Smithsonian Institution
National Museum of American History

Philanthropy Initiative
Oral History Project

Interview with:
Steve Wasserman
WGBH

Interview conducted by:
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AMANDA MONIZ: This is Amanda Moniz conducting a Philanthropy Initiative oral history with Steve Wasserman. We're at WGBH in Boston, at their headquarters on 1 Guest Street. It's July 10, 2018.

Could you please state your name and birthplace?

STEVE WASSERMAN: I am Steve Wasserman. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts.

MONIZ: Did you grow up in Boston?

WASSERMAN: Grew up in Boston and the area. I left it for a short time to tour the New England states with different jobs and ended up back here again.

MONIZ: Can you tell me about your family growing up?

WASSERMAN: Family growing up. I grew up the 1940s and 1950s in the Roxbury section of Boston. Lived in a two-family house. We were on the second floor. That's where my formative years were. We moved out of Roxbury in 1956 and moved to Brookline because the neighborhood was changing. It wasn't as safe as it had been. So my parents decided we needed a change. So we moved to a two-family in Brookline, Massachusetts.

I grew up there through high school. Attended college at Northeastern University and then went off to work. In 1967, I left Boston and I was in Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and then back to Massachusetts, in the space of about seven years.

MONIZ: What did you do?

WASSERMAN: Well, I was a pharmacist at the time. I graduated college as a pharmacist. My first job was in Kittery, Maine, working for Osco Drug. I opened their first store in Maine. And then I was hired away by CVS to work in their New Hampshire store, which was in Bedford, New Hampshire. It was their very first drug store. So I was their first pharmacist and I opened their very first pharmacy. That was in 1969 that I went there. And then they moved me to Rhode Island to work on two other stores in Rhode Island. One of them that was already an existing store and then the other one was a brand new store that they wanted to get started. I left CVS in about 1972 and came back to Massachusetts and went to work for an independent pharmacy. I did that for a number of years.

Then I got involved in the travel industry. And then, through the travel industry, I got involved with software development for the travel industry. And then I retired. And here I am. I started volunteering at WGBH in 1967. That was my last year of college. My future mother-in-law was a bid taker captain in the auction and had asked my girlfriend at the time and myself if we would like to help out at the auction. We said, "Sure. Why not?" So my first experience was with the second auction, in 1967. We were bid takers as long as I was in the area. Then I left. When I came back we got back involved with the auction, first as donors, then as major donors, then volunteers again. Then starting in the late 1990s I started to spend a lot of time at WGBH.

I'm here now three to five days a week. I am a docent. I give tours here at the station. I work on events and I am the wine cellar manager for the auction. We have a 1200 bottle wine cellar here at WGBH. We auction wine at every one of our auctions. And that's fun. That's just another aspect of what goes on here.

MONIZ: You have such rich experiences. I'm really looking forward to digging into them. Let me ask you a couple more questions about your childhood first. What did your parents do for a living?

WASSERMAN: My father was a truck driver. He drove a truck for two or three companies at the same time. He worked four jobs. He was also a meat cutter. That was one of his jobs. And he delivered magazines for American News Company. He delivered the *New York Times* on Sundays. He would pick them up at South Station. He worked for a company that did that, and delivered them to the stores. And then he worked for one of the newspapers here in Boston, the *Record American*, which was purchased by the [Boston] *Herald* a number of years ago. And that's what he did. He sharpened scissors. He worked with the meat. He cut meat. He worked for the *New York Times*. And he worked for American News all at the same time. And that was four jobs to keep us going.

My mom was a substitute schoolteacher. I had a sister also. And the four of us lived in Roxbury, and then we moved to Brookline. When I got to be 18 my father put me to work to pay for college driving a truck for the *Record American*. I would do that on the weekends. I'd go in at six o'clock on a Saturday night and finish up at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning. I earned $68. At the time, that was enough money to be able to take care of all my expenses for the week and also pay my tuition, because my first tuition at Northeastern University was $275 for the semester. That was all of the tuition, the whole tuition.

So my dad passed in 1966 and my mother got tired of spending time with kids all day and went to Garber Travels, travel training course and became a travel agent. When she became a travel agent she worked for two or three different travel agencies. Then she met a guy and they got married and she was complaining that she didn't like the way the agencies were doing things. So, her second husband then said, "Why don't you open your own?" And she said, "Well, I don't have the business experience." He said, "I do. So I can do the business. You can do the travel."

So at that point I was back in Massachusetts and I used to come in on my days off to see what she was doing and help out. And I went out and actually did some sales calls for her. And we ended up with about 100 commercial accounts. She was doing well enough for me to leave pharmacy and join her in the travel agency, which I did for about 25 years. And then somebody came up to me and said, "I understand you know what you're doing in the travel business." And I said, "Yeah, I think I know what I'm doing…" "We're starting a start-up to develop some personalization software for the industry. Would you be interested?" And I said, "How much is it going to cost me?" And he said, "No. It's not going to cost you anything. We need your travel knowledge, not your money." So I ended up getting involved in that.

I was doing volunteer work while that was all going on and when that ended, I retired and here I am doing volunteer work. I do this, plus I am a volunteer with senior housing in Brighton, B'nai B'rith Senior Housing. I run a management committee there. I'm also a library trustee in the town I live in, which is Burlington. And I'm also a precinct warden in Burlington. So I keep myself out of trouble.

MONIZ: It sounds like you're busy. Was volunteering or philanthropy part of your childhood?

WASSERMAN: It was not. During my childhood we had enough to get by on. That was basically it. So that wasn't part of it. But it became an integral part as I grew older and saw that I could do this. And started with the travel agency. We grew to be a pretty good-sized agency. Because of that, the airlines loved us. Because they loved us, they would give us free tickets. They gave us more free tickets than we could possibly use and so I started donating all of the organizations that had anything to do with kids in the Brighton area, and they would use them as fundraisers. So they raised considerable amounts of money on the airline tickets that I provided them. Everything from round-the-world tickets.

That's how I became a major donor here at GBH. Edie Baker who was the head of auction at the time, called me—knew I was in the travel business. They had got a Galapagos Island cruise as a donation, but without any airfare. So she asked me if I knew how she could get a couple of airline tickets to go with it. And I said, "I'll give them to you." And that was the first major donation I made to GBH. Then it just spiraled from there.

MONIZ: Before we talk more about your experience at GBH, was religion part of your childhood?

WASSERMAN: Grew up Jewish, but I wouldn't say I was a practicing Jew. We didn't have a temple affiliation because we couldn't afford it. Once I got married and moved to Burlington, I then had a temple affiliation in Burlington. We still have a temple affiliation now and I do volunteer work for them also. I left that off the list. They've got a building committee that I'm on there.

MONIZ: So tell me about getting involved with the auctions for GBH. You said your future mother-in-law asked you to get involved. What was the experience like in the early years?

WASSERMAN: It was fun. Taking the phone calls was a ball. The phone would ring. You'd have a procedure. You'd fill out a slip of paper with the bid and the item they were bidding on, and their name and their address. And all kinds of fun stuff. And there were runners who would take the bids and get involved with all of this. It was a lot of fun. A lot of activity. It was a madhouse and it was really fun to be involved in all of that activity that was going on. We were not on stage. We were off stage when all of this was going on. And you could see what was going on. It was all in the same studio. So it was fun. That's how I got involved and I enjoyed it.

MONIZ: Why did the cause speak to you when your future mother-in-law asked you to get involved?

WASSERMAN: She was a bright lady. She worked for Planned Parenthood, and she worked over at Brandeis University and a few other places. If she was donating time to this there must have been a reason that she was doing it. So, I figured I would come along and see. When I was growing up we watched Channel 2 a little bit. It was not my mainstay of watching television. I know that. But we got involved with it more and more. And my son grew up on Public Television. Because at that point we knew where he was going to get the best bang for the television time that he had. That was PBS. So from there we got involved—heavily involved—

between donations and now a member of the Ralph Lowell Society here at GBH. And I'm also part of the Great Blue Hill Society. So our family is now quite entrenched here at WGBH. Between our volunteerism and our financial support it's a little bit of everything.

MONIZ: Can you talk about the development of the auctions? When you got involved those were still the early years.

WASSERMAN: Those were the early years.

MONIZ: Can you sort of walk me though the whole process.

WASSERMAN: My jobs at the beginning were one or two shifts during a whole auction. I was not in the entire stream of how things developed when it went on. I do know that for the first ten or fifteen years these were basically run, from what I could see, in a very similar way. There were go-getter areas. And people would go out and get everything and bring them in. We'd have two studios, one that was a staging area and the other where the auction was done live. And stuff would be presented and taken off. There were jobs, tons of jobs. There were 4,000 volunteers in the early days of the auction. There were 68 go-getter areas. The greater Boston area was divided into 68 areas and each area had a captain and each captain had a team. The team varied from four to six or seven individuals and they would go to the same businesses year after year after year and get the items. Bring them to the captain. The captain would then bring them in along with the paperwork that went with them.

That's the part that I saw. I didn't see what happened out on the street. I didn't see what happened in the backroom areas, because I wasn't involved. I would be working more in the staging area with the items coming in, putting them in the shelf. They had a shelf for each day. Other people would then take the stuff from the shelf and then put them on tables when they were ready to go up. Other people were writing the scripts for everything. It's a huge organizational process. It was massive. It went underway with two or three staff people running this whole thing and all volunteers. It was basically a volunteer run auction, with 4000 volunteers. Literally everything from, the heads of different departments. I ran something called Bay State baskets. Bay State baskets were items manufactured or sold or produced here in Massachusetts. We had Carlson Orchards and Houghton Stow [phonetic] provided us with empty bushel baskets.

We would then get these items and put them together in baskets and we would sell them two or three at a time, as multiples, four or five times a day, each day of the auction. And we would have everything from atlases to jams and jellies, to candy, to lobster-shaped lollipops, to soy sauces, to spicy oils. You name it. If it was made... Teddie Peanut Butter. Anything that was made here in Massachusetts that people would like to have, we went after it. And we got them. They would donate 100 items so we would have enough for a hundred baskets. Sometimes they'd only donate 50 items, so 50 baskets would get that. So our advertising and our scripts would say the baskets contain a variety. You never know what you're going to get. But here's an example. We'd have a display set up with some of the items or a lot of the items that were going to be there. Can't guarantee it's going to be in your basket, but it's here.

Got to a point where we had so much stock that we had to divide it up because it wouldn't all fit in the baskets. We pulled out the organic products, Amy's Organic Foods and everybody else's organic foods, and we made a separate organic basket. Then we had so much more stuff, we had a dessert basket that was just sweets. So we had three different kinds of baskets going at the same time. We had florists donating cello wrap and we had florists donating the green paper that they wrap their flowers in that we'd line the baskets with. And they donated these big bows that we put on the baskets. So we had all these well-decorated baskets that we would show on air. And we had one expanded that we had opened that you could see as the prop, that was set up as a prop. In fact, I actually glued the items down so that it wouldn't roll around because we were bringing it on and off the set three or four times a day, and we had to last for the 10 days of auction. So we did that for quite a while. That kind of stuff.

That was one of my main jobs for many years—the Bay State Baskets. It was fun. It was something I enjoyed doing. And in the middle of it all, I got sick one year and I had to have more help. We had a whole team that would put the baskets together. We had pallet racks with all the items on it. When I was sick I would sit there and direct people because I couldn't touch or do it myself which was not the most fun, but I was there. Trisha, who was in charge of a lot of it at that point, I used to call her from home. And she would say, "Yes, Steve. Okay, Steve." Wasn’t feeling well. And then after the auction was over she said, "You used to call in and you didn't make any sense at all what you were saying. We just said, 'Yes, Steve.' And just hung up because you were still out of it from being sick." It was funny. Those were fun days. It was very interesting times with the auction.

MONIZ: So somebody would call to make a bid, and then you would write the bid down?

WASSERMAN: Yes.

MONIZ: Tell me how it worked.

WASSERMAN: We had bid slips and the phones would ring. We had 50 phones set up. And there would be a team that would work a three-hour shift. And those 50 people would be up there taking bids. Sometimes if there was an empty phone I'd just go up there just for the fun of it and just sit down and take over a phone. It was… Phones would ring. You'd say, "Welcome to WGBH, Boston. Which item are you bidding on?" And they would give you the item number or they'd give you what it was and then we'd look at all the boards we had up all over the place—the blackboards with all the items on it—to try to find which table it was located on. We had four or five tables going at the same time, A, B, C, ... E. Then we had a quickie board. We had a multiples board. We had ... you name it. There was something going on. Anything we could do to sell items and sell them as fast as possible, we did.

So we would find the item. We would ask them how much they wanted to bid for it. They would usually ask, "What's the current high bid?" And I would look at the board and we'd tell them what the bid was. And they would give a bid. Then sometimes you'd look up and the bid has already been exceeded what they had already said. "Well, it's already gone past that. What would you like to do?" And they'd say, "Well, leave it alone. Maybe that person won't get it and I'll get it." Other times they would up bid. We'd fill out the slip. We'd hold it in our hands in the air and a bid runner would come and take it from us and run it over to that table. There would be people at the table to take the bids and put them in order and tell the people at the blackboards to change the price based on what the new bid was.

And that went on continuously for hour after hour after hour. And each table was sold off in rotation, A, B, C. And then they would throw in an E every once in a while, which were the bigger items. And then they'd throw a quickie board in which was basically nine items and they would read them. They would flip the board. On the other side of the board were nine more items. They'd read those items and then they'd go back and sell off the first nine items immediately. And that's the way that worked. And they would just lower it and keep loading it with things and it was everything from hard items to gift certificates to jewelry to art. Anything that you can imagine. Julia Child one year auctioned off a cow.

MONIZ: What?

WASSERMAN: Yes. It was a calf in the studio and she auctioned that off.

MONIZ: Why a cow?

WASSERMAN: It was donated. We took anything. We took a pink Cadillac one year. It was a used pink Cadillac. Some years we had four or five cars, all used. We sold them. We had a pink Cadillac. It was eventually bought by the owner of a local beverage company to give to his wife as a gift. That stayed in the family a number of years after that.

That's a little side story. I eventually met that gentleman. He was in the beverage industry. One of my accounts was Pepsi Cola and Coca Cola. I had both accounts and I actually met him at a later date. And I said, "I remember that." And we reminisced over the pink Cadillac that he got. And that's how I knew he bought it for his wife. So it was fascinating. The whole process.

And everything was donated. We paid for nothing. Nothing at all. The forms, the envelopes. Everything was donated. It was an amazing system of getting anything you needed. The packing materials were donated. Everything that we needed to operate the auction was donated. Whether it was food for the volunteers, drinks for the volunteers. Anything and everything was donated. Every piece of paper was donated. Every envelope was donated. Everything we mailed was donated. Anything we left behind to a donor was a donated piece of paper. We never bought anything. It was amazing how the community came together and donated everything that Channel 2 needed to make this auction happen. It was quite fascinating.

MONIZ: Did you have a sense when you first started volunteering here that WGBH was so well loved and well … ?

WASSERMAN: Oh, yes. There was no question about that. You could see it in the people that were donating things, in the bidders and what they would say when they would call. We had a woman call every year. She must have called and was high bidder on 20 to 25 to 30 items. Sometimes even more. Want me to give you her name?

MONIZ: Sure.

WASSERMAN: Her name was Mrs. J. K. Lilly. She's long passed now. She was the wife to one of the heirs to the Eli Lilly and Company drug company. And she spent her summers here on
the Cape; lived in Indianapolis. And the auction was on in June, and she used the auction to buy all of her Christmas presents. That's what she did. She would bid on everything. She'd sit by her television and bid on the things she liked, and those became her Christmas presents. And she did it every year for many, many years. In the old days the high bidder's names were announced. They ended up having to stop that for various reasons. Fake names and things like that came up, so there were some problems. They ended up stopping using the names, and we just called the high bidder to confirm that they were the high bidder. So we ended up just announcing what the high bid was and not who the high bidder was. We had a lot of problems with that too, initially, because if two people bid the same amount, it was the first one who bid that amount. That's the one who got it. And when we announced the high bid was $60 and they didn't get a call, they would call us. "I bid $60. Why didn't you call me?" So that was a small problem that we got over initially.
And for the rest of the auction that's how we ended up doing it. Calling people. So we had a confirming squad that did nothing but confirm bids. Because you'd call somebody and they'd not necessarily be home. So it was continuously trying to reach these folks. It was very interesting. The whole process. It was part of the 4000 volunteers.

MONIZ: Yes. So then tell me after the winning bid, the auction's over. What happened next?

WASSERMA We took no credit cards. So you had to come in to pick up and pay. So we had, post auction, a "pick up and pay" area, which was manned by a huge number of people. And people would come to the station on Western Avenue, and they'd line up at the "pick up and pay" window. They would fill out a slip with the items that they were high bidders on. The runners at "pick up and pay" would look for the items in the computer, then go to the shelf that they were marked on. Once it came out of the studio after it had been presented, it went to the "pick up and pay" area, and on the auction bid slip was the shelf number and location of where that item was. Then that was put into the computer so that when somebody came to pick an item up we knew exactly where to look for it.

So at that point people would either pay by cash or check. At the beginning we didn't take credit cards. And we had things for people to do. We had a cotton candy machine. We had out apples that were donated. We had all kinds of things to keep people entertained while they were waiting at "pick up and pay." We had drinks for them and all kinds of things while that was all going on. So they'd come to "pick up and pay," get their items.

Now some of the art, you could see on TV, but once you saw it in person you weren't quite so sure whether this was really something you really wanted. So back in those days, you were allowed to say "no" at "pick up and pay," to anything. Most people took the items whether they were ugly or not ugly. But some people said, "No. This isn't what I expected. I don't want it." So it was left. So that happened a lot. We also had items that never sold to begin with. We had thousands of items. We had 10 days, 12 hours a day of auctioning. We had a lot of items.

So after "pick up and pay" was finished, which lasted about 10 days, people were allowed to come and claim their items. We would shut down "pick up and pay." We'd have items left over. What do you do with that? We had a post-auction auction. Postauction auction, or the PAA, was for the volunteers and then for staff. Everything was then brought back into the studio, put on tables, and a certain day was assigned that this was going to happen. And all the volunteers that were interested in getting some of the items, the items were put on the table at their opening bid. I think it was the opening bid. I'm trying to remember now. Either that or 50% of value. I think it was opening bid.

You could pick them up and take them and pay for them. That went on for about 45 minutes or so. Phil Collier, the head of the auction at the time, would decide how long it was going to happen. And so at the end of that period everybody had to take what they were going to buy and pay for them and leave the building. But then you could come back. We then had a silent auction with everything that was left. And the silent auction you could put your price, the amount you wanted to pay on it, starting with a dollar, and go up. But you couldn't hover over an item. Now a lot of people saw an item at the beginning. They wanted it. But didn't want to pay the opening bid. They wanted to pay less. So they left it hoping that they were going to be able to buy it at less than that in the second half of the post-auction auction.

Well, everything was left on the tables when everybody had to leave. When they came back and everything had been moved around. So people couldn't run over to that table and see the item that they really wanted, bid on that at the dollar, and stay there and wait for somebody else to bid on it. They couldn't do that. So they had to run all over the place to find out where it had been placed. Then we had volunteers, the troubleshooters would volunteer to follow people, to watch people, make sure they weren't hovering. If they saw somebody hovering on an item they made them leave. Because you couldn't hover. Somebody else could put an amount down. You had to go someplace and come back. And you never knew when Phil was going to say, "The auction is over. Everybody leave."

At that point, they would go over to all of the items and circle the highest bid. Then people would be allowed to come back in, go over, and if they were sure that that was their high bid, they'd go to that item. Everybody had a ticket and they had to write a number down next to their high bid. Then they would pay for it and get it at that price.
It's a lot of fun. And that would last about an hour and a half, post-auction auction.

MONIZ: The whole thing sounds like quite an operation.

WASSERMAN: It was a huge operation. It was a lot of fun. Left over, I picked up a lot of stuff in postauction including a set of Dali prints which I still have to this day, which has gone up in
value considerably since then. But it was really a lot of fun. The volunteers loved it. They came back year after year after year. The jobs were there. The auctioneers were there. We have volunteers that did nothing but handle the auctioneers. We had, in our Conner's [phonetic] conference room at 125 Western Avenue, they had food set up for the auctioneers. The auctioneers were basically a "who's who" in greater Boston. The governor. The mayor. The Lieutenant Governor. The Secretary of State. All of the local politicians. The City Council members. Everybody who was anybody. Plus a lot of the business owners that donated year after year after year were also auctioneers.

I was involved with wine for a while. We had wine people there. We had the Skinner wine folks who helped us out with their ... All these auctioneers were there. People like Rex Trailer back in the days, who was a local personality. We had personalities, news people from the stations who came over to be an auctioneer for a table. They got to auction one or two tables. They were given the scripts. They read the scripts—the people that we're talking about. And they loved doing it. And they loved coming over to do it.

It was just another aspect of auction that made it so much fun. Out of the volunteers, there were two ladies that took care of all these auctioneers. And then they had runners that would take the volunteers from Conner's [phonetic] up to the studio, make sure they were settled in the green room. And in the green room we had people. We had hors d'oeuvres for them in the green room and they would talk. And they would get a copy of their script so they could look at the scripts at that point. And if they had any questions or pronunciations they could get that out of the way. And then they would be brought out onto the studio in time to do their table.

And we had the people who did the crossover work, basically controlled what was going on. Went from table to table to table announcing who the auctioneer was. And that's how the auction went on. It went on for hour after hour like that, day after day. Then it was auction central. Then it was everybody in the control room. The only paid staff were the people in the control room who ran, and the camera people. Everybody else were volunteers.

MONIZ: What was the relationship among the volunteers like?

WASSERMAN: It was a wonderful relationship. It was like a brotherhood. To this day, there are friendships formed during auction that are still there. We get together once a month with two or three families. We go out to dinner with couples that were auction people. That's still going. And there are reunions all the time. Different groups that worked together for years. The troubleshooters. Every year they have a party for the troubleshooters. The same group gets together. And this goes on throughout our whole auction world. People that I never see and never were involved with have their own group parties, and I'm with other folks. It just goes on like that. It's just a wonderful experience. And when auction ended as a live entity it was very sad. But times change. GBH news times have changed. The space and the auction have changed.

Ebay changed everything. When ebay came around and you could get on your computer, look at an item, "I want that. Okay. Current bid is $2. I'm willing to spend $50 for it." And they put in a high bid of $50. But it only goes up in the $2 increments or whatever it is, and if it gets to $30 and they're the high bid, they win it for $30. They don't have to watch it. They don't have to continually watch the TV or watch the computer to see what's going on. So that changed these auctions quite a bit. Because people no longer wanted to spend all day sitting in front of a TV waiting for their items, or items to come up that they would want to bid on. If they're looking for a trip, all they have to do is go online to find a trip right now on a trip site and go ahead. If they're looking to buy a television set, they can do the same thing. And buy them at auction there.
So it changed the way that people looked at auction. So we had to change too. So we went to an online auction which basically did the same as what ebay did. You looked at an item, you liked it. Okay, it's going to be on for three days. Current bid is $10. You're willing to pay $100. You put in your high bid. It's $5 increments and you are automatically increased and if it reached 100 and somebody outbid you, you'd get an email that you'd been outbid and if you want to continue, go on back in and change your bid. Which is what changed the way auctions were done.

So we had to go along with that, which means we did not need all of the volunteers that we had. When we stopped auction a lot of people were very upset and disappointed. This was a summer ... People took vacations based on the auction, took their vacation time to work the auction. It became a way of life and a major interest for them. And when it stopped it was hurtful to a lot of people and they couldn't quite understand why WGBH would do this. To this day some are resentful that the auction stopped.

MONIZ: What year did it stop?

WASSERMAN: Good question. I'm going to guess 2010 maybe. Around there. Sometime in that period. Eight years ago.

MONIZ: So you've stayed involved with WGBH. Had you already gotten involved in other ways before the end of auctions?

WASSERMAN: No. I was only involved with auction. Then I got involved with wine during auction. Phil Collier, the head of auctions, got me involved in the wine portion of it also. And wine continues to this day. So when [the auction] stopped being live,

I still had a job. A lot of people didn't have the jobs any more. There were still some jobs. There were jobs for people to go after items. We have a whole cadre of folks now that make telephone calls to get items. I'm also in charge of the volunteers that go pick up the items because we don't have the go-getter teams anymore that went and actually got the items from each of the stores. Now, when volunteer telephone people get an item that can't be mailed to us, they send me an email. I then put it on a list and I send out a list once every couple of days to about 100 volunteers who've said that they would be willing to pick up items for auction. And then it's assigned on a first come, first served basis. They go get the items and bring them to the station.

So there is still that kind of involvement, plus the telephone folks. Then there are the script writers; the scripts still have to be written. Data still has to be entered into the system. And data has to be entered into the online portion. So, there's still a lot of auction jobs available. Some of them are done by volunteers. Some of them are done by interns. Some of them are done by staff. So it's a combination now. So, auction is still there, but the number of volunteers is definitely, definitely less. It's under 100 at this point that are required to keep the auction going.

MONIZ: And so this is the wine auction?

WASSERMAN: Wine and general auction. The wine auction is a whole bunch of volunteers: Me. That's it. I'm the whole wine auction. I go after the items. I solicit the donations. I pick them up or get them delivered here. I list them. I take pictures of them. I stack them in the wine cellar. I put everything away. I pull the lots. I put the lots together. I write the scripts. I package everything up. And the only thing I don't do is, when people come in to pick them up, if I'm not here, one of the staff members will then give it to the people that have paid for it. It's not pick up and pay because it's already been pre-paid.

Everything is paid for by credit card now. In order to bid at auction now you have to give your credit card with the understanding that if you are the high bidder your card is going to be charged. So that's what's going on now. And probably a third of our items are still too big to mail. So we have things being picked up all the time. Maybe it's not a third. Maybe it's probably 20% of the items that are not mailed to us. The others are either dropped off or we pick them up.

MONIZ: And does the auction take place at the same time of year that it did when it was larger?

WASSERMAN: It used to be June; now it's May. [When it was live] it used to be June for 10 days, then it went to seven days, then it went to three days. It's now the whole month of May. May 1 to May 30. And then items that don't sell, we have what we call "extra innings." So the following week, after auction ends, we put everything together, see what we have left, and then we open up the auction again online for extra innings. Some of the items we've cut prices on. Others we haven't because we started to see that people started getting savvy and say, "Oh, if this doesn't sell, it's going to be cheaper during extra innings." So we've started not making them cheaper in extra innings on a lot of the items just because we thought we didn't really need to. Because people are going to buy them. If they were interested, they would buy them. If they weren't interested at all, they're not going to buy any of them.

We would then have a post-auction auction after auction here at the station. With anything that's truly left over that we can't do anything with we would open the auction to staff and hold it in the lobby here at GBH. We would put all of the items out that we had left over, open to the staff with the price on it. And staff and volunteers could come and pick up whatever is left over down there for a bargain price so that we didn't have to store it. That went for gift certificates, gift cards, and tangible items that we had left over.

MONIZ: What's the relationship like among volunteers, interns, and staff?

WASSERMAN: It's different. The volunteers are in one room. Interns are in another area. And staff is in a different area. So we really don't see each other a lot. We know each other. We know who each other are. Staff we are familiar with a lot. Staff mixes with us all the time. Interns come and go because they're here for a semester and then they're gone. Some of them, just like any group, are friendlier than others and go out of their way to meet the volunteers and say hi to the volunteers. Others just do their work and do what they're supposed to do and that's basically it. So it's a mix, just like everything else. Volunteers come and go. Interns come and go. Staff is pretty stable. It's a pretty stable staff. We're all very friendly.

Staff makes it a point to make sure that they see and talk to all the volunteers. Every day. The staff comes in to our area to see what's going on and to see everybody. They all make an effort to do that, even though they're busy. Head of the volunteers, Jaime Reese. Jaime is an amazing lady. The amount of work that she has to do with all of the events that she has to get volunteers for. And she will stop and listen to any volunteer at any time and talk with them even though she's got 700 things that she needs to do. And she still manages to get her work done and to be extremely outgoing and friendly to all of the volunteers.

And then they have events for the volunteers. They have two or three parties a year. At the start of auction there'll be a volunteer party. At the end of auction there'll be a volunteer party for those involved in auction. And then there's a holiday party every year for all of the volunteers. We have a potluck and a Yankee swap. And that's a lot of fun. We get 70 or 80 or 100 volunteers come to that. It's just fun. They work to keep the volunteers happy. And the staff throughout the building ... I mean there's eight or nine hundred people that work here. They all know that volunteers are very important and I'll walk down a corridor and somebody will say hi to me and say thank you very much for volunteering.

I get that throughout the building. We get it from production people, from other people in the departments. Anybody that knows you're a volunteer, or if you say you're a volunteer in conversation they'll say, "Thank you very much." They all say it. Nobody is threatened by volunteers thinking they're going to take their job or anything like that. We're doing things that the staff don't do, that they don't have training for. A lot of these jobs are very different. And so there's a place for everybody here at GBH.

MONIZ: You mentioned you're a docent. Can you talk a little bit about that?

WASSERMAN: Sure. When this building opened in 2007, we moved from our old location at 125 Western Avenue. We were in 12 different buildings and it was very difficult for anybody to know what was going on in the 12 different buildings, nevermind for getting to a meeting on time. When the ruling came down that everything had to be digital by 2009, GBH looked at their existing facilities on Western Avenue, and found that they didn't have any room to digitize that building. They needed to move. They started looking for a site. They found a new site, which was two buildings - one existing building and one vacant lot. They said, "This is where we're going to be."

They built this second building and it opened in 2007. The second building is the production facility. And it was a glorious state of the art building and they wanted to show it off. And the best way to show it off is to have a team of docents available to give tours of the facility. So they put together a tour that ran approximately 45 minutes, with a script and everything else. And they went looking for docents. A request went out for volunteers that wanted to be docents and we had about 20, 25 people that took the course, which lasted about two and a half months, to learn everything that they needed to know about GBH, their

production facilities, and about the history of GBH so that they could actually give an intelligent tour that lasted 45 minutes.

The tour that they put together, the script they put together, actually would run a little over an hour. So everybody had to either figure out a way to get it in 45 minutes or have their tours run a little late or leave a few things out. So all the docents tours are a little different. And so we have taken probably 30,000 people through the building by now. Jaime does keep track. We do have to give a report every time of how many people we took through. It's at least 30,000 [people who] have gone through the building. Probably more by now with these tours. We give tours to school groups. We give public tours a couple of days a week at two o'clock in the afternoon. We give private tours. We have visitors coming in.

Since we have one of the largest PBS outlets we have visitors coming in from all over the country and they'd like to see the facility. Docents give tours to them. Our RLS (or our Ralph Lowell Society, which is the higher membership group here)—we give special tours to our RLS prospective members, and members, and families. We give tours to community groups. We give tours to ... You name it, we'll give tours to them. Everything from foreign language speaking groups. There's a Japanese school in the area, Showa, that brings their kids in from Japan to teach them how to speak English and they immerse them in the culture here and they bring them here.

In fact we had an award sitting on the wall in the lobby in Japanese. I couldn't read it. So I had a Japanese group of kids in, I pointed to it, "Anybody can read that?" And they looked at it and one woman put up her hand and came over. She read it and she looked at me and she said, "What's a Zoom?" And I said, "Zoom is one of our children's programs." She said, "Well, that's for excellence in broadcasting for your children's program Zoom in Japan." That was the foreign one that was sitting on the wall. It's still down there in the lobby now. Now I know what that's for. I told all the other docents what it is so they all know that that is for Zoom in Japan.

That shows the international reach of our programming; it's all around the world. That's what the docents do. There are days that I'll be here doing something for wine and I'll get a phone call from Jaime, who says, "Do you have a half hour? I just got a call. There's somebody in the building that they want to give a quick tour to." And I'll drop everything and go do it. There's a couple of other people here in the building. We get the schedule about the 20th of every month for what's available for the following month. And everybody chooses and then you have your tours assigned. And that's been going on since 2007, since we opened the building. And that's the docent program.

MONIZ: How else are you involved?

WASSERMAN: High school quiz show. I'm one of the volunteers that works on that. I've worked on Sing that Thing. Ice Cream Fun Fest—I am the scooper captain. We have seven or eight different ice cream companies who are providing ice cream for Ice Cream Fun Fest. And I've got teams of scoopers in the morning and the afternoon that scoop the ice cream and give them out to all the kids in line, the adults in line. So I head that up. And I'm also in charge of the ice cream truck, refrigerated truck, and I have a crew that makes sure that all the ice cream stations are full of ice cream and doing that.

MONIZ: Is that a fundraiser or ...?

WASSERMAN: It's a fundraiser, the Ice Cream Fun Fest, yeah. It's scheduled for this coming Saturday. And we'll have close to 1,000 people come to it, and family groups. Starts at 10 o'clock in the morning and goes till 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Two sessions, morning and afternoon. Then when we found that we had the tents for the entire weekend that they're up, we're now going to have the Craft Beer Festival in the evening. So we use the same tents. We don't have to spend extra money for another event. We've found another use for the tent. And so we now have the Craft Beer Festival. We have 32 different craft beer companies. We have music. We have dancing. We have food. We have everything. We have 500, 600, 700 people coming to that Saturday evening.

Since the tents are still going to be there on Monday morning, we have a staff ice cream party under the tent on Monday morning, around noon I think, before they take the tent down. So we are using the tent as much as we possibly can for three events now and that's one of the other things that I'm involved with. And I've been involved with other events here too. There are showings. Every time we put on a

new program we have a screening here at the station. And the screening requires volunteers and it also requires docents. At all of our screenings, we do 15 and 20 minute quick tours for participants who come to any of the screenings here. And that's pretty much a constant thing.

There's always something going on. And the other thing we use docents for is any event that we have. If we've rented the space out to Harvard, or to do a TED talk, and there's some free time, we have docents give tours for people who come to these events. Anything we can do to get people to know a little bit more about WGBH and to possibly become members, we do. It's all part of the fundraising package that we do here.

MONIZ: And I know you're volunteering with some other organizations. Can you remind me what those are?

WASSERMAN: I'm also a volunteer with B'nai B'rith Senior Housing. I'm on the management committee. I've been on there for 10 or 15 years. We have 300 units of senior housing under management right now. We've built others. We've got another hundred units that are pre-construction at this point in two or three different towns. They are all income-eligible units. They are all housing for the elderly as opposed to extended care facilities or things like that. They have to be able to take care of themselves. Rents are based on their eligibility and it's all sliding scale rents.

I'm also a library trustee in my town. And I'm also a precinct warden in my town for elections. A few things to keep myself out of trouble.

MONIZ: Is there a common thread that you see among your different volunteer activities?

WASSERMAN: It's all volunteer activity. It's all involved with helping people in one way or another. All of it's volunteer. There's no compensation for any of the things that I do. There is compensation - the satisfaction of what I'm doing. And that's helping people. And here at WGBH I always end up with a tee shirt from every event, or hat, or something. So there is some compensation. There's also free food. If there's food in the event, we usually can have some food after the event is over.

So it's a lot of fun. It's enjoyable. The people that I deal with in all the organizations I belong to and everybody that I work with makes it worthwhile to do this. I've got the time. I've got some skills, so it makes it possible for me to do these things. Also, my temple that I belong to is looking to do some work on the

outside of their building, and since I've got the construction experience through B'nai B'rith and through some of my own projects, I'm volunteering there to try to get the facade of the building upgraded to make it look better. So that, too, is another project that I'm working on. Keeps me out of my wife's hair.

MONIZ: Yeah, it certainly sounds like you're busy.

WASSERMAN: Yeah.

MONIZ: Let me ask for a couple of final reflections.

WASSERMAN: Sure.

MONIZ: Is there something that you regret or that didn't go the way you hoped in your philanthropic activities?

WASSERMAN: The only thing I regret is that I never made more money in my life that I could give more to the organizations I volunteer for. I feel that every one that I volunteer for is a worthy organization and needs to be funded in one way or another. Whether I do it with my own manual labor and time or with cash or with both, I wish I had more cash because, yes, my time and my activities help but there's certain things that that can't provide. So I wish I had more money to do that.

MONIZ: And what's your proudest accomplishment?

WASSERMAN: Probably my marriage and my son. And his two children, my grandchildren. That's probably my proudest accomplishment.

MONIZ: And what about your proudest accomplishment of your philanthropy?

WASSERMAN: The philanthropy? It's the times that I've given to GBH I'm sure. I've raised probably through my wine alone in the last 10, 15 years, probably $50,000 a year.. So I'm looking at half to three quarters of a million dollars in wine that we've sold, which is very nice. I'm very proud of that—that we've been able to do it. And the donors. I'm so proud of the donors for providing us with this stuff. They're willing to come across and right out of their own personal wine cellars. A lot of that is where it's coming from. From collectors. It's so nice to have these people on our side. That's part of what I'm proud of here.

MONIZ: And you've shown me a whole lot of different objects relating to GBH, the auctions and whatnot. Is there one object that you think particularly captures your story of your involvement with WGBH?

WASSERMAN: Well, I do have an apron left over from auction. It was a major volunteer apron, which was nice to wear that. During auction week, everybody wore an apron. Basically they were different colors. They had what their job was on it. It had pockets in it because you always had to carry something around with you. And troubleshooters had red ones so that everybody knew they were troubleshooters. So if you had a problem you'd go to somebody with a red apron and they would help you out. They also handled phone inquiries from people that needed help. So I'm proud that I had an apron. Everyone that was back in that area has their own apron still with them and they are proud that they own those aprons because they were an integral part of what they did here at GBH.

MONIZ: I'm very grateful that you're donating it to the museum. It's a terrific acquisition. Thank you.

WASSERMAN: You're welcome.

MONIZ: Well, thank you. This has been a fascinating conversation. I've really learned so much.

WASSERMAN: I'm glad you're here, and I'm glad you're willing to do this, and I'm glad you're enjoying it.

MONIZ: Thank you.