

# Lisa Phillips-Pierce

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## SPEAKERS

Interviewee: Lisa Phillips-Pierce

Interviewer: Fatemeh Rezaei

### Fatemeh Rezaei

Good morning. This is Fatemeh Rezaei. It's April 5, 2024, at 11am. I'm with Lisa Phillips. We are on the online Zoom platform. And we are going to begin our oral history interview for the University of Baltimore Stories, the 100th Anniversary Oral History Project. The purpose of this project is to celebrate the university's Centennial by preserving the memory of those influenced by the University of Baltimore over the years. We will be creating a digital archive and exhibit and making these recordings available online. And thank you so much, Lisa, for participating in this project. And thank you for being here. I'm going to start with simple questions, where and when were you born?

### Lisa Phillips-Pierce

So, I was born and raised here in Baltimore. I actually have a birthday coming up. April 26.

### Fatemeh Rezaei

Oh, happy birthday.

### Lisa Phillips-Pierce

Thank you. I was a non-traditional student, you know, because I kind of, you know, enrolled in the University of Baltimore, I was already in my early 40s. And so, I was a non-traditional, you know, student.

### Fatemeh Rezaei

So, you grew up in Baltimore, right?

### Lisa Phillips-Pierce

Born and raised as a matter of fact, when I enrolled in UB, Dr. Kurt Schmoke was just named as the president. But he was the mayor of Baltimore, when, when my children were in school, and the last years of my high school experience, and so that was something that definitely motivated me to enroll, because my, how I got to UB was just so you know, kind of unconventional. I had a very meaningful undergrad experience. And I wanted to pursue my master's at the school where I did my undergrad and

so the dean of the business school, she told me, "No, no, no, I want you to go and see the world. I want you to do your master's at another school." And I said, "No, but I'd love it here." And, you know, I had so many wonderful experiences, she said, "Yeah, but you have more experiences, when you see a different setting." And she said, "There's a wonderful program, you know, at the University of Baltimore, with Towson University, and so I'm kicking you out.

And I'm kicking you down (interstate) 83 to enroll in the University of Baltimore." So, I kind of came kicking and screaming. But then when I saw that, that Dr. Schmoke was named the president, I was like, Oh, my goodness. And so, it not only played a role in my approach to my graduate program, but it really made me switch gears. So, because I knew what kind of mayor Dr. Schmoke was, I knew that, you know, I had to build a business that was going to first serve and impact the citizens of Baltimore. So, at the time, when I joined University of Baltimore, I had a gift basket making company that was really making strides.

I'd been on, you know, the local news, like eleven times for my gift baskets, because I would do demonstrations on the air. And I even was, you know, on the national news for my gift baskets. And so, when I got to University of Baltimore, I had to really decide what business I was going to pursue in my MBA. Dr. Schmoke being named the President really impacted that and so I wrote a proposal on something that I knew would have an impact. And I submitted it to the dean. And he approved it, you know, he gave me some wonderful feedback on how I could do it. But he also said, If you build it here, you know, we will support you and man was that a game changer.

### **Fatemeh Rezaei**

Let's go back to your early life. So, I want to know like, could you tell us a little bit about your family life when you were growing up in Baltimore?

### **Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

Sure. So, I grew up in public housing. You know, I had a tumultuous early life. We were placed into foster care, my siblings and I, in the 1980s, when foster care was just, you know, just really housed children, but never provided children with the mental health, you know, services that they needed, or, you know, the support that they would need, you know, as they aged out of foster care. Now, back in the 80s, when we were placed in foster care, children aged out at 18.

And it wasn't until children started dying that they looked at the age that they were letting children age out. And you know, because you're releasing teenagers to the community with no family, no support, no resources. And so that had a very negative impact on me. So, I ended up, I ended up in this awful wilderness. And it caused me just to lose everything in my life. And so how I found, you know, my footing, so to speak, was actually based on the business that I started.

So, I was formerly incarcerated, lost custody of my kids, had nowhere to live, I was homeless. And so, in order to get my kids back, I was given like a list of things that I needed to do starting with getting a job getting a career, getting stable housing. And so I participated in a Welfare to Work program, where, in order for me to get my monthly government benefits, I had to participate in this training program. And it changed my life. I chose medical billing and coding; I was really good at it. And I ended up getting a

job at Johns Hopkins, because at the time, Johns Hopkins was the only hospital that was hiring people, you know, who had been formerly incarcerated.

But that experience really changed the dynamics of my family, I was able to get my kids back, I was able to go from being like the most impoverished family on the block to being one of the most successful families on the block. And that had very lasting effects on my children. And so, I left medical billing and coding. And I, you know, went to the Career Center, and I said, I want to start my own workforce training program. And so, the person laughed at me and said, well, people don't usually do that. They usually work for workforce programs, but people don't start their own.

And so, by that time, I was doing some wonderful work in therapy. I, you know, and I learnt tools in therapy, on how to overcome, you know, adversity, right. You know, and of course, the first tool I learned is not to accept the first "No." So, they told me the first No, but I was, you know, I learned in counseling that you take that No, and you just continue to just dig deeper. For, you know, more information. Why is it No, why is it that a person can't do this?

And so, the person at the Career Center said, well, why don't you start your journey with working with an organization that does work for us because even though I benefit, greatly benefited greatly from workforce, I didn't know the intricate details of how I was able to be in that position. And so, I've got a job working at Job Corps, and a job, I made every engagement, my classroom. So, when I got hired at Job Corps, I made Job Corps my classroom, so I learned how to build partnerships. I learned how to motivate and engage the students that I was responsible for getting a job for are getting an advanced training for. And so, my experience at Job Corps is what led me to enroll in school. So, I enrolled in school, because-

### **Fatemeh Rezaei**

So, you went to Coppin State University for your Bachelor of Science?

### **Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

Undergrad, yes. And so, and the reason is because I learned that anything that's going to impact individuals' lives, you need to have a very good business acumen, you know, because you want to make sure that you have access to the resources that it's going to take. And the only way you can do that is by making sure that you had the skills to be able to build it, and build it, as I said, build it upright, and not build it sideways.

So, I enrolled in Coppin as a business major. And like I said, I had a wonderful experience. I learned at Coppin how strong I was, because my mom, even though, you know, we were placed in foster care, once we aged out, and, you know, we went looking for my mom. And so, you know, we found her and, you know, really, you know, forgave her and started building up a relationship with her. And in my second year, at Coppin, she died. Oh, it was just, it was like, oh, no, we were just getting, you know, to know each other.

And, once again, in counseling, I learned how to turn those adverse events into something positive. So, you know, some well, meaning people told me to drop out of school and grieve my mother's death

properly. And, you know, once again, I was trained in counseling, not to just make my decision on the first level of information. So instead of dropping out, I just kind of, you know, thought it through and I said, you know, what, I'm not dropping out of school, I'm going to dedicate this semester to my mother. And it was the first and last time I ever made the Dean's list. I was taking five classes, and I made the Dean's list.

And that really positioned me well, to be able to handle the whirlwind of building a business, you know, because that was such a tough time for me, you know. And it happened, like I said, right smack dab in the middle of midterms. So, it's like, oh, my goodness, like midterms and finals, you got to step your game up. And so, I, you know, had to really get inspired by dedicating that semester to my mother, and like I said, this, the experience, I finished Coppin, a very strong student. Now, keep in mind, I was still raising children. And I was working full time, and I was taking a full load, you know, and so, once again, it strengthened me to be able to handle building a whole business from the ground up, that people said, it's no way you're going to be able to do this.

And so fast forward to 2014, my first semester at UB. And I, you know, by that time, I had gotten my legs, so to speak, and I decided to enroll in the entrepreneurship MBA, you know, to get the marketing to get the relationship building to get the infrastructure and the acumen on how to build a business. And so, it was just wonderful. I mean, the CEI department. They implemented so many tools for the business students to get mentoring, and to get resources and it was just so wonderful. And so, I even got my first contract as a workforce training provider, even before I graduated, you know, because of all of the support that I got from the school.

So, the school let me know they would, the dean's office would book classroom space for me, so that my students, I could teach them right at the school. And that was so meaningful for some of the students who didn't even finish high school. And they became inspired and motivated, that they were taking the class on a five-star University campus. And so, all of that, really, really built so much equity into my program. And so, and once again, like there's no stop, you know, because you're on a successful path. And my last

### **Fatemeh Rezaei**

So, I have a question here, so, in 2014, you started your business, also, you started studying at the University of Baltimore, and you had kids. So, what challenges did you face balancing, you know, working, doing your business, like studying at UB, and also like, taking care of your kids? What challenges did you face? And how did you overcome those?

### **Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

So, I faced a lot of challenges. My son, that is disabled, he became disabled while I was in school. And so, I had to call I had to come in the year, and I had to allocate resources to be able to handle this abled adult child, you know, and so, in addition to my son becoming disabled, I still had to work, I still, you know, I still had to build the business. And so, when I started school, I was not a great student, you know, because I've been out of school more than 20 years. And so, one of the challenges that I faced is that I had to face how to pack everything I'm required to do in my life, and how do I add school in and not only add school in, but make sure I'm successful in my classes.

And so, it's so interesting, because I was single at the time I was in school. And so, in my second year of undergrad, I gave up dating. And because I looked at, where, where's the time going to come from? Where's the time for me to study and where's the time for me to get my work done, you know, and so I gave up completely, I gave up study, I gave up dating. And I didn't resume dating, until I made the Dean's list in undergrad. And the first person that I went out on a date with, after I made the Dean's list, I'm now married to him.

**Fatemeh Rezaei**

That's nice.

**Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

And the reason is, is because I knew that I had to be very targeted in my dating, I really had to make sure that I was going to date someone who would understand the load that I had, and, you know, my accessibility, and then I had to make sure I found someone who wanted to, you know, get married, you know. Not right away, I understood, but I had to make sure that I was with someone serious. That was really serious about, you know, down the line. And, you know, obviously, it didn't start like that, right.

So, we just would date and as he learned more and more about my goals and what I was doing, because he was not interested in anything long term. But when he saw what I was building, you know, and he became more curious about what I was doing, that kind of changed the calculus of our relationship. And so, you know, I ended up you know, like I said, I ended up you know, marrying him and we, we actually we got engaged in 2018. But I also had a health scare back then I was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

So, we called off everything because now all of our focus had to be on, you know, me getting healthy and going through radiation and surgery. And so, I was allowed in 2017 to early walk, you know, because I was in good standing with the school. But my capstone was not available during, you know, the time in time for me to graduate. So, I was able to early walk, but my family, you know, they thought that I graduated because they all went to a graduation, right? Not knowing that, yes, I was allowed to participate.

But now I have to go back, you know, and finish these classes, you know, these two classes, I had a corporate finance class, and my capstone in order to actually get my degree. And so, I was so conflicted, like, oh, my God, do I tell my family, you know, like, what do you know, what do I do, and so, I enrolled in that semester, January 28, knowing that February the 5th, I was having a craniotomy. And so, I told, you know, Dr. Singh, who was teaching capstones, I said that the saying, you know, I'm going to have surgery, but I don't want to drop your class.

And it was amazing how not only Dr. Singh, but you know, my classmates, how they rallied around me, they would get the assignments for me. And the beauty of being at UB is that it was not my site alone. Like, everybody was like, oh, you know, we're going to, you know, do this, and we're going to help you. And it's so interesting, because one of my classmates, his name is Rod Matthews. His son, and his ex-wife are students of mine now. And he sent them to me, you know, for workforce, and it's just so

amazing how the relationships that I developed at UB spilled over, you know, to my postgraduate, like, I'm friends with so many of my classmates on such a deeper level, you know, after we graduated, so it's so wonderful.

And so I accomplished it, I, you know, my husband was wonderful, he got me an extra laptop, so I could, because my short term memory was really compromised because of the radiation and, you know, in the surgery, and so, my classmates and my husband and Dr. Singh, you know, they all rallied around me, and I got this beautiful email in June 2018, from Dr. Kathea the assistant dean, and she said, I thought that you would want to hear this news that your degree was awarded.

I saved that email because I actually use it to teach my students about resilience and about how not accepting all the information that is like, available, you know, like, you know, go deeper with your research, don't just settle for the first No, or don't sell for, don't get discouraged. And so, I ended up getting my degree and it's on my wall now. You know, and, you know, I do online classes, and I show that degree, to you know, my students because they also learn everything, I had to overcome to get to that. Yes.

#### **Fatemeh Rezaei**

So, this dual MBA program with the University of Baltimore and Towson University, I know that offers a unique educational experience. What was your experience like? Like attending two universities? How was that? Tell us about that experience.

#### **Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

It was meaningful and comical at the same time. What made it meaningful is that you get to experience learning from two juggernauts right, like so I took classes at Towson and classes at UB. I chose UB as my home school, because you did have a choice. But what was comedic about it is that my daughter and I were going to school at the same time, and she was in Towson, full time. And you know, she was like, you cannot take any classes with me, because you're going to start dancing, you're going to embarrass me. And so, it was just like, like, I had to almost like sign a contract that I was not going to register for any classes that she registered for. But it was fun going to school along with my daughter, and she's actually in a Master of Social Work program at Morgan now. And so, she, you know, she graduated from Towson, we graduated, like three days from each other.

#### **Fatemeh Rezaei**

That's very cool!

#### **Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

Yeah, and so that's what made my whole experience meaningful. You know, because I was really her example, her shining example. So, when she came up against challenges getting through her program at Towson, she kind of could look at me and say, wow, my mom is doing this while she's battling a brain tumor. And so, it really, it, you know, it looked bleak for a while, but it actually turned out to be wonderful, because it, we both kind of found our strength to be able to get across that finish line.

#### **Fatemeh Rezaei**

That's nice. So, what are some of your favorite memories from your time at UB? Do you have any that you remember?

**Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

I do. I remember a marketing class where NASA professionals came in, and they wanted to do a case study. They wanted to do a case study on, like, what would be like the next great invention or what, you know what, and I had no idea that organizations like NASA, that's how they get information, they, you know, they come to where the thinkers are, right. And so, we all had, we were in a group, and we all had to come up with some kind of concept.

And they would take that information, you know, back to see which ones were viable. And I came up with, like, at home, breast exam, monitor, where even though women do monthly breast exams, this was a way to kind of scan your breasts and like, the phone would, you know, create the image of whether or not anything is there. And so, I had so much fun researching it. And keep in mind, I have zero technology experience, right? You know, so, so, but I just thought that if there were a way for women to access maybe a very, very, very low dosage of, you know, imaging, that they could, you know, find their own masses before they are detectable through a breast exam. Because I've learned, for example, I have very dense breasts.

So, the density of my breast could feel like lumps, you know, but it's just the density, you know, but the danger in that is that a mass could be mistaken for something else because of the density. But if there was a way that I could examine, you know, instead of having to wait every year for breast exam, you know, there was a way that I can keep a better eye on it, I would feel comfortable, you know, so, but I had so much fun researching, you know, that and so that was something very memorable, you know, that we got to meet individuals from NASA.

And I actually was able to connect with someone from that team, to really just learn like, I've always been so intellectually curious about things. And so, I was able to have lunch with one of the engineers to learn like what you know, they were working on and so, but that's just wonderful that UB has like this body of thinkers, that agency like NASA would come in and say, hey, you know, give us what you got. And so that was memorable. Another memorable moment for me took place when I was invited by Dr. Weiss to one of his entrepreneurial classes to present to the undergrad entrepreneur students. And I actually was invited three times from Professor John Zurich, you know, he invited me recently I went late in 2023.

And so, because during my journey, I was invited to the White House, to the panel for a roundtable discussion on the state of women owned businesses. So, I just had all these wonderful experiences to share with you know, with the undergrad, UB students, business students, but my most memorable experience was when I was able to make my first donation to the school as an alum. And so to be able to donate \$5,000 to the school, like that meant so much to me, because God knows, I wish I could donate more, right and so, but being able to give back to the school is probably my most memorable, you know, moment, because the Dean invited me to a board of directors meeting, and they, you know, members of the Board of Directors got to meet me, I was presented with an award from



the dean's office on the generous donation, and I was invited to the dinner that they give at the Chancellor's mansion, and I actually was invited this year as well, my husband and I are going to go.

**Fatemeh Rezaei**

That's nice. So, you still have your business, right? And your pride now is related to that, could you tell us a little bit more about your business?

**Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

So, Celebrate Us Workforce Training. The beautiful thing about the role my education played is that I learned how to scale. And in addition to learn how to scale, I also developed a business confidence to be able to approach big companies to infuse what I do and having that confidence really paid off in 2021, when I was contacted by an executive from Walgreens. So, during COVID, Walgreens was really struggling with their frontline customer service associates, who when you first walk into and they'll say welcome to Walgreens, what a lot of people don't know is that the cashiers become the pharmacy technicians. But what ended up happening is Walmart and Target increased the hourly wages of their customer services associates, their cashiers, and Walgreens could not match that.

So, they asked me if I could design them a bridge program that would hold that position at 17.50 an hour. And I wrote a proposal. And Walgreens loved it. And I wanted to beta test it in one store. And they said, no, we're going to test this in all 93 locations, which were in upstate New York. But what that did, was that got me on the radar of the Department of Labor in New York. And so, I was able to become a training provider for the state of New York as well as New York City. And I was actually in New York yesterday. I'm working with a nonprofit that was founded by the hip hop artist Jay Z, and the owner of Fanatics athleticwear it's called The Reform Alliance, and it's a nonprofit that focuses on legislative issues regarding parole and probation.

And so, they're experiencing a pivot right now. Because now they've done some great work to get some laws changed. Now they need to, you know, they need to expand on providing resources for individuals who come out of prison. And so, they invited me to present and I'm actually working with them to, you know, build a resource infrastructure for individuals getting out of prison. And so, my experience with Walgreens, you know, gave me the confidence that I could, you know, I could assist a billion-dollar nonprofit, right? Because money is not the only tool that makes the organization successful, you need connections, you need resources, to be able to impact lives. And so, all of that groundwork, that frontloaded work, happened at UB. I learned it at UB.

**Fatemeh Rezaei**

So, one of our questions that we usually ask is, how did your time at UB influence your career choices? I know you've already covered that, but is there anything that you want to add about this?

**Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

Yes. So historically, I've never, you know, worked a job or had a job offer, you know, that really spoke to my passion and spoke to my gifts, until recently. I was contacted by Johns Hopkins, they have an opening for the Director of the Workforce, because they want to go in a different direction with their internal workforce training. And so, I had two interviews with them so far. And what really blew me away



was not the details of the, you know, what the job involves, but that they looked at my skills, looked at my body of work, looked at my education, and, you know, they, you know, agree that they would compensate me with \$120,000 salary.

And so that blew me away, you know, because I've never worked a job where I've made more than \$40,000. Right, so to be out of the workforce myself, for so long, and then to be, you know, invited to this position, because I haven't worked for a company since 2014. You know, I've been a full-time entrepreneur, and so, but for them to really examine my body of work and say, hey, you know, and one of the things that surprised me is that, I said, well, do I have to dissolve Celebrate Us?

And they said, no, you know, because, you know, what you do Celebrate Us, it does not interfere with Johns Hopkins, because they have their own workforce. And so, so but that was, that was something that was really meaningful for me, because it really, you know, it really speaks to the foundation that was late with my education from UB, that allowed all these other wonderful things to happen.

**Fatemeh Rezaei**

That's great. That's nice. So, is there anything else about your time at UB that you want to share with us?

**Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

So the only thing that I want to, you know, share is that one of my goals is to get more new graduates to donate to the school to become donors, and not to have to wait until they, you know, strike it rich or hit it because there's so much you can do to help the school, you know, as an alumni, and so I'm even kind of stepping my efforts up as well. You know, for example, one of my goals is to get more corporate, you know, get more large corporations to send their workers to UB to get advanced degrees and business degrees. And so that's one of the things that you know, I want to focus on, and I want to, you know, really put a dent in.

**Fatemeh Rezaei**

Thank you. Thank you so much for giving us your time and I really enjoy listening to your stories.

**Lisa Phillips-Pierce**

Alright, thank you so much for even considering me for this.