

+Interview with Brunilda "Bruni" Hernandez

J.L. So this is Jane Latour interviewing Bruni Hernandez on Saturday, March 19th, 2005, and Bruni ...

So, Bruni, tell me about where you were born, when and ...

B.H. I was born March 14th, 1959, in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York. I was born on Henry Street. I think I was born on Henry Street in Gouveneur Hospital which is not existing any more where it used to be. ?? but ...

J.L. Okay. Okay. And your parents? Where were they from?

B.H. My parents are from Puerto Rico. My Mom came over to the mainland when she was fourteen years old and my Dad came over, I think, when he was eighteen.

J.L. And what kind of work did your folks do?

B.H. My Dad worked,--when we were youngsters he worked in the Tootsie Roll factory which, I believe it's not any longer in New Jersey,--I'm not sure,--which was cool because he used to bring Tootsie Rolls home so that was cool. And then my Mom worked in the garment district in the factories.

J.L. Okay. and ...

B.H. She was a seamstress.

J.L. And was she in a union?

B.H. She was in the union. She's a very pro-union worker.

J.L. So that would have been the ILG, the International Ladies Garment Workers.

B.H. Yeah, the International Ladies Garment .. Yeah, yeah, yeah. 1199, I think,---right?--1199? I can't remember.

J.L. And now what about your Dad. Was he a union member?

B.H. I'm not sure. I'm not sure, 'cause when they moved,--when the Tootsie Roll company moved--he lost his job so I don't know whether there was a union there or not.

J.L. Um-hum. What did he do after that?

B.H. After that he worked in ... somewhere on the Bowery street unloading trucks and stuff for a packaging company.

J.L. Hard labor.

B.H. Yes.

J.L. So what ... Tell me about your education before you went into the Electrical Apprentice Program.

B.H. Well, I was ... I had finished high school in 1977 and in '77, I guess, September of '77 to ... The first semester I entered college I went to Marymount Manhattan College straight from high school and I was kind of in that little,--you know--how .. I don't need to go to school, and--you know--I'm going to hang out and ?? So I quit school the first semester. I just did one semester of college and that was in spring of '78. And then after that I guess ... after that I hung out. I didn't--you know,--I wasn't in school. I was looking for work, things like that, and at that point my Mom and I were in a struggle,--you know,--a Mom/daughter kind of thing. I left the house and I moved in with Evan.

J.L. And where did you and Evan live?

B.H. We lived on Houston Street, and she lived right near the little Jewish temple that was there on Hudson Street. I don't think ... I'm not sure if it's still there.

J.L. I don't know.

B.H. Yeah, across the street from

J.L. Katz.

B.H. from the Katz. I love Katz, Katz is

J.L. Delicatessen.

B.H. Yeah and they have great pastrami and French fries. So we lived there. So I lived there with her. And after several months I needed to look for a job and so what we did was we found this recruiting and training program for young adults who .. they would train people for interviewing and looking for work and stuff like that.

J.L. And where was that located?

B.H. That one was located, I think, it was on 125th Street in Harlem, I believe.

J.L. Okay. It was up there. Um-hum.

B.H. Yeah. So we went there. And the gentleman that was training us--we were doing like--I guess it was, like, math training and interviewing and stuff like that,--he said: Well, Local 3 the IBEW is op--has opened up to women. Why don't you two, 'cause I think it was the two of us, try to go into the electrical union. And we're like ... You know, I had never thought of being in construction or being in any trades or anything like that. I mean, it was ... I used to like looking through the peep holes in the construction but that was as far as I got close to even thinking about it.

J.L. Uh-huh.

B.H. So ... so Evan and I said: Yeah. Okay. So Evan and I got

Trained--manual dexterity and all that; math and stuff, and in the union had just opened up, so that was in 1978.

J.L. Right. That's when they opened for ...

B.H. To women, and so we were training in '78-'79?? . We went and stood in line. We were so funny. I think they had, like, five hundred jobs they wanted to fill with apprentices but there were like---I think there were like fifteen hundred applications or something like that, so Evan and I were number three hundred and three hundred and one--totally ?? We were there and the way they used to do it ... And you know that IBEW is in Queens, Flushing, Queens,--

J.L. Right.

B.H. They would line up all these young people outside to go in and get the applications. And we slept ... We lined up the night before because we knew that there was just that amount open

J.L. um-hum.

B.H. and we knew there were going to be a lot of people. So we were there ...

J.L. Were there a lot of people camping out?

B.H. Oh yeah. We all camped out overnight. I mean, some of the guys were playing football and stuff. It poured that night. It rained that night. And so Evan and I were there and the next morning we got in,--you know--we got up and got the application and ??

J.L. And so then they called you? They wrote to you? You had to go for an interview?

B.H. Yeah. We had to go for an interview.

J.L. Okay.

B.H. Which was so intimidating. It was, like ... I think they had, like, five ... four or five men in a round table interviewing.

J.L. And were they kind of: what's a nice girl like you doing here?

B.H. Oh yeah, yeah. Why do you want to be an electrician, you being a woman? And--you know--

J.L. And it's going to be hard and what kind of ...

B.H. ?? hard,--you know?--do you have the strength? You know? do you think you can do it?--you know?--so things like that.

J.L. And so then ... so then you got notification in the mail that you passed?

B.H. Yeah. We had to take a test. We had to go through the interview, take a test, and then we got a notice that we were accepted.

J.L. And the test was math and ...

B.H. It was math.

J.L. Uh-huh. Yeah.

B.H. I guess math and analytical stuff, I guess. I'm not sure. I can't remember.

J.L. And so then you show up for your Apprentice Program.

B.H. Yes. So then we show up and I don't know how they do it now, but the apprenticeship is you do four years of apprenticeship and then you eighteen months of, like, a mid-mechanic kind of journeyman. And then, after you do those ... And each time you move up you have to take a test and then you become an A journeyman--a journeyman wireman.

J.L. And so you were going to school and working.

B.H. Yes.

J.L. So tell me about the school part first.

B.H. The school part. The school part was that the Electrical Union was in ... in cooperation with the Labor Studies of Empire State University--

J.L. Uh-huh. Empire State

B.H. Empire State College. They had ... they would accept the apprentices--the apprentices--the apprentices from the union to .. to get a degree, an Associates degree, in labor studies. So we had to go to school two nights a week.

J.L. Uh-huh. And you were also studying electrical stuff in the classroom.

B.H. Yes. We would be studying theory. We would be studying unions. We would be studying about,--you know--electrical formulas and anything that had to do with electricity and stuff and the labor movement.

J.L. And how did you find the instructors taking to having females in the classroom and responses in terms of education and teaching?

B.H. I had ... I liked my instructors. I didn't have any problems in class at all. I think we had ... I think we did a hour and a half or two hours a night. I can't remember.

J.L. And so what about the work part? You had to ... your

first job?

B.H. Well, my first job was--I will never forget--City College of New York. They were doing their first wing, and that was up in Columbia, a hundred and

J.L. thirty-fifth Street, around there, Convent Avenue.

B.H. thirty ... near 138th Street. Yeah.

J.L. Something like that. Yeah.

B.H. Yeah, Convent Avenue. That was my first job. And--you know--you come in with your nice brand new shiny tool box with all your tools and stuff and you're given your little pink slip kind of--you know--that you're showing up for work. And the first thing I get is I get all these stares from these guys just sitting around. It was really nerve racking. I was so nervous so ... and it's a huge building.

J.L. And so hundreds of men?

B.H. Oh yeah.

J.L. Yeah. And what were they building? Do you remember the building ??

B.H. It was the ... I think it was the west wing and this was in '79 for the school.

J.L. Yeah. So how did that go? I mean, did they ... what were your experiences like at work?

B.H. Pretty much the first six months were--you know--getting to know how things work around male-dominated construction and a single woman on the job with all these guys around and it was hard. I mean, it was like, you would get--you know--remarks and ... what are you doing here? Why aren't you here? Why aren't ... You're taking the place of a man. You're putting a place that--you know--a husband and ... You know? Why aren't you home?--things like that.

J.L. Um-hum. Yeah. And what would be you k--you know ... Was there harassment or

B.H. Oh yes.

J.L. Any kind of withholding of information or skill or
....

B.H. There wasn't withholding of skills. The ... the fortunate part was some of the mechanics that I worked with were being ?? You know? You were there. You were helping. You were working. You know? Others were not very helpful, like, they would not help at all and they wouldn't--you know,--they didn't really want to work with women and stuff. And,--you know--for the first six months I went in and I was nice and timid and thank you and da, da, da, da. After six months I was just cursing up a storm just like the guys.

J.L. And that wasn't like you? That was new behavior?

B.H. That was new behavior, oh yeah. And, I mean, the first six months really, like, you ... every day you became a little more like, Oh my God, I really have to stand up for myself because most of these guys don't want me here. You know? I mean, that's what I was thinking, especially from the comments.

J.L. Um-hum. Um-hum.

B.H. And ...and-you know,--after that it was, like, I'm going to be here. This is what I want to do. I want to get ... I want to learn this trade and I'm going to do it. You know? And whatever it takes I'm here and you'll have--you'll have to deal with it.

J.L. And when did you discover that you liked the work, that you ...

B.H. Oh, I liked it right away.

J.L. Right away.

B.H. Oh yeah.

J.L. What did you like about it?

B.H. It was working with your hands. It was using-you know-your brain, I mean, as you were doing these formulas and you were figuring out how elec--electricity worked and--you know-how to hook up panels; how to ... just how it all worked: how motors worked. How ... It was something totally not anything I ever thought I would be doing so ...

J.L. It must have been a fast learning curve. Right? I mean, you were learning a lot every ..

B.H. You were learning a lot and you really did have to learn. And, you know--with the electrical-with electricity, I should say, one of the guys told me: You really need to respect it. It can kill you.

J.L. Because ...

B.H. If you don't respect it, it can kill you.

J.L. What about overcoming the ... did you have any fear when you started working with electricity 'cause it is powerful. I mean,

B.H. Yeah!

J.L. How ... how do you deal with that? You just ...

B.H. You just make sure the circuit is off. (both laugh) and that you're putting the right wires where they go. Nothing is ... Nothing is going to blow if you really pay attention and ... I mean, I've had several times where I got a nice little shock,--you know?-like, Oh, whoops!

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. That one's on or whoops! Those wires need to be crossed. You know? So ...

J.L. So you started standing up for yourself.

B.H. Yeah. I mean, the first job after the six months I really had this mechanic who was a bastard. I mean, he was not a very nice guy,

J.L. Um-hum.

B.H. And he really did not want women in ... in the trade. And ... and the thing with being first women in the job, there were no changing facilities. There were no toilets or bathrooms or anything like that prepared for women coming into the trade so every job that you went on you had to make sure that there was a toilet and there was a changing facility. And that .. that was a struggle. For a long time that was a struggle. Where's our changing room? Where is the bathroom that we're going to use? You know? You're required to be--you know--open to that--you know ... eventually you're going to have at least one woman coming to your job so you're going to have at least a place where--you know--they could change.

J.L. Right.

B.H. So at this job what they did ... what they ...

J.L. What job ... Do you remember what job it was?

B.H. Well, I'm talking about the first job.

J.L. Okay, the ?? one. Okay.

B.H. Yeah. Yeah, 'cause this is the job that started me out--you know--on the road to becoming a journeyman. What they had was they ... they ... the bath--the toilets were enclosed in plywood and they were lined up. So what they did was, at the end of one,--I think there were probably like eight,--so at the end they ... they put a plywood in--they just slapped a plywood up in the middle and ... and that was my toilet. Plus that was my changing facility. So I didn't have a trailer or a room. That was it. So that was my little home, a toilet closet. It was kind of like a closet. And ... and the thing with this guy was--you know,--since he didn't really like us, he was a drunk so I was kind of afraid and they wouldn't change me. So ...

J.L. So you were working with him? He was your journeyman?

B.H. Yeah, abso-- ... he was my mechanic. So after lunch he would be--you know--you could smell it.

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. Yeah.

J.L. And then he would get more abusive?

B.H. And he would get more abusive. And Italian guys,--and this was my experience then; it might have changed,--they are really verbally abusive, and he was one, verbal--verbally abusive with just foul language and--you know ... so the experience that I had was, since he didn't like me,--you know---Thursday ... there was this one Thursday that I had to go to school. What he did,--this was his joke,--was he took the cinder box,--you know?--the cinder blocks, the twelve inch cinder blocks, they're the big ones,--

J.L. Right.

B.H. He took cinder blocks and put it in front of the door to my toilet changing facilities. And I was getting ready to go to school so I had to go and--you know ... so I'm like, Oh man, this is--you know,--this sucks. You know? So I threw all the cinder blocks down, got in, changed and--you know--just went my way and didn't even confront it. And I sort of knew who it was.

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. Friday comes. Now, Friday you want to be out of there. You know? We're there, three o'clock, you're out of there. You know? You're there from seven to three and you want to go home. It's Friday. Well, he did the same thing. And Friday he gets really plastered. So he fills up the front ... He covers the front of the doors. It's time,--you know--it's time to go and I'm so angry! And this was the first time I ever let my anger get the best of me, because it's not really good, especially when you're in a situation like this. I was so angry I knocked it down. And ... and we used to have these gang boxes. I don't know whether you know ... the gang ...

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. That's where we have all the tools and stuff.

J.L. Right.

B.H. And I was so angry I took a two by four and I put it under this gang box and just flipped the whole thing over, and it rolled over and the tools got all mixed up. There was a lot of oil in his tools. He was so particular ...-got a little oil and they got all little messed up. And so anyway, so he threatened me. He was threatening me and stuff like that. And we were, like, in a circle .. It was like ... It was like ...

J.L. And other people were just watching?

B.H. Yeah. All the guys circled us and he was, like, cursing me; You son of a bitch! You ? Who the hell you think you are? You don't belong here, bla, bla, bla. You know? Like, I was so scared. You know? Like, how stupid can I be to just let this man get the best of me. And he was like,--I mean, he was like, two inches from

my face with his finger and you this and you that ...

J.L. And you're very slightly built.

B.H. Well, I mean, I was what? Nineteen maybe, skinny--I was skinny, five foot five, and I'm like: Oh my God, I'm going to be killed. I was so scared. And it was that bad. I mean, it got that close. And there was this guy who was, like, a Jamaican guy, Hector,--I will never forget him,--he said: don't worry, Bruni. I had your back ... and,--you know--he had a knife. He had pulled a knife and he had his knife, like,--you know--down by his leg. And he said: If that son-of-a-bitch touched you I was going to get him. You know? So I'm like, Oh my God! I can't believe I did that, 'cause he's stupid. You know? You just ...

J.L. But you knew that you had to stand up to him or else.

B.H. Yeah. I mean, that was it. And from that moment on we never talked to each other. We never...He was not my mechanic any more or anything. He was ... after that ... After that pretty much people on that job just kind of left me alone, and I got good mechanics after that and they were just teaching me. And,--you know--working in colleges and schools and stuff you have huge panels because you have to have transformers and you--you know,--so it was huge. And I was just learning a lot after that and stuff. And as an apprentice, you're on the job for at least a year, maybe a year and a couple of months, and they have to switch you 'cause they have to show you different types of work and move you around and stuff like that. So after my year (unintelligible) you get the pink slip you're out of there and wait for the next job.

J.L. And where did you go then? Do you remember?

B.H. No, I can't ... Oh, after that I went to Battery Park

J.L. ??

B.H. Yeah.

J.L. And how many ... there weren't any women there or there were? What ... what was the situation?

B.H. At Battery City Park, well, I was the only woman in City College, which was ... at Battery City it ended up Evan was working there. It ended up Evan was working there and Laura.

J.L. Um-hum. Laura ?? [Kelber]

B.H. Yeah. So that was kind of ...

J.L. So you had a shanty together?

B.H. They had a shanty for us. We had a changing place. We had,--you know---

J.L. a bathroom?

B.H. a bathroom, or not a bathroom. It was more of a port-a-john, 'cause it was a new--totally new construction. ?? and stuff so that was good, although big . It was big.

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. In Battery City Park, I remember ?? It was huge.

J.L. I work near it. Yeah.

B.H. And having those first three buildings that they ... was huge. So we only saw each other maybe at lunch,--you know?-and stuff like that. So ...

J.L. But ...

B.H. But it was good. It was ?? good support. We would, like, end up--you know--at the elevator or something. It was a tough job. I mean, it was, like, things were big. I mean, there was no small shute with sides and small, like rain gear. You know? so you had these huge rain gears you .. especially if you're--you know--small. You had these rain gears that were big and they had these boots that were big and ... flood.

J.L. Yeah. Evan also ...

B.H. Yeah, exactly, splashing around 'cause you had to go for coffee and ... so you had to go in the mud and the rain and the snow,--whatever. It didn't matter. You had to ...

J.L. Was that the first building they were putting up there or the first ?? putting them altogether.

B.H. Those were the first three. You know? That was Battery City Park. They were the first three buildings that went up in that ...

J.L. And how long were you there?

B.H. I was there ... I think I was there for a year and a couple of months.

J.L. Um-hum. So let's talk about your graduation from your apprenticeship. Did you have a ceremony?

B.H. You know, what was funny with the college graduation,

J.L. Um-hum.

B.H. We had our ceremony at Columbia, I think it was, and it was terrible. What was funny with that was that once all the apprentices were called up to get their diplomas and stuff it was a very hot, sticky .. I mean, they didn't have air conditioning on. There was these huge fans going. So people were getting agitated 'cause of the heat and stuff. What happened, which was ... I mean, I was ... I walked out with all the apprentices. I walked out with

them. And I looked back and half of the audience was gone, which was kind ... when I look back on it, Oh, that was a bad move. But it was just too hot in there.

J.L. Were your folks there? Had you had a ??

B.H. Yeah. My Dad ... I think my Dad went there and stuff so that was ..?? but ...

J.L. And then the ... so you finished your apprenticeship and then you just get your card in the mail or something? Don't they have a ceremony?

B.H. Um-um.

J.L. No ceremony. You're at ... You're done.

B.H. That's it. So what we did was we had a little party, all the women that got their A cards--after all of them got their A cards, we got ... We did the part like That picture of me you saw, that was the party. And we all went and stuff.

J.L. Uh-huh. And where did you have the party?

B.H. It was a ... I think it was a restaurant that we went to.

J.L. Marty said there's a restaurant on 23rd Street that you all used to like.

B.H. Yeah, there was one there. And then this one was, I think, in The Village somewhere, and we did that.

J.L. Uh-huh.

B.H. And it was a lot of fun.

J.L. So were you ... did you participate with Women Electricians, the group that Cynthia Long? Did you do some work with that?

B.H. We did. We ... I started with them in the beginning and basically our concerns were, of course, changing facilities and bathroom facilities for women on all the jobs because now you ... you have women coming in and as a union we ... we expected--you know-to get support for these things. So that's what we were working for. Excuse me. And so,--you know,--eventually after several years we did get ... we did get that. It was ... it was hard. It was ... You know? And one of the things--the other thing that we were trying to work for was at--we had union meetings so we had to go. As apprentices you had to go and stuff like that,--was when they ... when whoever was at the head of the meeting would address the apprentices and the journeymen that they we would address the brothers and sisters. That took a long time. I mean, I don't know if they do it now, but there were some of our so-called leaders that just did not really want that and they kept: Oh brothers, so here we are ??

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. And--you know--we kept "Sisters!" ... and "sisters!"

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. So that was one thing that we worked on and--you know--Cynthia really and Evan were really working on that ?? Yeah. So

J.L. So tell me about other events with tradeswomen. Did you participate with United Tradeswomen at all or go to events or forums? I know they had a lot of forums. They had some demonstrations.

B.H. Yeah. I would go to some of the demonstrations and stuff. I ... I, in the beginning I did a lot and then I just dwindled off.

J.L. Because of why?

B.H. Because you get tired,--you know?--I was getting tired. And I'm like,--you know--we're fighting for the same things year after year after year. And I have to give credit to women like Cynthia who kept going at it year after year after year. I mean, she ... she really has hung in there and she had a lot of, like all of us, a lot of harassment and stuff. But she kept going and,--you know--she became--you know--more and more involved in the union so that was ... that was good. You know? I don't know ... I didn't have that kind of energy. And I would go, I would ...

Side Two

J.L. So were ... were you at the pots and pans demonstration? I think it was at AT&T. So pots and pans. Were you there?

B.H. No.

J.L. No? You don't remember that.

B.H. No I don't.

J.L. Okay. All right. Okay. But you did go to demonstrations.

B.H. I did go to demonstrations, yeah.

J.L. So now, did ... did things change after you got your journey card, your A card, in terms of the treatment or ...

B.H. Actually, I think things changed before then. Let's see. I started the apprenticeship in '79. I think by the time I was entering probably my fourth, fifth year it was getting a little better. More men were more responsive and willing to work with you and stuff like that and you still had the few guys that really didn't want you on the job and stuff, but I think they ... I think more and more were accepting the fact that--you know--women were going to come into the trades. So I think--I would say that even before I got my Journeyman card I was being respected a little more. And--you know--once you pass your internship/ apprenticeship

the fourth level and you're going into mid-mechanic,--you know-people are, like, okay, this person---you know--probably knows some--something,-you know?-and give you more elbow room to work. And from early on, I really liked working by myself,--you know?-and I would say: Hey, give me that and give me this, and--you know--give me the plan and ...

J.L. Don't you usually work in ... in

B.H. In pairs.

J.L. In pairs?

B.H. Yeah. You usually work in pairs. So I would tell the mechanics: Hey, why don't--you know,--why don't I go do that. You know? Why don't I go set up the panel and you go--you know--do whatever, 'cause I really liked ... I really liked running pipe. I really enjoyed running pipe.

J.L. And tell me what you like about that for ...

B.H. Pipe work ...

J.L. What ... Tell me what pipe work is for, like, for those of us who don't know what's behind the wall. What is it?

B.H. Well, most pipe work that you do is mostly for, like, commercial, like, schools, for instance, because a lot of the pipe work is going to be exposed. Inside the walls--you know--when you're running studs and stuff like that, most of the things inside the wall are--and it really depends on what it is: if it's commercial, if it's school, if it's residential and stuff,-you have ... you have pipe work, you have Romex, you have BX and stuff like that, so it really depends on what type of work it is. And for me, for the pipe work that I did, the schools you had to run a two beam, which is pipe,-two beam is a softer kind of pipe. And then you have the IMC, which is a stronger pipe and stuff like that. So you really use those for more for commercial kind of school kind of construction. And what I liked about--what I like about running pipe mostly was when the pipe was going to be exposed it was kind of concentric ... it was like, a concentric pipe run, which means you really had to use your knowledge of the formulas and math and angles and--you know,--ninety degree turns and elbows and offsets and things like that, which meant when you look .. Like, if you're looking at an industrial plant, when you look at the pipes you see they're all going nicely in the same where there's nothing that's bumping out. You know? There's no ... You know, when it bumps out, it bumps out in a nice ninety degree elbow or of a forty-five degree offset. And when you look at it, it's kind of like a river. You know? You just...It just goes smooth and it's ...-you know? Everything just turns at the right time and--you know,-it goes up at the right time, and they're all going the same way. That's concentric pipe runs. I love that because it was like we were looking at a painting or something that was just ...

J.L. It sounds like art work when you describe it.

B.H. It was really ... I mean. And then you had to really learn your formulas of how to make a ninety degree bend in a pipe, because if you didn't know how to make a ninety degree bend in your pipe then you were going to kink it. You ... that ... You can't run wires in that 'cause you have to make it where you're going to right ... Once the pipe is in you're running your wires through those pipes. So you don't want to run ... You don't want the wires to run hard. You want them to be smooth, one end to the other. Everything goes through all nicely. Kinks and stuff really you're not ... You don't want kinks. You know? It makes it hard. And when you look at it, you want to look at it like it was your masterpiece. You know?

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. It's perfect almost. So that's what I really liked. I really liked running pipe. And most ... and when you run a nice line of pipe and people look up, they're like: Oh yeah. She knows what she's doing.

J.L. Yeah, a good feeling.

B.H. Oh, look at those ninety's. Look at those offsets. Off sets go like this. Look at those forty-five's. You know? They're all running perfect. I mean, that's how I saw it. You know?

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. And you're--you know--hanging and measuring and using your level and--you know--make sure things are going in and coming out where they're supposed to. And you come up the wall and you go through the wall and you want to make sure, when you're going through the wall to the other room, that you're--you know--where you're supposed to be,--you know,--and all that stuff. I really enjoyed it. Panels, when you're working on a panel, you want to look at a panel and you're running your wires into the panel, you want the wires to look like they're a picture. You know? You ... you're folding--you're bending the wires nice. They're going into your circuit breaker and they have all the shapes, and you tie it up nicely. You know? I love that especially when it was all brand new and it was all easy. It's all open for you so you're, like, running it and people leave you alone. You do a good job, you're doing the work, people leave you .. but when they look--when they look at what you're doing and how you're doing it, they leave you alone, 'cause it's like ,that's good workmanship. That's a good worker.

J.L. And stuff ...

B.H. Yeah. And that's like,--you know--she knows what she's doing. Yeah. And then you'll be like ... and then, when I used to ... when I was a mechanic you would get plans. You'd get floor plans.

J.L. Um-hum.

B.H. I would just tell the foreman: Give me the floor plan. I'll lay it out. You know? I'll do it. Just leave me alone and ...

You know? And you go in and you lay out your ... where your switch is going, where your outlet is going. Then you count the circuits: how many outlets and how many switches can go on one circuit. And then,--you know--when you lay everything out: where the lights are going, where--you know,--all these things are going, you lay it all out, which means your floor is set so that either you or the next person who's going to come in, run whatever wire: the Romex or the BX or the pipe. Okay? Then you know that ... that there's going to be an outlet there and--you know--there's going to be an outlet six feet over there; there's going to be a light over there, and everything is set. So you lay it out ... So you lay it out, the next person come in and runs the wires, the walls go up and you don't see all the ... You don't ... You're not going to see all the work that went in there 'cause you're only going to see the outlets. But you know. You know? So ...

J.L. So tell me about ... what about...was there harassment on the job throughout the years and what kind of coping strategies did you develop?

B.H. Yeah. There was harassment. There was, like, Do you want to go out with me? You know? So you ...

J.L. What about if you ... in terms of race and ?? harder to get ??

B.H. Oh yeah. Oh, you're Latina, you're loose, you're--you know:--let's go. I'll get an apartment. I'll get ...

J.L. That was an assumption,

B.H. Oh yeah.

J.L. Not on everybody's part but ...

B.H. You're easy, yeah. The guys that really wanted to ... I mean, there was so much sexual harassment. I mean, I had foremen like: You know what? I live in Long Island. I can get an apartment and we can--you know--hang out.

J.L. Apartment?

B.H. Yeah.

J.L. Wow! Serious.

B.H. Serious.

J.L. So what were your coping strategies for dealing with that?

B.H. After a while I would just, like, you know, you're such an idiot. Just leave me alone. You know? I'm not here for any of this,--you know,--and stuff like that. And,--you know--you would just kind of brush it off or curse him out or just--you know--tell him to go--you know--suck on a cigar or something. I don't know. And then you would talk to your fellow women electricians.

J.L. And did the union ever provide any kind of support or-- you know---

B.H. Not really, not what I saw.

J.L. Um-hum. What about ...

B.H. They would always say, Oh, yeah, yeah. We're working on it, or, yeah, or--you know--'cause you would tell them: Hey,--you know--there's no bathroom on this job. It would take a long time before--you know--they would come back and say: Okay, we're going to get you a bathroom.

J.L. What about pornography? Was that an issue?

B.H. Oh my God, yes! Oh my God, that was an issue! I mean, pornography was a way to harass the women on the job. And I got ... I really had a bad experience with that in ... in (unintelligible) I think I was in Hunter College--something like that. There was this one guy who really, really could not stand women. I mean, he hated women. I mean, I think he hated women period. But he did not like that women were coming into the trades to work. And he did not like me. You know? And at one point he told the shop steward ... the Shop Steward,--you know--is the person that is supposed to be our ...

J.L. Advocate ...

B.H. Advocate. Right? He told him: I don't like ... I don't like her. I don't like any women working in this, and I'm not going to ... I will not work with women. So we didn't work together. But he would constantly ... Like, what we used to have is on Mondays we were supposed to have a safety meeting, which was one of the good things that happened with the union on the jobs and stuff. You ... you'd have a safety meeting every Monday. And the unfortunate part is the safety meetings were in ... was in the men's locker room. That was unfortunate because we didn't ... we didn't have that. We had our own room to change in and stuff. So we would have to--you know--go to ... to the men's locker room, which there was always some kind of "Penthouse" or--you know--"Hustler" or some kind of magazine around. And it was fine. Everyone was around and--you know--it was, like, turned over or whatever, or hidden or whatever. But this one guy who had it in for me refused to let that be the case and so he would plaster the walls with these naked pornography--you know,-- naked pictures of women and pornography and stuff like that and he ... and,--you know,--and I would tell the Shop Steward I am not going to the meeting. I'm not going to expose myself to that. You know? It's obvious that--you know--they have a problem with that--with me coming, so--you know,--I'm not going to do it. So I would refuse to go to the meeting and I would refuse to go into ... and when you were an apprentice, you were supposed to, like, sweep up, women. We did all this crap work: sweep the shanties or whatever, and sweep and stuff, and sometimes I would refuse. I said: Look. I'm not going to do it. There's too much crap there. You know? I don't want to--you know--expose myself. Other times I would just, like, blow it off if there was, like, one or two and I'm like,--you know--and just look away, or whatever. But this guy would plaster the walls with these pictures. And so the Shop Steward would, like,--you know,--you got to let it ... you need to take those pictures down 'cause we can't have that in--you know ... and a lot

of guys didn't like it. You know? A lot of the guys didn't like it, but they refused to do anything about it. You know?

J.L. Um-hum. Yes.

B.H. So,-you know--so he ripped it up,-you know-ripped them down and stuff like that, but then he just kept doing it , just ... Then one day there were naked pictures of women on all the walls of this shanty and the ceilings.

J.L. Oh my God.

B.H. And I don't know if he did it by himself. I ... To this day I'm, like, he could not have done that by himself,-you know?-but all four walls and the ceiling were plastered with this. And he had them taken down and he was sent to another job 'cause they weren't going to tolerate that and ... which was nice. This Shop Steward was really for, like, a good working environment. It didn't matter whether-you know--there were women on the job and stuff. He was going to have a good working environment 'cause it made for better ... it made for a better environment. So he was sent- eventually he was sent to another job.

J.L. Good.

B.H. But, yeah. There were always pictures and-you know-words and

J.L. Drawings ...

B.H. And drawings and--you know-just crap that they would have. And,--you know--it went on. And every job was different and you had to deal with it. On most jobs that you went to you had to deal with one or two people who that-you know--didn't like you. And I think eventually it got better, but--you know--you would still have them.

J.L. What about sources of support while you were going through this?

B.H. From ...

J.L. Where did you get your support?

B.H. Well, it was mostly from the women, the other women. It was mostly from just us deciding that we're going to have meetings and we were going to decide,--you know--who we're going to go to, who we're going to talk to, and--you know--just getting together and just kvetching, as they ... and, God, I had this one guy and da, da, da, and watch out for this guy and--you know? So we kind of supported each other in that way.

J.L. The Women Electricians?

B.H. Um-hum.

J.L. Uh-huh.

B.H. Yeah.

J.L. And so tell me about--well, tell me about the sources of satisfaction for being an electrician?

B.H. For me, I really liked it. I really got to enjoy being an electrician in that it was a trade. It was a trade that, once I decided that I wasn't going to be in it any more, it was something I could just take with me. I will always have that. I will always be able to do it. You know? And I thought that was an asset was that it's something that you will always have. And you could go anywhere. You could go to any state, to any place and be an electrician. You know? Some places you would have to get licenses. Other places ... New York you don't have to have an individual license 'cause it's part of the union and contractors have to have their license, and stuff like that. But in places ?? for instance, Virginia, each individual electrician has to have a license. (unintelligible) But, you can take it with you anywhere. And like I said, it's so neat to wire up a room. Everything is in. And go to the panel and turn that switch on and

J.L. Light ...

B.H. There's light! And you did that. You know, you, like, it's amazing! It's, like, a miracle.

J.L. Well, speaking of taking it anywhere, I know that you did some work in Nicaragua.

B.H. Yes.

J.L. Why don't you talk about that. When was that and what ... what brought you there and ...

B.H. Yeah. Nicaragua was in 1987 was when I went, August of 1987. And that was a little different because that was more of a political statement. It was during the war of Nicaragua and it was during the contra--the Iran Contra War, I guess. And we really,--we meaning the people involved with the New York Nicaragua Construction Brigade, which was what the organization was,--we didn't believe in what the United States was doing and we didn't believe in that Nicaragua was being bombed in different places and schools were being--you know--turn--you know--turn down from or destructed, or whatever. And so what we wanted to do was we wanted to go to Nicaragua and build some schools was the mission.

J.L. And was this an all-women brigade or males and females?

B.H. Well, it started out as the New York Nicaragua a Construction Brigade [it] was a men and women organization. And by the time I got involved they had a women's group and they had the coed--a coed group, let's say it that way. And Evan was a part of that and she was one of the kind of the leaders in getting this women's group to work. And there were other women in many different trades. Even if you didn't have a trade and you wanted to be in this organization, you could be in this organization. And they decided it would be easier to have a women's group go to Nicaragua and hire

women. That's what we ended up doing. This Women's Brigade went to Nicaragua to Condega, a little town out of, like, I think it's like a half hour from Managua or Esteli. And it would have ... it would be easier for other ... both Nicaraguan women to work with us because we were all women and stuff and in Nicaragua and in a lot of Latino's community culture, there's a really big thing of machismo. Like, women are supposed to just be Moms and--you know--and housewives and--you know--take care of the kids and ... although they do everything. I mean, they do the gardening and they do the milking and the- whatever, that it takes in the different countries. So we hired eight ... When we were there we hired eight Nicaraguan women to work with us constructing a school, which was so cool!

J.L. And you had to teach them?

B.H. We had to teach them 'cause they didn't know about construction so we had to teach them. Now, Evan was there in the beginning doing all the red tape and preparation stuff. And when I went I went in August and they had already gone earlier in the year to figure out where we were going to stay, who we were going to stay with, what town we were going to work in and stuff like that. So we ended up working in Condega, Nicaragua, which is a cute little town, and each woman would live with a family so that was kind of neat. And like I said, I went in August of '87. I was only there unfortunately to dig out. Like, I was there we were digging out. We were ... We surveyed and we decided how big the area was going to be and stuff like that. And I was there digging. You know? And everything had to do by hand.

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. And the kids ... The way this little town, because they didn't have schools,

J.L. Um-hum.

B.H. Some kids would go to school in the morning and some would go in the afternoon. I think the young would go in the morning and the older children would go in the afternoon or vice versa. And those that were not in school would come once in a while, would come with machetes ... that's how we cleared the land was with machetes, and help us clear the land. And I learned how to use a machete and stuff. It was a lot of fun. And the women would come out and--you know--work with us and stuff. And so I was there for one month, and so I was there in the beginning, mud and rain.

J.L. Did you ever have a chance to go back?

B.H. No.

J.L. No?

B.H. No.

J.L. But they did build the school.

B.H. They did build the school, yeah. And my understanding is that after all that, the building of the school and stuff, they did organize some of these women and developed a group of women there

that continued to do some kind of construction. That was my understanding.

B.J. Okay. So tell me about your decision-making process in terms of leaving the trades? How many years were you in and then what made you decide to leave?

B.H. Yeah. I was in the trades for ten years, from '79 till '89. And part of the reason why I left was that I always wanted to be in the medical field. I mean, I ... when I was young I wanted to be a pediatrician. And when I started--each time I started college it would be a pre-med student somehow. I don't know what happened. And so I was in ... in a place where I did not want to retire in construction because construction can be very dragging in the system on your physical being, mentally and physically and sometimes spiritually. And I did not want to be an old lady in the trades. And I wanted to really go back to school and get into some kind of medical ... in the medical field. So I decided at thirty that I would retire from the union and go into ... go back to school and that's what I did. In '89 I was accepted at Mount Holyoke College and I went in as a pre-med student and I did two years of pre-med, which was in biology, chemistry and all that, totally got burned out, switched out to women's studies and what we were studying was global health care in women and children, and that's where I stayed. Got my BA in Women's Studies. That was in '93 I graduated. Then my partner at the time was looking into graduate school in Texas, Austin, Texas, she was accepted and so I went ahead and went to Texas with no plans and graduated from college with no plans at all. I didn't know what I was going to do after graduating and stuff. And while I was in Texas in '95, '94-'95, I started going to school to see if I could join the nursing. So I did one year of a master's in nursing and then I switched over to a Bachelor's in nursing because it ... I finished school faster. And so in '98 I got my RN license and was working in ... as a nurse which was ... I was happy, very happy to be doing what I was doing.

J.L. And tell me about the kind of work you do now.

B.H. Now I am a public health nurse and I work for Arlington County Department of Human Services and I love my job. And basically what a public health nurse in my position does is we have clinicals, so we have maternity clinic, family planning, immunization, child health clinic, and we have one nurse of the day office which is like a walk in clinic and anyone can come and ask questions and stuff. It's mostly women and maternal and child health and ... and that's kind of like half time, part of ... part of my time. And the other part I do case management and I follow families in whatever they need and children and--you know--any ... any kind of problem that comes up.

J.L. So you've switched from working in a basically all male environment to working with women.

B.H. Yes.

J.L. And how do you contrast your two careers? What are your thoughts about the ??(laughs) That's probably a dumb question but ...

B.H. The women's one is more nurturing? (laughs)

J.L. Surprise!

B.H. More nurturing. Yeah. There is a big difference between male dominated work environment to a women's dominated work environment, a big difference. And the difference is in nurturing support. You know? You can cry on each others' shoulders if you have to; that kind of just ... that kind of environment,--you know?--mothering, caring,--you know,--sisterly love and--you know--and all that kind of stuff. And the male environment is, like, you needed to pull yourself up by ...

J.L. Suck it up.

B.H. Yeah, suck it up, and--you know,--you need to take care of yourself and you need to do it; you need to be strong. You need to be--you know ...

J.L. And men pay a big price for that.

B.H. Men pay a big price for that. It's unfortunate. And ... and I saw guys that I worked with that I really liked who were old beyond their age. I mean, they were just hunched over. They were tired: their hands, their--you know--their ... everything hurt and they were always complaining about--you know ... they were miserable, a lot of them. You know? And,--you know--they would retire and in two years they would die. You know? It was just ...

Tape Two

J.L. So the satisfactions of your new career are ...

B.H. I just love being a nurse--being a public health nurse and working in the community, which is what I do and just meeting lots of different people and because it's maternal and child I meet a lot of different women from a lot of different countries: Ethiopia and Uganda and Mongolia and--you know--Korea and just Iran and Pakistan. I mean, it's just ... You know?--and then,--you know--all South America, Oh, and Central America. It's just unbelievable. And it's such a mixture of people and it's just so rich.

J.L. And you must be doing a lot of educational things too. Right?

B.H. Yes. Yeah, we do. We do a lot of education and we--you know--we do a lot of health education, family planning, maternal and child and parenting and domestic violence. There's a lot of domestic violence and things like that. And what we try to do, is although it's maternal and child, when they do bring their male partners, husbands, boy friends, whatever, we do try to educate the family in ... in whatever ...

J.L. The importance of health care.

B.H. Yeah, the importance of health care and the importance of--you know--non-violent kind of--you know--learning each other and stuff like that, kids and sex, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV ... You know? All of those things we try to do. And then, of course, it's Arlington County so I try to give them resources in Arlington County that they could either get from the Department of

Human Services or other departments throughout Arlington. so it's ??

J.L. When you look back and your time ?? experience I ... I mentioned to you last time we spoke about ... I read this wonderful book about the Brooklyn Dodgers: "The Boys of Summer," and in it they wrote about Jackie Robinson and they said: "He bore the burdens of a pioneer and it only made him stronger." And what do you think about that: being a pioneer and what are your thoughts?

B.H. I never really thought of myself as a pioneer. There were so many people that came in before me. I mean, I just ... And of course, one person ... I feel really good that I was part of that first five women, the group of five women, which was Cynthia, Melinda, Evan, Beth Goldman and myself. And it was a scary thing to do. It was something unheard of and especially in the electrical union. But I feel very fortunate and very honored to have been in that group of women and stuff. And,---you know--a lot of them did a lot for the women that came in after them. And so I feel fortunate to be part of that. But I think, like, Cynthia did a lot. You know? Evan did a lot. I mean, Evan ... and I, of course, I'm biased 'cause Evan was my best friend,

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. Yeah, and she was one hell of a woman.

J.L. What was special about Evan? You knew her a lot better than I ever did. Tell me about Evan?

B.H. Yeah. Well, we were friends since we were seventeen and we're two weeks apart in birthdays, the same year, so I was, like, Oh! We kind of connected. And she was always involved in something good for the community and involved in the Latino struggle; involved in--just involved in women's struggles. And she just kept going and just--you know,--always looking to fight against injustices for the ?? who were exploited and stuff. So she was always amazing! She was always there like a pillar. Like, she was kind of like a stronghold, just kept going and just kept--you know--Well,--you know--we got to do this. You know? I know it's hard. I know it's this ... but--you know--you have to do it. You have to pair ... It was kind of like her ... Like, what I saw in her was, like, we need ... Even though we're going through this and it is hard and it is frustrating and it is painful, we need to do this so that another women coming before us--coming after us will have a better experience. And that was really our attitude. We really need to go through this and just put up with it,--you know--and ... and correct the wrong and ... because there's going to be other women coming. And,--you know--we just need to prepare it kind of. And that's what it was. It was ... It was that kind of attitude. And she was always there. She really ... for the little short woman that she was she had a lot of power in her being and ... and--you know--what was fair and the things that needed to be done. You know? She was there.

J.L. When we look at assessing affirmative action today and the situation of women and children and women's wages and things like that, what ... what do you have to say about assessing the gains that ...

B.H. That it still sucks. Really! I mean, it's always--you know? For the most part, women still make less than men. You know? Women and children still are not educated and don't have the resources to know--you know,--about health

care, know about things that they need for their family. Still research is made mostly through men,--you know?--heart attacks ... the heart attack, the research that's out there is heart attacks in men, cancers in--you know--in men. So a lot of ... It's still a men oriented ... there is--you know--a strive towards hanging. You know? There's ... there's more research that's going towards women and children and stuff. But I think we still have a long way to go, unfortunately, in that arena. And,--you know,--and--you know--you still have presidents of colleges saying that women are not good in science and math and they're ... and I went to Mount Holyoke College and I know that there are women that are excellent; that are so knowledgeable and who are--you know--mentors for women going up. I mean,--you know--? And I have to say I went to a women's college. Mount Holyoke College is a women's college. It had really brilliant professors, women professors, really ... I mean, women in math and science. And Mount Holyoke is known for science with really great people. So somebody who's the president of a college saying that--you know--women are still lacking in math and science, I don't know where he came from. You know? You still have that kind of attitude. 2005, you still have that kind of attitude. It's unfortunate.

J.L. And what do you have to say about the importance of these good paying jobs for women? I mean, there's still very few: like, around two percent of women in construction and in general, the blue-collar jobs are very--you know--sparsely populated by females. But what do you have to say about it as a field for women?

B.H. I think women should get into it. I mean, I really ... I think it should be opened up more. I think women should be more ... welcomed more. I mean, I--you know--I think sometimes women do a better job than men do in many different ways. You know? It's unfortunate that it's only two percent. I think ... I think women should get into high paying jobs, especially in the jobs that are construction electrician. I like electrician. You know? I think it was great. It was ... to me it was much better than being a plumber. But,--you know--plumbing is needed. Electrical is needed. Working in--you know--in the other trades--in duck tape--you know--working in ...

J.L. Sheet metal ...

B.H. Sheet metal. Right.

J.L. Right.

B.H. I mean, they're all needed. I mean, without them ...

J.L. What do .. what do you think it would take to change the work environment in ... on construction sites to ... that's a big question. I mean ...

B.H. That is a big question, and I think--I think part of what it would take, which is what it ... what we've always been working for, is for fair and open work experience. It should not be that, Oh my God, you're a woman so you cannot lift a brick.

J.L. Or we're not going to hire you.

B.H. Or we're not going to hire you because you're going to be--you know,--you're not going to do--you're not going to be able to lift that, or you're not going to do the job right. I think what needs to happen is I think it needs to be open and it needs to be

fair and people need to say, Okay, we'll hire you. Let's see what you can do? Not everybody can do ... Not every woman can do it. Not every woman can be a nurse. You know?

J.L. Right. Yeah.

B.H. Not every woman can be an electrician. I mean, it really ... what I feel like is that there should be a way that people should let people decide for themselves. If I want to be able to go and be an electrician, than I should have the opportunity open to me for me to say I'm going to try to be an electrician. Why should I have somebody tell me: Oh no, you can't come in here. It should be open. It should be open and people should be able to make that decision whether they can do it or not. There's a lot of people that can do a lot of different things and there's a lot of women that can do a lot of different things. Just got to give them the opportunity to show it; to do it, and to be able to say, Oh man, I can't do this. I'm going to go do something else. But give that woman the chance. Give that woman the opportunity to say: I'm an electrician. I can do this. I'm a nurse. I can do this. This is what I want to do and let them do it. It's that opportunity needs to be opened and in a lot of places it's not.

J.L. Um-hum. Well, anything else you want to add? Other comments?

B.H. I think women should go into any profession, any trades, anything that they're sure that they can do. I think they should be able to give ... I think they should be able to be given that opportunity.

J.L. When you worked with the women in Nicaragua how was it to overcome their own internal psychological barriers to doing this kind of work and to doing something that was ... I mean, what was that ex-- ... that must have been an amazing experience?

B.H. That was amazing. You know why? Because they were like, Oh my God, I never lifted a hammer. But here you are and you're a woman and I'm a woman, and you're going to show me how to do it and I'm going to be able to try to do it. It wasn't ... they were in a place where it was supportive, it was nurturing. It wasn't ... She wasn't being put down if she couldn't lift the hammer or lift the bucket or whatever. She was being edged on to ... If you want to lift that hammer and you want to build that wall, and you want to--you know--hammer that nail into that piece of stud, you can do it. And we're going to be right here. And if you can't do that, don't worry about it. There's another thing you can do. You know? But first, just try it.

J.L. And did you see---did you see the ... the growth in them and the ... and the ...

B.H. Oh my God, they loved it! They were so happy. You should have seen them. Oh, I never lifted a hammer before. Oh, I never nailed a nail before. It's like, okay, but you had eight children. You milked the cows and you--you know--you know--you plant the seeds and you do that. That's hard labor.

J.L. Or I was reading recently about women in Africa. This woman who won the ...

B.H. The Nobel Prize ...

J.L. And having to carry these big buckets of water.

B.H. Um-hum.

J.L. Yeah, and heavy--you know ...

B.H. The thing is, who am I to tell you, Jane, that you don't have the strength to do anything.

J.L. Or the brains.

B.H. Or the brains. I can't do that. You need to say, Bruni, let me try that. I'm going to do that. And you know what? A lot of times it's not muscle-it's not muscle strength that you need. People think it out and a lot--and most women that I have worked with are probably not physically strong, but they think it out and they say, Oh, I can lift that from there, but I can do it this way and it's much easier to do it this way. And they do it. They take it from that Point A and they put it in Point B. A guy would just come in and oh and-you know--just tea it and ... But who's going to--who's going to live longer? Probably the woman that used her brain to say, Okay, I can move that but I'm moving it this way where I'm not using every single muscle in my body. I'm using this muscle in my body or--you know-and I can move it easily. You know? And the guy will come and he'll use the muscles and the bones and the things, but his back--eventually his back is going to go out and who's going to be standing? The woman because she didn't have to use all of that. You know? So it's just ... and the women in Nicaragua, they were so happy. They just really wanted to do it. They were like: I'm going to show these guys I can do this. You know? They had a really good attitude, like,--you know:--they can do it; I can do it. And they would just pick up their belt and put it on; take the hammers and just hammer, hammer, hammer, hammer away. And just,--you know--take the shovel and dig a hole. And,--you know--mark out what they needed to do: use their brains, use the math, use--you know--you know-whatever it took. You've just got to give people a chance.

J.L. Yeah.

B.H. And that's part of it. A lot of women do not have the chance to explore what they can and cannot do. And I think that's what we--that's ... The first women to go into the Electrical Union, we showed the IBEW: It's the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, number 3, that women could become electrical workers in more ways than one. Now they've become union organizers. They've become shop stewards. They've become--you know-leaders in ...within the union. There's so many different ways.

J.L. (inaudible) Well, I thank you Bruni.

B.H. You're welcome! You're very welcome.

4-40 □