

Interview with Rebecca Brown March 25, 2014

Rebecca Brown (RB)

Skylar Boutin (SB)

SB: So first off, where were you born?

RB: I was born in New York City.

SB: Now, were you raised there?

RB: I think my family moved out about when I was quite young; maybe three.

SB: Where'd you move to?

RB: To New Jersey. In what at that time was a pretty rural area is no longer.

SB: Do you have any siblings?

RB: Yup, I have a brother who's four years younger than me.

SB: Now, what did your parents do for a living?

RB: Well, my father worked in New York as a Stock broker and so he was eventually transferred to.. took a job at a new firm in Philadelphia and we moved to the Philadelphia suburbs western part of the west Philadelphia when I was eight. My mother one of the; her job which she always loved the most was actually working for a newspaper which she did when my brother and I were young and she had other jobs after that, but my father remained in the investment business.

SB: Even when you moved to New Jersey?

RB: Well, he was in the business then and then moved in to... That was his career and still is.

(From 1minute 27seconds to 1 minute 33 seconds she talks to husband)

SB: So did you; so you must have transferred high schools or schools when you lived in Pennsylvania?

RB: Ah, ya, start as an eight year old, I remember the big challenge was how to spell Pennsylvania, but I learned.

SB: So, was it in high school; did you go to college somewhere else?

RB: I graduated from a public high school outside Philadelphia and I went to Mount Holyoke College which is in South Hadley, Mass. I went back to Philadelphia for graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania and I got my degree; Master's degree in Political Science. As an undergrad I studied and emphasized American History and Politics. Same thing in grad school and while I was in graduate school I took a job on a political campaign; mayoral campaign in Philadelphia, so my first political experience was doing that.

(TIME: 2:43)

SB: And that was right after college?

RB: That was right after grad school.

SB: So what was the business you had that you restored old houses?

RB: Well, that came later on, so I had my graduate degree and I worked for a city council women in Philadelphia. I actually remember some people wrote Arlen Specter was the U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania for a long time and his wife Joan was a city council woman. I worked for her for a bit. I worked for an investment banking firm doing community relations work; spent a lot of time in Washington working for them then left that to join a small public relations firm in Philadelphia. At that point I then decided I really wanted to work for myself. I have always liked working with my hands and I would really rather be outside so I started a business renovating old houses.

SB: So that was almost like a spark to the blue almost?

RB: Ya, it was kind of a, sort of a; actually I was asked to be a partner in this little public relations firm which I thought would have been great I really liked the fella I was working with, but when I started looking at the books, I realized that there were some major ethical problems. When I called them to his attention it was not very well received, so I kind of lost that job, so that's when I decided to try something on my own. So I worked with some gentlemen who are new in the city. Both of them were African Americans. The three of us, so there are two black guys and this white girl who's me would be doing these carpentry jobs all over the place. It was great fun and I learned a lot from them and then I started my own business doing that. It [her company] was called Women at Work and it was Rebecca Brown General Contracting. That grew into a business that; I guess my first love was public policy and social change and so after being a contractor for a number of years and learning the trades, I started a nonprofit contracting business and that was called Women at Work, sorry. We trained intercity in the building trades and then created a for profit business if they then could graduate into. I did that for a number of years in Philadelphia and learned a great deal working with all kinds of people; working for all kinds of people and kind of learned the language of a you know out of the ivy league realm that I have been in. There is nothing like walking in to somebody's house as a carpenter as opposed to a Social Worker or another perceived professional because when you do that people do what they do. They don't change their behavior. I saw a lot of pretty sad circumstances with people. Young people sort of trapped in a cycle of abuse, old who were trapped in their homes at that time surrounded by crack houses. Then you knew men who were a working poor man in that nonprofit situation had a lot of difficult circumstances as well. So that was a great learning experience doing all that.

(TIME: 7:05 min)

SB: And you did this mainly in the Philly area?

RB: Yup, it was all in the Philadelphia although the for profit business I had started doing big commercial painting contracts down in the Washington D.C. and the Virginia suburbs area. I was pretty stressed out by all that. Trying to run two businesses compete with other contractors on the one hand and try to run a nonprofit on a competitive basis is quite challenging.

SB: Also there were; you had two different businesses going?

RB: Yup, I think the business model was a good one, still having training situation and then having people go to a for profit business, particularly one that would be employee owned. That is the goal with that one, it was; you're competing against other businesses, but you're trying to advance your nonprofit vision. This one was teaching a lot of what they call life skills to people who were trying to get their acts together; get their lives together. It takes a lot of time and effort that most contractors aren't paying for.

SB: Right.

RB: So, um, so you do need to have some good subsidy from grantors and funders and city folks and trying to do all that at once was hell which is why I ended up moving up here. My parents in the meantime bought a second home in Waterford Springs, Vermont.

(TIME: 8:58 min)

SB: Oh, okay.

RB: and, I guess that was in the, I don't know, late seventies, early eighties maybe and I; probably late seventies. So I started coming up here while I was in college and beyond just for vacation. I have always loved to hike and you know the outdoors. So like many people I thought I wonder if I can make a living here and so feeling quite burned out from that contracting experience so I did decide to move here in ninety three (year) or ninety two.

(TIME: 9:41 min)

SB: Oh, so you haven't been here long.

RB: Well

SB: Twenty one years

RB: Ya.

SB: Never mind.

RB: So, it was the longest I have ever lived anywhere. I found here a grant funding job with AHEAD which the affordable housing group in Littleton is.

SB: You worked with AHEAD?

RB: yes

SB: Oh.

RB: And I knew I had a job for a year with them. That was the grantor and it was part time which was great. So I got to settle in and spent not be working all the time. It was during that time I met Harry who's my husband; Harry Reid.

SB: Did he work at; does he work at AHEAD?

RB: No

SB: How did you meet your husband?

RB: At the gym in St. Johnsbury. (VT)

SB: Wow.

RB: So, he had; he worked; he was career military and had also worked for the state park system. He was the Cannon Mountain and Franconia state park manager for many years and ran park operations for the state. So he was very well; had been around. We got married in ninety four (year) and I then took a job with the Courier newspaper as a cover reporter. I had not worked for a newspaper except for my college paper, so that was a great job. My mom was particularly pleased about that because she loved being a newspaper reporter and being a reporter on a small town paper you get to know all kinds of people and that was a great experience. My reference point for journalism before that was basically the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* for the sports section. Writing for a community paper was a much different experience and it is a really, really important, much more important to this community than the *New York Times* or the *Boston Globe* or really any other paper and then I became the editor there after taking a bit of time off to write my first book which was the mountaineering history book.

(TIME: 12:18 min)

SB: What's that called?

RB: Its title is *Women on High*; pioneers in mountaineering.

SB: So at what point did you start A.C.T.?

RB: So we started ACT; the Ammonoosuc Conservation Trust in 1999 was when we got it going. I think 2000 was when we got incorporated, but, so I was in the newspaper at the time and the editor there. At that time there was a real real estate boom all over the country and that boom finally reached here so there was a lot of land turnover and there was land right about ninety acres right on our road here. This is a dead end road and so the forest all back here is a place where everybody in this neighborhood likes to walk and ski and sled and everything. So that had come out of an old family trust and the heir was no longer around here and wanted to sell it. It was subdivided into nine or ten house lots, so we thought wow that would really change the neighborhood, so we, we; I did a lot of environmental journalism when I was with the Courier and I did a lot of freelance work in addition to being with the Courier. I did New Hampshire Public Radio recording and I wrote for a lot of regional and some national forestry and outdoors. So anyway I got to know a lot of people in the conservation organizations around New England and I got help on what to do from some of my friends through that which was to we got friends and neighbors here to purchase the land and we worked through a regional, New England wide Land trust called New England Forestry Foundation and we conserved it with them and then we realized we are not the only people in the north country facing that kind of issue where some land that was really important to us and our community, but not large enough to be of interest to the bigger organizations like the forest society or. There was a need for a North Country based land trust to work with local people here. So we started ACT on that basis. I was the founding core president of that and was the board president for gosh, five or six years and we realized the business of land conservation was much more complex and in need of a good old real attention than what we could give it as all volunteers. So I had at a certain point left the newspaper and started working for the Connecticut River Joint Commissions, which is a Vermont, New Hampshire organization focused on the Connecticut River watershed created by a statute in both states to advise the states on environmental and economic and all the issues that affected the river. So I was working there and transitioned to working part time for ACT

and part time for them and then eventually full time for ACT, so I am now the Executive Director for that.

SB: So, right now you balance ACT with being a representative?

RB: It's challenging. This is why I am working weekends.

(TIME: 16:32 min)

SB: What made you run for representative?

RB: Because two years ago the legislature in New Hampshire was making national news for being a very divisive, unfriendly place and it wasn't only the kinds of laws they were passing were objectionable to a lot of those. It was just the whole tenor of the place that really changed and I worked in New Hampshire long enough to understand that this state by large is a pretty practical, pragmatic kind of place where people from both sides will sit down together and work together. You don't always win but you will come back to work together another day and that seemed to be changing in Concord at that point, so I and many others decided to run for the first time to try to; to try to get that back so that's why I ran. It was also a new district. We got the 2010 (year) census. When the census is done every ten years, that affects the district lines in the state, so where we sit in Sugar Hill (town) and where you are in Lisbon (interviewer) used to be, before last year was part of a; I think there were fifteen towns in the district. It was just a crazy district that was impossible to represent. It got re districted into five towns, so it was a manageable size that makes sense and also organizationally, ACT was at a point where I thought we were doing; we matured as an organization to the point where I could, I felt I comfortable doing some other things of interest to me. My first priority is still act and my job, but I felt that I could try handling the legislature as well. I also thought that it's important for people to associate with the conservation community to be working on issues that are not only conservation, I think that is really important for our state and for our conservation community.

(TIME: 19:00 MIN)

SB: So how many people do you have working with you in ACT?

RB: We've got a terrific Board of Directors and I have one part time person who's working with us on a lot of administration/ administrative work and some other really great volunteers. So, we are very, very small and I hope to be able to add somebody to that mix.

SB: How many properties do you (own/ conserve)?

RB: We've conserved over four thousand acres and we own about fifteen hundred (acres) ourselves and the rest are owned by private individuals with a conservation easement on it which they've thought, which the private land owners have determined is to conserve the land forever and that's what they want to leave as their family legacy, that's why people do this kind of work.

SB: So do you only do it in New Hampshire?

RB: Yup.

SB: Okay, so it is specific to New Hampshire, like northern or like?

RB: This region of New Hampshire, so it is the North Country. Our service area starts kind of in the Monroe, Bath area and goes north really as far as you want to go and there is a lot of conserved land up north, so big forests, but our northern most easement at the moment is in Lancaster (NH).

SB: Lancaster, how much property is in Lancaster?

RB: That we've conserved? It's part of a farm, it's about a sixty acre field and woodlot.

SB: I didn't even know Lancaster had land.

RB: and we were, we're working on, well, we just created an 840 acre community forest which involved four towns: Franconia, Sugar Hill, Landaff, and Easton and that land is owned by ACT on behalf of the community, so it is managed by a group of residents, representatives from the four towns and from act and from other interesting people. That was a really big deal for us; it's rare to have towns working together on anything these days so. Even across the country, I think we are the only multi town community forest, so it's gotten a lot of attention. We did that because it's a major, well, it's hard to find land that large anymore because it is all, so much of the land has been split up the high elevation; very visible from Sugar Hill from Easton and all four towns. A huge recreational area, it is going to be a fantastic mountain biking place. We are working on trail building up there, planning for that right now and we will be starting our trail building this spring and summer and fall and a great place for environmental education. We want to hopefully work with Lisbon school to get kids out there. The Lafayette (school in Franconia) fourth graders have already been using that land. It's really not about the land, it's about the people, the land is a tool; land conservation is a tool which the goal, and the mission is to keep our community connected with our land.

(TIME: 22:45 min)

SB: It looks like you from seeming in college when you were working with the mayor and when you were doing your construction businesses, it looks like you just want people to work together almost, you have this idea, this is what I am gathering, you have this idea of why knowing that can be better, people need to know, people need to know, people need to connect and it's all about connecting, that's what I've been getting from everything I have been writing down.

RB: I appreciate that insight, People had; I have to say when you go to a good college and a good grad school and you can reuse everything, my parents were a bit taken back when I started the construction business, but to me it all made sense and even how that led into the rest of my career because in a sense it is about connecting people. I do totally believe that wisdom comes from many people working together and sometimes a catalyst is needed for that, this is what the role of the land trust is and I felt that was my role as an editor, so.

SB: Now, through this time have you ever gotten criticism, like, just from your journey?

RB: About the direction I was taking, or about the things that I did?

SB: Just like your whole direction?

RB: Well, as I said, I think my parents were a little unhappy when I started pounding nails and I can remember early on in that part of my career, I just started business as a contractor and when I would go out to talk to people about potential jobs, I would always make sure to drop something in there about

Constitutional law just to try to impress upon them that I really had a brain, so I think I dropped that after a while, so I think I had that tension myself about is this really what I should be doing, but I liked; it was a short digression, but it was really important to me and refreshing actually to have a very tangible outcome to my work. Which is what construction is all about.

SB: Right.

RB: And, I also learned a lot and a bit of in the study of politics and being an activist, it was a really good experience to feel what it's like to work with your hands, I mean work manually, manual job all day long, because at the end of the day, the last thing you want to do is get involved with something at least for me that took a lot of mental effort. So, among other things that I learned, I appreciate anyone who runs a small business of any type because you got to pay the bills and you got to meet payroll and you have to do everything else that that involves. So I have a great deal of respect for small business people and for the challenges of trying to organize among working people. Political action among working people is tough, you're just tired at the end of the day. So any of the people who have always worked in a more intellectual or professional environment who are politically active, some people just don't appreciate that. So doing what I do now full time work in the conservation area not having the environmental training academically, I think we came to the conservation business in a very pragmatic way which is reflected in our mission which is really about conserving what people call working landscape. The forest is going to be management timber for our forest products industry; very important. Farms, they are working farms actually growing stuff. So, we also, our land is beautiful which is why people are here, the scenic values are very, very important. We are really focusing on, right now being involved into a big farmland I guess because that is such an important part of our economy and people are really seeking local food. In long term to feed ourselves we would want to happen to feed ourselves more locally, we need the land base to do that.

(TIME 27:54 min)

RB: So you were talking about what's going to come next and what you have, so the land conservation business, when we conserve land that is in perpetuity forever, that is the agreement that you make and so when you think about that concept, who can predict the future obviously; nobody can. So it is interesting working to trying to craft a conservation easement that's the legal document that stays with the land, but will anticipate changes in the land and environment and community, so that's an interesting thought. As a writer, for years I followed this region as a professional observer writing about it, and as an editor I wrote an opinion about it and I also; the last published work that I did was for the book, *Beyond the Notches*, which was stories from the north country published, gosh, five years ago. Franklin Pierce did it. You should get that book, that's an important one to have in the historical society also; I will show you a copy. But I was asked to write the last chapter in that book of what's the future for the vision for the North Country region.

(Time 29:11 min) p3

RB: So, after being a professional observer for many years and generally writing a lot about it and having all sorts of opinions about it as an editor; just thinking a lot about work in land conservation which is this land that we conserve is supposed to be forever, so you're always thinking ahead; what's it going to be, what's the economy going to be like, how are you going to make use of this land, how does it stay financially viable for land owners, for people and all those things. So, in that context, I was asked to write the last chapter of this collection which is called *Beyond the Notches; Stories of Place in New*

*Hampshire's north country* and it was published by Franklin Pierce University in I think it was 2010, oh, 2011. So my, I think looking at the future of this region is very challenging and we really are at this transformation point of evolution between the traditional manufacturing forest products industries. Your town of Lisbon, look at the change, still a lot of manufacturing going on there, but very different from the shoe making that used to be the dominant business. The paper mills have shut down except for the one now in Gorham (town). You know you've got the saw mills etcetera, etcetera, so we are really in this changing time. So, my thinking about the last chapter for a book like this and you always want a last chapter of a place to be somewhat upbeat, it can't be a downer, but I think also realistic and at the time I was leading a life that was really struggling with what is a positive vision here and that was in 2010, it takes that long for a book to get published and I believe it was that may of 2010 I was literally sitting on the front porch here, it was a beautiful spring Saturday morning and thinking I have to write this because the deadline is looming and Harry brought in the *Globe*, the *Boston Globe* that morning, "so did you see the story about Colebrook (town), the explosion in Colebrook?" I had not, it was in the *Globe*, and that's what when that plant up there that used black powder blew up and killed two guys and a horrible accident and I just, I thought this is like third world. Those guys desperately needed those jobs, they were all former paper mill employees, but I think that it looked like the process may have been rushed a little bit on permits and so many measures and so forth, but I thought if we set the bar low that's what we are going to get and I have always felt that if you ask a north country person, you are going to hear two things, one is we don't want anything to change and two is we want our young people to stay here or come back and make a good living, and, you know, how is our economy reflecting that? That's the real challenge, it hurts. So, that, I thought we have got to do something different and my work is to re-live the land, as I said a working landscape and at that time, I think, that was when the local food movement in Vermont was really robust and I had been reading books by people about local food, the *Omni Wars Dilemma* was one of the important ones at that time and I thought, so why not here? We've got the land, we've got the heritage of growing things, we are trying to attract more young people here and there are a whole lot of young people who want to go into agriculture businesses, farming or another ag work. So I thought, what would it look like if we put some intent behind that and so I called a bunch of people I know in all kinds of different areas, but creative, thoughtful people and said let's get together and talk about whether we want to put some intent behind growing our own local food system and revitalizing our agricultural economy and we did and now it has evolved into *Keep Growing* is the name of that initiative that ACT is involved with and a lot of other people. It is all about how to bring land back, fowl land back into production, attract new farmers, make sure the farms that we do have are prosperous; if you eventually earn a new living doing farming. All very challenging, but in the long term, but I think in the long term this will be very, very important to the health and wellbeing of our communities. So, the chapter that I wrote; back to the book which is sitting here is called *The Rediscovery of the North Country* and is how we, is about our land ethic and how we may use our land in the future and it does kind of present the opportunity around more agriculture as well as using our forests. I think our land is really our touchstone here.

SB: Especially up here

RB: Ya.

SB: You know?

RB: I mean, it doesn't matter what age or race or gender or political affiliation or town you're in, everybody loves land, so that's very, very important.



SB: Now, this land you conserve, do you have to write in the document what it can be used for, like specifically?

RB: Well, the easement does describe that and it's pretty, it's pretty broad. It is the land can be and we encouraged it to be used for forestry, agriculture, recreation. It is absolutely up to them if they want to allow hunting or not for instance or whether they want to allow motorized use, that's up to the land owner. On our own lands we allow hunting and snowmobiling where there are trails.

SB: Now, I am not sure if you would know this, but the railroad bed that is a snowmobiling trail (Old Boston Maine Railroad), is that under any conservation?

RB: The railroad bed itself?

SB: Yes.

RB: No, but I believe it is owned by the state, but the land on either side is private land. In fact I own some land not far from you around the little pond (entering Lisbon from Littleton direction).

SB: No way.

RB: Ya. We just bought within the last year twenty five acres there, one of the parts was kind of for sale, and it goes with that house with the blueberry place, right next to that point. Then there is a nine acre field along the river that you can't really see from the road, we just bought that as well

SB: I just heard that sold too.

RB: Ya, the farmer wanted to sell that because it is really eroding and is losing land there, so what we are going to do is there was a stream that was blocked going into that little pond, we are going to replace, unblock it, replace the culvert so the stream is flowing and that will dry out about three acres that the farmer can now use for planting corn so that will be a higher value for him, and along the river, that corner area is closer to the road, along the river we are going to restore what you call a riparian buffer with vegetation along the river to try and stabilize that from erosion and provide wildlife habitat, so it will help the river as well as birds wildlife and mammals.

SB: So, when you moved up here did you plan on living in Northern New Hampshire when you moved to New Hampshire in general?

RB: Well, I moved to Vermont where my parents had a second home and in Waterford, and I was looking in this area and was looking in New Hampshire, in fact I was looking at this very house. Grew a vibe with the realtor early on, I said that would be the kind of house I would like, it was small, it was old, course it wasn't for sale or anything, but as it turns out, the people who owned this were good friends of my husband who I hadn't met yet and this is where we ended up because they did finally want to sell, they were not going to come up here anymore this was a second home.

SB: Did Harry live in Vermont too?

RB: No, Harry is from here, Sugar Hill.

SB: Oh, he's from Sugar Hill? Okay, wow, and you met in Vermont.

RB: Ya, believe it or not, we met at the gym, well, actually we met at the bar restaurant that at that time was attached to the gym, very convenient.

SB: What else do you go to the gym for. (Not real question)

RB: So, what else would you like to know?

SB: I think that's it.

RB: Well, since you are talking about women in history, this book, *Women on High*, the mountaineering book is all about the first female mountaineers. I did a lot of original research and found their original writing and trying to bring these people back to life, so starting in the nineteenth century in Europe and it also includes the White Mountains. In terms of being an advocate for women, I feel like I have done that all my life and never really worked on women's issues per say, but it has been always a part of who I am and what I do. This book is the expression of the importance of understanding women's place in history. Some of these mountaineers, not some, all of them put up first ascents. In the mountaineering world, that's a big deal, you are climbing and reaching a summit of something that hasn't been reached before. This book started as a project for the Appalachian Mountain club, I was writing a piece on them for their hundredth or hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary and they wanted to know the history of their earliest female members and the AMC started taking female members unlike the European clubs soon after they were founded and women played an important part from almost day one. But, as you have already recognized, it is hard to find those stories. I found just materials on their own members that was more than I could fit in a magazine article, so I proposed doing a book. It was a fantastic experience doing that book, I felt I was living back in the nineteenth century, it was great fun. These mountaineers seem to be a very literary bunch and so they wrote a lot and to be able to find a lot of that and do some digging, the internet allows us, even from my front porch in Sugar Hill to look all over the world for sources. An interesting note is the first published article by a woman in the mountaineering journal of the Alpine club; she had to write under a male name because they would have not published her article.

SB: I hear about that a lot.

RB: They were some really bold, courageous women and really just some great, great fun and the White Mountains has some great stories in there as well.