

**Interview With Brenda Berkman
December 7, 2004**

J.L. It's Jane Latour on December 7th, 2004, interviewing Brenda Berkman in Brooklyn at her home.

So, Brenda, it's been eight and a half years since I've interviewed you. You were recently promoted last time,--the last interview, which was August 7th, 1996,--to lieutenant so a lot's happened since then. I would particularly like you to speak about going into your position of command and what that was like, as a Lieutenant.

B.B. Well, that was a long time ago.

J.L. Yeah.

J.L. Anything that springs to mind. We could dwell more on the Captain's status, but--you know--as a neophyte Lieutenant
.....

B.B. Well, there's not that much difference between the two, actually.

J.L. Yeah.

B.B. But ...

J.L. But that was new for you. What stood out?

B.B. Yeah. I mean, I was really glad to become an officer for a bunch of different reason. One was the boredom factor and all of that. After you've been doing fire fighter work for X number of years, yeah, it's time to move into, like, a different role, I think. And for me it was time to do that. And also, I mean, it wasn't, I don't think, as hard for women firefighters to adjust to the role of being in charge as it is for the men because the ... at least the first generation of women firefighters in New York were never part of the gang. You know? They ... they weren't that accepted in the kitchen to begin with so it wasn't that hard to take themselves out of the kitchen and --you know--be in charge and not be one of the guys. And that's a very hard thing for a lot of the male firefighters. And I don't think it was nearly as hard for women. Certainly it wasn't that hard for me because I really appreciate as an officer, that I set the schedule. You know? I'm not relying on a committee vote so much. I mean, I ask the guys what they want to do, but I go upstairs in my office and I do what I have to do in terms of my responsibilities. I'm sure that the guys are doing what they're supposed to be doing in terms of the ... their daily routine, and--you know--I run the drills, I'm in charge of the building inspection and I like that. I like that part of being an officer.

J.L. So how was the response to you when you came in as a Lieutenant?

B.B. Well, I think I told you that the first thing I--one of the first things that happened to me when I went to the Battalion was that the Battalion Chief came to visit me and the Company I was in for the tour ...

J.L. Which was? What was the number?

B.B. I don't know. It was Ladder 24 or... It was one of the .. like, my first tour in the Battalion, he came in and said that he didn't want me in the Battalion and I said: Well, that's too bad because I really wanted to be in this Battalion. And I thought to myself: This guy just gave me a get out of jail free ticket. I mean, now how could he possibly say that he was evaluating me fairly if he started out with that kind of an attitude? So I just sort of spread that story around a little bit, and before I knew it--you know--people were treating--at least at the Battalion level were treating me like--you know--normally or relatively normally and that was pretty much the end of that. And it's a totally ... It was a Battalion that not many officers liked working in. It worked out good for me. I enjoyed the area that we worked in a lot, which was mid-town Manhattan. There was a lot of variety of emergencies and types of buildings and a lot to learn and I had a pretty ... when I did take a regular company, which was Ladder 12, there was a ... a number of different spots open and I liked that place. And one of the reasons I liked it was because for a New York City Fire Department at least it had a fair amount of diversity among its firefighters. I mean, I was the only woman but they had several Hispanics in the House and several African-Americans and it turns out, a couple of gay men, and--you know,--I mean, so it was ... it was not as monolithic as a lot of places that you could work. So it meant that--you know--I really feel like some of the white men felt a little bit more restrained in some of their comments and behavior because of the large number of some kind of minority that was there at any one time.

J.L. You joined a new union when you got that position?

B.B. Um-hum.

J.L. And how was that?

B.B. Much better.

J.L. Was Peter Gorman the head of it then?

B.B. I honestly don't remember.

J.L. Yeah. But there was an improvement?

B.B. If he wasn't the President then he became so shortly. He's been ... He's been President for quite a long time now and he was just reelected President. And, I mean, the first thing about the union was that at the meetings there wasn't nearly as much screaming and cursing and open bad mouthing of women firefighters that went on, as few meetings as I had attended with the UFA. And--you know,--the first couple of union meetings that I went to I was really, really nervous, and someti--there were comments made from time to time about the women that weren't particularly flattering, but ... and you know--it's still the case that when I go to a union meeting, there's still some guys that just won't sit next to me,--you know--which is hysterical to me. But in terms of the union Board--you know--I mean, I would say I have a pretty good relationship with them that I've developed in the last couple of years, in

particular, where--you know--I could stop by the union office and people have me--you know--invite me in and offer me coffee and--you know--sit down and talk to me at length and--you know,--not just Gorman but some of the other guys as well. And Pete has been very supportive about certain kinds of things. Like when I made a motion to ... that our Union should donate--make a donation to the strike fund for the London Fire Brigade, Pete got that through the Board. And then, when we were at a general meeting another officer stood up and proposed that they double the amount that the Board had allocated. And Pete gave me full credit, along with this other guy, for--you know--pushing the donation. He never hesitates to--you know-- say something flattering about me if he feels that--you know--I did something for the union or in the interests of the Department that the union approves of. So ...

J.L. Quite a switch.

B.B. Quite a switch. He makes a point of saying: Brothers and Sister at the union meeting 'cause usually I'm the only women there. I mean, there are two other women officers now but they don't attend very often. And,-- you know--if you had a video camera it would show that I'm actually wearing a union sweatshirt. You know? They haven't gotten to the point where they order a lot of small sizes, but they do give me stuff--you know--when I do go and ask for it. So ...

J.L. So let's segue ...

B.B. That's a switch.

J.L. Yes, a big switch. Let's segue to when you were promoted to Captain.

B.B. The UFA, on the other hand, has gotten worse.

J.L. Oh really, 'cause I ... that's the question that I thought of and that I just added.

B.B. In my opinion, they've gotten a lot worse.

J.L. Let's talk about that now. How ... Let's talk about how they've gotten worse, specifically.

B.B. Well, the guy who was elected as president of the UFA is ...

J.L. Steve Cassidy.

B.B. Steve Cassidy, made his name on his opposition to a statue that was supposed to be put at headquarters after 9-11 that revised, as he called it, the three guys putting up the flag at the Trade Center, which was a famous picture that was all white men, and the statue wasn't going to have any women in it but it was going ... it did have a figure of three male fire fighters, one who looked sort of African-American, one who looked sort of Hispanic and a white male. And Cassidy's thing was: Oh, that's not historically accurate,--you know?--and therefore ... And this is, like, racist because--you know--they're trying to show people who weren't there and everything else. And it was really racist, what he was arguing. And despite the ... You know, it was

a huge embarrassment for the Department 'cause it was a donation and the intent was really pretty innocent. You know? The women fire fighters weren't all that thrilled 'cause there wasn't anything recognizing that there were actually women down there. But in any event, that's how he got to be well known. And then he ran for union president.

J.L. And did they put that up, that statue? Did it

B.B. No. No, the statue never got put up.

J.L. That was withdrawn.

B.B. Yeah. I don't know what the hell happened to it,

J.L. Yeah.

B.B. But it's gone. And every time I see Cassidy he is--you know--he won't talk to me. You know? He won't look at me. It's ... it's really pretty absurd. He's never.... As far as I know, he's never met with the women fire fighters organization. I'm not President of it any more, but he's never met with them.

J.L. This is interesting because Patrick Lynch from the Police Union, ran on a platform after 9-11 to change it away from Brotherhood--you know?--of Patrolmen,

B.B. Yeah. Right.

J.L. or Patrolmen's Benevolent Asso--

B.B. Right.

J.L. It was going to be

B.B. Or it was going to be ...

J.L. Brothers and Sisters after ...

B.B. It was going to be the Patrol Officers or something?

J.L. Or something.

B.B. I forget what it was. Yeah.

J.L. Something--you know--generic rather than ...

B.B. and that ... Right. And that

J.L. He didn't push through with it, I mean, but ...

B.B. No. That was defeated ...

J.L. by the Board.

B.B. sort of narrowly, but ...

J.L. But still, it's quite a difference.

B.B. Yeah. And Cassidy is always pushing for a harder physical abilities exam even though he knows that it would have an adverse effect on women. And the union has opposed the ... One of the sort of major affirmative action initiatives that the Department has actually undertaken, namely, the promotional exam for EMS to fire fighter which is supposed to bring in more women and minorities and has actually had that effect, Cassidy and his Board have always opposed that. But he also ... You know, he's done a lot of anti-union stuff, really stuff that has made him very hated by the International and a lot of other locals around the country because he endorsed George [W.]Bush.

J.L. Because of the election, right, and campaigned for him.

B.B. Right, and campaigned for him against ... even though Bush has been awful with respect to the Fire Fighters Union. The International was an early supporter of Kerry. The Officers Union endorsed Kerry,--you know,--and it was really ... And Cassidy went out of his way to--you know--FU all the Locals that had come here after 9-11 and helped and raised money for New York and done all kinds of things, and he just blew 'em off like their opinions didn't count for anything. So I don't think of him as a good union man to begin with. And he's certainly misogynist and --you know--even though he claims to have mended fences with the African-American men. So ...

J.L. So let's talk a bit about being promoted to Captain. And you say it's not that much of a difference between Lieutenant, but were there anything .. What changed or what ...

B.B. Well, the first thing that changed was I came back to Brooklyn from Manhattan and I worked for about nine months for the Safety Chief who had been one of my Battalion Chiefs in the Seventh Battalion, who I had a lot of respect for. And we had a great working relationship. I was ... he was a great boss and mentor. And I enjoyed doing the work but I really didn't enjoy being down at headquarters. I really liked working for him but I didn't like all the other stuff that was going on. And also, I just want I needed to get back to the field. I mean, there's not that many women in the field to begin with and so--you know--every time one of us leaves, however good the reason is,--you know--it's, like, Oh, they're hiding. They don't want to really be firefighters.

J.L. Right.

B.B. You know, you have thirty years in the ... in the field and you spend a year out of the field

J.L. I heard that from a Battalion Captain in Brooklyn about you.

B.B. About me?

J.L. and about the women fire fighters.

B.B. Oh yeah. We're all hiding.

J.L. Um-hum. You can't do the job.

B.B. Yeah. Well ...

J.L. go on light duty ...

B.B. He's full of shit!

J.L. I wrote down the whole list-litany after I spoke to him.

B.B. And where were you talking to him?

J.L. He's somebody--a son of somebody that I know, and he was very concerned ...

B.B. And how many years does he have on the job?

J.L. I'm not sure. I didn't ask him. But he's a Battalion Captain.

B.B. Is he ... No. there's ... He's a Battalion Chief.

J.L. Battalion Chief. Sorry.

B.B. Yeah.

J.L. But he was exceedingly concerned that I not share that with anybody and so he's remaining anonymous. But ...

B.B. Well, there's a bunch of guys--you know? And this attitude ... they can be six months out of proby school, have never worked with a woman, seen a woman at a job, and have very strong opinions about women, because--you know--the Department does very little to counter that. There's so few women on the job and there's nobody to kick their ass ...

J.L. Um-hum. How many women now in the Department--on the job?

B.B. Well, we're still at around the twenty-five mark. I mean, it's around twenty-seven or something like that. But for every woman that they hire,--and they've been hiring about one a class,--so there's been about--you know ... fifty percent of the Fire Department has come on since--the Fire Fighters have come on since 9-11,--fifty percent--three years ago and of that number only ... and so that's ... that's about, Oh, I'd say about nine thousand,--half of nine thousand. So let's say they've hired thirty-five hundred or four thousand;--something like that. Of that number I think eleven are women. And for every woman who comes on there's a woman who retires. I mean, we just had another woman retire not too long ago,--you know?-- So we had a woman who's graduating from Proby school in a couple of weeks, another woman whose just being sworn into the next proby class. We probably have two more women after that. But we--you know,--we did a tremendous amount of volunteer intensive training in ... in 2004, starting with--was it 2004, 2003. I really don't know. I think it was this year. I have to look at my date book,--where we spent eight weeks with these women at the New York Sports Club doing very intensive cardio-vascular and muscle endurance activities in the health club two times a week. Then we did eight weeks of

practicing the exam out at the Fire Academy. And almost all of this was staffed by volunteer women firefighters. And so that's--you know--that's a tremendous commitment. Out of that we got maybe twenty-five women that scored a perfect one hundred. And then ... then there was another group which--you know--got the next lower score. They missed one event by--you know--one second--however many things they missed it by, and they ... some of them got hired through the EMS promotional list. So,--you know--maybe we'll get twenty or twenty-five women off that list which will run for, like, three or four years. So that is an enormous amount of effort for a relatively small return. But if we hadn't done that there wasn't a single woman who scored a hundred on that exam who hadn't been part of our training program, and by that I mean who had attended, like, more than three sessions. Anna did the statistics and it had something to do with--you know--she didn't feel that people who had attended only a couple of times really got the benefit of the program. So that's pretty telling. It means that--you know--you need this kind of intensive effort to have any real chance of success. And for us,--you know--it's heartbreaking to see even one woman fall out of that group.

J.L. Um-hum.

B.B. If we had had a hundred women in that group of likely hires, it wouldn't be nearly as unhappy for us if--you know--half of the hundred said, Oh,--you know--I'm not really interested in the job or--you know--I've decided not to keep up my level of fitness, or whatever.

J.L. Now, that commitment ... I know that somebody sent me an article from the City Club about the initiative with the Sports Club but ...

B.B. Right.

J.L. ... and they mentioned Legal Momentum, and they were involved with that. But United Women Fire Fighters also ... Was that ...

B.B. We provided ... The Sports Club provided some of the staff and they provided Nick McNickle to direct the program and Nick had previously directed the pro--the program before which was run at John Jay College and now ... and then he moved over to the Sports Club and he did this program. And they had some,--you know--they had some trainers there, but they couldn't have run that program without volunteer women firefighters. And so every session there was usually six or eight women firefighters there as well to help with the training. We ran,--you know,--we ran a lot of the stations. And then when we ran ... then Anna Schermerhorn, who's a firefighter in Ladder Nine, one of the younger women--she has about eight or nine years on the job, also from Minnesota, I might add,--Anna organized this whole training program out at the Fire Academy, that was run three times a week. And to run the program properly we had to have a minimum of eight volunteers staffing the course, which we had for every single session. And we were the only ... all the other fraternal organizations ran similar programs,--they were allowed to also run programs,--and the guy from the Fire Department who oversaw the course said that the women Fire Fighters had the best program by far. And we had this enormous level of commitment. Both retired women firefighters and also active duty to ... to show up at these sessions. And then the kids also ... a lot of 'em came--you know,-- went from the eight weeks at the Sports Club to the eight weeks at the Training Academy.

J.L. So let's talk about recruitment from the Fire Department 'cause this seems a good place to talk about it.

B.B. Sucks.

J.L. Sucks still. I know you were working, the last time we were working together, on advocacy. You were trying to do a lot with that. So Douglas White is supposed to be in charge of that. So what do you have to say ...

B.B. Well, they hired ... Well, they hired a--you know,--- they hired a firm to help them with recruitment and it was a firm that had done work in the African-American community but knew nothing about the women's community, and they came up with this slogan: Heroes wanted,--which we felt was really not a good outreach to historically excluded ... excluded groups after 9-11 here all these people who had had no contact with the Fire Service .. the whole image of the Fire Department in their minds was of fire fighters being killed by buildings falling down on top of them. So we really felt that was counterproductive in terms of recruiting people of color.

J.L. Those ads were everywhere.

B.B. Everywhere: Heroes wanted! And you know what? We got people applying from Japan and California and Australia and ...

J.L. What about from Harlem and ...

B.B. Yeah. Well, and yet they were not able to significantly increase the number of people of color and women applying. And you know what? That num--the numbers ... even if you say, all right, we had--you know--two thousand African-American men take the written test and then we had--you know--two thousand Hispanic men take it and we had four hundred women take it,--you know--which is basically the same number that we've had since I took it in 1977 ...

J.L. I thought five hundred women took it last time.

B.B. Yeah. well, I mean,--you know--it's ... they haven't increased that number significantly since 1977. The only thing is that the numbers of people actually taking it had dropped somewhat so they've increased percentage. But that's not the important number. The important number is who is in the top fifty percent of the list. Who's in the top four thousand names on the list? And a lot of these people don't show up for the physical abilities exam, and then if they do, they either didn't score high enough on the written or high enough on the physical abilities exam to actually be in a position to be hired. And then--you know--beyond that, the question is how much does the Department do to actively keep in contact with these people so that they don't lose interest; they don't move and lose their ... their ... You know? It's very labor intensive. Anna Schermerhorn is in constant contact with every woman on that list who has given any indication that she has a continuing interest.

J.L. Now. I know you had discussions with them. What is the problem? They're not responsive to people who've been thinking about this for a very long time and have important things to say about what might work? Why are they so deaf?

B.B. Well, they always think that they know best and they put- and they always reinvent the wheel. They put new people in charge every time. There's re-- ... the person who they put in charge this latest time, I mean, who is really in charge,--not Doug White but somebody else,--had no experience with recruiting people to the Fire Service or any uniformed service for that matter. And,--you know--frankly there wasn't that much direction given to her because the people who had done it the previous time sort of left and didn't pass along any of the ...

J.L. There's no debriefing; nothing ...

B.B. There's no historical memory, none whatsoever. And it's not unique to recruitment. It's pretty much that way with the entire Fire Department. The minute somebody retires and leaves a project, it's like okay, where's the papers? You know? What did this person actually do? Where ... What point in the process are we at? You know? It's like nothing was ever done. It is amazing sometimes how we manage to put fires out, but we do. So what's really discouraging to me is that I look at other Departments who ...

J.L. That are doing better.

B.B. ... who started out in the same place that New York did, both in terms of small numbers, hostility towards women and people of color

J.L. In San Francisco they had a court order for, like, twenty-five years.

B.B. Right, and which I think they recently ended, unfortunately.

J.L. They did.

B.B. But they ended up with over two hundred women. How they got a woman Chief of Department, not that that necessarily guarantees any particular advantage to women, but--you know--this woman hopefully at least has some recognition of some of the issues. In the UK,--I was ... I just got back from the United Kingdom,--when I visited the London Fire Brigade in the early '80's when I first came on the job, they had exactly the same issues, I mean, active harassment and physical abuse of women fire fighters,--you know,--a real derogatory attitude towards women and people of color. Boy, that culture has been forced to ... to turn around. And I see friends of mine who started out after me in the Fire Service, now they're Chief of Department. You know? They're the head of their organizations or they're--you know--very high ranking. They have a real voice in their organizations. And in our Department it's still the case that ...that doesn't exist for women.

J.L. I went on the Internet and looked at the Brits, and it was pretty interesting and amazing how much work they've done.

B.B. It is really amazing.

J.L. What are some of the things they've done that have ...

B.B. I ... some of their equality stuff.

J.L. Do you want to talk about that?

B.B. Well, they have--you know,--they recognize that it's a

cultural change that has to occur. And,--you know--they had the same issues about .. they called it bullying. You know? It's just hazing. This is what we do with all the new recruits, bla, bla, bla, and they've dramatically changed their training methodology. They have set rules and time tables. They do specific outreach in the communities. They have a different hiring process than just--you know--answer a hundred question multiple choice tests that--you know--does ... that actively seeks to reach certain groups. And now they have some really radical--I mean, radical for the Fire Service--initiatives about--you know--bringing people in from the outside who have no Fire Service background to assume certain kinds of administrative roles. I'm not so sure how--you know--how that's going to get integrated into everything, but--you know--they're .. they're moving along. And they've done a lot more research ... I think that they have. You know? They have a political imperative to do this. And there is no political imperative in New York City. I don't know what the hell the Council's doing. But,--you know--the Council yelled and yelled about the whole recruitment process. The ...

J.L. I know, like, a year, a year and a half ago, they had hearings and they had

B.B. They had hearings. They have hearings and ... but they have no teeth. They never, like, punish the Fire Department in any way. No one's held accountable for any of this stuff. The women,--you know--the people who were in charge of this abysmal recruitment effort ...

Side two

J.L.. Okay. So we're ...

B.B. You know? But also, I mean, basically citizens are ... they're not ... they don't seem to care about the fact that the Fire Department doesn't reflect the face of their communities and that--you know--the same numbers of people die in fires every year that always have. The Fire Department's always touting the fact that fire deaths are dropping, but not as you would expect. There's lots of things that --you know--we could be doing to make our communities safer and they're just not happening because people aren't ... they're not focused on that. And so ...

J.L. One thing ... I was at an award ceremony at the Fire Department recently and they talked about more training for the officers, a new training program for the ??

B.B. Well, they'd damned well better have some more training 'cause nobody has any experience. I mean, they've created a situation where the entire Fire Department is under-experienced. They allowed all these senior people to retire with their pension and crap, and they've hired all these new people

J.L. That's a referral to the large exodus after 9-11 in order to take ...

B.B. It's really a dangerous, scary situation.

J.L. ... advantage of the fact that you get to take the top--you get to figure out your best quarters for the pension.

B.B. Yeah. But ...

J.L. I was reading that in "The Chief."

B.B. But,--you know--they've just given a whole series of promotional exams where you could be a Fire Fighter on 9-11 and now you're on the Battalion Chief's list. And ... and these guys have--you know--have no--basically no fire experience to begin with because they came in during a very low level of fire duty. And so,--you know--they would have had to have been on a while to get some .. some experience. But also they have no command experience. They ... they haven't really been in charge of companies. I saw ... I looked at the Battalion Chief's list and there was some guys recently promoted who weren't .. who hadn't even been assigned to a company. They're still bouncing in the Division so they never had a company to ... to--you know--learn about all the little ins and outs of personnel management. And the Department knew this was going on and--you know--you get this guy, [Salvatore] Cassano, who's Chief of Operations, being quoted in the paper saying: Oh,--you know--we got the cream of the crop now.

J.L. Well, I was wondering about that.

B.B. Well, you got people that can memorize,--you know--but I don't know how they're going to be at a fire scene.

J.L. They're highly motivated. That was another way he described them.

B.B. Highly motivated? No. They ... they took three exams right in a row. You know? And the rest of us se--the senior captains, hadn't taken an exam in over six years. That was ... that was when we took the Captain's exam. So these guys took three ex--had three exams, Lieutenant, Captain and now Battalion Chief in the time since we had taken our Captain's exam,--you know?--we'd take .. competing against some ??

J.L. No doubt about it, the FDNY has screwed up. But I want to segue more towards gender issues. And one thing I want to ask you about is just today there was an article about the guy from Staten Island who got smashed in the head with the chair on New Years Eve...

B.B. Yeah. Right.

J.L. And he's filing a big law suit. What about the culture in the fire houses and, in terms of women, and--you know--the kind of the nature of that I mean, I'm sure it varies very ...

B.B. The culture is very hostile.

J.L. Yeah.

B.B. The culture is very hostile to women. It's very hostile to difference. And,--you know--my argument is that if you promote diversity within your organization you benefit not only the people ... so-called minorities in the organization but you also benefit all those white men who really didn't want to go along with this program. You know, they really weren't all that thrilled about

shaving their heads in Proby School and looking like a bunch of skin heads. You know? They ... they might have some differing ideas about how the organization should be run. But basically everybody is shut down in the kitchen. You know? In the U.K. they call it the watch culture because that's ... that's what their crew,--you know--that work together all the time is called. And,--you know--and us ... it's the Fire House kitchen. It's the idea that the guy with the biggest mouth, who's the most obnoxious is the one who sets the tone for the Fire House.

J.L. the Rush Limbaugh of the Fire House.

B.B. Yeah, and--you know--everybody else has to tow the line or they're going to be made fun of or driven out of the Fire House or--you know ... And so they just learn to shut up.

J.L. Um-hum.

B.B. And as a result, all kinds of--you know--important, I think, important contributions from those people ... they just .. then they just kind of regard the job as a place to go and hang up. You know? I'll just go and hang out with my friends and not that ... This is ... this is a work place where we ... we genuinely value peoples' ideas and we want you to think of it as work, not, like, as your ... where you're going to go hang out with the guy who just did your group;--something like that. That's all well and good. I mean, helping each other off duty and ... and being there for each other in times of crisis, that's fine. But the idea that you have to go along with everything that that guy says because--you know--he did your group or because otherwise he's going to make fun of you or ... that's crap.

J.L. Some of the ... I recall reading these stories about the Staten Island incident and some of the stuff that was aimed at him was to sort of like ... along the lines of homophobia or--you know--that kind of stuff.

B.B. Yeah. That ... who knows?

J.L. Who knows?

B.B. I mean, who knows because--

J.L. But is that ...

B.b. You know,--that kind of language is so common that ... nothing to do with .. You know, the Department finally asked me to teach EEO. And one of the scenarios they have is a guy who admitted in the kitchen that he liked to watch "Six Feet Under" and they started calling him a fag. You know? I mean,--you know--this kind of stuff ... it would be funny if it weren't so really demeaning and demoralizing to people. It is unrelenting. And they will just beat a person down and a lot ... and frankly most people can't stand up to it. They just ... they don't want to be bothered. You know? It's not that important to them. They don't see the job as that important. And the kind of stuff that goes on ... the things I've been reading that have come out of the UK,--you know--what they recognize is that if you bully somebody in training they will them adopt a survival thing where either they pretend to go along with the

program but they really don't or they'll actively fight the program all the time,-you know?-or they'll just withdraw, let's say. And I guess the other option is they don't think for themselves. They go along with the program so much they just go along with the program and they never think for themselves that there might be a better way. None of that stuff is good for the organization. You know? It causes a bunch of ... It creates a bunch of office--you know--boss haters, boss fighters. It makes people into--you know--blind followers. It's goofy. And yet this is the culture that is really pushed by the Fire Department and--you know--they're always touting it about how so-and-so was so-and-so's son and--you know--and this guy was my buddy and --you know--just this high school locker room type of thing.

J.L. Tell me about ... well, there's a few ... a few questions I'd like to ask you to reflect back on, just in terms of when you first came in. One question I'm interested in is if you could think a bit about comparing the support from the women's movement, women's organizations, back when you first were trying to become a fire fighter and ... the current, contemporary period.

B.B. Well, we had a lot more need then. I mean, we really had terrible things going on that ... and no clout whatsoever in the Department. I mean, not that we have any clout now but--you know--we were ... we were very junior and inexperienced and we didn't know what ... what the game was. You know? And I'm not saying that there aren't individual situations where women are still having a difficult time; they are, but--you know--now at least they have some senior women within the Fire Department to give them some advice and be advocates on ... on their behalf. That didn't exist for us in the beginning and we really needed organizations like NOW New York City ... And,-you know--at one point, there was this street action group called WAC and they did some great stuff for me when I was--you know--trying to get the doctor who had assaulted me ...

J.L. Was it WAC?

B.B. This was WAC.

J.L. Okay.

B.B. They were very short lived but they were ... they were great for me and they did some street theater that was really ... that got a lot of publicity. And,-you know--we tried very hard, at that point, to form some alliances with the women police officers and the women--the very beginning of the women's sanitation. Women correction officers were ... their then President was very good and a very capable person and--you know--the City Councilors-- some women City Council members who facilitated that, Pam Elam's boss, Miriam Friedlander, at the time. And so that stuff was critical to us then. I would say now that--you know--there's women's groups since then, like the New York Women's Foundation, that funded one of our training programs, not this recent one but the one before that. You know? There's been other groups that have stepped up for us over the years. But I don't think they're as vocal about their support now as they were in the early years. You know? The stuff's just not as egregious as it was then.

J.L. Um-hum. But also it seems that consciousness has faded or is ...

B.B. Oh well,.. I think a lot of people really believe that the situation resolved itself. They're not aware ... Every time you .. that I give a speech or anyone talks about what the actual

numbers are you hear a gasp. Like, when I gave a speech at ... right after 9--11 down at the Women's ...

J.L. National Law Center?

B.B. Yeah, the National Women's Law Center and it was before all these--you know--muck-a-mucks, that ... five thousand people in a Washington ballroom, and you could hear a ... an audible gasp, a loud gasp, from people when I told them how many people--how many women there were in the New York City Fire Department. They don't believe that. They think that by now we've got to have a thousand women in the New York City Fire Department. And--you know--nobody's telling them anything different. So I think a lot of women's organizations just think, okay ...

J.L. It's sort of disappeared as an issue.

B.B. Yeah, because maybe they've heard about the--you know--the woman Fire Chief in San Francisco and the fact that they have over two hundred women there now.

J.L. the Police Chief in Atlanta ...

B.B. Police Chief,--you know-- ... there's one place that has ... Well, San Francisco has both a woman Police Chief and a woman Fire Chief so--you know--I think they think,--you know--New York's ...

J.L. I think so too.

B.B. New York's fixed it when, in fact, they haven't fixed it. So ...

J.L. This ... we're living in a period of real political repression--regression---

B.B. A scary period ...

J.L. Scary, and, I mean, what ... what are your thoughts on the situation for equality, affirmative action, any of that in this ...

B.B. Move to Canada. I don't know. You know, at this point, I mean, it's just fight like hell and ... and--you know--make sure that the next four years after this, that there's a change. Clearly people have misread a lot of the political temperament that's out there in the hinterlands and I ..I really wonder whether we're turning into--you know--two nations here, really not all that different from--you know--the North and the South in the Civil War. I mean, there really do seem to be two political cultures. There's, like, the Northeast culture and ... and California, and then there's, like, the rest of the country. And that's frightening to me because,--you know--I wonder what are these women that voted for the Republicans thinking? Do they really think that ... that a group of people that tried to eliminate Title IX, eliminate the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor ...

J.L. Took all the pay equity stuff off the Web site ...

B.B. Took all the paid ... No, no, eliminated any pay equity initiative; absolutely eliminated them; are willing to send women to Iraq to be killed but aren't willing to give them their full rights in the United States are perfectly happy to have women making--you know-what is it now?-seventy-nine percent ... seventy-nine cents to the dollar .. It's actually dropped, I think, from what it was maybe a year or two ago. Our earning capability as compared to men;- -you know-to go along like that and still have--you know,--really poor job opportunities for women in good paying jobs like the trades and fire fighting. I ... I really ... You know, I think that a lot of women maybe mistook confidence for competency, particularly in a war-time President. And, yes, he exudes confidence, mistaken confidence, mis-based confidence, but it's confidence and ... and it certainly, in my opinion, has nothing to do with competence. Now we have ... we've got him for four more years.

J.L. Yeah. You talked about the ...One of our interviews I asked you about the future and you said one of the big areas that would make a big difference would be Title IX in sports, girls in sports. And I hadn't actually been paying attention to that. But now as a Girl Reporter for a public press I actually have ...

B.B. Jane Latour, girl reporter!

J.L. I woke up and--you know--I had just paid no attention for over twenty years. And it's astounding, the difference in women in sports. I mean, it's just amazing! But ...

B.B. But there's some down sides too.

J.L. Okay.

B.B. I mean, ...

B.B. There's a large number of--you know--educational districts that simply can't afford after-school programs anymore, New York City being one of them, and so a lot of the opportunities for after-school sports have disappeared off the map entirely because of budget concerns. So there's no sports for boys; there's no sports for girls. And--you know,--we never have gotten away from the elitist--you know--NCAA attitude toward sports. Women are now as invested in that as the men. But that being said, I mean, it just thrills me to hear my male co-worker fire fighters talking about how they want their daughters to get a lacrosse scholarship or a tennis scholarship or some kind of scholarship, and they're planning on this! You know? they ...

J.L. Soccer ...

B.B. Right. They are ... they are driving these kids--these girls--to these after-school sports or these private club sports activities because they see it as a ticket to--you know--a good education. And I'm not so sure that it has directly benefited the applicant pool for the New York City Fire Department but I'm sure it has in other places, Title IX being--you know--a root cause of things. I read about people who are just slightly younger than myself who had the benefit of Title IX and--you know--they're always, like, former something sport--you know-person and--you know--played at a competitive level at such-and-such college or something. And we never had any of that, so it can't hurt.

J.L. When you look at the other uniformed services in New York like the Police Department, Sanitation, Corrections, ... There was just a profile of a woman from the Port Authority Police Department promoted to Captain in *The Times* today.

B.B. Oh, I didn't see it.

J.L. Have ...

B.B. I don't read *The Times*. (laughs)

J.L. Do you have any contact with these women and their support organizations?

B.B. Well, after 9-11--you know--we had a con--we had contact with some individual women but--you know--it's very limited. They're really on different career tracks than we're on and they have--you know--different powers that be that they have to deal with and stuff. It's too bad. I mean, I really wish that there was a lot more contact between the organizations, but it seems like... You know, I tried--Oh God, this is more than a year ago now; it's probably a year-and-a-half or two years ago,-to see if we could get a coalition of women within the Fire Department to work together. That would be women EMS, women Dispatchers ... Now, the numbers in all these segments of the Fire Department are very small, especially, like, women Dispatchers, a tiny group. EMS is, of course, there's more women in EMS than there are on the fire fighting side of things, but

J.L. But even ...

B.B. But I could not get--I could not get the women EMS workers ... And I was going to have to try and sell this to the Women Fire Fighters who, at that point, there was a lot more of the senior women still around and they were initially adamantly against having anything to do with the women EMS workers. Now we have quite a few women Fire Fighters who used to be on the EMS side so I don't think that prejudice exists as much any more. It's,--you know--it's a difficult issue because, of course, everybody assumes, when I say Captain Berkman calling from the Fire Department, that I'm on the EMS side and a lot of the women don't like that. I mean, after all we fought all these years to be recognized as fire fighters and it's always assumed that we're EMS.

J.L. Say Captain Berkman, Fire Fighter.

B.B. Yeah. Well, that ain't happening. I say Captain Berkman of Engine 239 and ...

J.L. Okay. Researching the EMS on gender issues I see that there's a big problem with the women not having the ... The course for Paramedic is offered and they don't have to pay for it but, because they're mothers and they have a family and they ... they work long hours, they don't have the time so it turns out that mostly the males have taken advantage of the ... You know?

B.B. Yeah. Well, that doesn't shock me.

J.L. Yeah.

B.B. You know, despite the fact that they have women at fairly high levels in EMS, those are appointed positions so you're always beholden to-you know--your ... whoever put you there. And I don't know. There's some women's consciousness in EMS. I just haven't had time to follow through on that. I mean, after I'd had this meeting at my house where the EMS women basically said we can't possibly join with any other women 'cause we can't even get a women's organization going within EMS and--you know--that was sad.

J.L. Hard times. Okay. So you've been in the job for twenty-two years.

B.B. Um-hum.

J.L. Are you going away?

B.B. No. I'm just (inaudible)

J.L. Yeah. No fires, please. So twenty-two years and there's still out there there's this,-you know--different ... differing reactions to you, like, some iconic status versus others,--you know-who are, like she had an agenda and resentment. What are ...

B.B. God! I hope I had an agenda.

J.L. (laughs)

B.B. You know? How pathetic to go through life without an agenda!

J.L. ... without an agenda! ?? Sister Berkman ...

B.B. I was just ?? Okay. I'm just sort of ... You know. What I see in people is they're, like, totally focused on their family, their immediate family, and--you know--they drive the kids to soccer games and they take the kids to Disneyland and--you know--they worry about their house and their second car and their second job and there this and their that, and--you know--maybe they're a little bit involved in their church or maybe a little bit involved on their .. in their block or something like that, but they don't have any, like, knowledge or interest in the larger world around them. You know? The kids don't ... Everything is what you get fed through television and popular culture ...

J.L. Driving to work; Rush Limbaugh ...

B.B. I mean, it's just crap and it's really brain deadening! And it's all about owning things and shopping and--you know--this and that.

J.L. Consumption is the national religion.

B.B. So ... and there's no questioning of that. There's no questioning of--you know-why things are the way that they are; how we can have so much poverty in our own country; how we can be fighting in Iraq but people are killing each other like crazy in Africa and our government doesn't do anything about that.

J.L. No oil.

B.B. Well,--you know--maybe if it was Nigeria it'd be a little different or something. But ... and so, I think,--you know--

I' not ashamed of the fact that I'm act--I'm interested in issues that are larger than my own individual concerns. And if that's an agenda, then, yeah, I have an agenda and my agenda is I don't want any more little girls growing up and having somebody say to 'em that you can't do that because you're a little girl, not because you're not smart enough or not strong enough or--you know--you don't have the training to do it, but just the fact that--you know--you're a girl. You can't do that. And that, I think, is idiotic. And so I'm not going to see that change in my lifetime, but certainly, I think, things are a little bit better than they were in the 1950's. Hopefully, it'll never go back to the 1950's. That's my agenda.

J.L. Okay. So, now, you're still on the job. You could retire but you're still on the job. What keeps you going? What ... what's ... where are you getting your energy?

B.B. Right now I'm not so sure. I've been thinking a lot about retirement, like, a lot. Well, I mean,--you know--you have ... I'm not an old person so if I'm going to retire I better have some .. some idea of something I want to do. And fire fighting really spoils you for a lot of different other types of work because--you know-I just took ten days off and went to the UK and didn't use a day of vacation time.

J.L. Wow. Um-hum.

B.B. You know? I have two more weeks of vacation coming up in ... in a week. I mean, it just goes on and on! And I make a pretty damned good salary,-you know?-so

J.L. Now, let me ask you a leading question. What about the Battalion Captain--

B.B. Chief ...

J.L. Chief,--Battalion Chief? I have a block,--Battalion Chief?

B.B. I'm not ...

J.L. Are you going to take that test?

B.B. I took it.

J.L. You took it.

B.B. I'm not on the list.

J.L. Oh.

B.B. Yep.

J.L. How did that happen?

B.B. I didn't pass the test.

J.L. Oh, okay.

B.B. They ...

J.L. It's very hard?

B.B. Well, the last time the passing mark was fifty-seven.

J.L. Uh-huh.

B.B. This time it was eighty-one. That's those boys that studied the three tests. So there were a lot of senior captains that missed it by ... by several points and I was one of them.

J.L. So the fact that you're experienced, been in the Department for a long time, have a Master's in History ...

B.B. Had no effect unless you ... Unless you had the passing mark to begin with.

J.L. Yeah. Okay.

B.B. And it was a hundred point, multiple choice, pen and pencil, I mean, pencil and paper--pencil and paper memorized .. No, no ... nothing on resume; nothing on experience; nothing on projects you worked on for the Department or assignments you held; nothing on education other than--you know--minimal requirements you had to have in order to be promoted,--so I forget what it is, like,--I don't know--it might be up to two years of college at this point,--and no oral component or interactive component, nothing like running a fire scenario or talking--you know--to a panel. I've actually sat on evaluation panels for promotion for Lieutenants in other Departments and--you know--they have an oral exam. They sit before a panel of outside evaluators and you ask them questions and then you rate them on how they answer. My department doesn't have that. So this--you know,--you could be--I think you could be functionally illiterate and get promoted.

J.L. So you've mentioned some of the great things about being a fire fighter, but just in the more non-monetary-vacation realm. What are some of the satisfactions of your career that you ...

B.B. Well, it's been a little hard lately because--you know--I think that there's... we had ... After that incident in Staten Island the powers that be decided that the way to manage the Fire Department now is to really bring down the iron first and return us to the good old days of strict disciplinary grooming--you know--routine.

Tape Two

B.B. That's alright. Pam was always having me do ... Maureen has me do stuff: open jars.. You know? I'm really, like, very capable of doing that kind of stuff.

J.L. Good. It's good somebody is.

B.B. Yeah.

J.L. So now that we've got the tape in the tape recorder I want you to continue telling me on tape two about what you were talking about.

B.B. Alright. Well, since January the Department's decided that ... January , 2004, when they had the incident in Staten Island, then they had all these other things where the cops were arresting us like crazy for drunk driving and that kind of crap,-- you know-it's probably .. it is the case that discipline got completely out of control after 9-11 where ... and there were lots of reasons for that, some of which the Department fostered and--you know-human nature being what it is,--you know--people took full advantage of. And then,--you know--then they wanted to put on the brakes. They wanted to pull in the reins, and the speeding train, to mix analogies like crazy, was not going to be stopped. So they .. they wanted to put on the brakes, stop the speeding train, and their way of doing it was to, like,--you know--everything by the book. That was fine except for the fact that we're in the midst of, like, a period of tremendous demoralization because we have no contract and--you know--the Mayor is saying that--you know--we're not going to get any raises and--you know--

J.L. Aren't they talking about putting four five fighters instead of five ...

B.B. Well, that's happened. That's already gone. That's already gone.

J.L. You know? That's happened. So ... and then there was the shut down of the fire houses. I know you were ...

B.B. six fi--close of the six fire houses.

J.L. You were active with that.

B.B. That was ... that was tremendously demoralizing. I mean, I was the Captain of one of those houses briefly, and even though I was there for a very short time--you know--it just made me suicidal. I mean, it was very, very difficult. And what made it most difficult for me was not the idea that a fire house was closing but that I believe firmly that there was no basis for closing that fire house and that the statistics, the economics of it, all of that was in the opposite direction; that that place should never ... that particular place

J.L. What house was that?

B.B. That was Engine 204. And,--you know--I'm not going to go into all the things that led me to believe that, but the rap that I heard out of the highest levels of management in my organization was just ... it was ... it was embarrassing. And yet the fire houses are closed and they remain closed. And they don't care,--you know--if fire fighters die, if civilians die. Their attitude is, well,--you know--you're driving a ten year old car. If you were that interested in safety you'd have--you know--a brand new car with all the latest safety devices and everything, and it's the same way with the Fire Department. You can't have perfect safety so we're going to just make do with

this ten year old car that we've got, which,-you know .Okay. Then don't lie to people. Tell them. And so, instead of trying to actually tell people what they've done here, which is increase the number-the amount of response time for us to be able to get to their house; that they've made it so that it's going to take a lot longer for companies to be actively able to come in and rescue somebody because they've cut the number of fire fighters and they've reduced the number of Companies; that they have all these companies out of service at any given time so, in fact, while you think you have a fire house protecting your neighborhood, it's not there for that time-that particular time,-all these kinds of things are not ... they're ... they're not telling the public the truth because they feel that the public would be outraged, just the same way that they decided they weren't going to close any fire house that had lost a member in 9-11 because they knew that the families of those fire houses would raise a holy stink about it. So they picked only houses that ... where nobody was actually killed. You know, this is calculated and this is really hard to take.

J.L. So you say it's a period of demoralization and ... But looking back on your career,--I mean, even though you're not yet out the door,--but what are some highlights?

B.B. Well, the fact that we had all these women that stayed for twenty years,--surprise!--and that some of us got promoted;--

J.L. Right.

B.B. That we have some ... we have some good young women coming up behind us. Hopefully they'll--you know--continue the struggle. I was very encouraged by the women who ... who--you know--volunteered and ... and organized and worked so hard on the training program for the new group of women. Hopefully they'll pay that back, the new ones that are coming up. You know, it's ... it's just going to be a very long drawn out process by reason of the lack of numbers. And so that is a little discouraging. But,--you know--hopefully these kids will really study very hard and ... You know, it may be that ... that there'll have to be some initiatives from outside of the Fire Department that really force the Fire Department to change it's culture, the way they've done in the UK and in other places in the U.S. I don't think this culture is going to change itself voluntarily the way that it's going now. People don't see the advantage to having a different kind of fire fighter and a different kind of fire fighting mentality. After 9-11,-you know--there was this huge emphasis on .. on the manly man,

J.L. The brotherhood ...

B.B. The brotherhood and the heroism and this and that, and all those things have existed

J.L. It sort of like regressed.

B.B. Yeah. All those things have always existed and they'll always continue to exist, but that's not all that the Fire Service is about, and getting killed. You know? We should be smarter than that and we should recognize that there's a whole lot of things that we can do to prevent that from happening.

J.L. Yeah. I don't think the Command Center in the World Trade Center helped a lot and Giuliani didn't seem to take any heat for that.

B.B. Oh, absolutely none! Oh, he's a big hero as is George Bush. You know? These are guys who ... All this stuff happened when they were in charge, so to speak, and yet when they rushed to the site,--you know--afterwards and put their arms around people and talked about how tough they were going to be on terrorism, well, how tough were you on terrorism before 9-11. You know? I mean, Giuliani was basically on his way out the door as a totally disgraced Mayor when 9-11 happened. And just to project an image of strength without really making the city a better place, I don't think. You know? To tell people that the way to deal with tragedy is go out and shop, that is pathetic and--you know--it really makes you question not only the government that you have in power right now but also peoples' common sense that--you know--that voted for these guys and continue to vote for these guys. The idea that people would think about Giuliani for Mayor,--I don't--for President,--you know,--he wouldn't ... he couldn't have gotten elected dog catcher before 9-11. So ...

J.L. Well, on that happy note, is there anything else you want to add?

B.B. Well, give me those questions 'cause I ...

J.L. Okay.

B.B. You know, it's a little hard for me to be upbeat after the election we've just had and after some of the things that have been going on in the Fire Department recently. But,--you know--that doesn't take anything away from all the things that we've been able to accomplish over the last twenty years. And even if we step back from some of that,--you know--we did do these things. You know? Women went to fires and they put them out. Women supported other women in their struggle. Women helped other women get on this job and you know--even like, Rocky [Jones] and I are going to run an LR--are going to run, like, a little training session for women on how to study for promotional exams. I mean, we haven't stopped doing that stuff. Eileen and I are both going to be involved in doing EEO training. Other people are involved in ... in being EEO counselors and being part of diversity training, other women that is. So,--you know--all these things ... It's just going to be a long and involved process. And unfortunately,--you know--we haven't been able to accomplish maybe as much as we would have liked or as much as other places have accomplished. There could be ... You know? But ... but given what I've seen in other places, you never know. There could be, like, a dramatic turn around all of a sudden and--you know--something could happen and ... and things could really change for the better. So,--you know--you can always hope.

J.L. And Anna Schermerhorn is still active with United Women Firefighters now? Is she the ...

B.B. Yeah. She's probably going to be the next President, so--you know--that's a very ... that's a big positive, in my opinion, because she's got a highly developed political consciousness and she's--you know--shown her capability by being able to organize this training program, and she certainly established some very good relationships with the younger women. So,--you know--if she can get their support and ... and their cooperation,--you know--the organization can maybe revive itself and .. and you know--with new energy and ... because clearly, there's a lot of stuff that can be done and that has to be done. You know? Things are far from over in

terms of women being integrated.

J.L. What about the national organization for women? Is that still running ??

B.B. Well, it's going ... it's going to be in a period of transition also because--you know--one of the lead founders of it, [Terese] "Terry" Floran, who's been the Executive Director since we hired an Executive Director, is planning her transition for the next couple of years and so ...

J.L. Meaning her retirement?

B.B. Her retirement from ... from this organization, so I--you know--that's going to ... that's going to take some work. And I'm ... I have great hopes that the organization's going to pull through and be able to be stronger as a result of this. But it's always an iffy situation when you have any group that's been so thoroughly dominated by one personality for so many years.

J.L. Are you still active with them?

B.B. I'm active in the sense that,--you know--I go to their conferences, I do workshops. I haven't been on the Board for many years. I,--you know,--I still am very involved with them in terms of issues revolving around physical abilities testing. And Terry sends me inquiries and Anna and I just wrote an article, actually, about the training program in New York for the national group. And,--you know,--so I'm still involved in that sense.

J.L. I know you did a lot of work about this--around this sort of like, what?--a generic test, a different test than New York has?

B.B. Well, it's similar to New York.

J.L. Could you explain that?

B.B. Yeah. It's called the Candidate Physical Ability Test and it's actually pushed by the Fire Fighter's Union and the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the IFF and the IFC. And,--you know--there's some up sides and some down sides in terms of--you know--hiring more women through the use of this test. It is probably easier for women to pass than the New York City test,--excuse me,--but a lot of women candidates don't have access to any kind of preparation programs for it. It's a very trainable test. And there hasn't been a lot done by the--a lot of work done by the organizations that are promoting this test to improve the recruitment and training segments of the program so--you know--we're constantly talking to them about that. And,--you know--it's ... it's better than some tests that were given previously. It's probably harder than some tests that were given previously. It has some sort of shaky science behind it but--you know--it's ... it's what we've got right now so it's what we're working with. It's better than a lot of stuff that they could have come up with, actually.

J.L. Okay. Well, thank you very much for ...

B.B. Think you want to do dinner?

4-40

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