

**From Community to Cyberspace, An interview with Susan Maze-Rothstein, 2001**

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BROOKLINE TAB

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COMMENTARY

BROOKLINE THEN & NOW: Larry Ruttman

Two women of color growing up in Brookline

Of course, Brookline has not been impervious to the racial blight that has infected America for 300 or more years, almost resulting in our dissolution in the Civil War.

But, on balance, Brookline comes off a lot better than most places in the United States of America, according to Susan Maze-Rothstein and Lisa Wong, when they appeared a few weeks ago on my program "From Community to Cyberspace," showing all during August, on Brookline Access TV.

Each of these accomplished women went all the way through the Brookline school system, lived here as single moms, and have chosen to remain here during their adult years, despite some unpleasant (but formative) experiences as they moved from childhood to maturity. Each of them are now highly successful women. Susan is an administrative appeals law judge in the Department of Industrial Accidents, and a

professor at Northeastern University Law School, where she teaches a first year required course entitled "The Law, Culture and Difference Community Lawyering Program." Lisa is the Coolidge Corner Branch Manager of the Brookline Savings Bank.

Even this brief sketch of their respective backgrounds raises multiple questions about Brookline, such as “What is it like for a woman of color to grow up in Brookline, and go through the Brookline school system?” and “Does that help or hinder one’s development? How have these women managed to succeed so well in the world? Has Brookline been a help or a hindrance in that, why do they continue to reside here? Is Brookline really an enlightened community vis a vis race, as we like to think? What can we do to improve our attitude (official and otherwise) toward racial issues?”

To start off, I asked Lisa why she avoided a certain stairwell at BHS, when she was a freshman there.

“My overall experience in the Brookline school system was positive as I went through Devotion, Baker and BHS. But as a freshman at BHS there was a particular stairwell where there was always a certain group of children loitering in that stairwell. These children were from the Whiskey Point area of Brookline. They would make derogatory comments – racial comments – as I navigated that particular stairwell, things like “hey Chink” or mimicking the Chinese language, and that was very intimidating when you are a new student. So I just learned to avoid the stairwell from that time forward. During the one or two future times that I used that particular stairwell, out of necessity, I just learned to develop a thick skin, and to try to run up those stairs as quickly as I could, and think nothing more of it. It was horrifying when you’re 13 years old.”

Susan’s first formative experience along these lines was when she was in the kindergarten or first grade at Pierce School, playing house with a small group of young children in the class.

“They were playing with dolls and I said, “I want to be the Mommy.” One little girl looked at me and said, “You can’t be the Mommy.” I said, “Why can’t I be the Mommy? I want to be the Mommy,” and she said “You’re not the same color as the doll.” And it was at that moment that I looked down at my skin for the first time with an awareness that there must be something about my skin coloration that made this an impossibility. I remember feeling hurt because I couldn’t be the mommy. So that was one of my early Brookline school experiences.”

“I learned quite a bit about human nature growing up in the projects on Egmont Street, and I also discovered my athletic talents while living there, not because I was enjoying playing with the kids so much. I learned about those talents running away from children who were trying to whip me with their jumpropes, and saying “Go back to Africa.” They were Irish Catholic project kids. Because we were the first family with any color beyond white that had moved into the project, I was running away from children who were running after me trying to whip me back to Africa, and yelling over my shoulder “I was here before you. I’m part American Indian,” and I would run and run, and learned that I was quite quick.”

“That was the kind of experience that helped me get an understanding of power relationship – of social dynamics – and to really understand at a very fundamental level that life is not a level playing field.”

“However, I also found that when you identify your skills, you can find ways of using them. Actually I drew on that resource all the way through school, because in the eighth grade at Devotion, I became the person who got the award for being the most athletic eight-grader, and at BHS I got the award for being the most athletic female at BHS, having belonged to the gymnastics, track and diving teams.”

Susan’s dearly loved and recently deceased mother was white and WASP, later becoming Jewish, a religion Susan now follows. Her father died when Susan was an infant, but his racial mixture of Native American and African-American gives Susan a wide spectrum of racial, ethnic and religious traditions, all of which she keenly appreciates.

But as Susan herself notes, her dark skin has resulted in the world seeing her as an African-American, from which base she has ventured forth with good and great spirit to help ameliorate the discrimination and inequity which continues to haunt our social milieu.

Susan goes on about the experience of her family in the project: “my mother – when she saw how the children were treating us in the project – went to the pastor at St. Aidan’s, asking him “Could you say in your sermon how important it is for children to treat each other equally, because my kids are being tormented by the kids in the project,” to which he said, “kids will be kids,” and he refused to say anything in any of his sermons.”

“So with that support, my mother then decided on her own to create little community gardens, because she thought if she could get the kids engaged in something creative, that would change the focus of their attention, and they would stop tormenting us. In fact she was successful in getting them very involved in those gardens, and it made our lives a little easier.”

“Nonetheless, during that time, teenage boys in the project tried to run my brother over in a car, and I still would do a lot of running to get away from those kids. It wasn’t a very comfortable and embracing childhood.”

Lisa's experience, when her family bought a house and moved to South Brookline, where she attended Baker School, was somewhat more comfortable, but still had racial overtones.

"I remember being aware of the lack of Asians attending Backer School. I remember in third grade there was only one other Asian. I was painfully shy, and that made me even more shy, feeling I couldn't identify with anyone."

But Lisa went on to make friends in heavily Jewish South Brookline, attending several Bat Mitzvahs, and recalls that, "I was exposed to a different culture as a result of that, which was wonderful."

Susan's diverse cultural and racial background, not to mention the economic and geographical differences from Lisa's situation, made the road Susan had to hoe difficult and daunting. Ironically more so after METCO arrived during her Devotion years.

"At the time METCO arrived, I learned very quickly that not only was I not particularly acceptable to my white counterparts because I was too black, but also unacceptable to my inner-city Boston counterparts because I was too white, because I spoke the Queen's English, and did not have the same body and language mannerisms. So there was a cultural divide on that side as well."

"It was another kind of awakening to find myself in the middle, not fitting on any of these pictures really!"

So did Susan get support from her teachers, as one might expect?

"What support? I never had a teacher take an interest in me as a learner. It could best be characterized as "civil inattention." No one attended to me as a learner, several teachers reporting to my mother along the lines that "she's so bright, but she's just an underachiever, with a wringing of the hands. We don't know why."

So I asked Susan the logical next question, Did she believe that this teacher's civil inattention was racial?

"That's an open question. I'd have to say it is a combination of things, as most things in life are. My Jewish counterpart kids of the Coolidge Corner area were no more embracing than the project kids. All of these children come from somewhere. They come from families. Somehow subtle messages or blatant messages were being transmitted to these children. It was that adult population that actually was teaching in the school system at that time. So I would have to say this, reflecting on the children population – that the adult population probably wasn't far different. So I would think there probably was some race in it!"

Susan adds that "certainly as a child, one hopes that the adults in the system are looking at multiple issues, and trying to be as supportive as possible. That was not the experience I had!"

Not quite agreeing, but certainly not disagreeing, Lisa says about her teachers that "I wouldn't say that I was completely ignored by them."

Listening to the accounts of Susan and Lisa, one might think that when they got out there on their own, they would leave Brookline. Not so! Both of them remained here, are prospering here, and bringing up their children here. So I wanted to know why that is the case.

When Lisa became pregnant in 1985, she left her parents home, and "found a nice little place" right here in town.

"I think there is a little bit of stubbornness in me that I probably inherited from my father in that if I got myself in a jam from a societal standpoint, I will take care of the problem myself. I will deal with any adversity on my own. I love Brookline, and I was working for the Brookline Savings Bank. They granted me my maternal leave during the time I moved out.

"I now was a mother. I now had to be concerned with certain issues, with the crime rate, with the health of the school system, with day-care issues, and Brookline was ideal, absolutely ideal! My daughter, Daniella, still attends the Brookline school system. She will be a junior at BHS this year."

After a failed first marriage left Susan stranded in New York City with a young child, she too returned to her mother, still living on Egmont Street, to attend Boston College Law School.

"This would be the best family system I could have as a single parent. Brookline is a walking community. I knew that the schools here have solid academics to offer, and those were very, very important to me as a parent, and as a young person trying to figure out what to do with limited resources. So that's why I came back to Brookline."

Susan, "the underachiever," was a star student at BC Law School, going on to clerk at the Massachusetts Appeals Court (a position reserved for only the most brilliant students), then worked for a few years as a civil litigator, ultimately (at a very young age) becoming a judge, and professor at Northeastern University School of Law.

Turning the negatives of her early experiences in Brookline into the positives of today, Susan has become a bridge person, exposing first-year law students to the complex relationships among law, diversity, values and our multicultural American society, in an effort to address unmet legal needs within America's diverse society.

"I truly think of myself as a bridge person, bridging between cultures and bridging between lenses. Each person has their own individual lenses which come from everything that that person brings to the table. And because I bring a number of different lenses to the table, it helps me to work across barriers."

Hearing this, I described Susan as a "cultural optometrist," working on issues of social justice, such as one of the projects at Northeastern Law School, focusing on [sic] predatory lending in minority, immigrant and low income communities, the client, in that case, being Boston Community Capital, whose goal was "to uncover the complicated impact of predatory lending on various types of borrowers, so that when they come to the lending table they are not going to get bilked."

Susan says that her students "in doing that learn tremendous amounts about how law affects people across lines of power, race and gender."

It seems to me that Susan's bitter experiences here in Brookline could well have led her in other and very negative directions. Can Brookline take credit, at least in part for Susan becoming the positive and healing person she is? Perhaps, but obviously more has to be done!

Lisa, although a bit more oblique in her remarks, comes to similar conclusions.

"Brookline Savings Bank has been wonderful to me! I try to work very hard in return. I sometimes feel as if I have to work twice as hard because I am female, and other times I feel as if I have to work three times as hard because I am a minority female. And it grows exponentially when I think of every non-conventional personal matter that I have to deal with – I'm Asian, I'm female, I'm a single parent still."

"And there's a certain glass ceiling that may exist at Brookline Savings Bank. It's an unspoken glass ceiling that I'm not certain whether I can rise above. I love my employer. They have been very good for me, but I'm not one to sit quietly, unlike what my parents taught me. I will be brash. I will be loud. I will be a troublemaker, but it feels as if you have to be sometimes, as a minority, as a female, in order to be heard!"

We often tell ourselves that Brookline is a wonderful community vis a vis race. Is it, or is it not?

Judge and Professor Susan Maze-Rothstein say [sic], "I think it is a work in progress. First of all, I'm very thankful for my life in Brookline, and for my present life in Brookline. Both of my children have gone to the Brookline public schools. But also I'm a very active member of the Diversity Committee in the Driscoll School and because Brookline thinks so well of itself, it's very unwilling to look at and acknowledge where it needs to do work!"

"I'm very hopeful about our new superintendent, Mr. Silverman. He seems to have a strong eye toward issues of diversity. I'm looking forward to dialogue with him about that. But we certainly still are experiencing the concept of students of color not achieving at the level of their white counterparts. Is that because of some genetic flaw, or is that because of the nurturing they receive – or is it because of something that's in combination together with what is happening in the school setting itself?"

Coolidge Corner Branch Manager Lisa Wong agrees that "it is a work in progress. Brookline is a wonderful place to live in. It's a melting pot. It's an extremely diverse community. Since all of us have lived in Brookline, you can definitely see the improvement in the community from the time we were children, until the time we are adults. There's no place like it, and it can only get better!"

It may well be Susan's face, and Lisa's face too, represent the America of the future, and the Brookline of the future. If that is so, I say bring it on, that's what America is all about!

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Susan Maze-Rothstein grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts, in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the generally liberal tenor of the times and the progressive nature of the town, Susan was the victim of discrimination. The child of a white father and black mother, and a resident of the town's lower-income housing projects, she was subjected to negative stereotyping and behavior because of both her race and class. While some of this sentiment was manifested through physical violence, most came in the form of indifference and neglect on the part of school officials and church leaders. Despite these obstacles, she went on to obtain a B.A. from Cornell and a J.D. from Boston College. Maze-Rothstein now serves as an Administrative Law Judge at the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Industrial Accidents and an adjunct professor at Northeastern

University School of Law. She teaches law students to address issues of difference in the law through her Law, Culture and Difference course and the Community Lawyering Program.

Maze-Rothstein continues to live in Brookline, where she is raising two children. She remains committed to addressing the subtle and overt forms of discrimination that she faced and that most residents of the town do not know exist. She has been a leader in developing the Diversity Committee at the Driscoll School, a K-8 school in Brookline. The Diversity Committee works on issues such as curriculum and hiring, sponsors cross-cultural social and educational events, and serves as an umbrella organization for the many committees that represent the school's diverse community.

For more on Maze-Rothstein and her activism, go to JWA's *Women Who Dared* exhibit at <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wwd/jsp/bio.jsp?personID=psmaze-rothstein>

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What do you conclude about the town, Brookline, from Maze-Rothstein's remarks? Would it be possible for anyone to say the same thing about the town in which you live?
2. How did the perceptions of others help shape Maze-Rothstein's self-image? How did Maze-Rothstein use others' more limited views of her to develop an appreciation for her rich and diverse background?