this anyway?" and when he told me, I had the opportunity to make my entire Wells College salary in six months, I felt like that was God telling me to jump. So I within 14 days resigned to that job. Was back in Atlantic City with my mom, one Webber girl down, walking on the beach and having this conversation with God, whom I lovingly referred to as Dude. And I was like, "Dude, if...either you're telling me that I'm going to get this opportunity, or you're telling me not to be afraid to manifest this idea, because I can attract the kind of money to myself that I need." I got home, I got that opportunity. That led to me doing a pre-run of my company called Gwen Webber-McLeod, inspiring people to new levels of leadership, and I decided that all of my clients were only going to be mid-level to executive level leaders.

I went to graduate school, graduated in 2006, with a Master's in Management, disclosed that I was going to do this to a bunch of my girlfriends on September 11, 2007, and in 2008 my current corporation, Gwen Inc., was formally incorporated in New York State. So I had quite a journey to leadership, and I started at a very young age. Like I mentioned, I was only 23 when I moved to Auburn, and it was that journey to leadership and the journey of being a black woman, growing as a leader, that led to me thinking that there should be a private sector business. It's solely devoted to helping people who are leaders by choice, promotion, or hiring, be the best they can be. And the attributes, the competencies that I see in myself and other very talented leaders is confidence, competence, courage, and calm. So our company mission is that we help leaders achieve business goals by focusing on the competencies of confidence, competence, courage, and calm.

My company's been in existence since 2008. We're based in Auburn, most of our clients are here in New York State, but we work nationally, and I travel nationally, and lecture on the topic of leadership. From my point of view, I'm very unique in the industry. There are very few black women in the leadership development industry, it's predominated by white men my age or older. That's why I created my not-for-profit: create pathways for younger women leaders to navigate the dynamics. We trademarked the term "unexpected leader" to define this type of leader. So she breaks the, what I think is, a cement ceiling for minority women, as she's experiencing being a first, only, and different, gaining and sustaining credibility with her peers, because they don't expect it to be her. And it's not because she lacks qualification, it's because of microaggression and unconscious bias. Then all of our clients in the not-for-profit, and in my private sector business where I work with executive level women, I'm also concerned about their legacies, because they know whether or not another woman of color has the same opportunity she has will be based on her performance, and primarily perceptions of her performance.

So in that space at our company, we work with these women individually, to help them craft their first 90 days on their job, so they can normalize their leadership for people who don't expect it to be there. I just feel very blessed. And you know, my company, we serve all kinds of leaders. Frankly, a lot of our clients are white men, because they're the CEOs of companies, but I feel very blessed to be able to leverage my life experience and to really have acted on that thing that I was just saying as a little 19 year old girl: I was going to only work for companies or organizations that had demonstrated track records of commitment of black people and women, and now have leveraged all of that to create this company that works nationally out of this cool little office space in my home in Harriet Tubman's hometown. How about that? That's really exciting to me

So I can say this, I hope this doesn't come across as vain, but I'm very proud of myself from a historical perspective, because I do believe I'm historically obligated to not only honor Harriet Tubman, but to honor Kate Freeman, who was the first black woman who ever came to Auburn in 1793, with the founder of Auburn. No one ever talks about Kate Freeman here. So I have a T-shirt in my office with her name on it. It's here every day as a reminder that I'm obligated to her, and to Harriet Tubman and every black woman that came after them and before me to do my

work in this community in this way, and that a significant focus of my work has to be creating new generations of confident, competent, courageous and calm black women leaders.

AR: You mentioned Kate Freeman, is there any other sort of history that you think about when you think of Auburn or Cayuga county that isn't common knowledge, isn't published history?

GWM: Mm hmm. I would say that Auburn knows very little about its past and current black residents. I would not only say that I don't think they know, I don't think they.... I don't think as a community... We know very little, I've not seen interest in knowing about Auburn's black community. So when I moved here, one of the catalytic events for me coming here was that I would be living in Harriet Tubman's hometown. When I arrived here in 1980, there was not a visible indicator that this amazing woman who has done more in America than any man that I know of any race, that she even lived here. So you almost had to know somebody who knew that her house was here and that she was buried here in order to even know that she had lived in Auburn, New York. The only, and I'm talking about public evidence, was I think there was a plaque, one of the county courthouse buildings that honors her. There was not a sign, there was nothing that would let you know that Harriet Tubman lived here and no one except for people that were really studying her historically, the Harriet Tubman Boosters Club, members of the AMA Zion Church. If you didn't know those folks, you wouldn't have known she lived here. I find that appalling, to be honest with you.

I want to say that I felt, and I still feel this way sometimes, it's almost this, like, the community was simultaneously proud and ashamed of that historic fact. I experienced that in Seneca Falls too. There were factions of people, or at least when I was there in the 80's, early 80's and 90's, that were not real happy that Seneca Falls is known for the first women's rights convention. I felt that same vibe and I feel that same vibe about Auburn and Cayuga County, and there's evidence of it all the time. You can read the Auburn newspaper anytime. Her name is mentioned, and someone's like there's more to our history than just her, or look up the research on trying to name a school in our district after Harriet Tubman and the most racist, vile things are coming out of the mouths of high school students, family, their family members. Frankly, I hate to say it, even educators in the community about honoring her. Kate Freeman, if you don't know, you would never know, because no one ever talks about her. She and Harriet Tubman gave me the courage to run for my political campaign in 2019, and I think generally speaking, Auburn's relationship with its black community is similar to a quote by a young black woman actress that was like a gun in my brain when she said it. As she said, "America loves black culture, but hates black people" and I think we are seeing increasing evidence of that right now in this political environment.

And I hate to say this about a place that I've lived for almost 40 years. I moved here to live here and raised my family here, and my husband, his family's DNA is in the dirt of this community. I think that that's still true about Auburn from a political point of view, but that doesn't mean that there aren't great white people here, and that there aren't great white people who are being great allies to us. But if you monitor the local media, as recently as two or three months ago, we have a sitting county legislator who is very comfortable saying the most racist things from the

floor of the county legislature. And so I think that a lot of work has to be done in our community to get right with its history, not only of African Americans, but its relationship with Native American community, its relationship with women. I think a lot of work has to be done. But I would say that the black community is, from a historical point, is almost invisible. When you read about Kate Freeman, you realize that this woman who came here as an indentured servant, she wasn't a slave, she was indentured. Once she worked off her servitude to Hardenberg, she bought property, she laid the foundation for so many things, that became the springboard for African American families that have lived here for generations. And our community never talks about it. I think that's problematic. And I think we're doing a disservice to the children of our community by not talking about these women and other people of color, because these kids are growing up in a world that the workforce is going to look like this.

In the next 5 to 10 years, up to 85% of the people entering the workforce are going to be women, people of color, and Millennials. I think we do a disservice in communities to children, we don't teach them their full history, and then they leave Auburn and they go somewhere where they might have a black boss and have never interacted with a black person before, in a deep, meaningful way. So what gives me hope about this is that when the George Floyd protest started happening in Auburn, the first march was about 200 young people and they were predominantly white. And I think that visual, and then challenging their parents about white privilege, racism, all related things, is beginning to cause a tipping point in our community. But I think if current leaders don't create space for emerging leaders to cause the community to tip, I could come back here in 50 years, and still Auburn could be in this condition, and that's not what I hope. So I'm doing everything that I can to make sure that that's not the community's reality, but I think that's a big problem. Hear from a historical perspective, honoring the community's history.

AR: Well, thank you very much for being a part of the project.

GWM: Very honored.