



Mark Montigny

Interviewer:

Okay, so we are recording. This is Emily Reinl, I am here with Senator Montigny who is going to tell us a story. So go ahead.

Mark Montigny:

Well, it's hard for everybody to tell their story, right? But I greatly appreciate you, Emily, and the Whaling Museum for giving me the chance. I was joking off-air or off recording how I think of an oral history as something that you do when you're much older and somebody like a child, an adult child says, I want to get your history before you're gone.

The wonderful irony is that my ripe middle, post middle age, I have a nine-year-old son who loves this museum, and someday he will come in here with me or after me, and hear a whole bunch of stuff that he's probably heard and a whole bunch of stuff he hasn't heard. Because I'm going to do in this story what I do in all of my speeches and dissertations, and that is I'm just going to go where it goes without a plan and who knows what I'll reveal and what I'll regret.

I guess, where it starts for me is where it starts for everyone is, how did we get here? My grandfather was a whaling artist, Clarence. It was in a very French way, [foreign language 00:01:21], but for us, he dropped the D-E, which I wish he hadn't because that was our heritage, but it was the thing at the time. And so we Americanized it into Montigny and he married Anna Murphy, my grandmother.

And although a very French last name, my blood is mostly Irish from what I know. Of course, until you have it all checked out, you're not quite sure, right? So my grandparents on my mom's side, my dad is William Bud Montigny, and my mom is Elizabeth Sheen Montigny. Her parents came from Ireland, like a pretty typical immigrant story. And somehow my grandfather, who was a lover of everything wailing and a very, very talented whaling artist, I've spent my entire adult life collecting his art and scrimshaw, some of which is featured here in the museum.

So that's a very proud thing for me. But it's relevant in this way because anyone who someday listens to this or reads the transcription will know through almost every line my love of this beautiful city and part of it is just family heritage. I was brought up here and I live about a half a mile away from where I spent my entire childhood and young adulthood. So one home on Reed Street in New Bedford, moved to Hawthorne Street in New Bedford and I'm very happy to be in Myopia.

The beauty of it is though, one of the reasons why I can perhaps appreciate New Bedford more than most is I did a funny thing starting very young, and now that I think back over life, it's a light moment, but maybe it's indicative of personality and upbringing. When I was about three and a half, I took off on my little red tractor towards downtown New Bedford and who knows why that was my direction.

But Dr. O'Donnell, who ultimately gave braces to two of my siblings, I have a sister, Katie, who's older, a brother Billy who's older, and a brother John who's younger, and he picked me up, didn't know who I was because he hadn't met my family yet. And the story goes that he went from street to street and I kept telling him, that's my house, that's my house. So imagine I'm thinking now as the father of a nine-year-old, if my son somehow got on a tractor or now a bike and somehow was a mile away, I mean I would be ... if I'm thinking about it, he's nine.

I was three and a half and somehow I arrived back home and that was the beginning of a very, very mischievous high energy childhood. But to speak to adventure, because I think my mom and dad really didn't have a chance to travel or take us around the world because we had four, we call them Irish quadruplets. It was like one in a row,



four over four years.

And they sacrificed everything to make it work like most families. And they instilled very early on though I think this sense of curiosity and adventure. So fast-forward when I was about 11 or 12, myself and Charlie Quinn, it's just fun to watch people succeed. I grew up with Charlie Quinn is a major factor on the waterfront in New Bedford. And we started in mischief, I won't discuss here, but I'll mention only one thing.

We got on a Greyhound bus and went to Boston looking for fireworks and we were 11 or 12 years old. And I have to think of that when my son turns of that age. So I mentioned it again because this pattern, so then at 17 I hitchhiked cross country when people were pretty discouraging about hitchhiking. And my mom and dad, I remember saying, "If you go, don't come back." And of course they didn't mean it. They were the most loving parents that anyone ever had.

And I went and that was my next adventure. And then fast-forward again, I ended up on a backpacking trip with my younger brother John through Southeast Asia. And when the Tiananmen Square Massacre happened on June 4th, 1989, I went to Beijing within weeks of the massacre. And of course most people said, well, why would you do that? Do you work for the government or are you insane? And it became more of a lifetime of adventure and it's relevant here because now that has led me to almost half the countries in the world, including most recently when people were discouraging a visit to Transnistria, which is a breakaway Russian republic near a war zone, I visited it.

I went to Moldova and Romania and Turkey. It has always made me appreciate New Bedford even more. I think I had this appreciation earlier than most because I started to talk about my grandfather Clarence, he not only was a whaling artist, but he loved New Bedford and everything whaling from what I gather, I never met him. He died in 1957. But my dad always shared that with me. And ironically here we are today at the Whaling Museum.

He had his shop on the public outdoor space at the lobby of the Wheeling Museum, and we have a beautiful watercolor painting that he painted of it. So how is it relevant? I think we had a natural love for New Bedford and for its history. And of course we're very, very blessed because you can't move the city. It's on the ocean, it's on the bay and the harbor's there forever and it's been there and it will be there in perpetuity hopefully.

So all these assets, all this historic property and this art and this culture and history is easy to love and it came natural for me. So my dad, he didn't have the art talent, although I think he could have if somebody had pushed him into it, but maybe he didn't want to because maybe his father gave him that option and he didn't. But most of my family has art talent.

My brother very specifically would say to me, you can't draw a straight line with a ruler. And he's right. I discovered that there are certain places in the brain that learn different things and I must have other talents. But my older brother, my younger brother and my sister are all talented artists, although only my sister does it as a profession. She was an art teacher as well as a very talented ceramic and jewelry maker.

My brother Billy, brilliant, went through UMass and got a full scholarship to Brown for his PhD in biochemistry and cell biology. And yet for fun, he got an art history degree and got a 4.0 in art history, which people in art history tell me, are you kidding me? It isn't drawing, it's more work and more memorization than probably than his biology class. But the point being that even in that level of brilliance, and he, we think of as a genius, art was at the core and it came from that, who knows, the genetics, but certainly the orientation through my grandfather.

So we grew up in these streets and my brother and I, John, were because we're a year apart, spent a lot of time running around when downtown New Bedford had a lot of empty buildings. So you fast-forward and it's just not really ironic, but it's such a pleasure for me to have spent most of my career developing downtown New Bedford.

So when I was a kid, the buildings were empty. When I worked for the Chamber of Commerce, I worked for Jim Mathis at the New Bedford Chamber of Commerce. And it wasn't even really a training ground because I was a natural cheerleader for New Bedford already. I already had a chip on my shoulder that said, don't you be talking about my city. And it was weird. It was like this dark cloud that for decades followed New Bedford.

We had all this beauty and tremendous diversity in the culture and in the ethnic groups here and just it was a



friendly, fun place to grow up in a safe place to grow up. And yet I'm reading this stuff always negative and that's reversed substantially the last 20 years. And I'm one of those people that got to help with that. My legislation built the Star store and even as the Star store is suffering right now and possibly dying, I get some satisfaction because in every story it says, Montigny helped create Star store, the Star store gave us this arts and cultural renaissance that can't be turned back.

So even if we can't save it, and I'm trying desperately downtown New Bedford's going nowhere but forward because of the Whaling Museum and the art museum and the Zeiterion Theater and O'Hara. But really it's because of the natural beauty that never left. These buildings weren't torn down because the waterfront historically said no. And people like my grandfather painted and invested and put their time and effort into this.

One of the words I would use to describe it as just this eclectic community and it attracts eclectic people. It's not a coincidence that artists end up here and musicians end up here and that interesting people come here because the history is phenomenal and the present is phenomenal. So I mentioned the story of travel and adventure, but really it's rooted me even more.

As I said, I live a half a mile from where I spent my entire childhood and young adult life and I have no interest in leaving. And if I hadn't seen anything, I guess a critic could say, well that's because you don't know what's out there if you've lived in your little cocoon. But when you see 90, 100 countries in most states and you end up a half mile from where you grew up, something's working.

So we've all stayed true to it. So my mom and dad lived in a couple of apartments before they got married, bought a home on Reed Street in New Bedford. We owned it until my mom couldn't take care of herself anymore. She was finding a way up those stairs to our chagrin in her late '80s driving a car, the strongest woman I've ever met. She had polio as a child that she contracted in New Bedford as a child that caused severe physical difficulties.

I never realized it. It's hard for me even to talk about it, never realized it because she was so strong. They pretty much implied that she shouldn't have children. She had four of us all healthy. She sacrificed everything. My dad, they would say about my dad ... Well, my mom, mom is unique where it's impossible in an oral history to even say. I wish my mom were still with us because I want my son to know that his nana is kind of indescribable.

And I think that most people who aren't as close and haven't learned everything about love from her would say the same thing. There's generations of people. I remember as a kid, the kids somehow ended up at our house and it was a lot of times the kids who were disenfranchised or kids who were maybe outcast in their own home and somehow they ended up there. And then, and my dad, same thing.

He had personality where the one thing I remember everybody saying about my dad is I never heard him say a bad word about anyone. That's how it was at home. We were lucky. We were lucky to have that kind of love and good fortune, not fortune, but good fortune. And my siblings, same thing, a lot of sibling rivalry, but just wonderful big brother and big sister in Katie and Billy and John was like my partner in everything good and bad, still is in many ways.

But the city was an amazing place to grow up. So then I go from an active, really I was very dedicated to athletics. My brother John and I were rivals. We both set high school records that lasted for decades in track and played football, not as successfully, but I went right in from that intensity of athletics to really high level intense student leadership in college.

I went to the local university where all four of us could, it was the only thing we could afford. We were all there at the same time. So imagine four kids at best, middle class family going to college at the same time. Try that today.

Interviewer:

This was at UMass Dartmouth?



Mark Montigny:

Yes. And I took full advantage of it. It was an incredible experience. I got elected, it was essentially student body president, but it was called student trustee, which was more important because you had by law a full voting right and full power of a trustee. And boy did I exploit it. I told the other trustees who were mostly all white men, I said, "Guys," there were a couple of brilliant women.

But I said, "Guys, you can either deal with me when you read about me in the newspaper talking bad about you, or you can negotiate with me as an equal who represents thousands of students because you don't represent anybody. You got it for political reasons." I was a handful. And I've never changed. I was a handful before then for all of my young adult years and probably to some people, a handful now. My brother followed me as student trustee, which was a very proud moment for me.

We literally tied each other's record in high school and I wouldn't have wanted to beat it, but he's younger and he claims that he beat it. He said when you convert meters and feet, he beat me by a millisecond. So who knows? Who knows? But to grow up in this rich city. So even when I think of exploring again to my parents chagrin, and I hope it never is repeated by my son, we were on empty ferry boats in the harbor at 10, 11 years old.

We one time were on the news because there was a oil spill in the harbor and we were on one of the painter's rafts that they used to paint the fishing boats. And we were paddling it in the harbor while all the TV cameras were filming the oil spill. And the Coast Guard guy was yelling, "Watch that oil boom." And we almost couldn't reverse on time. They chased us. We found our way under the pier.

But story being that it was a beautiful place to grow up, not only because you had parks like Buttonwood Park that were beautiful places and clean beaches swimming on Buzzards Bay where there's no parking fee, only in New Bedford, but it was like a movie set being in downtown New Bedford and on the pier. It just was probably not as safe as my parents would've preferred when they thought we were at the park and we were attracted to downtown.

But that maybe gave me a different passion. I have friends in the Senate who represent areas, particularly wealthy areas where they arrived, they came after they made their fortune or after they graduated from graduate school. And I guess they get up every morning and do their best to work on policy. But I don't know how you get your passion. I wake up and this is New Bedford.

I walk through downtown today for a couple of appointments and I'm like, yeah, I helped make this place great because it was great to begin with, but if you don't have leaders like you had with the Waterfront Historic League and others, and you don't have people like me who cared deeply about it to work with the artists and musicians and museums, you're just like any other place.

You're just like any other place. And we are not like any other place. A critic could say and point out struggles that we still have, but they probably don't have a building that's 200 years old that's got a nice little loft that you could sleep in for half or one third of the price of the place they live where there's no character.

So I've worked in the Senate, I've been all the way to the top of the Senate as chairman of ways and means and lost to the presidency unfortunately at a very young age in my career, which was a hell of a humbling experience because I, of course, if I had become Senate president or governor as I had intended to run for the US Senate, I would've been able to do more for the things I care about.

But what happened after that loss is I kind of returned home more and spent more and more time in New Bedford and more and more time focused on New Bedford and decided despite having what they call the war chest, the biggest war chest in the House or Senate. So the implication being that if you want to advance you might be able to. And I just concentrated more locally. Took care of my mom, spent almost every day with her, traveled the world when I had free time and just focused on New Bedford.

And I'm really happy I did. Although I do represent Fairhaven, Dartmouth, mad poison and a cushion, and I represent them fiercely, but the core of the district is in the city and the city has the most policy and financial



needs. So I spend more of my time thinking about what the need is and it all flows from my childhood. When I think about it, I don't think about it unless I have to pause.

So in oral history, you have to pause. And I think about all of the passion I put into downtown New Bedford somehow comes through the blood of my grandfather and it flows to like my mom worked at Star store and shopped at Cherry and Webb, and we went to the peanut store on Christmas Eve and I bought my dad black licorice and my sister Katie red pistachios every single Christmas. So why wouldn't I still want to bring my son to the Whaling Museum and tell him about the peanut store? He wants to go to the peanut store and I can't bring him there, but I can bring him the memory.

Interviewer:

Can you talk a little bit about what that is? The peanut store?

Mark Montigny:

So the peanut store, see, it's funny because I can't imagine anybody not knowing what the peanut store is, but you have to be from New Bedford. So it was this little store that had every kind of peanut and candy I've ever seen all in open shelves. And I don't even understand how he did it. He had a peanut roaster, when you walk the block away, you could smell it and every single kid wanted to be there.

And I can remember standing in the window and there was this beautiful woman, well, she was probably a girl at the time. She was probably 12 when I was 10, and I don't even know how she got the job like child labor. And I had such a crush on her and years and years later ended up spending a little bit of time with her, a little adult time, we'll leave it at that.

And I remember telling her and she's like, "This is not true." I said, "No, I had one of those little boy crushes and stood in the window and watched you with the peanuts." And it's like every kid, I associate Christmas Eve with my father dropping me off and me running around and my family then years later saying, we can't believe that you put gifts in little wrapped paper bags and you gave me black licorice even though I don't like it, but my dad did like the black licorice.

But this is what was so fun and innocent about New Bedford. And on the other side, we had dollar days at Lincoln Park, which was the local amusement park, and you hear kids talk about Disney World, we couldn't afford that. We went to Lincoln Park and I swear I've never heard a kid talk about Disney World with more joy than we had at Buttonwood Park.

I'm sounding like my father and mother, I'm sounding my age. But it just was a wonderful place to grow up and then to be able to represent the place. And still like my mom and dad lived here until my dad passed years ago, sadly, which has been a big, big hole for me and us. My mom, only two years ago at 95, the strongest woman I've ever met, not withstanding that polio tried to knock her down and she never stopped loving New Bedford.

And we grew up with that value system. We grew up when the rest of the world was talking about diversity and equity, we were living in as kids. We just grew up in the West Center of New Bedford and you didn't think of those things. And then when you realize that a lot of the world does think of that, it kind of makes you angry and pissed off because, and again, travel, but mostly upbringing.

But travel brought me a different level of cultural appreciation. So if I'm in a country and I've got a person who's Kurdish and I'm in northern Iraq and as an American, it just so happens I've been there twice and I'm listening to somebody and instead of reading about a war and a difference and an evil dictator, I'm talking to somebody about their family and their experience in a war fighting actually as our allies.

And then shift halfway around the world, I'm listening to somebody in pick a country because I've been to most of them, but pick a country on any continent, they're saying the same thing about family and struggle. So it's informed my views on immigration, it's certainly made me more compassionate because I've been stuck in places where I didn't know if I'd get out of them. And somebody took their time to bring me, including very recently



going to Transnistria and doing the homework.

And the State Department tells me as they have my whole life, don't go, don't go, don't travel, advisory. So I go, of course, but only after doing homework. And it's because I won't go to a truly dangerous zone. I would like to have gone to Ukraine this time. And I just felt like it wasn't the wisest thing, but I knew that where I was on the border is this, it's not even a border, Transnistria is a ghost country right now.

But my point being that if you do your research but then you rely on the goodness of people, it's the same in New Bedford as it is in Northern Iraq. Or pick any place on earth that an American thinks they don't belong in. And I've showed up in most of them without a hotel reservation. But so here we are. My mom and dad are not with us, and all of us have stayed connected.

So I hope someday that my son will come in and listen to this. He won't have the same connection that I had, only because the world's different now, but he'll have an appreciation for it and I know that.

Interviewer:

So we do want to wrap up sooner. Are there any final little stories about your childhood, your mom maybe that you want to share before?

Mark Montigny:

It's interesting how I think I've gone on enough, but I could go do this once a week for a year and think of new stories. We had this really mischievous, harmless, thank God because we had such good parents, I am convinced that the mischief would've turned maybe more sinister if I didn't have the good guidance. And I was lucky too because when I got into sports in high school, in fact, I visited one of my coaches, coach Prefontaine the other day.

He's dying, he's in hospice. And I've never really had a problem telling the teachers and mentors and coaches like Jim Mathis at the Chamber of Commerce, like Jim Susa, my track coach, Bob Doud, my college coach, so many people along the way, every story you're going to hear have been touched even when they don't realize they've been mentored. I mean, it's good when you wake up enough to realize that a bunch of people have greased that path for you.

But I think of again, the beauty of staying here. Many of my friends moved on, even my younger brother, his career, he's a highly successful president of a major company. He's had to move, but yet he's still connected here and still keeps a home here. And my sister and brother have done all these interesting things. My older brother has ridden his bicycle from New Bedford or Vermont where he lived after to the West Coast 15 times now.

It's just kind of crazy. And he comes back. So I just think of how rich it was to grow up in that kind of an environment where we had 25 kids in the neighborhood playing kick the can and capture the flag. And I explained this to my son and I see an old soul in him. He doesn't say to me, come on daddy, can we go play video games or go to Disney? It's like, tell me about capture the flag.

Tell me about, what is kick the can daddy, what's the object? And he's questioning me about all this stuff. And we do mostly old school things together. And I think it's just directly because I was the luckiest person in the world along with my siblings to have my mom and dad, but to have my mom and dad and to grow up in New Bedford, this is what I know.

Interviewer:

That's wonderful. Thank you so much. It's wonderful hearing your story.