Oral History Interview of Gary Christenson

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Interviewed By: Kathryn Kilbride

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Interview Summary

In this interview, Gary Christenson, the Mayor of the City of Malden, reflects upon his experiences attending Suffolk University first as an undergraduate, then for a master’s degree and finally to pursue a law degree. He describes his work on the Student Government Association, relationships with mentors, and what it was like to balance his course load, work, and involvement on campus. Christenson concludes by discussing how his time at Suffolk University prepared him for a career in public service.

Subject Headings

Christenson, Gary
Massachusetts -- Politics and government
Suffolk University—History

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KATHRYN KILBRIDE: Good morning. It is ten o'clock on Friday, November 4th, 2022. My name is Kathryn Kilbride and I'm conducting an interview via zoom for the course History 239: Getting Started with Oral History taught by Professor Reeve and for the Suffolk University Oral History Project through which the interview will be made public. I am interviewing Mayor Gary Christenson, Mayor of Malden, Massachusetts, and a triple alumnus of Suffolk University. Prior to completing this interview all parties have completed a consent form, so that this interview can be made available to the public at Suffolk University’s Moakley Archive. Gary, for today's interview we will primarily focus on your experiences at Suffolk and your professional life since.

GARY CHRISTENSON: Okay, it's worth repeating, Katie, that it is Friday, November fourth and typically City Hall is closed but I'm here because of you and Suffolk University.

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KILBRIDE: Thank you very much. My first question is back in high school. What were you looking for in potential colleges?

CHRISTENSON: I must admit that my first college was Boston College. I had done interviews. I had done recommendations. I had done everything to prepare to be admitted to Boston College, and when I received that letter that I was being wait-listed, I was crushed. But it was the very next day that I received a letter from Suffolk University who said I'm accepted. I just felt like this was a school that wanted me. They thought it was a good fit and the rest is history. I never gave Boston College another consideration. I eventually was accepted there but by that point, it was all about Suffolk University because they were the first school to give me the opportunity to attend.

KILBRIDE: So then, once you got to Suffolk. What were your first impressions of the school, the students, and the environment in general?

CHRISTENSON: Well, it's hard to think back that far now as I get older. But I thought it was what was written on that acceptance letter that I received; that it was a school that was
accessible, that was diverse, that was practical. I found all those things to be true when I actually arrived in August for a preview of what the university was going to be like. So, it was everything that I thought it was going to be, and more because I ended up, as you mentioned, obtaining three degrees there.

KILBRIDE: So that goes into my next question, which is, you got your bachelor's degree, your master's degree, and your JD from Suffolk. So why return not just once, but twice?

CHRISTENSON: For those same reasons that I just mentioned, which it was very practical. You know, I lived not too far from there, so it was accessible. It felt like home in a lot of ways. It was diverse. You could get around very easily. The schedules of classes were something that I could work around as I had to juggle multiple jobs to pay the tuition. And so, it was just a good fit for me and what I was trying to accomplish.

KILBRIDE: So, next question. You were really involved in the SGA [Student Government Association] as an undergrad. But on top of that, you were still a student taking classes, and you had a job to pay to continue taking those classes. What was that experience like? And were there any difficulties balancing those different roles and responsibilities?

CHRISTENSON: No, because I think it was something that I always wanted to do. In high school, I was class president, my junior and senior years, and I really enjoyed it. And I wanted to continue to do that if I could at Suffolk. So, when I was able to, fortunately, be elected class president my freshman year, it just was a natural extension of what I had been doing at Malden High School. I did not find that to be too much of an issue in relation to taking classes and working because I had a very, very supportive family who were proud that I was able to go on to a university. And so, they made it possible for me to juggle all these different things I had going on.

KILBRIDE: Why run for class president in high school and then continue here?
CHRISTENSON: Yeah, I was asked that question. Should I wait a year or wait two years to first get acclimated to university life? But when your heart is telling you to do it that's what you do. And so, I had a real desire to serve. And that's why I instantly did that when I arrived at Suffolk.

KILBRIDE: So, who are some of the people you got to know at Suffolk that had an effect on your life, either personally or professionally?

CHRISTENSON: I hate to admit this, but I'm probably going have to look up some of the names. Definitely, Coach James Nelson. I think he's known as Jim Nelson. Well, actually, most people just call him Coach. Obviously, Dean Nancy Stoll. I think if I have that right. She was influential for me. Ms. Chris Perry, I think that was her name from the Financial Aid Office. Those are some of the people that I remember having a positive influence on me.

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KILBRIDE: Can you be a little bit more specific about those? Like what? How they helped you, and in what ways?

CHRISTENSON: Just being supportive and constant encouragement to continue to do all that I could and should, even though I was working, taking class, and serving in elective office. It was strenuous at times, as you can probably imagine, but they were always there to say, “Keep going. Keep working hard. You're doing well.” Which you know at that time was helpful for me because I had never done that before. So, having them constantly saying to me that I was performing well, it was helpful to me in the end.

KILBRIDE: I get that from advisors and professors, and how helpful that is. So, what are some of your memorable experiences of attending Suffolk?

CHRISTENSON: Hmm. Memorable experiences. Well, first of all, one is finishing it. I mean, it's a marathon. That's what I try to tell our high school students today that it's not a sprint, it's a marathon. And so, you have to, you have to work hard at it. I remember obviously the
challenging classes I took. I also remember spending a lot of time in the Sawyer cafeteria. I don't know if that's still a place to be when you're not in class, of course. And I remember some of the events that we had together. The dances and the different events like that. The Red Hat, which I think is no longer [in business]. The Derne Street Deli which I think has changed hands. Yeah, so those are some of the instant memories that I have. Looking back the *Suffolk Journal*. Is that still [there]? Yeah, that's still there. We did a lot of work together on that, you know, just letting them know what the Student Government Association was doing, and how we could work together to get the word out about some of the issues that the university was being confronted with at that time.

**KILBRIDE:** So, that kind of leads into my next question, because I did research, and I read some of the seven journal articles about what was going on at the time. And, so I saw that the SGA was both pushing change like advocating for clear communication between university higher-ups and students. But also reacting to change like there was a few staffing changes, and there was a new smoking policy put into place. So, I was wondering if you could reflect on those changes, and how, you know, what it was like going through it at the moment.

**CHRISTENSON:** It was a perilous time. I remember at one point there was talk of outright disbanding the Student Government Association. But fortunately, we were able to regain our footing and come together to not only rebuild the SGA but when I left, I thought it was as strong as it had been during my time there. I think the way that was able to happen is just being able to come together and communicate and find a way that we could all work together around. So, that was was something I remember. I also remember there was a huge issue about tuition, as I'm sure there always is today, right? But fortunately, we were able to come up with some initiatives working with Ms. Perry from the Financial Aid Office and others; that didn't stop the increases, but slowed them. And then, finally, I remember there was a lot of angst around the divestment of funds in the university's portfolio that were going toward South Africa at the time, if I remember right. So, those are some of the issues that I remember.

**KILBRIDE:** So, what lessons did you learn at Suffolk University?
CHRISTENSON: Hard work and dedication are the keys to success, and that remains today. And that was definitely one of the lessons I learned there and being able to juggle and adapt to changing circumstances was another. In other words, it's not a straight line, you know. You're going to be pulled left and right at times but so long as you can end back up in the middle that's what helped me while I was a student at the university. And it was, I think, the other thing would be that it was real. I mean it was. I was in an urban city. I was in Boston. I was able to see a lot of the issues that still exist today with homelessness and drug addiction and transportation. You know all those issues, that by being exposed to them there, it's helped me later on in working on those [issues] now, as mayor.

KILBRIDE: So that has to do with my next question. As I said, you're from Malden, and you graduated from Malden High. Then you got your degrees from Suffolk and now you're back in Malden. So, how did you bring your Malden experiences to Suffolk? And how have you brought your Suffolk experiences now back to Malden?

CHRISTENSON: Well, what I learned at Malden High School was again the tenets of hard work and dedication. So, I felt like I was able to bring those to Suffolk University, as mentioned in an earlier segment, juggling multiple jobs while still taking a full load of classes and serving on the Student Government Association. I was doing something similar at Malden High School. I think I had at one point four jobs at the same time. So, I always felt hard work was the key to getting to where you wanted to go, and so I used that same formula at Suffolk. And I think the same applies from Suffolk now to being mayor of Malden. Again, all the lessons I learned about juggling classes while still working and serving in student politics has helped me here. When people ask me, “How are you able to go to so many events and work on so many issues?” It's because of that upbringing I had from Malden High and Suffolk University. That's helped me today. I'm certain of it.

KILBRIDE: If you don't mind me asking, what were some of the jobs that you worked?

CHRISTENSON: I was a paper boy. I worked for the Boston Globe. I also worked at Granada Lanes, which is no longer. That was a bowling alley and an arcade. I was actually known as Bowling Alley Gary. At one point, I did a couple of stints at the United States Post Office in
Boston. I used to, believe it or not, used to work at the Palace just before Route One. That's before your time. So, I had a lot of jobs. Whatever I could do, I did.

**KILBRIDE:** So, you were elected mayor of Malden in 2011, and took office January 2nd, 2012. In 2013, you were interviewed by the Suffolk University Law Alumni Magazine. You were asked how your first year as mayor was going, and you answered, “The first year is going great, although I feel like I'm in my tenth year.” So now, over ten years later, could you reflect a bit on that first year, and the ten years as a whole?

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**CHRISTENSON:** I have to say, Katie, very good research. Well, let me say this, all kidding aside, there is no better feeling to be able to live out my dream of being mayor. So, let me make that perfectly clear. I tease a lot about the job, but there is no better feeling knowing that you wanted to be mayor in high school, and then to actually be doing it thirty years later.

I tell every student that I possibly can, “Do not get caught up in all the focus on notoriety and money, and stocks and bonds, and being famous. I think it's about what your heart tells you that it wants, is what you should do.” And so, it's been, I wouldn't change a thing. Looking back, it's really been rewarding. There's no better feeling in the world than someone saying, “Thank you for helping us.” And, I can say, though, the one thing I wish we had more of is, there's never enough of this [money] to do all that you want to do in the city. I mean, we get asked to get involved with every conceivable project or issue that you could think of but there's just never enough funding to do it all. So that's the one thing, looking back, I wish we could have more of. But again, when you're living out your childhood dream it just never gets old.

**KILBRIDE:** So, as you said, it was your dream to become mayor. Why did you want to run for mayor? Why do you want to be mayor? How did actually becoming mayor live up to those expectations or not?

**CHRISTENSON:** I have absolutely no idea about that. The best way to describe how this all happened, I was a pretty introverted person growing up. I had maybe five to ten friends, tops.
And one day, during my junior year, those five to ten people came down the same hallway that I was having a conversation with someone else. “Hey, Gary, how are you? Good, hey? Rick, nice to see you. Hey Nancy, how's everything going? Good! Hi, Joan! So good to see you.” And after the seventh or eighth, the person I was speaking with said, “Wow, you should run for class president.” Not knowing those are the only five to ten people I knew in the high school. Something just registered, you know, something clicked. And so, that's when I found out who I was and what I wanted to do with my life.

So, it wasn't like I had been raised in the family of elected officials or that I came from some famous family that had long standing ties to politics. It was just that incident, of seeing a few people that I knew and someone saying, “You should really run. I didn't realize how many people you knew.” Not knowing that was it eight out of the 1600 students. So that's how it happened.

KILBRIDE: So, what advice would you give current Suffolk students who may be hoping to follow a similar career path, get involved in local politics, and things like that?

CHRISTENSON: Work hard, hard work. That's what it takes. That's what it is. That's what it will always be. I can't tell you the number of high school students that are always excited to show me the new apps and the new technologies that are coming out, but from what I've seen in my time, it's been about hard work, and it will always be about that. So, in other words, what I would tell those students, whatever it is they choose to do, what you put in is what you're going to get back out. So, if you slow roll it, you might get something out of it. But you won't get [much out of it unless] you give it everything you've got is what I would say.

KILBRIDE: Is there anything else that you would like to address, or we're hoping was going to come up that we have not already covered?

CHRISTENSON: Nope. Just I guess, I would use this as an opportunity to thank Suffolk University for helping make me who I am today. Looking back, I am certain that Suffolk had a
real positive influence on how I was able to achieve my dream. And I want to thank them for that.

**KILBRIDE:** So, if that's all, then on behalf of myself and Professor Reeve, thank you so much for contributing your time and for your willingness to participate in the Suffolk University Oral History Project.

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**CHRISTENSON:** Of course. If there’s something that you think we’ve missed, don’t hesitate to reach out. I’ll do all I can to answer it, except if you're going to contact me about taxes; there's no answers for those.

**KILBRIDE:** Thank you.

**CHRISTENSON:** All right, very good. Say hi to the family.