

An Interview with
Nina Balsam

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
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interviewed by Dr. Blanche M. Touhill
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Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri

Collection S1207 Women as Change Agents DVD 94

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PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS

WOMEN AS CHANGE AGENTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

JULY 8, 2016

NINA BALSAM INTERVIEWED BY DR. BLANCHE M. TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: ...when you were young, talk to me about your family: your parents; your grandparents; your cousins; your siblings; your neighborhood kids. How did you play? Did you play with boys and girls or did you just play with girls? Just talk in general about those early years and then tell me, was there anybody in your family circle or your close neighbors, people that you really associated with in your early years who said to you-you really have ability and you can do things that you want to do, and you can do great things, that kind of rhetoric.

Nina Balsam: In my family, there was my mother and my father, and I have a twin brother and that kind of shaped me to a large extent because, in a way, boys were prized maybe more than girls in my family and my brother was a smart kid...I was a smart kid too, but boys were prized in my family in a way that maybe girls weren't. I don't know exactly how that shaped me except for that I wanted to do anything my brother could do and maybe do it better than him, so there was some competitiveness that was going on and that was fed a little bit by my father more than my mother. So, I played with boys. I had some girlfriends but mostly I played with boys. The boys would go out in the street and play football and I'd play with them and I'd be as good as them, and my brother, interestingly enough, was not very athletic and he was overweight, so I did better than him in that sort of thing and maybe that's what drove me to some extent. My parents, I feel like they were really influential in terms of my choices in life. Both of them were involved in labor union organizing in New York and were members of the Communist Party U.S.A. and were always involved in civil rights sorts of things so that really started me out pretty early thinking about what I wanted to do in life and what I was interested in and it was really, from a very early age, social change. I was a strong feminist when I was little, which was unusual in some ways.

Blanche Touhill: This was after World War II?

Nina Balsam: Yes.

- Blanche Touhill: And you lived in New York at the time of Betty Freidan?
- Nina Balsam: Well, I lived in Miami. What happened is, they lived in New York and they had to leave New York because of what was going on in the McCarthy era. So they left New York, they came to Miami and they sort of started over there. But they still had their values and the friends and groups that they dealt with and I was exposed to that. So it really did influence me and it influenced my brother also.
- Blanche Touhill: Was it hard to leave New York under those circumstances?
- Nina Balsam: For them?
- Blanche Touhill: For you?
- Nina Balsam: Well, I was born in Miami actually so they left New York, they came down to Miami and then they had the two of us. The other thing I should tell you is that I was three pounds, fourteen ounces when I was born...and so I'm 64...so at a time when the technology was not particularly available for me to survive.
- Blanche Touhill: You were lucky you weren't blind.
- Nina Balsam: I was lucky that I wasn't dead, I mean, really. I survived. I was in the incubator for a month and I survived out of sheer will, I think, and I was three pounds, fourteen ounces, he was five pounds, fourteen ounces. He went home with my parents. I stayed in the incubator and I think that shaped me also even though I was an infant. I struggled to survive and that has been a thread through my life in terms of struggling to attain something and as we talk, you'll probably understand that a little bit more.
- Blanche Touhill: Were your parents called by McCarthy or the atmosphere was such that they felt it was better to go someplace else and start again?
- Nina Balsam: They felt endangered, so they felt that they had to leave.
- Blanche Touhill: But they weren't pursued in Miami?
- Nina Balsam: No, and they weren't the only ones that were in the Communist Party U.S.A. who came to Miami. My parents had some very good friends that also came to Miami and apparently it was a haven of some sort for those folks. I don't know why, maybe it was far enough away from where the

actual action was taking place, Washington, D.C. or New York or whatever.

Blanche Touhill: Did they continue their affiliation with the Communist Party in Miami?

Nina Balsam: They did, yes.

Blanche Touhill: But they weren't as threatened there?

Nina Balsam: No, they weren't.

Blanche Touhill: That's very interesting, isn't it?

Nina Balsam: Yeah, and I don't know why that was, I guess just a different atmosphere.

Blanche Touhill: Had your parents to the City University of New York in any way? Had they attended college there?

Nina Balsam: No, my mother didn't attend college.

Blanche Touhill: Did she go to the New York City public schools?

Nina Balsam: She did.

Blanche Touhill: And your father as well?

Nina Balsam: As far as I know, he did. Let me tell you: my grandparents were socialists, on my mother's side and I think that helped to shape my mother and helped to shape me as well because they came from Russia...they're Jews, I'm Jewish...they left Russia to escape the pogroms and they were socialists so there was all kinds of stuff that they did in New York that was related to socialist, the socialist party, actually.

Blanche Touhill: So, you grew up in Miami then?

Nina Balsam: I did grow up in Miami.

Blanche Touhill: And you went to the Miami Public Schools?

Nina Balsam: I did.

Blanche Touhill: And, how were they?

Nina Balsam: I could have gotten a better education, I guess, there but I got what I thought was an okay education. There was some integration going on in

the schools so that was good but not a lot, not as much as maybe I would have liked, and my parents would have liked. But what we did have was Cubans in our schools, Cubans who had escaped from Cuba and come over to be in Miami to get away from Castro. So that was interesting.

Blanche Touhill: Did you learn to speak Spanish?

Nina Balsam: A little bit. I took Spanish in school.

Blanche Touhill: What decade were you in the public schools?

Nina Balsam: It was in the '50s and '60s, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: It was during, really, the Vietnam struggles and all of that but you were young at that time.

Nina Balsam: I was very young and as I grew up and began to understand more about Vietnam and take a position about Vietnam and go to college and take even more of a position about Vietnam, yeah, so I was pretty political at a pretty young age.

Blanche Touhill: Go back to your grandparents. Did you know them, or you just knew the stories about them?

Nina Balsam: No, I knew them.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, you knew them, and did they stay in New York or did they come to Miami?

Nina Balsam: No, they stayed in New York.

Blanche Touhill: Did you go back and forth?

Nina Balsam: Yeah, and I used to spend a lot of time with my aunt and my grandparents. They lived on the lowest east side of New York and it was great to go there. It was really great to go there. It was really fun, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Well, New York is an exciting city. I think it's the most exciting city in the states but that's my opinion.

Nina Balsam: And that neighborhood was so interesting. It was just fascinating, mostly a Jewish neighborhood but starting to change also. So, it was fun for me.

Blanche Touhill: Was it down near where the Tenement Museum is? Do you know where the Tenement...

Nina Balsam: I do know where it is, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Was it down there or was it a little...

Nina Balsam: It was more...and I don't know what direction we're talking about, really, but I think it maybe was more south, maybe more north. I don't really know.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, but it was not that particular neighborhood. It was a little bit different?

Nina Balsam: Yeah, but I do know where that is, actually.

Blanche Touhill: Did your grandparents get out on a contract? Did they have a contract when they came to the states?

Nina Balsam: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Blanche Touhill: Did they come to meet relatives?

Nina Balsam: Not that I'm aware of.

Blanche Touhill: You think they just got out?

Nina Balsam: They came through Ellis Island and I don't know of a contract and I don't know of relatives. It's kind of interesting because my grandmother and her sister were married to two brothers.

Blanche Touhill: Did they marry in Russian and then come or did they meet here?

Nina Balsam: They married in the United States.

Blanche Touhill: They met and married in the United States?

Nina Balsam: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: But your father and mother encouraged you to go to school?

Nina Balsam: Encouraged me to go to school?

Blanche Touhill: No, I meant, to college, to put your sights on?

Nina Balsam: Oh, yeah. Academics was very important. A Jewish family, academics was very important and that's, to some extent...I don't know why they prized my brother over me, like the male over the female. Maybe it was misogyny; I don't really know what it was because my father, even though he was very progressive, was not really great around the whole issue of feminism and women's issues. My mother was probably more of a feminist in some ways and she worked the entire time that I was growing up. So maybe that's where I got that a little bit. I was a strong feminist at kind of a young age.

Blanche Touhill: Well, talk about your elementary and secondary school. Were you a leader there?

Nina Balsam: I was outspoken and somewhat of a leader, yeah. I know I ran for student government.

Blanche Touhill: Did you get elected?

Nina Balsam: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: What was your office?

Nina Balsam: I was the secretary. My brother, of course, ran for president.

Blanche Touhill: Well, those were the days.

Nina Balsam: Those were the days, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Did any girl even run?

Nina Balsam: For president? I can't remember, maybe a girl ran, yeah, but she didn't get it; my brother got it.

Blanche Touhill: You were outspoken in grade school.

Nina Balsam: I was always outspoken, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Did you write for the school newspaper or something?

Nina Balsam: No, I don't recall writing for the school newspaper unless there was just an article.

Blanche Touhill: Were you a leader in a club?

- Nina Balsam: Well, this was more in high school. There was a service club that I was a leader in, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: And where did you give your service?
- Nina Balsam: It was community service. It was helping a non-profit do its work, yeah. It was that kind of thing, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you like elementary and secondary? You lived through it.
- Nina Balsam: I think I liked school because I was pretty smart and so I got pretty good grades and I liked learning.
- Blanche Touhill: Was there a teacher that you liked particularly?
- Nina Balsam: Yeah, my 4th grade teacher, I loved him, Mr. Rosenthal.
- Blanche Touhill: Why did you love Mr. Rosenthal?
- Nina Balsam: He was just really supportive.
- Blanche Touhill: Did he say you have ability?
- Nina Balsam: I can't remember him saying that but I think he would say it in a way that's like, if I disappointed him, he might say, "You can do better than this."
- Blanche Touhill: And then you did?
- Nina Balsam: And I did, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: But in high school, there wasn't some teacher that...
- Nina Balsam: Well, in junior high, I had a teacher, Miss. Blumenthal who really thought that I could do good work and really fed that in me, I think. It was my English teacher.
- Blanche Touhill: Can you write?
- Nina Balsam: Can I write? Yes, I can.
- Blanche Touhill: And in high school?
- Nina Balsam: And in high school, I can't remember a particular teacher. I remember teachers that didn't like me and one that taught government that didn't

like me because of my politics because I was very outspoken. In fact, that same teacher had my brother kicked out of the school and he didn't do his 12th grade. He went on to college a year early because he was creating so much trouble in her classroom. She was very conservative, and we brought a different voice to that that she didn't want heard and heard in class, so she wasn't very happy.

Blanche Touhill: It was easier to go on, but you didn't...

Nina Balsam: No, I didn't go with him, I stayed, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So, did you go to the same college?

Nina Balsam: With my brother? No, I went to a women's college.

Blanche Touhill: So where did he go?

Nina Balsam: He went to the University of Miami for one year and then he went to Brandeis and then I went to Simmons College which is in Boston. Both colleges are in Boston, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And how did you like Simmons?

Nina Balsam: It was fantastic, and the reason is that...well, one, it was very encouraging. There was a pass/fail system and I did pretty well in that system, but what I liked about it the most was that it encouraged us to be political in a way. They gave us a whole semester off to do political work, so I did work around feminism and around anti-war work and we got credit for doing that.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have to write papers?

Nina Balsam: Around doing that work? We had to write papers. I can't remember whether we had to write papers around doing that work. I can't remember what the requirements were, but I do remember that I was very politically active then, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: The teachers, you liked them?

Nina Balsam: Yeah, I really liked them, and they really encouraged me, and it was all women, so it was like there wasn't that thing where boys took over or men took over and those were the voices that you heard in the classroom. My voice could be heard.

- Blanche Touhill: And was the president or chancellor, were they a male or a female?
- Nina Balsam: A woman. So, it was very encouraging around being a woman and being successful as a woman.
- Blanche Touhill: How did you get involved in the women's movement? Did you actually join a women's group, or did you read all the literature? Why do you say that you were active in women's activities, the revolution?
- Nina Balsam: I did join groups. I'm not sure I could remember the names of the groups that I joined but I was involved in doing demonstrations and other sort of feminist type work and I got very interested in feminism, even more interested in feminism and that carried me through into my next stage in life.
- Blanche Touhill: And what was your major?
- Nina Balsam: Government and economics.
- Blanche Touhill: So, was there some teacher there that said you have some special mission in life?
- Nina Balsam: I had a number of teachers that really liked me and fed me that way. I remember my economics teacher, my history teacher, who was a great feminist and I took classes from her about the suffrage movement. It was so exciting. It was so exciting to do that reading and writing and learn about all of that stuff.
- Blanche Touhill: How many women were in each class about?
- Nina Balsam: Not many, probably...maybe 100 in each class. It was a small school.
- Blanche Touhill: What happened to your brother? Did he become a lawyer or something?
- Nina Balsam: No, I became a lawyer.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, you became a lawyer.
- Nina Balsam: And this is interesting. I have to tell you about this. My brother, he's got his Ph.D. in nutrition, I think it is, and when I decided to go to law school, my parents said, "We think you should go to social work school instead of going to law school because you're too emotional; you're too sensitive."

- Blanche Touhill: Well, social work is a sensitive, emotional...unless you learn how to handle that.
- Nina Balsam: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: So, you graduated from Simmons and did you go immediately to law school?
- Nina Balsam: I did.
- Blanche Touhill: And where did you go?
- Nina Balsam: Wash U.
- Blanche Touhill: So that's how you got to St. Louis?
- Nina Balsam: That's how I got to St. Louis and I hadn't intended to stay in St. Louis. I had intended to go back to the East Coast but here I am, after all these years.
- Blanche Touhill: How was law school?
- Nina Balsam: The best part about law school...I mean, law school is not fun that much, but I got to take classes I was interested in, some classes, and I also joined the National Lawyers Guild which is this progressive legal organization and so I was surrounded by people who had my same politics and we were in law school for a certain reason, which is sort of to do social change, social justice work. So that was good, and I got to do some clinical work at Legal Services. I made do, I can't say I liked it, but I was able to do things that I did like to do and it taught me what I needed to know in order to do the work.
- Blanche Touhill: How many women were in your class?
- Nina Balsam: Not many. I'm going to say 15 or 20 maybe.
- Blanche Touhill: Out of how many?
- Nina Balsam: I'm going to say...I don't know for sure but maybe 100.
- Blanche Touhill: What year did you graduate from law school?
- Nina Balsam: 1976, and there were maybe two women instructors and very few women in the class.

- Blanche Touhill: And did all the women finish?
- Nina Balsam: As far as I know, they did.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, I know that in 1972 with the Reauthorization Act of Title Nine, they began to say you couldn't be denied in the job or admission to a college, that all wrapped together. You're the expert, no doubt. And then in '74, the University of Missouri began to say how many women did you have on the tenure line; how many women do you have full professors; do you have any women in administration? Title Nine is not just athletics. That whole Reauthorization spun off into other...
- Nina Balsam: And now it's doing some great work around sexual assault and domestic violence.
- Blanche Touhill: So, when you graduated from law school, did you get a job with Legal Aid or something?
- Nina Balsam: They had a VISTA program that...
- Blanche Touhill: What is VISTA?
- Nina Balsam: Volunteers in Service to America and they actually paid...I mean, you could be a VISTA lawyer, so I became a VISTA lawyer at Legal Services. That's how I started at Legal Services and I was at Legal Services for 22 years and then I went out to do some other work. That was fantastic because completely surrounded by people that were doing law work for the reasons that I was doing law work. So that was like my family there.
- Blanche Touhill: What were your reasons?
- Nina Balsam: I wanted to change things.
- Blanche Touhill: How?
- Nina Balsam: Well, I could tell you what I did when I got to Legal Services. I was placed in the Family Unit and every single client I had was a domestic violence victim and there was nothing really...no law available to them where they could be protected. So we wrote the Adult Abuse Law. We choreographed it getting passed in the state legislature which, in that time, was not fun in terms of the politics of the state legislature. And then I argued for the Constitutionality of it in the Supreme Court.

Blanche Touhill: Of Missouri?

Nina Balsam: Mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: And you won?

Nina Balsam: Yeah, it was found to be Constitutional so now people can go...women or men, whatever...can go to the courthouse and get an order of protection and they don't have to pay for it and they don't have to hire a lawyer to do it. It was really, I think, a significant remedy for them.

Blanche Touhill: And that was satisfying to you?

Nina Balsam: Yeah, it's the work that I want to do.

Blanche Touhill: And how many years did it take you, from beginning to end, to get that law passed?

Nina Balsam: Three years.

Blanche Touhill: Well, that was fast.

Nina Balsam: It was very fast, and it was because we were strategic and it wasn't me so much. We had somebody, a lobbyist working with us that was very strategic about who we got to sponsor it and how we got support for it. But that's exactly the work that I wanted to do in my life and I've been, even in St. Louis, able to do that work in my life.

Blanche Touhill: So, what other kinds of things did you do?

Nina Balsam: Well, I stayed at Legal Services for 22 years and did lots of different stuff there. I was in every one of the units, the substantive units but then I started managing. I got interested in non-profit management, so I went back and got a Master's in non-profit management.

Blanche Touhill: Where did you go for that?

Nina Balsam: Lindenwood, yeah, and then I was the first legal director at the Missouri Coalition Against Domestic Violence. So, I stayed there probably six, seven years and helped advocates and lawyers who were doing that kind of work, figure out, sort of strategize about how they should handle something, which I liked also. I pretty much liked every job that I've had.

Blanche Touhill: It was the same theme?

Nina Balsam: Yeah, because I have to be passionate about the work that I'm doing in order to do that work. That's what drives me.

Blanche Touhill: Were you dealing with the legislature when Sue Shearer was around?

Nina Balsam: I was. I knew Sue, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Sue helped you?

Nina Balsam: She was a sponsor of the bill, yeah. She was very helpful.

Blanche Touhill: And Harriet Woods was around?

Nina Balsam: And Harriet Woods was around.

Blanche Touhill: And Sheila Lumpey?

Nina Balsam: Yes, all of them, yes.

Blanche Touhill: They were a remarkable trio, weren't they, and I'm sure there were other women there as well that I just didn't know as well.

Nina Balsam: Well, they were willing to fight for stuff and it was really fantastic, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Does that kind of woman still exist in the legislature?

Nina Balsam: I think so. I think Jill Shube does it. I think Stacy Newman does it, yeah. I think there are some.

Blanche Touhill: So, there's a pipeline?

Nina Balsam: There is a pipeline, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Did you ever think of running for office?

Nina Balsam: Only, like, for a minute and it was Sue Shearer that actually approached me to take her place. I'll tell you why I didn't do it. I'm a lesbian and this was not a time when, if that came out, that I would be elected.

Blanche Touhill: What if it came out today?

Nina Balsam: I might be elected today, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: It's amazing, in, what 30 years...

Nina Balsam: Oh, my God, the changes. I've never seen a social movement change that fast and I have a theory about it that's not probably just my theory, but I think it's because of the personal, because people know people in their families who are gay and you can't maintain this hateful position about it...

Blanche Touhill: No, you love them.

Nina Balsam: Right, when you love your cousins or your uncles or your...whatever, it's a personal movement in a way, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And I think, really, AIDS brought people out of the closet in a way.

Nina Balsam: Well, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Because they were going to die if they didn't pressure to get research accomplished.

Nina Balsam: Right, that was a great movement, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Do you know Steve Brawley?

Nina Balsam: No.

Blanche Touhill: Steve is writing the history of the movement in St. Louis and he's brought out a picture book which is sold at the Missouri Botanical Garden and he's very interested in collecting and pictures and artifacts of the movement.

Nina Balsam: So, let me tell you something else about me that's maybe related, maybe not, but I had a baby when I was 30 by artificial insemination and I was probably the second woman in St. Louis to do that that way and I did it somewhat because I wasn't married...

Blanche Touhill: And you wanted a child.

Nina Balsam: And I wanted a child, yeah. So, there's ways that I sort of...

Blanche Touhill: You've practiced social change yourself.

Nina Balsam: Right, I guess, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: I mean, you just didn't create it as a lawyer. You were in it.

Nina Balsam: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And how is the child?

Nina Balsam: She now has her own child and, so I have a grandchild and she's a fantastic mother and people obviously blame me for this, very outspoken, not easy to deal with, has very strong opinions but I'm proud of her.

Blanche Touhill: And does she work?

Nina Balsam: This first year, she hasn't worked but she's a jeweler actually, so she did that until she had the baby and then she took the baby to work for a while-while the baby was not mobile. And I'm sure she'll go back to work, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: As a jeweler?

Nina Balsam: Yeah, and she has her own business too.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how wonderful.

Nina Balsam: But she was working in a jewelry store actually when she...they lived in Colorado. Now they live in Maine.

Blanche Touhill: Did she go to school for the art?

Nina Balsam: Mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: And then she learned the design of jewelry?

Nina Balsam: Yeah, she, from a very young age, knew what she wanted to do. There was a bead store that opened in the loop. She was there every single weekend. I was there with her every single weekend.

Blanche Touhill: Picking up new beads?

Nina Balsam: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And then making them into things?

Nina Balsam: Making them into things and then starting to work there when she was probably too young to work there.

Blanche Touhill: And then she had an artistic ability on top of just liking something? She was more than a craft person? She's an artist?

Nina Balsam: She is an artist, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: I happen to know a couple of women who went to the University of Kansas for art and then they took a special course to do jewelry design so they had a special kind of minor or whatever you would say.

Nina Balsam: Yeah, so she went to the art school that's connected with the University of Massachusetts, it's called Mass Art. It's the only public art school in the nation related to a public university. My brother lives in Boston so that's part of the reason she went there, so he could sort of look after her.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, in case there was a problem, yeah.

Nina Balsam: Yeah, and there was a problem. She was so homesick, it was amazing. After being so rebellious, she was so homesick. It's like, "Really? Who are you?" Yeah, so she majored in small metals jewelry design, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And that's wonderful that she can practice that here.

Nina Balsam: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So, after the Legal Aid, where did you go?

Nina Balsam: I went to, it's called the Missouri Coalition Against Domestic Violence. It was called that then. Now it's Domestic and Sexual Violence and I was their first legal director so I wrote a manual on basically the law related to domestic violence so people would have that available and did a lot of training of advocates on the law to the extent that they probably knew the law better than most lawyers knew the law, which I think is important, actually, and did other things, some public policy work and some work on projects and stuff there.

Blanche Touhill: And does that organization still exist?

Nina Balsam: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And do you still work for them?

Nina Balsam: No.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, okay. You've moved on?

Nina Balsam: I did, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Where did you move then?

Nina Balsam: The next job was with the Center for Women in Transition and they do re-entry for non-violent women offenders and they hired me to implement a restorative justice initiative in the State of Missouri.

Blanche Touhill: What does that mean?

Nina Balsam: So restorative justice is a way of looking at crime and harm where you focus on the victim as opposed to really what we have in our system today, which is a punitive system that really doesn't even allow the victim's voice to be present that much. So, it's a whole new paradigm that's not so new; it's actually quite old and indigenous people used peace circles to basically resolve conflicts.

Blanche Touhill: What is a P circle?

Nina Balsam: Peace.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, peace circle so they sit around...

Nina Balsam: Sit around in a circle, so there's dialogues that happen, circles that happen and one-on-one dialogues that happen between victims and offenders and it can be used in schools and it can be used in communities and it can be used with crime and it actually is starting to be used quite a lot all over the world. The Economic Union, for example, is promoting restorative justice in the courts of their member countries and it is a wonderful system that reduces recidivism, amazingly reduced recidivism because offenders have to actually take responsibility, to understand what they've done, take responsibility for what they've done and for victims, where they feel like somebody really understands what happened to them and their needs for healing are taken into consideration.

Blanche Touhill: Do they sit with the perpetrator?

Nina Balsam: Sometimes they do, only if they want to and they can have a dialogue and if you watch it...and I've watched it, both in person and on video, you see that there's something that happens between the two that creates this bond and in what I've seen, people crying afterwards, hugging afterwards. It's remarkable and it's transformative and so I'm really a fan of restorative justice and right now I'm doing some domestic violence

work but I'm also trying to do it at the intersection of restorative justice and domestic violence, so creating opportunities for domestic violence victims to be able to use restorative justice and get the benefit of it, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: What if they don't want to see the perpetrator?

Nina Balsam: Well, they don't do it.

Blanche Touhill: Well, then, do they have a peace circle?

Nina Balsam: So, what I did was I created a program where they don't see their offenders but offenders...it's like...Mothers Against Drunk Driving do this, where they have victim panels, and the victims talk to the perpetrators but not their perpetrators so what we did was we created victim impact panels for domestic violence victims where they were able to tell their story to offenders but not their offenders and it was transformative for both the offenders and for the victims.

Blanche Touhill: Does the offender then explain why they did it?

Nina Balsam: No, they don't talk at all. They're not even able to talk unless the women that are presenting say it's okay for them to ask questions and then questions are submitted in writing. But they mostly are there to listen and what happens with them is that, for the first time, they've heard what the impact of the crime is, because they can't hear it from their victim because they don't respect their victims well enough to hear but now they're in a place...starting to be in a place where they can actually hear what the harm was. I've seen these guys start crying and not in a, in my view, a manipulative way, just like, "Oh, my God, I can't even believe what I did to my family." So it's a powerful thing and I'm very interested in it.

Blanche Touhill: Does it affect the perpetrator's sentence?

Nina Balsam: No, by and large it doesn't because that's something that, I think, victims would be very upset about if they were given a lesser sentence because of it, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So it's really an attempt to help both?

Nina Balsam: Yes, to lead to transformation. So there's research now about how a victim who participates in a restorative justice practice has less trauma

and is able to get back to work quicker. It's a very healing kind of thing and for offenders, they are much less likely to recidivate as a result of participating. I went into this job not really knowing about restorative justice but now I'm a tremendous fan of restorative justice.

Blanche Touhill: Where did it start?

Nina Balsam: Well, the second wave of it started in Canada. There's also...there was a program that was happening in the United States and Indiana. The Mennonites were very involved in this, very involved in it, and they still are. Howard (Zahr?) is a Mennonite who has a school actually in West Virginia and it's a school that teaches all about restorative justice and he's sort of the grandfather of the modern restorative justice.

Blanche Touhill: When did it first start?

Nina Balsam: I'm going to say in the late '50s maybe...mid '50s, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And then it sort of died down and now it's popped up again?

Nina Balsam: No, I mean, since it started, it's just...it's blossomed.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you said the "second wave" of it.

Nina Balsam: Well, because the first wave was indigenous peoples doing it.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, I see.

Nina Balsam: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And all the tribes or just some of them?

Nina Balsam: I think a lot of indigenous people did that. Even, like, the Maori did it and now what's happening in New Zealand is that they're using that system, that modality for their juvenile justice system so they've borrowed it from the Maori's to do it because it's a pretty effective system to use, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Well, of all the things that you've mentioned so far, do you have a couple that really stand out in your mind as being ground-breaking?

Nina Balsam: I think working on the Adult Abuse Law was important for victims.

- Blanche Touhill: Well, it came at an early time in your life so that must have taught you that you could make change.
- Nina Balsam: Yes, I was just starting my career then, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: Were your parents proud of you?
- Nina Balsam: My mother was really proud of me. I don't think my father was.
- Blanche Touhill: Because he was more of a traditionalist?
- Nina Balsam: Yes, and I was a lesbian and I don't think he liked that.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, I see. The woman had a role in life and you weren't fulfilling it.
- Nina Balsam: Well, I was not a traditional woman and he, in fact, sent me to charm school when I was in high school to become more feminine and I would argue with the person who was teaching me about, "Now, why do men have to open doors for women? Why do we have to wear make-up?" That woman, I feel sorry for her now because I was challenging her all the time.
- Blanche Touhill: And are they proud of your brother?
- Nina Balsam: I think my father was very proud of my brother, re-living his life through my brother in a way. I know my mother was very proud of me, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: And was your brother proud of you and you proud of your brother?
- Nina Balsam: We had a not great relationship for a long time, but my father died, and he was pretty young and that brought my mother and I closer together and when my mother died, it brought my brother and I closer together. So, we're quite close now and he's been fantastic with my daughter in Boston.
- Blanche Touhill: When he got to know her there?
- Nina Balsam: Yeah, that was great, yeah. So, we talk every week, yeah, so we're close now.
- Blanche Touhill: Isn't that wonderful?
- Nina Balsam: Yeah, yeah, it's really wonderful, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life have been like?

Nina Balsam: I hope that I would be a suffragist. I hope that I would be, like, rebellious and trying to change stuff and there were women that did that.

Blanche Touhill: Well, your mother was a socialist and a changer?

Nina Balsam: She was a changer also, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And have you gotten any awards that you're really proud of, or award, any kind of recognition that you really think was special for some reason?

Nina Balsam: Yeah and I'll tell you about it. There's one thing I want to say about my mother. My mother, I think, was initially upset when she found out I was a lesbian and then very soon after that, she joined (P-Flag?).

Blanche Touhill: What is P-Flag?

Nina Balsam: Which is a Parents of...gays, basically, lesbians and gays. She was an activist. She was just an activist. My father was an activist too. So I know that's a lot where mine comes from. So in terms of awards, I got this award that came with a prize, a monetary prize. It was called the Sunshine Peace Award and it was for domestic violence advocates and I was one of the first to get that award.

Blanche Touhill: As a woman or just the first to get the award?

Nina Balsam: One of a number of...a class of maybe 20 nationally to get it, yeah. And it came with a financial piece too, which came in handy. The other thing that I'm really proud of is that the domestic violence community here named an award after me. It's called the Nina Balsam Meritorious Service Award and why I like that is...my superlative when I was in high school was "Miss Dependability" so I think that is really how I operate. I really try to come through and help people and do what needs to be done and not give up and even if things are hard, not give up, which probably harkens back to my actually living as an infant when I was three pounds, fourteen ounces. So, yeah, I'm proud of that. And I'm proud to be able to help make things better for people.

Blanche Touhill: Who do they give the award to?

Nina Balsam: Others that...

- Blanche Touhill: ...work in social change?
- Nina Balsam: Yeah, others in the field, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: What's the theme in your life?
- Nina Balsam: I think I'm a rabble-rouser, sort of. I think that's the theme in my life. I'm not quite content with the status quo and I try to change things to make them better.
- Blanche Touhill: And that was a theme all through your life too?
- Nina Balsam: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, now what do you do?
- Nina Balsam: I work for the domestic violence community and I do court watch, so I watch the courts that issue orders of protection and we have a cadre of volunteers that fill out...monitors that fill out paperwork on what's happening and then a report is generated and then we go talk to the judges about what they could do differently that would be better for victims.
- Blanche Touhill: And are they willing to have you come in and tell them?
- Nina Balsam: They are, largely, not always, but I've been in this community doing this work for 45 years. I have a reputation and, so they do listen to me. Some of them really do listen to me and we work hand-in-hand.
- Blanche Touhill: Is domestic violence getting more prevalent or less prevalent?
- Nina Balsam: I think it's the same.
- Blanche Touhill: But now the women...or the men, have protection?
- Nina Balsam: Right, there's laws; there's funding through the Violence Against Women Act; there's services. When I started there was nothing. There wasn't a shelter. There wasn't a law. There wasn't a service provider. There wasn't anything when I first started doing this work.
- Blanche Touhill: What did women do? They just got beat up?
- Nina Balsam: They went to their sister's house or somehow got away or didn't get away, or had to kill their abusers, which some women did.

- Blanche Touhill: And then they went to jail?
- Nina Balsam: For the rest of their lives. I worked on a clemency project to try to get some of these women out because they killed their abusers and they got harsher sentences than the men who killed their wives. It's pretty terrible.
- Blanche Touhill: How is it as a lawyer to have that happen, where the women got a harsher sentence?
- Nina Balsam: It's terribly unfair. I think, in addition to being a rabble-rouser, I really feel strongly about fairness and people being treated decently and fairly and equally and all of that sort of thing. So that's been kind of a thread through my life. So, it really makes me angry.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, I know you've worked to get better state laws. Have the federal laws helped in any way?
- Nina Balsam: Well, the Violence Against Women Act has helped tremendously.
- Blanche Touhill: And what is that?
- Nina Balsam: It's a federal law and it funds the service providers. Various parts of it regulate what can be done around guns, for example. Those that have orders of protection aren't supposed to have guns. That's part of the Violence Against Women Act so there's a lot of law that's been accomplished through the Violence Against Women Act.
- Blanche Touhill: What if somebody gets such an order and they still carry the gun?
- Nina Balsam: Oh, it's against the law.
- Blanche Touhill: They can go to jail?
- Nina Balsam: They can go to jail, yeah. Enforcing the law is another question because it has to be enforced by the Feds and that's not a real high priority for the Feds but, yeah, they can go to jail.
- Blanche Touhill: Do they?
- Nina Balsam: It depends. If they're prosecuted, they can. It's usually connected to another crime, maybe a drug crime or something like that. There was just a case that the Supreme Court decided last week maybe that had to do

with being able to have a firearm as a domestic violence perpetrator. Somebody was in protection against them and the Supreme Court confirmed that they couldn't have a firearm so there's a pretty good law around that.

Blanche Touhill: I assume some of the victims die, get killed, from the...

Nina Balsam: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: ...perpetrator.

Nina Balsam: Yeah, there's a fair amount of domestic homicides that happen, a fair amount, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Are you more likely to get killed as you leave or are you more likely to get killed if you stay?

Nina Balsam: You're more likely to get killed if you leave because then what's happening is you're separating from him and he no longer has control and so he's desperate and "if I can't have you, nobody else is going to have you" so that's the most dangerous time, separating, leaving, is the most dangerous time.

Blanche Touhill: Does it last more than a year...

Nina Balsam: It can.

Blanche Touhill: ...that violence?

Nina Balsam: Oh, yeah, I've seen it last years and years and years afterwards, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So, these women have to go into hiding?

Nina Balsam: Sometimes they do, yeah, and they do.

Blanche Touhill: What effect does that have on their children?

Nina Balsam: Well, I think it's better to be separated from the violence.

Blanche Touhill: For the children?

Nina Balsam: For the children, then to live with it, is my feeling, because the children are affected too. I mean, the co-occurrence of domestic violence of child maltreatment is extraordinarily high so 65, 70%, if he's abusing her, he's abusing the kids.

- Blanche Touhill: Are there many men that get abused?
- Nina Balsam: The men think so. The men's movement, the father's rights movement thinks so, but it doesn't come close to what happens to women.
- Blanche Touhill: So, you spend your days organizing these court visits?
- Nina Balsam: Well, I observe in the courts with my monitors. I usually go with them and observe what's going on because I have a different take on it than they do because I'm a lawyer and I wrote the law, so I have probably a deeper understanding of what I think the judges could be doing differently and what maybe they are doing that's harmful. So, I try to observe as many dockets as I can.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you choose the right profession?
- Nina Balsam: I think so.
- Blanche Touhill: Not a social worker.
- Nina Balsam: I mean, I think you can make change as a social worker, but I think, being a lawyer, it opens doors for you that social work does not open for you.
- Blanche Touhill: Like what?
- Nina Balsam: When you're in the legislature, for example, people, they orient to you differently if you're a lawyer. You can be...I could write legal briefs and persuade people that way and I just think, whether it's good or bad, that more doors have been opened for me because I have a law degree and I've been able to do more with making change because I have a law degree.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, I believe, too, that changing law is...I think if you're a social worker, sometimes you can change policy but it's hard to change the law unless you really have a vision and that you know what's wrong and how to really write the law to make it a little better.
- Nina Balsam: Yes, which is what I tell my students all the time. I teach a Domestic Violence and the Law class at the law school.
- Blanche Touhill: At Washington U?

- Nina Balsam: Yeah, and I tell my students, "If you're going to go into policy work, you have to do the work for a while because that's the only way that you're going to understand what needs to be done in terms of public policy." Some of these students just think...they're just ready to rock and roll right away and, "No, get some experience under your belt."
- Blanche Touhill: And work your way up.
- Nina Balsam: Yeah. So, then you'll be grounded in really what needs to happen.
- Blanche Touhill: Actually, I think that's true in the teaching profession if you go into administration, you should teach for a while.
- Nina Balsam: Oh, yeah, for sure, I agree with you.
- Blanche Touhill: And I think today people want to get to the top right away and I'm sure that's true in business too. You come out with an MBA and you say you're ready to run the company.
- Nina Balsam: Exactly, and I actually think...I'm going to say this, and I hope I'm not offending anybody but I think there's a pervasive view of millennials, that they seem to really know what they're doing even though they haven't had much experience.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, yes.
- Nina Balsam: And that kind of rubs me the wrong way.
- Blanche Touhill: How many women are in law school today, do you know, or in Washington U?
- Nina Balsam: I can only say from my classes. Mostly my classes are all women but not entirely but I think there's probably at least 50%, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: You know, they weren't admitting women until, really, that Reauthorization Act in '72 and then their Pell Grants and other loans were in jeopardy unless they could prove an affirmative action plan. And the other thing, I think, that helped professional schools was they began to take statistics, not just from a campus as a whole, but they began to take statistics from individual colleges and in my lifetime, women couldn't get into the dental schools because I was told those little women couldn't pull those teeth from a big man, which I always thought was...

- Nina Balsam: That's ridiculous.
- Blanche Touhill: It's ridiculous but it was so funny to...
- Nina Balsam: There are lots of reasons that we were denied access to things.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, absolutely.
- Nina Balsam: It's going to affect your reproductive system or whatever it is, you know. Give me a break.
- Blanche Touhill: How is St. Louis as an environment for your career?
- Nina Balsam: Well, I worried about that in terms of being able to do social justice here, but I've been able to find nooks and crannies, enough nooks and crannies to be able to do it and so, while it's not Washington, D.C. or New York City or California, there is an opportunity to do social justice here and I encourage the students that I teach to look for those opportunities.
- Blanche Touhill: Why is that? Are there women that are supportive? Are there men that are supportive? Change is hard for anybody and what you're advocating, although it's fairness, there are a lot of people that, they don't want change.
- Nina Balsam: Well, I think there are...I feel close to the non-profit sector and I think that the non-profit sector creates a lot of change and opportunities for change and so that's where I've worked to create change and been supported to create change. So that's where I think you have to look. You're not going to find it may be as much in the for-profit sector. Maybe you're not going to find it so much in the government sector, but I think you can find it in the non-profit sector, where people come together for a purpose, a vision, a mission, and often that mission is to create change.
- Blanche Touhill: Is that true in other cities as much as it is here?
- Nina Balsam: I don't know. This is really the only place that I've lived an adult, so I really don't know but I tend to think that that's true of the non-profit sector in general and that's why I like the non-profit sector. That's why I feel close to it and I've always worked for non-profits.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, you know, when I was chancellor...and even before when I was the associate vice chancellor here...I used to build a lot of partnerships and I

found it very easy and I took our ideas to another town and I found it so difficult.

Nina Balsam: Really?

Blanche Touhill: And I often wondered, was this just a St. Louis thing or was it...I was shocked. I thought it would be an idea that people would embrace.

Nina Balsam: Well, I think...

Blanche Touhill: And it was sort of for non-profit good.

Nina Balsam: I think that there are two things probably going on: one is that once you live here and you network here, then you have opportunities. If you go to another place where you haven't networked, you don't know those people, they don't know your reputation, you're probably not going to get very far with it. You have to establish yourself, I think, in a community and have people trust you.

Blanche Touhill: Well, what I was bringing forth was the idea. I wasn't going to do it. I was bringing forward the idea and I found out that these organizations never talk to one another.

Nina Balsam: Really?

Blanche Touhill: And that in St. Louis...and maybe it's the various networks and I've often wondered, is it women that make those connections?

Nina Balsam: I think women make them better than men make them, honestly, yeah. I think they're wired to make those connections.

Blanche Touhill: So, as women move into these management positions in non-profits, are they more willing to sit down with another woman?

Nina Balsam: I think they're more collaborative by nature, yes, by nature.

Blanche Touhill: Although obviously I do give credit for men because a lot of the progress that's made in St. Louis ultimately has to be approved by men.

Nina Balsam: And that's more at a corporate level, right?

Blanche Touhill: That's more at a corporate level, yeah, but the corporations do give a lot of money to support non-profits here.

Nina Balsam: Absolutely, yeah. I mean, Reagan, his organization...

Blanche Touhill: RCGA.

Nina Balsam: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I know Jack Taylor...

Nina Balsam: Jack Taylor...

Blanche Touhill: Jack Taylor, [inaudible 1:00:35]...

Nina Balsam: Yeah, but I think of the men that are doing the changes in St. Louis being corporate and the women that are doing the changes are more non-profit.

Blanche Touhill: I think there's a lot of truth to that. My hope is that the women will eventually get into some of those positions.

Nina Balsam: And they may not be interested in it. I know, myself, I'm not interested in being in a corporate environment.

Blanche Touhill: No, but there are women...

Nina Balsam: Sure.

Blanche Touhill: ...that are working their way up.

Nina Balsam: Sure.

Blanche Touhill: Well, with that, I want to thank you for coming in today and I thought it was a wonderful conversation and you've had an interesting life and you should write about it someday.

Nina Balsam: Well, thank you, and thanks for the opportunity.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you.