



Gail Roderigues

Hannah:

Hello. We are going to be doing Common Ground with collab in Lighting the Way. I'm the interviewer, Hannah, and my interviewee, Gail, right?

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Yes.

Hannah:

Okay, so whenever you want to start.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Okay. Hi, I am Gail Hartnett Roderigues, and I'm giving my full name because it'll link into what I'm going to be talking about next. One of the reasons I came into this Lighting the Way pilot project was that I had written a book on Helen Ellis who started out in the Old Dartmouth Historical Society archiving some of the artifacts. And she is an artist that I got a grant for in Westport.

And it is a book about women of Westport. It is three women that fell through the cracks in the history books. And I dedicated it to my grandmother, for my grandmother, Mary Loretta Faye Hartnett, who taught me the important life lessons, be bold and girls can do anything.

We'll start off with one of the ladies is Charlotte White, and they named a road after her in Westport. And when I moved there I asked, "What did she do?" Everybody said, "I don't know." And I said, "Well, they named a road after her," So ended up doing the research and studied her.

There was another one, Ruby Devol Finch, and she did primitive art. And 150 years after she passed, they found her artwork and the Art and Antiquities went crazy for it and said she's a self-taught genius.

And then, again, Helen Ellis, who has a connection to New Bedford where she ran a bookstore here in New Bedford. And she also in the 1920s started a mobile bookstore where it was called Whaler on Wheels, and she would go to summer communities in Rhode Island and Massachusetts and sell her book.

The other thing I also connected with New Bedford is I work for the YMCA, and we are working on a Healthy Neighborhood Grant study. It's Conservation Law Foundation is our partner, and the funding comes from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. And we are working in what we call South Central or close to the south end neighborhood, which is a large Cape Verdean community.

And we are waiting for the rail to come down from Boston. And we don't want gentrification, so we want development without displacement. So we've been working hard for the last five years, and we work, take surveys, disseminate the data. MIT students brings that back to us, and we find patterns, and then we make a action plan.

And the last action plan we made is a mural at the Bisca Club on Acushnet Ave. And that mural was rolled out in the Cape Verdean Recognition Parade. It's their Independence Day, it's a couple days after our America's Independence Day. So that's my connection to New Bedford.



Hannah:

That's amazing. That's so inspirational that you want to do this for the community even with the women and the Cape Verean culture in our New Bedford community, it's amazing. That's really great.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Thank you.

Hannah:

That's awesome. Is there a way... Actually, before we do this, because we're going to get that.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Okay.

Hannah:

What led you to doing this with your life, made you inspired to reach out to the community, reach out to women around our community and from the past? Yeah.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Yeah, that's a good question. Thank you. And, Hannah, the inspiration for the Women of Westport book is... So I'm a Navy brat. I lived all over. And moved into Westport, my husband's from around this area. And Westport's a very tight community and just saw that there was a need to have these women recognized.

And my children should have been reading about this in their history at their education at Westport schools. And, actually, with this book and the Westport Historical Society, it'll be part of the curriculum now. So having gone to school for education, Bachelor of Fine Arts and Women's Studies, that was a culmination... Sorry, I can't say that word... to bring all those experiences and understanding of importance of women's place in their community. And these women made major contributions, and they never got recognized, so I was able to do that for them.

Hannah:

That's awesome.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Yeah.

Hannah:

Your kids and maybe their grandkids will be so happy to find that they can see this and be like, "My grandmother did this." That would be so cool. Oh my gosh. Speaking of kids, do you have any regrets from when you were a kid or a teen?

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Yeah, so we were talking about this. So I'm also in the Y, I'm in a woman's workout group called Women and Weights. So interesting enough, this is Women in Work and my book is Women of Westport, and this is Women and Weights. So we work out, they train us how to use equipment. Usually men do that, but now we know how to do it. And they asked us, at the end, we kind of huddle and we like, "How's your week going?" And things like that. And so, that question was posed last week.

So my regret was, when I was in school, so I wanted to be an educator, a teacher. And then, I thought, "Oh my goodness, the school administration and those office ladies are just going to drive me crazy." So I stopped that, and I finished up with an extra 18 credits for a Bachelor of Fine Arts.



So I was planning to go back to graduate school and did not. I was working for my father, he was making boxes for museums and galleries. He was a career Navy pilot, and then went to RISD, went on to School of Design and Photography. So it was art related, and I started working with him and that was good. But it stopped my trajectory into getting a master's in teaching art.

So I've had some good life experiences. I worked at the Providence Journal. But I think back, that would've been something I could have changed, and I would've gone right into graduate school.

Hannah:

Wow, yeah. Yeah, I personally myself I've been thinking what I want to do with my life for a career and how I want to navigate that. And you said that your father was in the Navy?

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

He was. He was a commander in the Navy, World War II. They were recruiting young men to be pilots, and he was a bomber pilot and was a career commander 27 years.

Hannah:

Wow.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Yeah, so we lived, my mom moved 18 times in 21 years. She had seven kids. So I was in the middle, so I moved probably about five times, but that was the life. Every two or three years, you knew you were going to make new friends and leave some behind. Yeah.

But it was amazing when he decided to take up a passion that he had put on the back burner in photography, and then was able to fulfill that before he passed.

Hannah:

Yeah. So that was really good inspiration to you.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Yes.

Hannah:

That's awesome.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Yeah.

Hannah: That's amazing. One more question. Do you have something to say for people in the future, women in the future who want some inspiration from you, you know?

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:

Yes. So thinking about having lived in all those places, and you go into certain communities and things are set and they're set in their own ways. You don't really have to accept that. I mean, you can let them be them, but you can go outside of the box like I did by making this book to recognize women that should have been recognized.



Also, just observe and go with your gut and whatever's internal is telling you what to do. And, really, like my grandmother says, "Girls can do anything." And certainly that is what I would suggest is don't be complacent and just find a way around it. I always say, "If there's a brick wall you keep bumping into, find a way to go around it. Find a way to go over it." There's always a way.

Hannah:
Always a way.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:
Yeah.

Hannah:
That's amazing. Thank you so much. That was Gail, and thank you so much.

Gail Hartnett Roderigues:
Thank you, Hannah. Thank you.