



**Worthington Memory**

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Contributor: Worthington Libraries

- Meredith S.: My name is Meredith Southard and I'm speaking today with Nicole—Niki—Gnezda. It is Friday, February 7<sup>th</sup>, I believe, 2020. And we are here today talking with Niki about her experiences growing up in Colonial Hills and her other experiences with Worthington. So I guess I'll begin by asking, what would you most want listeners to know about the Colonial Hills of your childhood?
- Niki G.: Well, I've thought about this and I think the thing that I feel the most when I think back was a sense of independence and agency that we had. Because it was a safe neighborhood and we lived on our bikes, and we could ride anywhere. Our parents trusted us to get on the bike, and we lived on Meadoway Park, so it was pretty far north. And we could go up to Colonial Market, otherwise known as the Little White, any time we wanted to. Ride around the neighborhood.
- Niki G.: And even when we were young, on our street, my sister was talking about this yesterday, we could go up and down people's driveways on our bikes. And so she said we used to call them the hills. So we thought we were mountain biking. But the neighbors, they knew who everybody was, they didn't care. It was a place for the children as much as for the adults in the families.
- Niki G.: But I remember that sense of agency, that I kind of had some self-direction in my daytime life.
- Meredith S.: You were sort of able to pick and choose where you went and what you did, and there was no one leaning over you...
- Niki G.: No, no.
- Meredith S.: ... telling you what to do.
- Niki G.: No, no. No, and you can only go two blocks, or no, it's not safe. And as we got a little older, first we could ride to Colonial Market, then we could ride to Nicklaus Drugs at Sharon Square. And then when I was really old, we could ride our bikes up to Graceland and that was kind of a big deal.



- Meredith S.: Yeah, that's far away.
- Niki G.: But yeah. But I mean, a sense of, like I said, agency or learning to be responsible for your own life and learning to have some choices and not having helicopter parents because I don't think anybody felt the need to be a helicopter parent in that way. And it isn't that there weren't things to be careful of. There were rumors about somebody in this woods and don't go in that woods. And I wasn't allowed to sled on Devil's Hill because the story was somebody'd killed there, which I think was not the story other people from Colonial Hills know. But that's what I was told.
- Niki G.: You know, so there were... There was a peeping Tom once. So it was a normal kind of thing, but it also was a place that kids just had autonomy. And we knew each other and like I said, all the parents knew us. And we called our neighbors' parents by their first names, which some people I suppose would think was kind of impolite. But for us it was a trust and we knew everybody and we had relationships with everybody.
- Meredith S.: And I know that your family moved from Colonial Hills to Worthington Estates. How old were you when you made that move?
- Niki G.: I was in middle school.
- Meredith S.: Okay.
- Niki G.: I think eighth grade.
- Meredith S.: Okay.
- Niki G.: Yeah, I had to be in eighth grade.
- Meredith S.: And I know you had ... How many siblings did you have?
- Niki G.: I have a sister who's 13 months younger than me, which is an important part of my story. And my brother, Eric, who's five years younger, six grades younger.
- Meredith S.: So you're the oldest?
- Niki G.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Meredith S.: Yeah. What's the story with your sister?
- Niki G.: Well she was 13 months younger than me. She is. And she was six inches taller and dark hair, dark eyes. But my mom raised us pretty much like twins. And so she was my best friend and everything we did, we did together. And when I was old enough to have first communion, mom would convince the priest that Terry



was capable of doing that too. So we would do it together, and when I started ballet lessons we did that together.

Niki G.: And I just got a picture of my Bluebird troop. A friend sent to me from fifth grade. And she was in it even though she wasn't in my class.

Meredith S.: Oh wow.

Niki G.: So we were really raised very much like twins except that we look so very different. And then when we got to high school, and we were best friends in high school, there were especially boys who would say things like, you can't be sisters because you get along too well. And we'd say, well, we can both spell our last name, so there. We're sisters.

Meredith S.: Yeah, that sounds really beneficial to both of you because she had a mentor and then you had a friend and...

Niki G.: Or the other way around.

Meredith S.: So yeah.

Niki G.: Because she was bigger than me, a lot of people thought she was the older sister.

Niki G.: So I just had this chip on my shoulder about not being able to be the big sister. And you know, I was still an infant when she was born, so I'm not sure I had a lot of... Ever sense of being just me.

Meredith S.: Yeah.

Niki G.: In the world. Yeah.

Meredith S.: That's great-

Niki G.: Maybe that's, excuse me, but maybe that's also why I felt some autonomy because when my mom let us out the door there was always two of us.

Meredith S.: Yeah. Where did you attend school and what do you remember of it?

Niki G.: I went to The Ohio State University School, which was one of the most important influences on my whole life, on who I am and how I relate to people and it was a place... It was founded on progressive education theories, John Dewey, it was experimental. It was creativity, it was individualized, it was project-based learning. We had... It was democratic learning, so the class might decide what the class study was going to be instead of the teacher making the curriculum. So they taught process rather than very specific content.



Niki G.: And it was very diversified. We had socioeconomically diversified, racially diversified. We had Down Syndrome kids in the '50s in our school integrated with everybody else when that was the time in history when people were saying, just put them in an institution. You mother can't handle this. Fathers would leave the family because they didn't want to be known for being the parent of a handicapped child. And yet, these kids were welcomed in.

Niki G.: And so that was really, really wonderful. I believe... There's a couple reasons I believe we went there. The personal reason my mom just told me is that she had these two kids that were almost twins and my brother, and my dad had just been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and she needed a break, and University School had a summer school kindergarten class. And she could get rid of me for a while every day. So that was part of us going there, and it was a really good match.

Niki G.: But the other thing she's told me for years is that there were no kindergartens in Worthington schools then. So this was 1957, and she and a woman named Nancy Wherry who had a handicapped son and a couple other women, much like your story about the sidewalks, got together and lobbied the superintendent, Harold McCord, about kindergartens. And he said to her, and I quote my mother, Mary, there will never be kindergartens in Worthington. So I believe that one reason we went to University School is that they had this kindergarten program which I'd already experienced and it was really good.

Meredith S.: That's-

Niki G.: So we did not go to Worthington schools until Ohio State School, University School closed. So I started in ninth grade at the Worthington High School.

Meredith S.: Was that kind of a culture shock...

Niki G.: Absolutely.

Meredith S.: ...moving to regular...

Niki G.: It was a culture shock both because it was so different and also because we were very aware that we had this other way of learning and this respect from the adults that was different from what happens in public school. And so I was very conscious of, how is this going to be different and what do I have to do to adapt and... I wouldn't have used the word achieve, but be successful at this.

Meredith S.: Yeah.

Niki G.: And socially it was a terrible culture shock because all my University School pictures, my glasses are like this and we didn't have hairdos. And we didn't care what we looked like. And then I walk into high school and everybody's hair, if you wanted to be popular, your hair had to flip perfectly. And I had one hair that



would never flip perfectly. And you had to have popular friends and they would meet in the locker room in the morning and tease up each other's hair and spray it and get it all right. And I didn't have those friends, so... That was my perception when I walked into school. But it was very cliquish and it was... The kids who had grown up throughout Worthington schools seemed to have a leg up on everybody else and there were clear groups of people that some people didn't want to hang out with, which really bugged me.

Meredith S.: Yeah, I mean, it sounds from the way you describe University School, just coming to Worthington would've been... The population here seems so much more homogenous I guess, than...

Niki G.: Yeah.

Meredith S.: ...the diversity of just people...

Niki G.: Yeah, and I... We took that pretty normal to have this rather diverse population.

Meredith S.: Yeah.

Niki G.: And so one of the things that's on your list of questions that I thought a lot about has to do with certain regulations in Colonial Hills and other parts of Worthington that started in the '50s, I believe, that selected out people of color in particular. I'm not sure that I was aware, I mean, there aren't any black people in Colonial Hills. But I was certainly aware that there were all these kinds of people in the school I had come from.

Niki G.: And then when I was in high school, my very best friend, and her father's name was Seth Washburn, and they lived in Medick Estates. But he was instrumental in working politically to get housing in Worthington Estates and places like that available to black families. And later on, my friend Becky said that they would have bricks thrown through their windows...

Meredith S.: Oh my gosh.

Niki G.: ...and his children were threatened for trying to move black families into the newer, better housing in Worthington. So I did have that kind of awareness. We had a... In high school there were twins, tall twin guys that were African-American and played basketball, they were basketball stars. And there was a girl, I think in my sister's class, who was dating them and the rumors were that her dad made her break up dating one of them. Her dad made her break up with him because of the racial differences and that kind of thing.

Niki G.: So that's a thing I've always been aware of. It's also something that now currently bothers me about Worthington. And if you go to some of the schools like Wilson Hill it's extremely diverse. And yet, if we have the Old Worthington Association dinner on High Street you might see one or two black faces there.



- Niki G.: The Historical Society, we really don't talk about the black history and we don't have an integrated population of people volunteering there and talking about the history of Worthington even though there were at least two black families that lived at the O.J. house and one of them had 10 kids.
- Meredith S.: I didn't know that.
- Niki G.: Yes. It was a rental property and there were two African-American families that lived there. And one had 10 children so if you look at it statistically there may have been more black people living in the O.J. house than white people over history. So yes, I am aware and concerned about diversity in Worthington.
- Meredith S.: Are you aware of any move to change that or is that just...
- Niki G.: Okay. When we had candidate night for this last election that question was raised about diversity.
- Meredith S.: Okay, yeah.
- Niki G.: And almost all the candidates said, well diversity is really good and we should have it. Nobody said, let's start a task force, let's have a sharing community event. Nobody said, let's bring, I believe they're Somalian immigrants that were at Wilson Hill, let's bring them in to talk about their experiences. Let's bring in the children of the Old Worthington black families who've been there for many more generations than most people here, let's have them come in. Let's do a multicultural event to actually break the barriers.
- Meredith S.: Yeah.
- Niki G.: Help people know each other. Nobody said that. Nobody had an answer just that diversity's good.
- Meredith S.: Yeah.
- Niki G.: And we should have it. And somebody talked about age diversity. So yeah. But I'm not very active in trying to solve this problem, but I also haven't found a venue or a way in to bring the communities together.
- Meredith S.: I mean, it just sounds like a very large and longstanding problem. And I'm sure it's like that other places as well.
- Niki G.: It may have, I'm not sure, but it may have started in the '50s and '60s when these housing restrictions were put into place. Like I said, I don't know, but I know there are Old Worthington families that are African-American. I know Harry Todd, for instance, was an important member of the Worthington Savings



Bank, I think it was, or Park Federal Bank I think it was. And he's a guy that you see him in the grocery store and you're excited to see him.

Niki G.: So there were families that were well-known and a part of the community and that may have changed. Or maybe not. I don't know.

Meredith S.: A question that's sort of in a similar vein, just in terms of your experience growing up and being aware of these larger issues in Worthington, did the Vietnam War... How did that affect you and your friends? What were you aware of when you were growing up?

Niki G.: Yeah, yeah. I think that's a really important question. My awareness of the Vietnam War started the day that my dad was sitting... In Colonial Hills we have a little living room. We didn't have a family room so he's sitting in the living room. We're walking between him and the TV and I remember the Kennedy assassination. But I also remember one day walking between him and the TV and he had a terrible look on his face. And I said, Daddy, what's wrong? And he said, I think we're about to go into a war.

Niki G.: I don't think that was the Cuban Missile Crisis, I could've been. I think that that was the Gulf of Tonkin or whatever started the Vietnam War. So I had that little bit of awareness. At University School, in seventh grade or eighth grade we each did independent studies on different... What's that part of the world called? They were Indo-Chinese countries then and I did one on Cambodia and Prince Sihanouk and I don't remember anything about it.

Niki G.: But then I came to Worthington High School in ninth grade and I don't remember any talk about it at all except that Spike Lee... Spike Lee, sorry, Spike Bonnell, I'm still back in the other topic, Spike Bonnell had been killed I believe in a helicopter crash and we had a big assembly in the gym honoring him.

Meredith S.: Was he in your class?

Niki G.: No, no, he was several years ahead of me.

Meredith S.: Okay.

Niki G.: So I didn't know him, but somebody died in Vietnam. So we had that, and it may have been the time when his dad was on the school board because some time when I was in high school I believe Dr. Bonnell was on the school board.

Meredith S.: Yeah, that name is very familiar, yeah.

Niki G.: The Bonnells are a really multi-generational family in Worthington, were pretty important. So there was that and then I remember senior year in government class we had current event quizzes. I don't remember any questions about the Vietnam War on the current event quizzes. Maybe they were the questions I



couldn't answer, because I didn't do well on those quizzes. But we didn't have discussions. I didn't know all this protest was going on. People laugh about did I go to Woodstock. We didn't know Woodstock was going on.

Niki G.: And one of the examples I use, senior year in high school we'd go to football games in white, in plaid, wool shorts and high knee socks. Kind of dressed up for the football games, very conservative. You can imagine tight Bermuda shorts and knee socks and loafers. I'd go to college, I went to Ohio Wesleyan, which was one-third population was from the East Coast so it was much more liberal, socially and politically liberal, than what I was used to here.

Niki G.: I remember buying my first pair of flared pants, right? And I didn't know the music that other kids were listening to and all that kind of stuff. So it was very much a culture shock. Right away knew about Vietnam War and protests and people would walk by the TV on our way to dinner and people would stop to see if they recognized the classmates that were at the March on Washington and that kind of thing.

Niki G.: And this doesn't have to do with Worthington, but I remember the first draft. And I was at a fraternity house on a date and all these... I guess you'd call it a date. The night of the draft wasn't really a date, but all these senior guys and their girlfriends were sitting there waiting for their number to come up to decide what their futures were. Do we get married, do we not get married? Do I go to graduate school? Do I go to war? If you can imagine your whole life is one moment when their number comes up, when your birthday comes up.

Meredith S.: Just pure chance. Wow.

Niki G.: Right. And determined everything. And so there was another culture shock in my life from the pretty sheltered, more or less behaviorally conservative Worthington in the... What is it, drug, sex, and rock and roll of going to college. I graduated in 1969 and that was a pivotal year. Because after that, Worthington High School was involved in the war protest and these kind of things. But my year it wasn't.

Niki G.: And that spring in college then was the spring that Kent State happened. So lots of things changed that year. But my year at Worthington High School was the last year of the old way.

Meredith S.: Yeah, I just... As a quick aside, it's interesting because we've been adding Worthington High School yearbooks to our Worthington Memory website and the '70s seem like it was a sea change from what you were talking...

Niki G.: Yes, yes, exactly.

Meredith S.: ... about your experience.





- Niki G.: Exactly. So here's this Worthington High School story. So senior year... Every year from the time I was in seventh grade we'd take our same old skirts from last year and take our hems up two inches. So senior year I was in Enriched English class. I won't say the teacher's name, but he was very, very popular. He was a very good teacher. But we were having a conversation about the dress code and how we didn't think they should have a dress code.
- Niki G.: Of course, University School never had a dress code, so to me that was ridiculous anyway. So the teacher was saying, well I understand what you're saying, but the community is not ready for us to get rid of the dress code. Which of course they did the next year, but anyway. And the dress code was that our skirts couldn't be any more than I think it was three inches above our knees. And I raised my hand and I said, but I just bought this skirt. And I'm short. And this is as long as it came. I can't even buy something that meets the dress code.
- Niki G.: He had me stand on a chair in front of the class with lots of boys in the class... My phone's going off or somebody's phone's going off. Had me stand on the chair and he took a ruler and actually put it against my leg, which meant he touched my leg, and measured, and it was five inches above my knee or something. He goes, oh that's three inches, you're okay.
- Meredith S.: Oh my gosh.
- Niki G.: And that was perfectly fine, that's the way it was.
- Meredith S.: And that's like a normal thing to do. Wow.
- Niki G.: Yeah. At the time I was mad that he lied and I was mad that my argument wasn't being honored.
- Meredith S.: Yeah.
- Niki G.: But I never thought of anything about, there's a man teacher touching my thigh.
- Meredith S.: Wow. Well, and it's so funny that you mention the dress code because we've seen some news, "The Chronicle" student newsletter that I guess they published at the time, someone donated a bunch to us. And the dress code was just like...
- Niki G.: Yes.
- Meredith S.: ...that was all...
- Niki G.: Oh, they were terrified. The adults were... Boys' hair couldn't... This was, this was two or three, four years after The Beatles came to America, but boys' hair wasn't allowed to touch their collars. And they had to wear socks, it was cool to wear loafers without socks. They had to wear socks.



Niki G.: Girls couldn't wear pants. We could not wear pants to school. So two memories about that are, first of all, we'd wear these short skirts. We didn't have pantyhose yet, we had garters and individual hose. And so I would sit, in geometry class I remember in my orange skirt, the whole time holding my skirt down so it would cover my garters when I was sitting in the chair and then the welts in the back of our legs.

Meredith S.: Oh, that's so uncomfortable.

Niki G.: Right? Yeah, but that's the way it was. And girls, we wore girdles. We wore girdles because I guess that's leftover from the '50s and the only thing I can imagine is they didn't want our rear-ends shaking. Well, we wore these empire-waist dresses that looked like maternity dresses so I... But yeah, it was pretty old-fashioned that way.

Niki G.: So there's that memory, and then the other memory is walking home from school, because we weren't allowed to drive to school, not that my family could afford an extra car. And my legs were red. And you know when you get really cold you get real itchy? I mean, it was terrible. And I walked from Worthington High School to Worthington Estates, or not even Worthingway. So it wasn't that long of a walk but... Because we weren't allowed to wear pants. Boys couldn't wear jeans. And they were very strict about that. They would send kids down to the office and cut their hair or send girls home to put on longer skirts I guess. That's my memory.

Meredith S.: And then it's just like you missed it by just a few years because before long ...

Niki G.: Yeah. A year.

Meredith S.: Yeah, yeah. You've already mentioned many ways that your childhood was different than other children who were growing up at the time. I don't know if you care to talk about what it was like growing up with your father and his disability and just how that affected your family and your childhood.

Niki G.: Absolutely, because it's a very important part of who I am and who our family is. But the thing that came to mind first when you said that, which is interesting, is that my mother worked. My mother had a college degree. She didn't work, and then when my brother was born, the same time as my brother was born, my dad got his diagnosis when my mom was in the hospital. Of course, then you were in the hospital for a week when you had a baby anyway.

Niki G.: And so my dad worked for a couple years and then was no longer capable of doing the work on a job. And so my mom went back and taught preschool and had my brother in preschool with her because there's not childcare, right? And then, oh this is a great story. So this one summer, and I'm trying to think. She was teaching preschool and Eric was three so I was probably about eight.



Niki G.: My dad had lost his job. He had just gotten a new job and he couldn't do it. And he'd lost his job and we had gone to visit my grandmother in western New York. And my parents believed that when we came back home we were going to have to go on public assistance, on welfare, because I imagine preschool teachers made like a buck a year or something back then, because they didn't make much the year I was teaching preschool.

Niki G.: And my mom, she had early on, right out of college, done some teaching in the Columbus Academy. Anyway, we're in this little podunk town in New York that you can't find on the map hardly, and she gets a phone call from Columbus School for Girls saying, we know somebody who knows somebody who knows you and said you might be interested in finding work and would you like to work at Columbus School for Girls? And it was the miracle. It was the family miracle.

Niki G.: And so she began teaching which led her to graduate school which led her to a Ph.D. which led her to an administrative job at Ohio State.

Meredith S.: Oh wow.

Niki G.: And she says that's because she had to. You know, nowadays she would have followed her talent. But then, well, she said that... She used to write notes to my dad and put it in his lunchbox and signed them "wifey." So that was the mentality with which she entered adulthood, right?

Meredith S.: Yeah.

Niki G.: So there was that, that she worked. And she would say to me, you need to go to college and you need to get a career because you never know if you might have to be responsible for yourself, take care of yourself. So there was that influence definitely.

Niki G.: The thing about my dad was... We learned that your value as a human being didn't have to do with your job, your job title, your income, your achievement. There was something innately important about a human being. And my dad was a great guy and he was funny. And we got to know him in a way other kids didn't get to know their dads because their dads were at work all the time. And their dads, I take care of you because I bring lots of money home to your mother to run the house. But my dad was home whenever I came home, he was home.

Niki G.: And so we learned that all people are important. And I don't want to say they weren't—they're handicapped, because he kind of was. But you don't dismiss people. You don't move them out. You love them. And you just find out what's lovable about them and they love you and that's so much more important than what his job might have been if he hadn't have been sick.



Niki G.: So there was that. And then the other part of it was, I was never embarrassed to bring people home. My brother tells stories of being embarrassed and stories of my dad falling and nobody helping him get up and that kind of thing. I don't have memories like that. I just, I remember bringing dates home and not being embarrassed that my dad was in a wheelchair. It was just... My mom always said she wanted us to have as normal a life as possible, so I thought I had a normal life until I grew up and looked back and realized there was a lot of dysfunction. There were a lot of family roles that we took on because of that, and my dad was sort of the center focus of the family, which again, in Colonial Hills then, my mom didn't have to be entertaining us all the time.

Niki G.: My mom didn't have to be driving me places all the time. She could be at work or she could be with Dad and we could be okay.

Meredith S.: Yeah, and I'm really struck by just the compassion that's been in your family because of all the hardships that you faced. I'm just trying to imagine what it must've been like especially in that era for a woman to run a household, have a job, have three children. Yeah, that's very unique I would think.

Niki G.: And I have acquaintances, kids that I grew up with who say that, your mother was the only one I knew that worked.

Meredith S.: Oh yeah.

Niki G.: And she had left such a great impression. Also, the strong woman thing. My mom ran the family and brought home the bacon and all that stuff in the song. So I just grew up naturally feeling like I should be able to say what I want and have a job and be hired, and so there were some things about being a woman that I felt like I got in trouble for trying to be too... Just a person instead of a woman. And some naïvete about that with the University School experience where we were encouraged to discuss. We didn't have to raise our hands to speak in a discussion, that kind of thing. And then my mom being so empowered in many ways. I've kind of walked into the world just thinking, I can say what I believe and I can stick up for kids and it didn't always go that well.

Niki G.: And I remember the first year I applied for a teaching job in Worthington. And that's when [Mr. Lane] was... He wasn't personnel director, he was assistant superintendent, something else. And my husband now, John [Snouffer], his brother was teaching art. And his brother said to John, John doesn't remember this, but his brother said to him, because I was dating John then, our head art teacher doesn't want to hire a woman because they just get married and have kids and quit. Which I did, but still, that was said to me clearly. So there were... I don't know, there was this place I had to find, and it took 60 years to find this place between being a person and an empowered woman. Or wanting to be empowered woman and being this person that people don't want to hear from sometimes.



- Meredith S.: It's kind of like a double-edged sword for you because you had this strength but then the world just wouldn't let you show it.
- Niki G.: Yeah. And I didn't understand that. Probably, from going through University School where we were encouraged to think things through and have our opinions and share our opinions and ideas, where ideas, they weren't personal. So if we disagreed... A good thing for this time in our history, but if we disagreed we didn't disagree with you as a person. It was just throwing ideas around. And this belief that it's that way that we come to the best idea or a compromise idea or the truth. And the rest of the world doesn't work that way.
- Niki G.: And then the other thing about teaching is that lots of attempts have been made to reform teaching. And most of the reforms that've been suggested, at least when I was in the profession, were reforms that were much like what happened at University School. And none of them took root, and I think the reason they didn't take root is because nobody... Rarely was there somebody in the public schools had ever experienced any other way of teaching or learning. And I had. So I could see the value of it, and yet I wasn't the person to implement this. So there was also this... People teach the way they live, the way they learned kind of thing going on. And I had wanted to integrate this humanity from University School.
- Niki G.: But you also asked about the compassion and the empathy in the family. A lot of that came from my dad being sick, but a lot of that came from generations past. Both sides of my family were immigrant families, which is another thing that's really important to me and another way I feel different. Where I didn't grow up... I grew up with the English speaker and not in the abject poverty. My grandparents, I could hardly understand my grandfather when I got to be 15. I'm the oldest cousin and I couldn't understand what he was saying. I felt like a part of the... Older part of the family now. A lot of poverty, a lot of cultural ignorance.
- Niki G.: That and my father would say, and I always remember this, he'd say, oh my mother gave away something I wanted. She always gave away stuff to the poor. I never know how she found somebody poorer than us, but she gave it away to the poor. And so that was kind of how my dad was. He had this tremendous belief in equality and socioeconomic equality and working people and unions, all those kind of things that help people get to a functional, socioeconomically functional level. So I got that from him.
- Meredith S.: Where is your family... Where did they immigrate from, just out of curiosity?
- Niki G.: This is great. My mom's family were Italian, so Italian and Sicilian. So my grandfather who literally was my size. When I was in college I was five-foot-two and 105 pounds. My grandfather was five-foot-two and 105 pounds because my mom had a tailored suit made for him. That's how we know that.



- Niki G.: He came from Sicily. So there's a lot of that in the family. There's a lot of that family loyalty and express your emotions at whatever decibel level you want. And if they're not listening to you, talk louder. But Carfagna's meats and homemade wine and little funny cigars and compadres coming over Sunday after dinner and the men sitting there drinking and talking. Names like Colonel Pandolfo and ... There's that in my background.
- Niki G.: My dad's side of the family's from Slovenia. And when I was a kid nobody knew where Slovenia was but it was part of Yugoslavia then. And what I've come to learn is that my grandparents immigrated, they lived three houses from the railroad tracks in this little town in New York. And when other Slovenians immigrated to the United States, they would come and stay in my grandparents' house and they would help them learn the language and get work and this kind of thing. And they could integrate into society a little bit.
- Niki G.: I've also come to learn that my grandmother lost three children. She, during the flu epidemic of 1918, I guess the town was pretty decimated. She lost a child and two... She lost an infant and two siblings who were children two days apart during the flu epidemic. She was caring for everybody and she didn't get sick. My aunt died when she was in her 50s. My dad had MS. My grandfather died in his early 60s. And then a few years ago I was doing Ancestry and was going through some stuff online and found a death certificate for her first child that I never knew she had.
- Niki G.: So I had this uncle I'd never heard of who'd died at six months in Youngstown when my grandfather was working in the steel mills. And he died of pneumonia so I think about the air quality and they may not have had heat in the house because this was in 19 ... teens some time. So I feel like there's this family, they talk about generational trauma and epigenetics and almost the cosmic, spiritual kind of theme that runs through our family.
- Niki G.: And then in my grandmother's family, her father worked for the railroad and had a leg cut off in a train accident. And so she had to drop out of school and go to work to help support the family. And yes, that's my family history. But it's a lot of people's family history if you go back that many generations. But it is something that I think about that's part of me and my life and has helped me also to think if my grandmother has survived this, maybe she's there helping me survive what I've had to survive. So that's there.
- Niki G.: But very different from ... The Worthington family I knew, I hope she never sees this, who, when Gary [Smith] was dying from cancer and he was still coaching I went to a track meet with him because I didn't want him to go alone. Used to go with him a long time before I had kids, but that got to be too much. But anyway, I went to this track meet with him and it was when cell phones were new. And this woman said to me, oh my God, I had to buy a cell phone because something happened. I said, what happened? And she said, well, I went out to lunch with a



friend and I didn't get home in time to take my son to soccer practice, and he had to call somebody else to get a ride.

Niki G.: You know, so I had this perception that a lot of the people in my neighborhood and a lot of the people at my school had very different, easy lives and a lot more money than we did, so, yeah. That's my prejudice. Against rich people with easy lives.

Meredith S.: Would you want to talk more about... You know, as we were reading there was... You won the Everyday Heroes award for your work volunteering at the Dowd Educational Center, the Homeless Families Foundation. And we read about your husband Gary Smith, renowned teacher, track coach. Your son, Tony Smith, who died in 2008 and who was also a teacher.

Niki G.: Fabulous teacher.

Meredith S.: Yeah. I mean, just this thread of tragedy that has run through your family, but yet you all have really funneled it into this very compassionate work. Do you care to talk about how you've done that or...

Niki G.: Absolutely.

Meredith S.: Yeah.

Niki G.: Because that's kind of who I am. But I don't know where to start. Give me a specific question.

Meredith S.: Yeah, that's big.

Niki G.: We can start with the Dowd Center.

Meredith S.: Yeah.

Niki G.: Okay. We're going to start with Tony and the Dowd Center. So my son Tony was a very unique, extremely caring, very egalitarian, and highly creative, did I say that? Highly creative person who thought differently and learned differently and really struggled in... especially by high school, but struggled in Worthington Schools because people didn't... He had a learning disability that wasn't identified till he was in his 20's because I finally got him tested. Because by that time I had a Ph.D in education so I knew we should get him tested, right?

Niki G.: But the schools just thought he was lazy, the typical things. Lazy, disorganized, didn't care, irreverent, oppositional. You know, all those things. So he really struggled and then... And he always cared about other people very much. In fact, he's the one that taught me to be even more accepting and more inclusive because I thought... I had the typical white person philosophies about equality.



But then he had said to me one time, Mom, what would it really be like if you really accepted everybody as equal? That really opened my mind.

Niki G.: So anyway, he one Christmas said he didn't want a present. He wanted me to donate to something. And my brother Eric had done something with the Teresa Dowd School for Homeless Kids years and years and years before. So I knew about this place a little bit. So I went down and talked to some people and I made a \$100 donation to the Dowd School that year. And I gave it to Tony for Christmas, and girls should get clothes, and you do this and that and everybody gets a book. And he opened this present that said, I made this donation, and he got tears in his eyes and he looked at me and he said, Mom, you get it.

Niki G.: So yeah, that had an effect on me. So when he died in 2008... He graduated from high school in '97 so when he died 10 years later, and I wanted to do something. I called them and that's why I volunteered there. I don't know. Was it a way to connect with Tony? Was it a way to live out his potential? Was it something to do and I knew that I... I don't know. But I had done a program that I initiated in Worthington, at Worthington Kilbourne which was called Creative Mondays or sometimes Creative Thursdays. And it was just an afterschool art therapy-like program. So kids would come in and they would pick a theme and they would do art on that theme and we'd talk about it. It was a way for them to deal with whatever they wanted that was going on in their lives and get some adult who listened, an adult... Some supervision and some interventions or just some empathy.

Niki G.: And I piloted a program one semester doing that with the kids in in-school suspension so we could kind of get to the underlying causes of why they screw up all the time in school and maybe find out... Maybe the teachers needed better understanding, maybe they needed a therapist. Maybe... One kid I ended up calling Children's Services and she was removed from her home and one kid was back-talking teachers because he'd come from Columbus schools. He was a Hispanic kid and that's just the way kids acted in Columbus and now I'm in Worthington and why do I keep getting in trouble. That kind of thing.

Niki G.: So when I retired, I wrote up a proposal to do this kind of a thing with kids at the Dowd Center. The Dowd Center is an afterschool program originally for homeless and previously homeless kids and now it's more generally low socioeconomic kids in west side of Columbus. Grubb Street right by... If you go down 315 South and you pass this big building with this big mural about Franklinton...

Meredith S.: Oh yeah, I think I've seen that.

Niki G.: Right? That's the building.

Meredith S.: Okay.





- Niki G.: So I just started this because I wanted to do it because it needs to be done and because I think the kids need to be listened to. There's so much bad stuff going down in these kids' lives that they accept as normal. Okay, that's my life. They accept it as normal and they get in trouble for their behaviors that are their coping skills or they're modeling after what they've grown up with. And nobody listens to know what's going on.
- Niki G.: They do at the Dowd Center. They care. But still, it's a lot of academic-based stuff. But what I hear about the public schools, these kids... There's so much bullying and so much... so much assault to their self-esteem and their sense of worth. And these kids grew up in situations where they probably feel no sense of worth to begin with. So to bring the circle back around, they're worthy because they're human beings, not because of what they are or aren't achieving, not because of the language they use or because they hit a kid or they don't hit another kid. Not because if their father's in jail or not in jail. They're just fabulous little kids.
- Niki G.: So I only do a couple hours a week, and I don't want to make a big deal out of it because it's not like I've walked in there and taken over the school and done this great thing. I just bring in some art supplies and listen for a couple hours.
- Meredith S.: But just thinking back to my own childhood, sometimes all it took was that one adult...
- Niki G.: Yeah.
- Meredith S.: ...to really reach out and...
- Niki G.: Well, there's statistics that I've read in graduate school are that one adult can compensate for seven bad relationships with adults in the school. Seven bad teachers can be balanced out by one really caring teacher. That's statistics, I don't know if it's true or not.
- Niki G.: But I also sometimes think, what would my... How would my life of been different if one of the guidance counselors... And my mom was in school and everybody knew about my life and they all idolized my mom and everything. How would my life of been different if one adult had said to me, what's really going on in your home? How do you really feel about this? Or, you matter. It's not just about your dad. Who are you in this family and who are you in this world? How's it going for you?
- Niki G.: Things might've been different. Or I might've covered it up and said it's normal. I don't know, but I keep thinking if somebody had gotten underneath the surface and asked how might things have been different.
- Meredith S.: Yeah. I guess is there anything else...



Niki G.: But...

Meredith S.: We've covered so much territory.

Niki G.: I know.

Meredith S.: I'm trying to think if I'm forgetting any questions here.

Niki G.: I'm so honored that you're me to talk about these things. I have a funny story.

Meredith S.: Yeah, I'd love to hear it.

Niki G.: So when we lived in Colonial Hills at Sharon Square shopping center was Gabels Dairy, which was also a big important part of the extended community. But they a Gabels Dairy's ice cream store, and ice cream cones were 5 cents. And they opened up the first Baskin-Robbins right across whatever that street is, Chase or something. And we loved it, it was so good. And my dad said, why would anybody go over there to Baskin Robbins and spend 15 cents on an ice cream cone when you could buy one at Gables for 5 cents. So I remember that.

Meredith S.: It seemed like... We interviewed John [Snouffer]. He mentioned... Was it Isaly's Dairy?

Niki G.: Yeah, Isaly's was at Graceland.

Meredith S.: Okay, Graceland.

Niki G.: So that was real special.

Meredith S.: Okay.

Niki G.: And you know how they always put triple scoops on it? Well Isaly's you could get one scoop or you could get, they were called skyscrapers. You could get a pointy, or you could get a really big pointy one. There were three sizes and it was Isaly's... Yeah, that was really a big deal to go there. That was special.

Niki G.: But we did our grocery shopping at Graceland because there was a Big Bear and a Kroger's and an Albers. And my mom would collect stamps, you know about these? They would give you, instead of coupons, they would give you stamps and then my mom and the kids, we'd sit there and put them in these books. And when so many books were full you could go buy a set of dishes or a new vacuum cleaner or something with your savings stamps. So we did that.

Niki G.: We bought all our records... There was a record store, or there was Woolco which was the Walmart of the time. And so whenever the new Beatles record came out or the new Simon... No, this was before Simon and Garfunkel, Peter



and Gordon. I just met him [Peter Asher] and I couldn't remember his name. Peter and Gordon up at Natalie's [Coal-Fired Pizza].

Meredith S.: Oh my gosh.

Niki G.: Or Chad & Jeremy. We just saw Jeremy at Natalie's. Whenever those records would come out my sister and I'd go to Woolco and buy the latest 45. So it was kind of a youth-oriented community, and the swimming pool... Oh, the swimming pool was everything. And we had dances on the tennis court on summer nights. There were a lot of... People complained there wasn't anything for teens to do, but I just thought there was so much to do. There were always boys and tennis.

Niki G.: We took... My sister and I, she was going into seventh grade and I was going into the ninth grade and integrating into public school. And we took tennis lessons that summer from these two guys who had just graduated from high school so they were older men and gorgeous and they had been state champion tennis players. And that was one of the highlights was taking tennis lessons with them. So yeah, to me that was a lot of stuff to do.

Meredith S.: Well thank you so much for talking to us today. You have such an interesting story...

Niki G.: Thank you.

Meredith S.: ...and really interesting perspective...

Niki G.: Really?

Meredith S.: ...on Worthington. Yeah.

Niki G.: Well, you live a life like mine and you either succumb to it or you start figuring a lot of things out. And so that's, I guess, what I've done. That's probably why I studied creativity, got my doctorate in creativity because that was a way in to understanding.

Meredith S.: Yeah.

Niki G.: So thanks. Thanks a lot for having me. When you wrote me yesterday, I was so honored for you to look at me as a person I am. That was nice. Thank you.

Meredith S.: You're welcome.