

Interview with Janine Blackwelder and Irene Soloway

[This "interview" was conducted during a reunion/social evening when Janine Blackwelder returned to New York City to attend Evan Ruderman's memorial. Soloway hosted Blackwelder and J. LaTour for a dinner and a conversation to fill in some of the gaps in Blackwelder's story. It contains a mixture of personal anecdotes, answers to questions, and rambling recollections by both Blackwelder and Soloway. Since this was a social evening, we were consuming wine while talking. LaTour took notes from a tape made during this discussion. The conversation took place on February 7, 2004.]

J.L. "Janine has a story ..." [Quoting E. Ruderman's interview.
Question: What was the story which pertained to violence against women on the job?]

I. "Janine has a story" so and so ...

J.L. Right.

JB. I don't remember a story.

J.L. I don't know what ... she was referring to.

I. Evan said that Janine had a story?

J.L. Yeah. She said all these different people. I said that ... didn't you get my second letter [with additional questions...mailed to JB]... Did I include that in these questions? [Reference to a list of questions that was mailed to Blackwelder.]

JB. I don't know what my story was.

I. Make one up.

J.L. I'm sure you have a story, Janine. Spin the yarns ...

I. You've never had sexual violence or ... violence against you on a construction site?

JB. I don't remember.

J.L. Okay. Let's go easy. Let's ... let's start. Okay. The first year you ... Like, ... because I wasn't [originally] doing the interviews as an historian and I wasn't doing it as an archivist. I was doing it just ... Okay. Let's get some stories about organizing so we can motivate the world. You know? I was doing ...

JB. Doing it as an organizer.

J.L. Yeah. Okay.

I. Okay, focus.

J.L. Okay. So what year did you enter the apprentice program?

JB. '79. The fall of '79.

J.L. The fall of '79... Okay. And ...

JB. Everybody was pretty much '79.

J.L. You attended Ohio University? How many years were you
.....

JB. For one year.

J.L. One year...and-okay, so you didn't finish,--and what were
you studying...

JB. International Studies. I didn't make the core ?? because I
transferred from there to Friends World College.

J.L. Which was where?

JB. Headquartered on Long Island in Huntington, Long
Island.

IS. Oh really!

JB. That's who I have my degree from, the State University of
New York, Friends World College. But I spent a semester at Columbia
University too.

IS. I didn't know that.

JB. I'm not that bright.

IS. (laughs)

J.L. a semester at Columbia.

JB. I [was one] of those Columbia boys.

JB. I can't believe I'd been in ... tried to make that my
occupation. You know?

IS. Academics?

JB. No, international affairs, world cultures and stuff.

J.L. Oh, they have a big thing there at Columbia.

JB. I was like ... I was like, twenty years ahead of my time
'cause I was interested in ethnic studies and all this stuff
that, like, twenty years later they started bringing into the
school system in California. Right. There was nothing for me.
There was no master's program,

J.L. Okay.

JB. 'cause it was education. It was global education.

JB. ... My degree is in Global Education.

J.L. Okay, a degree in Global

JB. You should see my transcripts, human .. I got about ten credits in human sexuality up at that Women's Center in Cambridge ...

J.L. This was a very progressive university.

IS. Based on your affairs?

J.B. (all laugh) Pretty much.

I. What did they call it, actual experience?

J.B. I actually taught a workshop there, like, in .. in a women's school. Okay. Go ahead.

J.L. Okay. So you got a job at Amtrak?

JB. I'm so glad we're doing this together.

J.L. Why?

JB. Why? Because I couldn't ... There was no Master's program for me. I was sick of doing Independent Study. I wanted support and colleagues and it wasn't out there. I couldn't find it anyway. And I had this notion that pushing papers in an office job would be slow death. So I wanted some kind of work that I could see the product of my labor and also I already had this notion, which I had discussed in a previous interview, that--you know--there was something somehow noble about the working class so I wanted a ... a trades' job.

J.L. Right.

JB. I wanted to create something with my hands and I wanted to deepen that identity with the working class. And so I went to RTP and they gave me two choices. One was Air Traffic Controller; the other was welding, two training programs. I assure you, had I gone into the Air Traffic Control I would have been blackballed with everybody else in the labor movement because I already was on the left. And I took the welding program basically because I visited a welding school and it looked really cool, like, seeing all these sparks, and it looked like fire works. And so I took a welding training program. It was ... God, it must have been at least three months, probably six ... six or nine months long. And we were up there at Manhattan Vocational Technical High School. Eventually it was about a six month program and we got a small stipend.

J.L. Manhattan Vocational

JB. Vocational Technical High School. And it was all women.

J.L. 96th Street, Manhattan?

JB. The RTP people in the Bronx had their relatives in there and--you know--I had this ex-junky friend, a dyke. She was like, the Bronx is ??

JB. That I told Irene for her own pleasure.

J.L. Did you take a job as a cleaner first.

JB. I was hired because of the welding program and they wanted to put women in the trades and I ...

J.L. for Amtrak.

J.B. I was given the impression that I was going to have a welding job.

J.L. Uh-huh.

JB. But they had a seniority system and a system of ... of bidding for jobs, and everybody has to start out as a coach cleaner or--you know--in a non-skilled capacity. So believe me, I was very surprised when, gosh, I think it was a year, a year and a half,-- something like that--before I got out of the coach cleaning department and finally was made a pipe fitter/welder. I remember sweeping the platform and the General Manager coming along, and I said: You know, this is an incredible waste of skill and brains.

IS. (laughs)

JB. But I didn't get an opportunity to bid for the trades' job until I had enough seniority to do so. And there had to be an opening. I had to wait for somebody to leave. And then I was on the bottom of the seniority roster and every time I bid for a day job I'd get bumped back to nights. And I was always--you know--

J.L. Okay. So you had some training in non-traditional ...

J.B. ... working nights in the winter time and shit, and never having weekends off. And when I heard that there was an opportunity to get a job in building construction, knowing nothing about building construction, I ...I went for it, 'cause, basically, I wanted a social life and I wanted weekends off. I was in my twenties...worked at the railroad was, like, Tuesdays and Wednesdays off and shit like that. Right before I left I finally found out that there were, like, women's bars open on Wednesday nights.

I. (laughs)

J.L. Oh well, too late; too late. Okay.

JB. It's a little too late.

J.L. So that was the training program, RTP. So you never were in a CETA program?

JB. No. No. That was a CETA program.

J.L. ... So you said, "Some of the guys were very threatened by me and gave me a hard time." How did they give you a hard time?

JB. On the job site, those who were most threatened were really those who lacked skill and ability themselves. And the really good mechanics were really least threatened. And the way they did it, I mean, one of my first jobs at the Port Authority Bus Terminal had one of the most abusive guys. I mean, it was like bumping into Archie Bunker on a bad day. He'd just say shit to you. And he did it to me, he did it to the black Shop Steward

J.L. Okay. So hold ... Slow up. So that was at the Port Authority?

J.B. Um-hum.

J.L. And what were you doing there?

G. Working as an ironworker apprentice.

J.L. Is there anything else you want to add?

JB. Well, that's an important point, I'd think. You know? It was like the drunks and the guys who were just hanging on by a thread because of who they knew or who they were related to that not only ... there were a couple who were outright, face to face abusive, but they also worked behind the scenes,--you know--to try to convince the foreman to lay me off so their brother could be hired.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.B. But those--you know--like, let's say, business agents or certain foremen, they weren't necessarily threatened by me. They didn't necessarily give me a hard time, but they knew how to--you know--get rid of me or deter me and managed--you know--to give the jobs to who they wanted. You know? The people with the power were really not threatened, I don't think. I actually found out that the business agents even, like, Billy Nulty, was actually kind of fond of me. They were kind of--you know--thought I was a nice person.

J.L. So Courtney--was that his last name? Walker?--tell me it was;--such a strange name,--

JB. I have such a ... such a vague recollection of this man.

J.L. because there's a Courtney who was very ... They were trying to get the ... You know, when .. They kept doing nothing with this consent decree so they had black members of the Local go into court to testify. And one of the ones who was very active in testifying was a Courtney,

JB. Yeah.

J.L. this Courtney Walker. And I wondered ... 'Cause to me it's an unusual name.

JB. I'm wondering if he's who I think he is. Do you know if he was West Indian?

J.L. Yeah.

JB. Jamaican? Father with a bunch of sons? Single father?

J.L. I don't know. See, I don't know. I can't tell that from the record.

JB. See, that's some--that's one of those items maybe Laurie [Gallo] would remember. But, I mean, if he's who I think he is, he was a very capable guy but he was also a very tough guy I heard, that--you know.. I heard some story which ...

J.L. So he wouldn't be afraid to go into court and testify.

JB. No.

J.L. ?? him ...

JB. No. these guysYeah. These guys knew what they were giving up but They also knew that this was really their only chance to have any real power and also to get a money settlement.

J.L. Yeah.

JB. You know? I wouldn't have participated in that because I really felt, like I said in a previous interview, that I would just be blackballed and it would just be too much for me to handle. And I felt that I'd make more money just kind of not bucking the system to that extent. But these guys ... I mean, I heard stories

J.L. And some women get black--...

JB. That I have no way to verify, but--you know--white guys talking to Courtney on the phone,--you know,--well, I've got a bunch of guys with guns and we're going to take care of you. And he's, like, Oh yeah. I'm sitting here in my apartment in Brooklyn with a bunch of niggers with--you know--guns that are better than your guns. You know? But I have no way to verify that stuff.

J.L. Yeah. Right. Well, it was probably the same Courtney then.

JB. I loved the West Indian guys in our Union. They were sharp. They were extremely skilled...

J.L. Now, remember "Riff-Raff," the movie? You never saw that? Okay. What this British ...

I. Is it about construction?

J.L. Yeah.

I. really!

J.L. It's so fabulous. And it's British

I. I remember "Legs."

J.L. It's British and they have all these West Indian guys. and when I taught at Cornell I had my Iron--all my-well, people in your local. And I had all these construction workers, including 580. So they .. I couldn't make them write,--you know? They wouldn't write anything, so finally

I. ... love this one!

J.L. Finally, an assignment about Iron Workers. So

JB. Alice the Welder. We can do a lot better ... Interruption:
la hora?

I. La hora? It's going ... It's actually about that time.

JB. Uh-huh.

I. So should I open up another bottle of wine?

J.L. I sent them to the movies and I had them come back and give oral reports on this--you know--"Riff-Raff." And it was like, such a magic night. It was so good.

I. Oh really?

J.L. I mean, they got into it. You know?

I. I have to watch this movie.

J.L. Oh man, it is a wonderful movie.

I. ... a movie about people in construction. (talk fades into background) I do. Bordeau or Verleau

I. I'm sure.

J.L. I didn't do any of the food preparation but I made sure that damned vino got on the table. Okay.

J.L. Evan had tried to get a job on the docks. So that I can show ... You know what I mean?

JB. As, like, a longshoreman?

J.L. Evan,--not Evan,-Oh, you mentioned that NOW was trying to get jobs for women on the docks?

JB. As longshoremen?

J.L. So I did the research, yeah, and I did the research in their collection down in the labor archives and I found all the documents. You know? And there's a list. Evan's name was on there but we didn't know.

JB. I .. I-you know,--it doesn't necessarily surprise me,

J.L. doesn't surprise you ...

J.B. but it's not something I've thought about in a long time. Where's your glass, dear?

J.L. I'm not finished yet. I can't even ...

JB. Is one of these guys yours?

J.L. Yeah, that one,

J.B. Which one?

J.L. the big one.

I. Okay. Well, this could ... You know? We don't have to rush over here because this is hot, piping hot, but I agree. This ... Notice the serving utensils?

JB. Unbelievable.

I. Well, we could have salad, or do you want to finish that, 'cause this could wait.

J.L. No, no. Let's eat.

JB. Let's work. Well, we could ...

J.L. We could work and eat.

JB. No. I really think we've got to give that at least ten minutes so, I mean

J.L. Okay.

JB. we could eat a salad and still burn our mouths.

I. Okay. Work, Jane, work!

J.L. Okay. The name of the first black and first Puerto Rican?

JB. Canal Street.

I. AT&T building was on the ...

I. I think so. Yeah.

JB. You heard "the incredible cunt story?"

J.L. Yeah. I heard it from Evan, but I don't have it.

I. I tell this story all the time.

JB. ... where he left enough space between his letters that I could change it to countless.

J. L. Right. Right.

JB. They probably don't know what a countess is, is the question.

J.L. So you're the one who did that?

JB. Yeah.

J.L. because--you know--we had, when I was at AUD last time, we had a reunion for tradeswomen and Marty [Pottenger] was the moderator. And somebody told that story.

JB. See, that story has gone around a lot. You know who has the absolute best story though is Connie Reyes. I mean, Connie,--and this is what Irene and I were talking about in terms of attitudes towards men, and getting along with men, being afraid of men or not being afraid of men, or how to deal with men,--Connie Reyes is this, like, hundred-pound Puerto Rican gal ...

I. Now she's probably two hundred pounds.

JB. Well, she was a carpenter and one tough cookie. And she was on a job where the guys had porn up in the shanty. And being a Catholic herself or being of a Catholic culture, being Puerto Rican,--I don't know if she was of a religious family ---

I. Yeah, she was religious.

JB. Well, I know she was but I don't know about her Mom and whatever,--but she knew exactly what to do and she brought in little postcards and little photos of the Virgin Mary and Jesus on the Crucifix, and she posted that in her little area and those porn things ... I mean, they were gross. They were, like, [____] **shots** and stuff, and they came down immediately. And those men treated her with respect from there on. And,--you know--she really had the most impressive story that ...

I. Well, she ... the reason that she was able to have--not only do really well but ... and thrive and not just survive and actually have fun and make money was because she knew how to ... she had, like, six different women's personas that she could bring out, based on who she was dealing with, and she knew that men were very vulnerable to ...

J.B. She liked men and she knew how to work them.

I. She could be mother,--you know?--lover, sister,

J.. tease ...

I. innocent,--you know,--sex goddess

JB. ?? five-eight. I mean, I couldn't believe when she was, like ... But she just truly liked men in every form.

J.L. um-hum.

I. Yeah. and she ...

J.B. And yet she was a feminist and stuff too, and really she didn't take any shit.

I. She never took shit but she was---and she wasn't afraid of men, and she wasn't intimidated by them, and she knew how exactly ... she had an understanding of what men responded to and could use that to her own advantage.

J.L. You know, here's another interesting thing about her. She kept journals the whole time she was working and she has them.

JB. Yeah.

JB. She's a smart lady, a nice person. Do I have any more homework? (all laugh) I really want to get my homework done.

J.L. Okay. You said about Mike Semanelli, "He turned out not to be such a great BA." ??

JB. Is that right? (laughs)

J.L. We were all great. Right?

I. Oh, of course.

J.L. Right? ... doing their jobs. Okay.

JB. Remember ... I don't even think I have a lot of experience with him as a BA.

J.L. Okay.

JB. Maybe he just didn't give me a job. I mean, we were pretty good friends.

I. and he didn't give you a job, not even a ...

JB. No. We were very good friends, and as far as, like, the whole Mafia romance and some of those BA's had,--you know--he and I would talk on the phone and I'd say: well, the best way to deal with those guys is don't accept the first cup of coffee. You know? and I don't .. I don't really remember why I would have said that.

J.L. You know, to get the annuity funds and benefits you need time??

JB. Maybe he's the BA that didn't get reelected. That was my suspicion.

I. You should ... Janine.

JB. I can't imagine who else. You want it open?

I. Yeah.

I. Where's that strength, that iron woman's ...

J.L. Yeah.

JB. Okay. Finish your homework.

J.L. Okay. What about the ... In order to get the annuity funds and benefits you need time working. How much time in order to qualify?

JB. Well, annuity and pension are very different things. You need ten years to be vested.

J.L. Right.

JB. An annuity,--you know--you can take along loans against it, and then you have to be out of the trade for a year to withdraw it. I have nothing left but a pension and I've never had documents. And that's the thing I plan on doing on Monday, going down to the Union hall.

I. Oh really?

J.B. Yeah. Sal's kind of thinking maybe I can do my writing and have the money 'cause I ... It's just like Being here and looking at the building across the street reminds me of a good friend I had that lived ten blocks away 'cause it's the same architecture. And all these memories of her came back. And I figured go to the Union hall and maybe all my iron worker memories would come back.

J.L. Well, as things come back ??

JB. But I would like at least a document,--you know,--should I get Alzheimer's or something.. I want something for my brother to find to--you know,--to collect my pension, 'cause I have nothing to show ...

I. They should give you your reinstatement.

J.L. Yeah. They're supposed to.

JB. But they haven't had my address in ages. But I had nothing, even when I was getting the yearly statements of how the funds were being administered and all that.

I. Do you remember that guy, Eddie, who was, like, in love with you?

JB. Yeah, Eddie Kirkpatrick? Yeah.

I. Didn't he ...

JB. He told me he was going to put his funds ... Yeah. I was thinking of asking if he was still alive or not and if he had ever done it.

J.L. What about the South Bronx bridge ?? What bridge is that?

I. We were just talking about that.

J.B. It was a drawbridge on Bruckner Expressway. And I don't know what it's called, and you'd hardly even notice it, like, if you were driving down from upstate or Connecticut or whatever,--you know,--it just feels like part of the highway but it's actually a Coast Guard drawbridge. And I was on permit with the Structural Local. By then construction was already ... had dipped quite a bit, I mean, just about bottomed out, and ...

J.L. You were with Local 40.

JB. Yeah. About using the "hell dog," like the big cardboard thing the United States Post Office used to have. They had a big thing of Rosie the Riveter using a **hell dog**. And,--you know--we had respirators and I guess, was it called a generator or something? remote, bringing the air through tubing? And we still all had high lead levels because your skin absorbs it,--you know--through your pores ... and I made good money there. I mean, with the wages and benefits I made fifty thousand dollars that last year, more than I had ever made.

J.L. What about .. You mentioned that ...

JB. Oh, here's a little sexism experience.

J.L. Uh-huh.

JB. ... and I could have fought being laid off from that job, too, but I was, like, ready to go by that time. But I arrive on the job. I have to walk across a beam to even meet the Foreman over the most polluted river of the Bronx, and I worked there and I worked hard for a long time. And one of the young new business agents, this guy Bobby whatever, this young Irish kid who got in--Bobby Burke,--said something about... when I went to the Union hall, I don't know if I was still working on the bridge or I had been laid off, he said something about ... No. I was still working there. I don't know why I was there. But he said something about talking to that General Foreman and about how amazing it was that actually I needed to do nothing to keep that job and yet I was a good worker, which is so full of crap. I mean, some of these guys kept this myth alive,--you know,--because it was an EEO officer that showed up and asked the women to report if there was any--you know--discrimination or hard times going on,--you know,--like, there was somehow this higher power that was protecting women on the job. Bull shit. They could have laid me off any time. And when they decided to, because they wanted--you know--a change of face and all, they didn't need to give any reason or anything. You know? They could have said, Well, you're having a hard time with your Foreman or, Oh well,--whatever.

I. They didn't have to give any excuse.

JB. Yeah, and that was just a myth. And so these guys kind of stroked each other,--you know--

I. With this idea that you had protection?

JB. Yeah, or--you know--

J.L. Or the women weren't pulling their load.

JB. Yeah. Like, isn't it amazing she's actually working when, really, she could have this job without doing anything, which wasn't true. I'm sure I would have ?? he would have gotten rid of me. But they keep--you know,--they keep the myth alive that it's because of the city or the Feds or whatever, the reason why the women are on the job, just so--you know--they don't ever have to really accept, well, this is a capable person and they're doing the job and that's why we can't let her go right now unless we're going to get--you know--do something that might get us in trouble. They just kept the myth alive. And when this guy told me that, he said, Oh,--you know--I was really amazed that you really know your shit and you can really work because you don't really have to,--you know--I was ,like, you're kidding. I mean, that's so not true; so not true. By that time I was already eleven years in the trade. I had been laid off from a number ... enough jobs for cause or ... and a couple ... I mean, in a couple of cases for cause, really.

I. What cause?

JB. well, like, ...

J.L. so many.

JB. There's ... No. there was one job I went to, that asshole Briarfield told me,-he told the whole gang: You know, you're going out on the Metropolitan Towers. You're going to be there a few days. They just want you to hang out and you're coming back up here to finish this job. So we didn't even show up with tools. And,--you know,--a couple of days later the guy lays me off and he says: Well, you know, Janine, you weren't really that productive. And I ... I couldn't even argue with him. We all left our tools at the other job because of what Briarfield told us. I mean, I was suckered at that point. I mean, generally if I lost my job I was suckered by somebody.

I. Are we done? Are we hungry?

JB. Are we almost done with home work?

J.L. Almost. Yep.

3 hours □