

Colleen Zawadzki

Full Transcript

Interview Conducted June 17, 2021

Interviewer

The first thing I'm going to do is to ask you for a brief bio of about three or four sentences. How would you want to be introduced to a broad audience of people who might interact with this project?

Colleen Zawadzki

Okay. I grew up in the city of Syracuse on the Northside with my Italian mother and my Italian grandfather. I went on to become a Syracuse City School District teacher of social studies—originally junior high, and then moving to high school. Then, I went on to become a high school principal, at the OCM BOCES campus. Throughout that time, I was also a trainer of teachers in the area of curriculum and social studies. So I have that perspective as a longtime educator and teacher, but also as a Northsider that grew up in Syracuse with my Italian family.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. To start very open-ended, what are your thoughts about the Syracuse Columbus monument?

Colleen Zawadzki

Well, you know, I bring out the notion that I was an educator because when I was a young teacher, I had a poster in my classroom of a baby holding their nose with a diaper. And the sign said, "if something stinks, change it." And I bring that up, because I believed that I was a truth teller even as a

teacher. I remember when I taught cultural anthropology at Fowler a long time ago, we were teaching about the Taino and the Native People of Puerto Rico, and the trauma and the absolute decimation of their population in such a short period of time. I don't think I ever learned about that when I was in high school. So it was profound for me to have to research that, to become a teacher of that, in secondary education within the last twenty years. And I believe that, you know, as a person that knows about the atrocities that Columbus committed against Indigenous people, and the horror that he brought into their villages—I believe that right minded people, if they knew about that, they would see that he would not be the person you'd want representing my Italian heritage. My best friend, her mother was at Auschwitz. And I think about what it would be like if she had a statue of Hitler in her community, because there were people that believed he was doing good things for Germany for a while until they knew the atrocities and they were on the receiving end of that. And I think even if they moved him to a small other part of Brooklyn, it would still be an atrocity for them to have him be someone that they would have to drive by. I worked a long time with the Onondaga Nation when I was doing training for their teachers. And I think having Columbus staring in downtown Syracuse at everyone's faces, every day that people drive by, is still very painful, just like that. And I sort of equate the two in kind of a simplistic way. So I struggle, because I have a lot of people in my life that I love, that are Italian and have Italian heritage in their families. And I understand their thinking behind why they don't want the statue removed, because it represented our struggles and the trauma that our own immigrant family members faced, but he was a bad guy. He was just a really, really bad human being. And I think any other person—da Vinci, I mean—I can name so many other Italian people that for me would really represent positive things about Italy. But I don't believe Columbus is the guy for this. And I really feel that people should realize the pain that he causes to so many Indigenous people in our community.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. What histories does the monument site and the monument represent to you?

Colleen Zawadzki

Well, it's really interesting because I went to Henninger, and I was trying to remember if I ever learned about the papal bulls and the [Doctrine] of Discovery, and I don't remember learning it. Now, of course I might have skipped a little school back then. But I asked my husband if he ever learned about the [doctrine] of domination or discovery. He doesn't remember learning it in North Syracuse. My Italian mother doesn't remember learning about it. So I never realized the strong connection between the Catholic Church and the Pope's papal decrees, and how that gave license to people to go and basically conquer and take that which was available if they were not Christian or people that were, you know, within that Catholic church or those dominating cultures. And I watched as I went about my learning of this, how little people that I know, know about those subject areas, and I just really am shocked that in 2021, people still have a problem teaching the reality of slavery, let alone what happened to our Indigenous people. And you know, they just found hundreds of poor children in Canada, buried underneath a school for Native children. And it shocks me how little we really know about some of the oppressive things that our Indigenous neighbors have experienced. So I feel that I was remiss in the way that I was taught, if you will, and that it is my responsibility, because even though I'm a retired educator, I still see myself as a teacher. And I will not stop until at least I let people know that I have learned more about these injustices. And I feel that if people make a decision once they know that information, then it's in their court. But I certainly think that people have a right to know the truth about some of the things that we were unaware of growing up, and I certainly didn't learn very much about that at all.

Interviewer

Same here. Absolutely.

Colleen Zawadzki

Right?

Interviewer

It wasn't really part of the education I had growing up.

Colleen Zawadzki

No, I never heard of it. You know, I can't believe it. I'm sixty-seven. And I hadn't heard of it.

Interviewer

The next question on my list—You've spoken to this a bit, but I'll ask it, and you can decide what you want to say. What do you want people to learn about the history of Columbus and the effects of his voyages?

Colleen Zawadzki

I really believe that people should know, as sad as this is to say, about the tremendous atrocities that he committed, that were documented in his own men's journals. These are not word of mouth scenarios. These were documented in first [person] point of view primary documents, and now that we have that information known to us, I was unaware that he brought hundreds of Indigenous people back to Spain, as slaves. He tried to see if that would work, and the way that he got them to go was by terrorizing them. And I think people have a right to know that he and his family members, his brothers, they were ruthless. And they were cold hearted. I mean, you can dominate someone without being a sadist, and without being so masochistic and so horrible to human beings, but what he did was truly, truly horrible. And I honestly believe that if people understood that he removed body parts of people as a threat to others, children and women, nursing women, women with infants, I mean, this is inexcusable. Anybody that stands up for a person that is that cruel needs to relook at their values. That's just my opinion.

Interviewer

Thank you. Are there other histories or stories, past or present, that you want people who come to the downtown circle to learn about?

Colleen Zawadzki

Well, I want people to understand the trauma that my own family members experienced when they came to Central New York. I mean, my great grandfather, Albert Ruda, was so traumatized by it, he left. He left his wife and children and went back to Italy, like so many people did. And I think I heard something like a ridiculous number, thirty or forty percent of Italian immigrants said, “the heck with it, I’m going back. I want no part of this.” I don’t want to deny the struggles and the opportunities that they ended up bringing to their children through those struggles. But I really believe that my family that struggled so much—my Italian mother struggled, and once she realized the reality and truth about Columbus, she agreed with me. She said there are many, many other people in Italy that represent our heritage much more appropriately than that person. So I think there’s a delicate balance between wanting people to understand the tremendous beauty and wealth of opportunity that Italians brought to Central New York, without dishonoring them by selecting a person in history that was so inappropriate for this task.

Interviewer

Thank you. You’ve touched on this already from your discussion of the previous questions, but is there anything you’d like to say about how your personal history or your family history shape your feelings about the monument site and its meaning?

Colleen Zawadzki

I grew up with my mom and my grandfather. My father left when I was six. So I grew up immersed in an Italian culture, and then on the Northside of Syracuse, you know, and I really want people to know

how resilient we are, and how tremendously powerful the role of family is, and the role of our heritage is. And I was very grateful, within the last two or three years, to make kind of a pilgrimage to Italy for the first time just before the pandemic, and go to Naples and go to where my aunt's family was, and leave her ashes there, and experience the beauty of Italy. And I want people to know that this tremendous charisma, or spirit, that we bring, kind of like the *joie de vivre*, this exciting love of life and of celebrations and traditions and food and gardens and washing our driveway, or whatever those things are, that we bring to our families and our communities, is really potent. And Syracuse is the community that it is because of our immigrant population, particularly the Italians. And I, having married into a Polish family and watching the differences, if you will—you know, we would always make a swimming pool full of food for everyone in the neighborhood on any given day, and inviting people in and being able to honor collaboration and gatherings and celebrations is really powerful. And it has always been part of the person that I grew up to be, and eventually the mother and then grandmother that I became. And so even though my name is Colleen Zawadzki, I am definitely an Italian grandma, you know, and if the kids could move in with me, and we could be eating and celebrating and enjoying every day as if it were a festival or a celebration, that would be my M.O. So I have become that personification, if you will, of my mother and my grandfather's family.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. I've got just a couple more questions. How do you think we should think about the site and the histories behind it in ways that can decrease polarization and address its complexities?

Colleen Zawadzki

Well, I think that we have to begin by honoring whose land it's on. And I think that's really critical. And I don't know how one goes about that in a way that both respects and honors the pennies and nickels and dimes that so many people contributed to change it from St. Mary's Circle to the Columbus Monument Circle, because before that it was an Italian Cathedral in an area that had gardens there. And my grandfather Albert was a groundskeeper for Clinton Square gardens, and I even

heard possibly the St. Mary's gardens. But it's really important that we both honor the struggles that the Italian folks had, as they were envisioning that, and their desire to honor their heritage, with the desire to not negate the challenges that the Indigenous people faced when everything was taken from them, and they got sort of relegated to the Onondaga Nation area and lost everything that was here, the lake, the streams, the kettle lakes, everything. So I don't know how one goes about balancing all of that. But I think that through celebration of our diversity and honoring the struggles that we have had, entering a new culture, while balancing, hopefully, a respect for people that have always been traditionally disrespected, is a really—it's a dicey situation. I don't know if through metaphors and symbolism, we can honor Turtle Island or, you know, the Great Tree of Peace, while we also honor the gardens of the Italian families that were coming here and the struggles that they were faced with. I don't know if there is a symbol, person, that we're looking at that represents all that is amazing about the Italian culture, or perhaps it's really just vignettes and stories about our ancestors that may do that. But there's no question about it. Our story, I mean, balancing all the people that came with all the trauma that they were faced with as new entries into any culture, needs to be acknowledged. But we really have to do it in a way differently than we have done in the past with the people that have owned this land. This was their land. So I don't know how you do that.

Interviewer

Thank you. That's a very powerful answer. This follows very closely from what you were just saying, but what do you think are ideal next steps for the site once the statue is removed?

Colleen Zawadzki

Well, I think that the next steps for the site would be to continue getting input from our members of the Italian community, to honor the original intention of the people that put it up without denigrating the potential for respecting the people that were here. I think that collaborating on design and envisioning it—you know, I think that I once heard when I was working at the Onondaga Nation, they always think sort of seven generations down the road, like, what will it be like for our great,

great-great-great grand...I think we have to think that way about this monument. I think we have to move away from the here and now and envision what it will be like in the future. I think there's a way to integrate technology and vignettes, and stories and metaphors and symbols in a way that is respectful and honoring of all people that immigrated to Central New York, whether it was willingly, like my family came over, or as slaves unwillingly, or outcasted, as our Haudenosaunee neighbors, but there's got to be a way to bring all of that into that Heritage Park area, I believe, if it's done well.

And I think that we can look to other communities throughout the United States and the world, where these monuments are toppling down, and see how they're redesigning them to be respectful and honoring the people that were originally on those lands, and selecting heroes and sheroes that are more worthy of being honored for being representative of our Italian heritage than this atrocious human being that they've selected for this. And you know what, once you know something to be true, you can't take that knowledge away. And we know this to be true about him. And I understand that he was "a discoverer," but I was thinking about this in bed last night, you know, imagine that—let's just say my friends and I decided we're just going to discover another little community, and neighborhood, and so off we go. And we're looking around, and we're kind of driving around. But then when we get there, we just decided to beat them all up, and take their land and steal their cars and trample their gardens and pollute their water and basically spit in their face. And I thought, well, you know, that's kind of like what we did. And so now that we have a chance to do some—You know, I spent some time in South Africa ten years past the end of apartheid. And it was the tenth year anniversary, and we went to see what differences that made in education. That was also at the height of the AIDS pandemic. And you know, I thought Truth and Reconciliation was so powerful, when I learned about how you reconcile something as horrific as what happened in South Africa, but they did it, you know. So I believe if they can do it with South Africa, we certainly should be able to do something that is much more dignified than we're currently doing with the people that live in our local community. I mean, we tried again, to get them a little piece of the lake and I don't even think they got that land. I think

recently that didn't even work out. So there's just got to be some way to show some level of respect for what they've experienced.

Interviewer

Absolutely, thank you very much. Are there any other thoughts that you'd like to share that I haven't asked about or we haven't touched on?

Colleen Zawadzki

No, I can't think of anything.

Interviewer

All right, fair enough. Thank you very much.

Biography

I grew up in the city of Syracuse on the North side with my Italian mother and my Italian grandfather. I went on to become a Syracuse City School District teacher of social studies--originally junior high, and then moving to high school. Then, I went on to become a high school principal, at the OCM BOCES campus. Throughout that time, I was also a trainer of teachers and administrators in the area of curriculum and social studies. So I have that perspective as a longtime educator and teacher, but also as a Northsider that grew up in Syracuse with my close Italian family.