

Interview With JoAnn Jacobs

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Okay, JoAnn, you were born in Brooklyn? Tell me about your family.

J.J. Well, I was born in Brooklyn in 1951, which makes me fifty-three years old now. My father was from Barbados and my mother was born in Brooklyn. His parents came over after he was born and they all lived--they--you know,--my father's family and my mother's family lived in Brooklyn. My father was in the Korean War and he was actually overseas when I was born. And at that point they had bought a house in Queens. I was the second child of four. I had an older brother who was seven years older, a younger brother eighteen months younger, and a sister five years younger so there were four of us. My father was an electrician and he was injured in .. in a fire when they were working at Ildewild airport. He was caught in a manhole that caught on fire and died of his injuries. At the time I was about five-and-a-half years old. And my mother, who was a housewife at the time, had to go out and get a job in order to keep us in Catholic school and maintain the house that they had bought so that's what she did. I remember her working in the meat department of the A&P, and then the job which she retired from eventually was with the New York State Department of Labor. she worked as a secretary/receptionist for twenty-eight years. and so that's my family background.

J.L. So you went to school in Brooklyn or Queens? What high school ...

J.J. Well, we ... the grammar school,--the Catholic grammar school that was in Queens near my house. And I went to Bishop MacDonald High School in Brooklyn, which was an all girls Catholic high School right next to the Brooklyn Museum and that was a four year school. My grades weren't good enough for me to get right into college when I graduated from high school, and that was in 1968, so I worked for sis months in a department store selling socks and wore that I didn't want to do that--you know,--I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. And luckily I found out about the SEEK program which gave remedial help to students and put them into four years colleges.

J.L. who ran that program? Do you ...

J.J. It was ... I think it was run by the City of New York. I'm not really sure. But,--you know--they gave us a stipend and paid tuition and paid for the books. My English skills were great. It was math that I was deficient in and in high school it took me, like, three cha--three times before I finally passed geometry. I was really bad in math. But so after six months of remedial work at York College, then I just fully matriculated so it basically took me four-and-a-half years to graduate.

J.L. And what did you study?

J.J. I majored in sociology with an eye towards going into social work. I ... My last semester I actually made the Dean's list, the first and only time that ever happened, and then I left-- graduated from college in 1973 and got a job working in a children's shelter. And at the time they--you know-- ... this was before group homes so it was an institution that housed children between the ages of seven and seventeen. Most of them had either been abused or neglected, but there were some behavioral, discipline-and disciplinary problems there as well. And I did that for seven years. And I worked nights kind of like a pseudo-mother, go into work at 10:30 at night and get off at 8:30 in the morning. And so I did that for seven years. And the reason I stayed working at nights was so that I could play tennis during the day and the weekend.

J.L. So that's fun. So then you had another career change. You went to work as bag attendant?

J.J. Yeah, at this Northwest Airlines. I had a friend who worked for the airlines, a guy who worked for the ... for Northwest airlines as a ticket agent and he knew that I enjoyed doing outdoor stuff,--you know--between the tennis and hiking and that kind of thing, so he thought that the baggage handler would be right up my alley, so to speak. So,--you know--he told me all about the job and he picked up an application for me. And I remember spending the evening with him and his wife and--you know--us filling out the application to make sure that I answered a lot of the questions in the correct way because I was going to be the first woman to ... to actually apply for the job. So,--you know--we wanted to make sure it was--you know--every T was crossed and I was dotted. And so I was hired and I was the first woman to be hired by Northwestern Airlines by JFK to be-it was called Equipment Service employee.

J.L. Um-hum. So you .. Were you ... you were handling baggage? That was basically the job?

J. Yeah. It was ... It was the International Association of Machinists union and it tripled my salary. I remember at the time I was about to get a raise to \$9000 with the shelter and the airline job was paying \$21,000. So the only hitch was that I had to get my drivers license before they would agree to hire me and ...

J.L. Commercial drivers license or just a regular ...

J.J. Just a regular ... regular driver's ... driver's license. So I did that and all my friends would run away from me when they saw me coming because--you know--I was always trying to borrow their cars to practice my driving,--you know--because at the end of that process there was a nice big check for me and so I was able--I passed on the first try. It took me about three weeks of driving lessons and practicing and then I was able to get my license and I was hired. And I stayed there ...

J.L. How was that as the first woman?

J.J. It was difficult, mainly because men couldn't understand why a woman would want the--want that job 'cause they didn't feel that I was strong enough to do it. This was 197--78 so you still had the vestiges of the women's movement,--you know,--the bra burning,

J.L. Right.

J.J. So I think what ... what finally won them over was me--you know--Hey, look. I have a college degree and you have a high school education and you are earning three times what I was earning. And--you know--I showed them that, yeah, I had to lift the luggage in a different way but I could do the job. You know? I asked them,--you know,--well, when they go on a trip do they just don't--doesn't their wives--don't their wives carry the bags,--you know--or do they carry them all? You know? So the combination of them actually seeing that I was able to do the work and ...

J.L. And what was the work force in terms of composition? I know that it was male but it was white male or African-American or ...

J.J. Ninety percent white male.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.J. Again, it's a union job.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.J. And it was kind of interesting because the few black men that I worked with--you know--they were really ... I expected,--you know--initially, I expected that they would be really supportive but they weren't. They weren't antagonistic but they were--you know--more or less neutral because they,--and I understood after ... After getting to know them I understood that they were in a precarious position themselves. They were a minority as well even though they were men, and they wanted to protect their turf and their positions within the union and within the area that they were working. So once they saw that I was able to do the job, then they started to come around and they were a little more friendly. By the time I left there really wasn't a problem.

J.L. Did more women come in before you left?

J.J. No. No. But,--you know--it's interesting now women are all over--you know--doing that work in every city you fly into, so that's good to see because it's ... you get travel benefits, union benefits, and--you know--health benefits and it was an enjoyable job so I'm really happy to see that --you know--women have blossomed.

J.L. So you went from that to the Fire Department. How did you learn about the Fire Department?

J.J. Well, before the Fire Department,--before I noticed the fliers about the Fire Department, I had taken the test for New York City Police Department and--you know,--so I--you know--had a leaning--you know--even earlier towards blue

collar, civil service work, mainly because of the benefits and the salaries and also because the Police Departments were saying it was--you know--a way to do something that was worthwhile. And unfortunately, Mayor Lindsay was the Mayor at the time and he put a hiring freeze so nothing came of that. But it was interesting because of the physical. You know? It was the first time I'd had to take a physical that actually meant--you know--lifting things or ... or using my body in a particular way. And at the test site when I took the police physical they also had a sanitation physical going on and so it was kind of interesting to see what the men had to do. At that time the women hadn't been allowed to take that test so it was interesting to see--you know--the rigors that they had to go through in order to be sanitation men.

J.L. And it was more rigorous than the ... for the Police Department.

J.J. Police Department, yeah, at the time.

J.L. So then you had taken--you took that physical and then ...

J.J. Well, then, so the fact that I wasn't able to be hired--you know--was disappointing but--you know--in the four years that I spent with the airlines I was enjoying myself. I was using the travel benefits. I'm not really sure,--and I always wish I could remember exactly what made--you know,--how I found out about the ... the Fire Department exam. Maybe it was a flier, a poster, or something, but I did find out about it and I applied. I found out about ... the Vulcan Society was training people for the physical and I went to a couple of their training sessions.

J.L. And they didn't balk at the fact that you were female?

J.J. You know, I didn't really pick up on it because they were black and ... and we were mixed in with men and defin--you know--by then I was much stronger than I had been,--you know--in the four years before. So I really didn't pick [up] on any ... any kind of negative or reaction as far as being a woman. If anything,--you know--they were a little more solicitous until they saw, well, okay, you can do that.

J. L. So was that something new that they had started to ...

J.J. I don't think so. I think the Vulcan Society always had a training for the ... for the physical and ... and for the written for the men that had taken the test in prior years. But what I do remember is, because I was working--still working ... turn that off for a second. I'm a bit confusing.

J.L. Okay. So you were talking about when you took the test for the Fire Fighters.

J.J. Right. The only training program that I knew of was the Vulcan Society's training program so I went to a few sessions there. The other thing that the Fire Department did was they allowed all the candidates to go to the test site and run through the ... the test so you got an idea of ... of what it was--what it entailed. And what I found was that the men that were proctoring the practice were real encouraging,--very encouraging. They actually told me I could come back if I wanted to and do it again so I think I did it once or twice more ... just went to armory in Brooklyn where they were actually going to give

the test and ran through it. And that was my preparation for the test other than--you know--running and trying to do push ups and that kind of thing on my own.

J.L. Okay. So you were ... So then you ... you took the physical test before you can take the written test. Right?

J.J. No. You take the written first.

J.L. Written first?

J.J. Yeah. I took the written in '77 and then they devised a list based on how you scored on your written. And I remember when I was working in the children's shelter at night, studying. They had booklets,--test booklets--that you could get, the Baron's test booklets, and so I would practice taking old exams and got a 94 on the written and then ... So I took the written test in '77, the physical in '78, and then I went to the airlines and ... and worked there until the law suit. And I was,--you know--sent a letter and told that there was going to be a class action law suit and whether or not I wanted to be a participant, which, of course, I did. And ... and then we were hired in 1982.

J.L. So then, when you were hired, then you went through the training.

J.J. Right. And, well, we had to take another physical. The court ordered the Fire--the city and the Fire Department to devise a physical that was more job related and the test was open only to the women because the u--u--Uniformed Fire Fighters Association, the Fire Fighters Union, had advised the men not to be a part of the law suit. So Brenda Berkman went ahead with the law suit, the class action, on behalf of the women so only the women were eligible to take the revised physical. And we did, and those of us that passed, the city had to hold forty-two or forty-five spaces for women in the next class and for that reason we were all in the Fire Academy at the same time.

J.L. So tell me about what that was like at the--your experiences at the Fire Academy?

J.J. Well, crowded. The lockers,--you know--the one locker that they gave us was ... was pretty crowded. But,--you know--it was very stressful. I took a leave of absence from the airline job,--I didn't quit,--and the Machinists Union representative was really incensed that I wasn't fired. He didn't think it was fair that I could take a--you know--I could just leave and ... and they would hold my spot. But the manager,--you know--a typical case of labor versus management,--the management insisted that I not be fired and that they would hold a spot for me and so I took a three month leave of absence in order to do the Fire Department--and to see if I liked it at the end.

J.L. Yeah.

J.J. So in the Fire Academy I felt that I had a leg up because I'd been doing physical labor for the past four years.

J.L. And you were athletic. Were you still playing tennis?

J.J. Yes.

J.L. Yeah?

J.J. Oh, definitely yeah. I was still playing tennis. But actually, I got most of my physical labor work from the ... from the airline job. ?? extremely ... You know, you're lifting mail freight and baggage every day. And actually it was much more physically demanding than the Fire Department was because you don't have a fire every day and you definitely have a flights going in and out that you have to load. So Fire Academy was interesting, mainly, in my mind, mainly because of the different personalities of the women.

J.L. Now, you ... you're always written about as the first African-American female. What was the ... there were other women of color in that class. Right?

J.J. Yeah. I think there were--if I remember, there were nine African-American women and one Hispanic or eight African-American women and one Hispanic woman. The reason that they said I was the first, and the reason that I actually was the first was that at the end of the six week training period, the Fire Department graduated only eleven women along with the male pro--probys that were graduating and of that eleven I was the only African-American. So technically I was the first African-American woman to actually graduate from and be assigned to a Fire House in the City of New York, if you don't count Molly the slave. I don't want to steal her ... her thunder. You know? But ... but even more importantly, was the fact that--you know--many more than eleven should have been graduated from the Academy in that first six weeks but the Department found ways to hold them back. They initiated something called deficiency slips, which was a way of ... of measuring or gauging performance in doing various aspects of the job: raising ladders, directing a hose line, hooking up a hose to the hydrant, demolishing buildings, tying ropes. Everything--everything that we learned we were graded on, and if they ... if one of the instructors felt that we were deficient we would get a deficiency slip. And it was pretty arbitrary who got one and who didn't and you were never really sure why they were doing that except that at the end of the day or during your lunch period, you had to go and work on whatever it was that you had gotten a deficiency in. It wasn't until we were supposed to graduate, when they were getting down to--you know--the fourth or fifth week, we found out that they were going to use the deficiencies to hold you back. And again, we weren't sure how many would count and which ones. Was it more important to be able to open the hydrant or ... or tie a knot. You know?-it was ... so it was very arbitrary. And ... and for that reason, when the ... the media showed up for the grad--first graduating class of women fire fighters there were only eleven when many more should have been included; not all. There were some women that--you know--I would have been terrified to go to a fire with. But there were also some men, after watching them in the Fire Academy,--you know--I would have been terrified to .to go to fires with. So ... But it really hurt in terms of the perception that women couldn't do the job,--you know--and those few of us that did get out were unique and superwomen when actually that wasn't the case. Well, it was in my case but (both laugh) but ... but that was--you know--definitely a divide and conquer strategy of the Department.

J.L. What ... In terms of that time that was, I'm assuming, a difficult time to get through that, what were your sources of support for ...

J.J. Well,--you know--my mother was--you know--a big role model for me,--you know--in terms of going out and supporting us. You know? We lived on the block with two ... two parent families ... I mean, my mother was a role model,--you know--going out and working and--you know--Welfare was ... was an option, but that's something that she chose not to do. One her sisters who lived in

Brooklyn was on the Welfare and I remember us going over there every once in a while and getting food,--you know--that they gave, give big blocks of cheese and tinned meat and rice and grits and--you know,--so we'd come back with a lot of the food from my aunt. But my mother would go out and work, so I always had a sense that I could do anything. And she always said that you could do anything. And I felt being pretty special going to Catholic schools and I knew that it was--it set me apart from my friends, the other kids on the block, and it made me feel better, which--you know--kids do, I mean,--you know,--so I think that held me in good stead. But other ways of ... other means of support were,--you know--my friends, my tennis friends. I was thirty-two when I went into the Fire Department so--you know--I was pretty well molded by that point and had been successful with the tennis so I knew that I could, if I worked hard, I had something that I could achieve modest goals and ... But the one thing that I did while in the Fire Academy that I think really helped a lot was I would eat lunch in the locker room. We were like goldfish in a bowl and I would guess in the six weeks that we were in the Academy, every fire company in the Department had to--you know--came to Randall's Island, came to The ... The Rock for something: to pick up a hose, to pick up a fire extinguisher or whatever. But the looks that were directed toward us were not pleasant so I absented myself by--you know--the times when you really would be in close contact with them, with--you know--active duty fire fighters that weren't your instructors or the other men in the class was during lunch in the cafeteria. So I would sit in the locker room with my sandwich and do my homework, whatever studying or whatever I needed to do. I didn't feel ... You know? I was friendly with the women, two women in my squad but I really didn't have time to be friendly with the other women because we were--you know--running from one evolution to the next all day. I car pooled with a fire fighter, a probationary fire fighter. He'd been in the job a year and he had a knee injury so he was just coming back. But he was a real fire fighter. And one of the other women that I car pooled with, Cecilia Salters, who's now Cecilia Cox, so we had that camaraderie to and from...But--you know--I didn't see Cecilia during the day because she was in another squad. She would cry going home at night--you know,--and she was trying to raise a daughter on her own and ?? I remember her talking about--you know--she went to charm school. What is she doing? Look at my ... I smell,--you know,--the typical female feminine what the hell am I doing here type of attitude which--you know--and ... and Troy, the fire fighter that we ... I car pooled ... we car pooled with,--you know--we would try and cheer her up or ... and all three of us were black and we lived in the same neighborhood. And it was kind of funny that years later Cecilia was the first woman who transferred to a truck company,--you know--the macho of the machos, so--you know--she had gone full circle, which was good to see. I'd hate to imagine what her career would have been like if she'd been the charm school girl for the rest of it but ... So that was kind of a funny story when I heard that she'd gone to a truck company. But another way of getting support, the Vulcan Society assigned each woman a mentor who--I don't know--was an officer. Mine was Captain Duran. They also initiated into the organization. They initiated the men, the few black men, as well but I didn't go. And the reason I didn't go ...

Side Two

J.L. Okay. So you're speaking about the Vulcans and you couldn't go to the meeting.

J.J. Right. Well, I could have but I chose not to. Number one, I wasn't in ... I wasn't a fire fighter yet. I was only in the Academy. You know?

J.L. Right.

J.J. I ... As far as I was concerned, I'm still employed by the airlines.

J.L. Right.

J.J. Gosh! It sounds terrible but you have the mi-- ... It's down on the table.

J.L. Right.

J.J. That's why. I'm saying how do you understand that. But it's ...

J.L. Yeah.

J.J. Okay.

J.L. So ... so you didn't go, but the role of the Vulcans in ...

J.J. Okay. (unintelligible) Could you turn off a second?

Yeah. I chose not to go to the meeting that night and to the initiation because I felt that I would wait until, and if, I--you know--actually graduated from the Academy.

J.L. Uh-huh.

J.J. And also, if I ... I kind of remember that we had one of our written tests either--you know-sometime that week so I chose to stay home and study for the exam. So that's why,--you know,--although the Vulcans were ... were offered a lot of support and eventually I did take advantage of it and joined the organization. But I didn't do it along with the other woman. And I think ... In hindsight I think that set me apart and I've never really felt like part of the group for that,--you know--and maybe a few other reasons. But ... but in the very beginning I wasn't there when they--you know--as a group of black women were inducted into the Vulcan Society.

J.L. Now, what about United Women Firefighters? When ... That started up ??

J.J. That started up while we were in the Fire Academy. It didn't actually start up. Brenda started it. Brenda--you know,--realized that we would need an organization for moral support in terms of--you know--tech--technical support, like how do you start the saw, not just--you know--how do you deal with harassment but that turned out to be one of the major benefits of having the organization. The women felt from the very beginning that there was someone that they could go to and talk to and--you know--we could hash around and figure out how to solve problems. Unfortunately, what I found to be the case in the early days, and probably still, was that, for those women,--and I'm speaking specifically about myself,--that I was not having the horrific problems that the other women were,--we really didn't get a hearing. You know? It was very difficult to go into one of the United Women Firefighters meetings and talk about the fact that you were having success and ... or how that was--you know--what were your tactics; what were you doing that was working because those women

that were having problems, their needs or--you know--came first and ... and so that's what was talked about at ... at the meetings. And that persisted--you know--even outside of United Women Firefighters,--and I spoke to you about it,--that everyone always wants to hear--you know--all the horror stories but I feel that that negates the hard work that I put forward to ... to make things work in ... in my situation. And I think that happened for a lot of the women that were not having problems. They stopped coming to meetings and they insulated themselves in the fire house because, well, at least there they were listened to and ... and they were having a good experience. So it wasn't just the women that were having problems that ... that eventually stopped going to United Women Firefighter meetings. I think a lot of the women that were mixing well and ... and successful in their fire houses stopped.

J.L. I'm interested in that whole question about your strategies for success, and--you know--maybe you want to talk a bit about what ... Why don't we first talk about your first assignment and then we could talk about your strategies for success. But also, were you aware of the role of the union when you were in the training in the Fire Academy?

J.J. Well, I was aware of the role of the union at the swearing-in ceremony when the union showed up with banners: don't ... "Don't let a girl do a man's job!" or don't--you know--and their wives picketing in the street in front of Ella McNair's fire house; newspaper articles, bumper stickers,--you know?--in my fire house bumper stickers. But,--you know,--at the swearing-in there was ... there was a huge contingent from the union making it known that they didn't want women, girls, in the job. And once--you know--when the law suit was settled the union persisted in continuing it on ... on their behalf. The city had given in.

J.L. Even after the city ...

J.J. Even after the City. I really didn't ... I wasn't as political-politically aware, I'd say, as Brenda and I think basically Brenda was the only one that was that politically aware and dealing with that on ... on that basis. But then again, she never really asked any of us to be there, to go to court, to--you know--to be part of that process,--you know,--I think. And I also felt that the best that I could do was to be a successful fire fighter so there was ... Another way of ... of winning your case was--you know--in your own little corner of the world realizing that ... that you could impact the men that you worked with. I was lucky because the captain in my fire house was ...

J.L. So tell me about your first assignment? Where were you assigned?

J.J. Engine Company 324 in Corona, Queens, which was in ... was eight miles from my house.

J.L. Right.

J.J. I'd never seen it before, but--you know--it was there.

J.L. Right.

J.J. And Captain George Donnelly was the captain and--you know--he ran a tight ship even before I got there. We had a lot of captains or officers that decided, okay, well, the girls come in we'll straighten out their whole house now whereas ... and so the

woman was blamed for the complete change around. But in this case, this captain was a by the book guy--you know--well before I got there. And what that did was it gave me breathing room. It scared the men enough that they actually got to know me and--you know--I ...

J.L. So he made it clear that there wasn't going to be any harassment.

J.J. He even had one man transferred ??

J.L. Somebody who couldn't adjust.

J.J. Right. Well, I wasn't there. He had ... He transferred before I got there because he was saying he won't work with me, and this, that and the other. And the only way I found that out was the guys told me months later,--you know--after I'd been in the fire house. The other thing that I picked up on,--you know--and I'm kind of sorry I did because it was really nice being patted on the back as one of the ... one of the best,--you know--because I'd gotten out in that small group, so--you know--they only really ... the whole job now knew about these eleven women, not thirty or forty, so I stood out. And,--you know--I realized kind of early on, I was getting patted on the back,--you know--well,--you know--you have a good attitude. And then I realized, well,--you know--if you're saying I have a good attitude that means the rest of them don't, and so,--you know--I was ... I was able to catch on to that pretty early so that I didn't disrespect the women that I had worked with. Like, for instance, Lois Mungay who was in my squad in the Fire Academy was one of those left back, and Lois--you know--just spent twenty years in one of the busiest companies in Brooklyn and,--you know?--so how is it that--you know--the two of us had worked together through our little six weeks in the Fire Academy, how was it that I got out and she didn't.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.J. And--you know? So there were arbitrary things that ... that occurred. For instance, when we were in the Fire Academy, I ... during lunch one day one of the instructors came to me and he said: you got a deficiency for the scaling ladders, which was one of the kinds of ladders that we had to work with. And I asked him, I said: Well, why,--you know? No one corrected me. I ... I thought I was doing it okay. What ... You know? No one said anything. And he said: Well, who were you working with? And I said: Well, I was working with Lois and I ... and no one said anything to her. You know? No one said that we were doing anything wrong. So he said: Well, I'll go and look into it. And he came back before the lunch period was over and he said: Okay. I took care of it. I said: What do you mean ... You know? Oh, he said: it's been taken care of. And I said: what do you mean? He says: well, no one could remember why they gave it to you so it was torn up. I found out that,--and this was at ... at the graduation ceremony,--I found out that one of the Captains that I'd had an incidental conversation with when we were training for the Fire Department test in the very beginning ... The City had to give us a month's worth of training before we went into the Fire Department on the new test;--he'd found out that I'd worked for the airlines loading luggage and that's what he had done before going into the Fire Department. So when they went to him and they said: Listen! Someone gave Jacobs this deficiency, he remembered me as having worked with the airlines loading luggage so he gave me the benefit of the doubt and tore up that deficiency. And except for that one,--you know--'cause I had gotten two or three others,--you know--but that was the one that would have broken the camel's back and I would have been left back. I mean, so it was that arbitrary, and--you know--it was just luck.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.J. So ... so once I was in the fire house and--you know--and ... and they got a sense that--you know--Listen! They didn't let out a lot of the women that should have been graduated and I think it was because of the media attention that we would have gotten. But ...

J.L. Do you think your captain was atypical or ... I mean ...

J.J. No. I think he was ... I think the majority of the officers and the men in the Fire Department were upstanding people.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.J. I don't think he was atypical. I think ... I think I was lucky in getting assigned there. I know that some women were assigned to officers where--deliberately assigned to companies where discipline was lacking, to put it nicely, and the hope was that--you know--we wouldn't last. And ... and I don't even think it was that devious. I think they didn't think we would last anyway. They didn't really target particular fire houses, so I'm retracting what I just said. I think that they threw us in there ... They split us up. They threw us out to the wolves and based on what--you know--what the union was saying, what the men were saying, they didn't think that we would last. And I think they were surprised by the fact that--you know--officers, after working with us ... believe me, if my ... if--you know--my Captain felt that I was incapable of doing the job, I would have gotten bad evaluations. And I didn't. You know? He ... he was fair and he really ... He and the other officers and the senior men in the company as well,--you know,--I would say ninety-nine percent of the men in the Fire Department were ... I mean, they had their doubts and they didn't believe that women should be in the Fire Department. And I'm not saying,--you know--that they ... they were saints or anything about that, but hey, at least they gave me a fair shot. And a lot of the other women, they gave them a chance.

J.L. Now, the New York Fire Department is notorious for being basically a white institution. So how was that for you when you went into your first fire house?

J.J. Well, I think ... I think it worked in my ... to my advantage in that the most of the men, or some of the men had worked with ... with black men, I'm sure, so ... but I,--you know--they didn't work with black women, so a totally unknown commodity here. And I think them not having any first hand experience, they probably thought that I had knives. I carried a knife,--you know?--I mean, based on what the media portrays minorities as. You know? So here I come and not only have I just finished working at a job loading luggage, I took a pay cut. I have a college degree. I didn't talk jive,--you know?--so I didn't fit any of the stereotypes. And as a matter of fact, their ... their explanation for why I got along so well was, Oh, well, you have a degree in sociology so you know what I'm saying as being ?? I think it's more that I just finished working four years or seven years with children. You know? That's why I get along and that's why I--you know--can work with you is because I treat you like children, in a way. You know? You draw ... you draw lines and--you know--you don't cross these lines. I had to take a guy aside and ... and I somehow figured out from an incident that I had had at the airport with one of the men is that when someone's doing something or saying something, you don't confront him in front of everybody. You wait until you're alone.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.J. And ... and that carried over with me into the Fire Department so that if I had a problem with someone,-you know-I'd wait until we're alone and I'd ask him,-you know,--do you use the F word every time I walk in a room because you're trying to get me ... get my goat or what? And he said: No. I use that all the time. I said: Oh, okay, and just don't ever use it to me. And ... and so we got along fine. You know? Consequently, if I banged my knee and I said shit,---you know--everyone wondered did I break my leg because I didn't curse. And I ... and I could. You should hear me on the tennis court. But ... but I think those kinds of things, their perception,-their--first, their negative perception of black women, and then I came in and had a--you know--gave them a totally different view of ... of me. You know? I like sports; had a good sense of humor. I like dirty jokes.

J.L. I was reading something about you in a newspaper article and it said sometimes you would talk about the Knicks and (laughs)

J.J. Yeah.

J.L. So you do actually like sports and basketball and ...

J.J. Oh yeah. I did ... I did enjoy sports and that's one of ... that's probably the one thing I miss most about being in the fire house was sitting around with them watching sports,-you know?--'cause you have, like, four people that you can--that you-you know-that you can talk sports with,--you know?--basketball, football, hockey. You know? So I do miss that.

J.L. So tell me, what ... what were some of your strategies for success?

J.J. The strategies for success ...

J.L. What do you think some things that accounted for your good experience with the men, working with them, being accepted?

J.J. Well, I think being willing to see their side of it. You know? Because when we first went in I had to--you know,-they ... after a few weeks or months, they,--you know,---we would have-a few weeks, we'd have the discussion: Well, do you think it's fair. You got in and my cousin didn't or my brother didn't. And my standard answer was no. I don't think it's fair. You know? And I'm sorry that he didn't. But what kind of idiot would I have been to say no. I mean, are you saying that, well, just because I don't think it's fair that I shouldn't have taken the job? And remember, I didn't take the job. I went into the Fire Academy, I studied really hard. I passed the test. You know? I passed the easy test. You know? I can't help--you know? This is the test. It's not my fault that your union told your brother or your cousin not to be part of the law suit. You know? So all I can do is come in and do what I need to do and work hard. But I also had a goal. And it was funny because I'd just left a job with ... with travel benefits. I took a six thousand dollar pay cut,-you know?--a job that I really enjoyed. You know? Airplanes are bigger than fire trucks so it's not like I'm trading,--you know? The airline job was much more glamorous, I think, than ... than fighting fires. But ... Whoops! I forgot my point.

J.L. But you had a goal.

J.J. Thank you. (laughs) Yeah. I had written a letter to a friend while I was in proby school and I'd outlined my whole life which actually turned out. You know? I was going to study. I was going to buy a house. I was going to retire in twenty years. And that was my goal and that's ... that was what I--you know--because that was what I looked at the Fire Department as. With the airlines I would have had to work thirty years and be fifty-five, or whatever it was. And with the Fire Department, twenty years, no matter what my age, and I can retire. And I just watched my mother work--you know--all those years supporting us and there didn't seem to be an end in sight. She eventually retired because she had emphysema and she died what?, three years after she ... two years after she retired. That was by 1985. I didn't know that in 1982. But ... but my plan was to ...--you know?--and I had written it down which was scary in this, like, in this long letter.

J.L. Make the plan; work the plan. Yeah.

J.J. Yeah. So I had goals beyond,--you know ...

J.L. So your ... you worked for a number of years until you got a promotion; ten years and then you got a promotion to Fire Marshal. Did you work in different fire houses during that time or was it the same?

J.J. No, I didn't. I stayed in the same fire house. I liked that fire house. It wasn't that busy. A lot of the men that I worked with would say, well,--one in particular, he would say: Well,--you know--if you want to be a fire fighter why don't you go to a busy company? And I said: Why don't you go to a busy company. You know? I said: What do you ... You know? And he'd been in that Company for fifteen, twenty years, or whatever, and ... and so I'd tease him. I said: Look! I saw pictures of ... of this place, I said. It was like a farm. I said: what were you doing here? And he was a big guy. You know? It was great. And so I found that ... that I never really was in the job. And you've been around women fire fighters that--you know--with their scanners and--you know? ... I was doing a job and I took a lot of pride in what I did, but it wasn't who I was. You know? It brought me a lot of respect. I loved wearing my uniform, especially as a black women. You know? I'd walk down the street in my uniform and feel really special. Otherwise, you know--you know--they think you're a maid or a nanny or--you know--because of the perceptions in this City and this society. So I really loved wearing the uniform and I ... I felt that it was a higher calling in terms of letting young girls, especially, see me in uniform. So I would go to schools in a neighborhood and do real fire safety talks.

J.L. Well, did you do that even before you were promoted to marshal?

J.J. Oh yeah.

J.L. You did?

J.J. Yeah. Yeah.

J.L. And did you do it on your own or as part of the Vulcans or United Women Firefighters?

J.J. I did it on my own time. And then, when the Fire Department would have recruitment, I would volunteer to ... Well, the Fire Department didn't have recruitment, actually. What they would do was they would ... a test would be

coming up and there would be fliers. And I would get the fliers and give them out to--you know--whoever I knew. Then, in 1990, the Fire Department finally hired fire fighters to be recruiters. They took us out of the fire house, put us in an office and said: Okay, a test ... There's going to be a test in a year. We want you to recruit and this is what,--you know,--what ... me, Eileen Gregan, a black fire fighter who actually was the president of the Vulcans at the time, Al Washington, and a Hispanic fire fighter and we ... we were the first fire fighters ever paid by the New York City Fire Department to do recruitment. We were the first recruitment unit. And,--you know--we basically did it on our own, figuring out what to do and how to do it and--you know?--do you go to a four year college when you're ... or do you go to a community college? Do you go to a high school or do you go to a job fair? You know? So--you know? And before that the ... the Department would give you a bunch of fliers and you'd stand outside the ... the marathon office where the--you know--people going to pick up their numbers for the Marathon or you'd go to where the women life guards were getting ready to be in a competition. You know? That's well and good but it's not really focused in a way that ... that it needed to be. So we--you know,--I was in the first Fire Department Recruitment Unit.

J.L. And how long did you do that?

J.J. I think we did that for a year and then we were unceremoniously kicked out. You know? They just disbanded it. And then they keep reinventing the ... the wheel every year.

J.L. Right. They do.

J.J. Every time there's a test or whatever. And then it was ... became a plum job and then, all of a sudden, you had all these white fire fighters doing it. But,--you know--I ... that ... those were some of my proudest moments were ... were,--you know--in that Recruitment Unit because early on I figured that that's what I wanted to do is I wanted to at least replace myself. You know?

J.L. Right. So now, you decided to take the test for marshal.

J.J. Well, I took the test for marshal because my thought was, going in, before I even--you know--got out of proby school,--my idea was, okay, I'm not too excited about this fire thing. It's dangerous. I had a father that died in a fire. I don't want to ... You know? I mean, it's exciting going to fires but why do grunt work. I didn't realize that--you know--officers go into the fire. You know? So I figured,--you know--I'll study to be an officer and ... and then I won't have to go to fires. This is all prior to actually realizing that I enjoyed doing it; scared as hell but I enjoyed it. So then I thought about, well, which job would prepare me more for my twenty year retirement 'cause that never changed. And ... and the fact was that the fire ... the fire tests, the lieutenant's exam, captain's exam, were always ... there was so much material to study,--you know--crates and crates of books, that you never really had a sense of what to study and whether you were going to do well or ... and I didn't want to spend five years studying for a test and ... I'd much rather go to law school. At least I know they had the Bar Exam every four months, or whatever. So I decided to study for fire marshal because that would prepare me for a career after the Fire Department. I would have a gun. I'd have police credentials. I could do something else. So that's how I decided that I was going to study for the fire marshal. And the Vulcan Society had a study group and we ... and I went to that study group for a solid year.

J.L. Were you the only female?

J.J. There were a couple of other black women that went, but hey didn't stick it out. You know? They didn't ... It was kind of sporadic. But I ... I went ... You know? I ... I did ... I read the Sunday paper and that was it, and I loved to read. You know? But I'd carry index cards around with me. The guys would ... as you got closer to the time for the test the guys would let me stay on the rig when we went ... we'd go to do building inspections. I'd sit in the rig and studied and they'd go and do the inspections. You know? But then I'd brow beat them anyway. You know? But--you know,--I just devoted my whole life to that for a year. And I was number 127 on the list, which was very good, except that it took them four years to promote me,--you know?--promote anyone. You know? So that was just like the Lieutenant's exam. The other thing was I didn't realize that you lose a lot of respect as a fire marshal because you are no longer going in fighting fires.

J.L. Right.

J.J. And they didn't wear uniforms which was, like, how could ... I want my uniform. I like my uniform! Whereas, these guys were--you know,--they wanted to get into suit jackets and ties. So I lost my uniform privileges.

J.L. But you got a gun.

J.J. Yeah. I got a gun.

J.L. And you got a badge.

J.J. Yeah. I got a toy. Well,--you know,--you always had the badges, but this one was,--you know--gold.

J.L. And you became ... that was in 1992 that you were ...

J.J. Yeah. And so I was the second woman promoted. Margaret Moffett was the first one. She was promoted to fire marshal. And it's kind of interesting because Margaret Moffett worked in my battalion. She had taken a leave of absence and didn't go into proby school with us. She went into proby school a year later. She was finishing a Master's in something. So ... so she came into the Fire Department a year after the others of us. She went through Fire Academy by herself. She was the only woman in the Fire Academy. But by then there were thirty whatever of us out there,--you know--so it wasn't that bad. Then Margaret was assigned to my Battalion, --to a fire house in my Battalion, and I remember the first day that I saw her. You know? It was like, there' a woman in uniform!--you know?--another woman! You know? and ... But I'd known that she was there. The guys had told ... You know. The word spread on the rig and ...

Tape Two

J.L. This is Tape Two: Jane Latour interviewing JoAnn Jacobs, November 3rd. Now we have the story of Margaret Moffett.

J.J. The story of Margaret Moffett. Margaret was assigned to the fire house that I had done my thirty day detail and what that was, was they assigned everyone to a fire engine and the make or break apparatus was the truck. So what they would do was, they detailed all probationary fire fighters, after their six months in the Engine, they detailed them to a truck for thirty days. And so I had done my detail in the company where they put Margaret Moffett, which meant that I had a year and six weeks of being in the Battalion and poor Margaret now

comes in and she ... and the men liked me, and now all she can hear is: well, JoAnn didn't do it that way, or--you know? And she's a totally different person,-you know?-and ... and should have been able and entitled to make her own way without always,-you know--JoAnn didn't do this or JoAnn didn't do that. So that's why I say poor Margaret. But I remember we were out on a lunch,-we went out to get lunch, in Scaturro's supermarket and we saw the Engine from 289 and they're talking on the radio. And it turns out Margaret was there. So get off the engine and go running to talk to Margaret,-you know?-another woman. And we're talking about the saw: how do you start it and--you know--and telling her--you know--what ... what I did, and--you know? And ... and so when we said good-bye and went back on the rig, the guys were --you know,--so what were you guys talking about, makeup? You know? No. We were trying to figure out how to start the saw. You know? But ... so that was Margaret. And ... and I told Margaret, when I was studying for the Fire Marshal, I said: You should study for this. You know? It's ... So I gave her my notes from the study class, et cetera, and she got a higher score and then got promoted before me.

J.L. But you said that Margaret went on to the trucks, which is a real macho job for a woman.

J.J. Well, no, no. That was Cecilia.

J.L. Oh, Cecilia. Okay. sorry. Yeah.

J.J. Cecilia was the one I carpooled with.

J.L. Right. Yeah.

J.J. Margaret is actually a supervising fire marshal now. She works up in College Point and takes care of an elderly father so ... But that's the story of Margaret Moffett. You know? There's nothing really ...

J.L. Okay. It's ... It's so interesting. So many stories, I can imagine, you could tell if we had more time. But tell me about membership in your unions. As a fire marshal are you a member of the Officers' union?

J.J. No. We were still (word lost to sudden volume drop)

J.L. So did you ever develop any kind of feeling of a brotherhood or being a part of that, or feeling that they represented you? Or what was ...

J.J. The union?

J.L. Yeah.

J.J. Not really. ?? again, I kind of held myself apart from that. You know? My concern was the day to day ... I would listen. I didn't really .. I didn't ... I didn't immerse myself into ... in Fire Department culture.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.J. I ... My defense in first ... when I first went in was this is a job. You know? I want them to respect me. I hope they like me. I'm not there to make friends, although that would be great.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.J. And that ... And you have to understand I just finished four years in another Fire Department so--you know--the airline was exactly like the Fire Department. You would think that fire fighters would be the way they were because our lives were life threatening and then ... and they had to rely on me to save their lives just like I relied on them to save mine. But it was much more base than that. It was that I was a woman and they were men, and that was a men's job. And, I mean, you see it all the time with your welders and your carpenters. You know? They ... You could put them in a fire house and they'd be exactly the same way, forgetting that--you know--this isn't--you know--welding isn't life threatening. You know? So I kind of stayed above that. You know? I didn't really get too involved in the union talk because--you know--you know--one guy's screaming this was good and another guy's screaming this was bad and--you know--and I tend to sit and listen and ... But I knew that the union was taking my money and if they could,--you know--if there was a vote and they said that they'd get rid of all the women they would have done it, so--you know--I really stayed above that, I guess. I didn't really get involved in it. A lot of women became delegates and ... that wasn't my thing. Right.

J.L. You did get an award from the City of New York: Sloan Public Service, 1986?

J.J. Yeah. But before ... before you do that,

J.L. Uh-huh.

J.J. What I did in ... in the four years I was waiting to get promoted to fire marshal, I had ... I had studied from 1987 to 1988 when they had the exam, and then, as soon as they had the exam, I immediately went and started getting books on how to buy a house 'cause ... 'cause I couldn't do that while I was studying. So I badgered the men in the fire house, most of whom had homes, to help me figure out how I'm going to do it; what kind of mortgages, and whatever. And we took the fire marshal exam in October of '88,--October of '87,--and by July of '88 * had moved into my house so--you know--*I applied myself--you know--to that. And then I left the fire house,--I ... I asked to be assigned to fire prevention, which was fire inspectors, which at the time were fire fighters. And ... and my reason for doing that was in the fire house you're part of the group and you're led around by an officer, basically, and I felt as a fire marshal I needed to learn how to make decisions and deal with the public on my own, and that's what fire inspection was. And I loved it. You know? The ... the worst part of it was I have a lousy sense of direction so getting a list of fourteen places to go in the morning and then trying to figure out how to get there was--you know--traumatic but ... So I did that for two-and -a-half years. And then I asked to be transferred into the Katrina Cannon's company because there had been a lot of problems going on there and no women would go to the company. They were involuntarily transferring men into the company. And it was kind of interesting because ...

J.L. What kind of problems?

J.J. You know, Katrina felt that she was being harassed and ...and so ... and she had won a law suit against the Department which you knew about. Right? So ... and it was kind of interesting because Katrina and I weren't friends; we weren't friendly. If you turn it off I'll tell you ... I was curious. I wanted to see what it actually was like working with this woman because she,--you know--my basic opinion of her was--you know? But I never talked bad about her,--you know,--and--you know--Katrina would come up in the fire house all the time. And I knew that if I--if I denigrated her, then it was really a reflection on me.

So,--you know--my basic answer to the guys was: Well, look--you know? She's not making all that noise by herself. You know? If ... if the guys ignored her, then she ... she wouldn't have anything to do. But someone must be encouraging that.

J.L. And other women were having trouble too. I mean, Ella McNair and ...

J.J. Well,--you know--a lot of the other women didn't bring it on themselves. My basic op--opinion is that Katrina brought it on herself because she was the one that got up at the fire at a swearing-in and did the muscle. You know about that.

J.L. Um-hum. Yeah.

J.J. But ... but you can't use this. I don't want to--you know
....

J.L. But ??

J.J. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah.

J.J. I went to ... That fire house was Engine 275 and stayed there until I was promoted. And ...

J.L. Do you think you had any ... you played a good role there?

J.J. Well,--you know--what it did was that we actually could talk after a while, 'cause--you know--you could actually feel the fire house waiting to see when the two of us were going to work together, 'cause I've given you what our history was. And,--you know,--so what I did was when ... when we finally had to work together,--and this was after maybe two or three weeks, I said to her,--I said, ... she was a chauffeur at the time and I said: Listen. Why don't you ... You know? And I played to that. I said: Weren't you scared,--you know--being a chauffeur 'cause I know my sense of direction and knowing the hydraulics and all. And she said: No. You know? And she liked it and she--you know? And so we kind of had a conversation on that fact. But so we really never had a problem and we're al-always been able, at least now, to have a conversation. So it changed it completely around and it was--you know--and she really won--wondered ... You know? She thought I was coming there to cause problems, or whatever, and I wasn't. I was just really curious. And I knew I was going to get promoted so it wasn't like I had to stay there.

J.L. A life sentence.

J.J. Yeah, exactly. Actually, one of the guys in my fire house had put in for a transfer to that Battalion and they were putting him in that company. And he came to me,--his name was Brian,--and he came to me and he said,--you know--he was, like, teary eyed; he said,--you know,--I'm going to ... she's going to get me fired. You know? I don't want to ... You know? And it's not like he can pull his transfer now. He has to go. You know? And I just--you know--kind of thought, like, gee,--you know?--that's ... that's lousy. You know? So I'm curious. I really would ... I mean, I'd heard the stories and I really wanted to see what she was like. And she ... I could see where she would be like that. You know? I made the mistake ... we had our own bathroom at that point in time, and it was her bathroom. She was used to using it but now she had to share it with me. And I made the mistake of throwing one of the brown hand towels in the

toilet. You know? You're not supposed to do that, but nobody pays attention ?? And the captain comes to me and says, Listen. You know? Katrina came to me because you threw one of the brown papers in the--you know?--one of the hand towels in the toilet. And I looked at him like, she came to you for that? Because, I mean,--you know,--in my world, Captain Donnelly,--you know,--you don't go to him with that stuff. I mean, you know--Captain Donnelly was, like, God in ... in the chain of command. You know?

J.L. Chain of command.

J.J. You don't go to the Captain about something ... so I went to her and I said: Katrina, why didn't you ... You know ... You know; you're right. I shouldn't have done it. But why would you call in the Captain and rat me out like that? Why didn't you just come to me? You know? And she said: well,--you know--I-you know,--I didn't know and I ... and you should be ... Okay. But I couldn't--you know--so this is--you know-- different personalities. You know?

J.L. Right. Yeah.

J.J. But she wasn't doing drugs. She wasn't beating her wife. She wasn't ... I mean, you know, so ... I mean, you have all sorts and this was what she was,--you know?--a real pain in the ass. But so I got promoted out of there and that was the only other fire house that I really worked in for any period of time. There were a lot of firemen really enjoyed it. They had great quarters. They had a wall in back. I could hit tennis balls up against the wall. They had a big yard with the barbecue grill. It had a garden. You know? It was a really nice fire house.

J.L. And what neighborhood was it in?

J.J. That was in ... off of Northern Boulevard in Queens,--you know?--Union Turnpike, up in that area, a really nice ...

J.L. So tell me the duties of a fire marshal?

J.J. Well, a fire marshal is a police officer and they investigate fires. A Fire Chief goes to a fire and he can't figure out how it started so a fire marshal will come and do an investigation: suspicion of arson,--you know?--fatal fires where--you know--civilians or fire fighters get killed;--fatal. So that's what fire marshals [do]...

J.L. Do you work on your own or do you work in pairs?

J.J. You work in pairs. Usually you--you know--have a partner and work in plain clothes. You work out of a base. They have different bases. There were, at one point, there were three hundred fire marshals. The Red Cap program was a big Fire Marshal initiative that they started in the South Bronx when it was burning down and they would put these trailers in the middle of, like, the Grand Concourse and Fire Marshals would work out of that and they'd respond really quickly. And as a result of the Fire Marshals doing the insurance investigations, arresting people for fraud,--you know--they built up a rapport with the community. They were getting a lot of good information,--you know--so the number of fires went down drastically in the South Bronx. So then they--you know, spread out throughout the other boroughs. When it first started, Fire Marshals didn't carry guns. They would do the investigation and if there was an arrest that needed to be made the Police Department did it. But men want their

toys so they figured why should those men get to carry guns and we don't, and--you know,--so eventually they became Police Officers and then ...

J.L. So you kind of--you know--back to the idea of originally taking the test for the Police Department, you kind of decided police ...

J.J. Yeah. But I think it would have been better if I had gone to the Police Department 'cause I really didn't enjoy putting handcuffs on people. And the majority of them were my people. You know? So I think if I had been a Police Officer and I was younger, then that would have--I would have been better at it. But I really didn't enjoy ... But the thing was that once I did decide that I wanted to be a Fire Marshal in the 1988 issue of the W-N_Y_F, which is a Fire Department magazine with New York Fire Fighters is the magazine,--they had an article about the Juvenile Fire Setters program and that was perfect. That got my interest. So I went--you know,--as soon as I got sworn in as a Fire Marshal I went looking for whoever it was I would need to get ... get into that unit 'cause--you know--I had always felt guilty about leaving the ... the children's shelter for money,--you know,--'cause I was really good at what I was doing and ... but--you know--putting cardboard in my sneakers to play tennis. But so this was--that was an opportunity for me to get back to that and so ...

J.L. So you did get into that unit?

J.J. Yeah, I did. It was funny because once I had taken the Fire Marshal's exam and I was waiting to get promoted I offered to volunteer with the unit 'cause I had a good background,--you know?--and the guy turned me down, Artie [Arthur] Massett [Supervising Fire Marshal]. You know? This snotty woman! Who does she ... You know? How does she ... and then ... so when I finally did get in there I had to twist him around my finger,--you know,--a big redheaded Irish guy. So ... But that was ... I took a lot of pride in doing that. And what the Juvenile Fire Setters ... And it took about a year. I was a Fire Marshal for a year,--you know?--doing car fires and girl friends burning up their boy friend's clothes and that kind of thing. And a couple of fatal fires, but--you know,--I really wanted to do the Juvenile ?? [Fire Setters Program.]

J.L. So then ... reading about you, you said you really enjoyed working with the kids. And do they still have that program in the Fire Department?

J.J. They've really decimated it because they don't have Fire Marshals. And you really have to want to do it.

J.L. Um-hum.

J.J. The supervisor I worked with at the time was Danny Higgins and--you know--he had two kids and he was a really easy boss to work for. Plus, I enjoyed what I was doing. And what was really special for me was that, again, the majority of people that you saw were black and Hispanic. So you knock on the door of this family whose child has played with matches or started a fire and you say Fire Marshal, and they'd open the door and there's this black woman standing there, so immediately they get ... You know? Whereas, I worked with this one guy, Hector, and he was the quintessential Police Officer and he'd knock on a door and he'd show them his badge and--you know--Fire Marshals and they'd take two steps back. So--you know--we had to modify that. But it was really a real pleasure to work with that unit. You know? So that's how I won that award (unintelligible words).

J.L. Yeah. So you won it for the Sloan award.

J.J. Yeah. That was great. You know?

J.L. For the work you did with the Juvenile Fire Setters.

J.J. Yeah. Yeah. And it really challenged you,--you know?--because, again, you had a family that just had a fire. You had to track down the people and how do you track them down? They had to talk to the unit in order to get money from the City of New York in terms of welfare or whatever that was called. But we would let them know that there was a child involved as far as--we think there was a child involved in terms of starting the fire either by accident or not. But we needed to get in and do an evaluation of the family. And then there was a whole network of ... of mental health centers that we could refer children to. We had a questionnaire that--you know--gave us guidelines and--you know--based on the score on the questionnaire--for instance, if a child wet the bed, played with matches, tortured animals,--we'd send them right off to--you know? But if he just wet the bed and didn't--you know--and the fire was an accident,--you know--a three-year-old playing with matches because someone left them around ... You'd go in. You'd take a look at the house. You'd see/watch the interaction, the child and the caretaker or parent or foster parent, and you'd do an evaluation based on that. So a lot of it was intuitive. A lot of it was rapport: you'd strike up a rapport with the person,--you know--the parent or, in most cases, grandparent. A grandmother was taking care of the kid and the daughter was in jail or on drugs or--you know,--so you're seeing people at the vulnerable time. And so what I would do was, in order to keep the appointment or make sure they kept the appointment, I'd mail a coloring book and re--to remind them that, okay, we have an appointment. Then I'd call that morning. You really had to be dogged in tracking down people. You're dealing with people that weren't sophisticated, in some cases, in terms of making appointments, keeping them, writing it on a calendar, so you had to--you know--call the night before, call the morning before I head all the way to the Bronx from Queens to ... to make this appointment. And you had to make it where they really saw the value in what you were doing. So that was the challenge. And to be quite honest, when you were doing that, I once sat down ... There were four of us in the unit and I once sat down and added up the number of jobs that I had done compared to everyone else and I had done, like, three times as many as ... as the next guy with the highest number. You know?

J.L. You mean in that unit?

J.J. In that unit. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah.

J.J. Because--you know-- the supervisor was a great guy but he wasn't really ...

J.L. He wasn't pushing people or leading people.

J.J. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah. So you really wanted to do it. You were very committed.

J.J. Yeah. And I don't mean to ... I mean,--you know--that was in the ...

J.L. Do you think ... kids are still setting fires in the city?

J.J. Excuse me?

J.L. Are kids still setting fires in the city?? This doesn't exist now, this unit.

J.J. Well, every time I hear about a fire and there is a child ?? Whenever I hear about a big fire I read the article and I look to see what the age is of the people involved. Were there any four or five year old boys especially, but--you know,--and invariably it's--you know--it could be that. The unit was started in the late '70s because a fire captain was killed in a fire that was set by a nine-year-old boy;--an eight or nine-year-old boy and there was nothing to do with him. You could arrest him and what would that do? You know? So they started this unit. It was based on one that was operating in Rochester and the Fire Marshals that got it started worked really hard. And it was something that was totally different from the things that they normally do. But they saw a need and they started a unit and it was just great. You know? We had Fire ... fire fighters or captains in fire houses ... You know? A parent takes their kid to the fire house 'cause he's playing with matches and they want the fireman to talk to their ... to their child. Well, we had fire fighters calling us up and saying: Oh, this lady brought this kid and this is the phone number and ... You know? So--you know--we were building up a rapport and ... with--you know--fire fighters in the fire houses that hey knew that this unit was something good. And then ... now I think they're down to eighty Marshals or less from three hundred so, of course,--you know--

J.L. Nobody is doing it. I wanted to ask you about United Women Firefighters and your activity over the years with it. And I know that for a brief period you served as President.

J.J. Yeah.

J.L. Uh-huh.

J.J. Well, Brenda was President before that and Brenda was ... I think I became President in '86 or '87. And my ... my goal was to do fun things; get the women involved in the organization not as a means to talk about the Fire Department but in terms of just getting together and doing things together as a group and I thought that ...--you know?--because Brenda was very on target for ...

J.L. Advocacy.

J.J. Yeah. Thank you. I'd say politics but advocacy sounds better. And but,--you know,--you'd go and there's the same five or six people at the meetings. So what I tried to do was ... One of the ... one of the first meetings that we had, we wanted to have it at a bar in Bay Ridge and I picked Bay Ridge 'cause it's where three or four of the women that never came to meetings lived in that area, so we thought okay ...

J.L. Um-hum, make it easier.

J.J. So, I mean,--'cause believe me, I looked like a fly in milk in Bay--in this bar so ... I was there with Eileen Gregan and one other woman and no other women came,--you know?--and that was very disappointing. And we tried to do a ski trip and no one wanted to do it. You know? So ... and Eileen Gregan was the vice-president at the time. So I think I stuck it for about three or four months and then I finally ... and told Eileen: Look, I'm going to have to cave

because I can't ... You know? I should be studying for Fire Marshal. And the other thing was the black women had the Vulcan Society and they were ...

J.L. And most of them were active ... Yeah?

J.J. Yeah. They were ac-- ... they had dinner dances. They had meetings. They,--you know,--so they- the black women had ...

J.L. A combination of social influences.

J.J. Right. So they ... they had somewhere to go. So basically, in my mind, I'm doing this for the white women. That was how it broke down, and I wasn't... and it was ... and they weren't interested. So I resigned and applied myself to study for my Fire Marshal test. It was a choice between ... between doing that and studying and I couldn't do ... Well, I could have done both but I couldn't have done the studying the way I needed to do it to ensure that I would get promoted or hi--you know? And we did ... You know? That was the point in doing a women's thing if it was just me running around doing stuff;--you know?--going to meetings or ... on behalf of whom? You know? So--you know,--I dumped it in Eileen's lap.

J.L. Um-hum. So JoAnn, you retired in what year?

J.J. 2000.

J.L. 2000.

J.J. Yeah.

J.L. Okay. And ...

J.J. In August, 2000. I think my retirement date would have been--was November,--you know,--but took my leaves in August.

J.L. So looking back on your career, how do you asses it in terms of you achieved your goals?

J.J. I achieved ... Yeah. I achieved my goals. I was forty-nine when I retired. Yeah. I turned forty-nine that May. I had ... Well, I was kind of disappointed in the last couple of years because I failed the hearing test for the Fire Department and so I was put on light duty which I could understand. They don't want you running around with a gun---you know---if you don't hear stuff. But so I worked in the EEO unit for a while which was a pleasant experience up until one point but ... So I was really eager to retire. There was no chance that I would have reconsidered. So ...

J.L. The EEO for the Fire Department?

J.J. Um-hum.

J.L. And it was, like, internal investigations into EEO complaints?

J.J. Well, that was part of it, yeah. That' what ... that's what it was supposed to be except that I actually left the unit because it was a choice between leaving he unit or filing a complaint against it,--you know?--typical

Fire Department,--you know,--puts in one of the biggest harassers going. You know? It was either--you know--leave the unit, shoot this guy, or ... or go somewhere else so I chose to--you know--go somewhere else. So I worked in the ... in the medical unit. I knew the Chief who was ... Remember I told you that the Captain in the Fire Academy who tore up my deficiency?

J.L. Um-hum. Well, also, he was ??

J.J. Well, at that point he was the Chief in charge of the medical unit so I went to him and I said ...

Side Two

J.L. What did the medical unit do?

J.J. Oh, they gave the annual physical.

J.L. Oh!

J.J. So they asked me ... They were looking for something for me to do,--you know?-'cause ... Then I had to deal with the EMTs who were all paranoid, rightfully so. They had just had a hostile take-over from the Fire Department. You know about that?

J.L. Right. Yeah.

J.J. Okay. So now all of a sudden, here's this Fire Martial in their midst. So,--you know--I had to assure them,--you know,--in various ways that I wasn't interested in their jobs. I wasn't spying on them. I just needed a place to hide so I could finish out my career. And I was doing eye exams, or whatever. And then I devi--they--I--they had me devise a stress class so I got overhead ... this was before Power Point and I got some overheads that I put together and talked about stress so ... and how to deal with stress,--you know?--something for a half hour or so for those groups, because when they were going through the physical--you know,--you'd go do your eye exam, the hearing test, the blood work, ?? there were always people sitting around doing nothing so throw them into my class. And it was a challenge because I'd never done anything like that before.

J.L. Um-hum. Yeah.

J.J. But it was also that, in some cases, you had EMTs and paramedics and fire fighters so you had to do it in a way that was equitable in dealing with fire fighters who think they're God's gift to the green earth anyway. So it was a challenge but it was a lot of fun. So I did that for a while. And then ... then Fire Marshals rediscovered me and I went to the training unit out at Fort Totten which was a whole bunch of fun. There are two classes of Fire Marshals there actually hiring fire fighters to--you know ... they were promoting them. And so,--you know,--I just kind of ran around and did stuff. I think I did one class on domestic violence issues and how police should handle domestic violence. I got the women's job. You know? But mostly I--you know--helped get doughnuts and--you know--tried to stay out of the way and make sure--you know--

J.L. They didn't put all your experience as a Fire Marshal to work in the training?

J.J. No. Basically, I wasn't ... I didn't really have that much experience. I managed to never actually have arrested anybody. I was ... I would always give

up the arrest,--you know,--'cause it's, like, twenty-four hours of processing so my ... I don't need ... I didn't--you know? Who wants to do that? And then you're dealing with these scuzzy people all day,--you know--for however long you're dealing with them, so I would ... I would give up my arrest and say,--you know ... Like, if someone was ... They way they said it is if you're working with a partner and it's your turn to do the arrest, they'd say, well, do you want it and, of course, they did. So ...

J.L. Yeah, notches in their belt.

J.J. So ... Excuse me?

J.L. Their notches in their belt in terms of ...

J.J. Yeah. So it wasn't a notch that I wanted. But,--you know--it's money in your pocket because now you ... you know--you're overtime,--you know?--a lot of overtime. Then you go to court and you have to see the D.A. and et cetera, et cetera. So I was always just kind of like weaving through the Fire Department. I never really was heart and soul into it, and that's why the Juvenile Unit was so wonderful 'cause I really finally found something that I could really lock into and enjoy.

J.L. You know, I know that you said that even after you left the Fire Department, you retired but you were still doing school visits.

J.J. Oh yeah. I still do that.

J.L. You still do that.

J.J. Yeah. Yeah. There's one school I've gone to, like, seven years in a row, their career day,--you know?--so I do that. And in the last couple of years I've gotten some of the younger women to go with me. You know? I think it's helped .. helps the kids to see someone their a-

J.L. Who looks like them.

J.J. Yeah. Yeah. I'm old enough to be their grandmother. You know? So that really helps. And it's also ... It was a way of introducing some of the younger women fire fighters into doing that with me there to help them,--you know?--as a back up. So I've done that and that was a lot of fun. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah. So I'm just interested in your ideas about ... You mentioned that the Fire Department keeps recreating the wheel, which is a problem with all the questions of equality of women and people of color.

J.J. Yeah.

J.L. So it doesn't seem that there's ... that everything translates over and that we learn from experience. So do you think that there are strategies that work and that the Fire Department could be implementing to try to have a more diverse department? Are they missing things?

J.J. Well, I think they're ... I think they're ... the strategy that they have now and that I actually devised, was the mentoring thing. When they had the first test that I could ... that I could actually help work with the trainees,--that was 1988,-- the physical 1987'-88,--and so I ... Actually, I was the only woman fire fighter that worked with Nick McNickle when John J. College ...

Brenda had gotten the money from some insurance company,--I don't remember what,-but Brenda had worked really hard and got money for a women's training program, separate from the men, which was necessary and ... but she didn't work with the program. She got the money but she wasn't here to--you know--three times a week doing it. I ...

J. L. Were you the only woman who did that?

J. For that one. Yeah, for that one I was the only woman. Then the next test ... and it was great. And I hear today how great it was. I wasn't really sure that it was--that it worked. But ...

J.L. Well, I read in the paper that the Women Fire Fighters are still doing this mentoring ??

J.J. Well, what's happening now is that ... and then the next test was in '94 and I did it again and that time ... I was buying my house in '88 so I did it for pay. In '94 I did it for no pay. I volunteered my time for the time that they were doing it and so that Nick was----Nick is the John Jay guy,--was able to hire another assistant, one of the students from the school. He used the money that he would have used for my salary. And the rest of it I said: We'll throw a party,--you know?--so put my money aside, whatever it is I would be getting so I volunteered. And it was great for me because I was in such good shape. You know? You know? They'd raise the ladder, I'd lower it. You know? They'd drag the dummy to one spot, I'd drag it back. So I was, like, I was, like, super woman. I was in really great shape. Nine hours a week I was working out with these young women. And what I tried to do is I kept telling the other women fire fighters: You know--you should come. They would love to see you, because I knew that I'm one person and I'm--you know--someone that ... that doesn't connect with me could connect with someone else ...

J.L. Right.

J.J. and they needed that. But we got ... I got the women ... they came one time and that was it. So then, while I was on light duty this last time ... Oh, the other thing was that Chief Layng- George Layng--was in charge of the training in 1988.

J.L. Was this the Chief [had worked as a baggage handler] ??

J.J. The same guy, yeah. (both laugh) So he used me in the physical. They did a video of a male and a female fire fighter going through the physical. So not hell went going through,--you know? I'd climb over the wall and--you know--and ... And even then, now--you know,--I had--you know--the workmen that were doing the ... the site,--building the site,--you know--everyone would stop to watch to see if I could actually do whatever it was I'm supposed to be doing. There was a four-and-a-half foot wall that you had to climb over,-or a four foot wall-with your air tank on so,--you know--and your coat, so I ran, I'd jump over, and they'd film. I'd run, I'd jump over and they'd film. So finally I said: alright. Look: we all know I can do it. Now, would you please put-give me a box,--alright?--you know?--so I don't ... Why should I kill myself here. So he used me in the video. And because I did that, I picked up all of these tips on what ... how to take the test. When you're starting to climb the ladder, start with your left foot so that by the time you get to the top you step off with your right foot, or vice versa, but just little tips like that. And so I went to him and I said: Listen! I'm working with the Women's Training

Program. Is that going to be a conflict of interest because I'm going to go back and I'm going to tell them anything that I can--I can learn? He said: No. That's great. You're not doing the test for them. I said: No. Then they'd fail. You know? I mean ... He said: No. That's fine. You know? Whatever you can ... and if you need any help,-if you need anything let me know. So I went back to Nick and I said: Look. This ... I'm doing ... I'm going to be in the video. So ... so all of these women that ... then we trained and they go and they sit down on the day of the test and they have to do the test, there I am in the video. And it was so cool. You know? Ad I look at it now and I was so young. But ... So and they used that for two tests. And so that was ... that was really great because I really had concrete benefits that I could offer to Nick. And I'd tell him, this is what--you know,--and he would devise the training around it. He was really great, an exercise physiologist. And ...

J.L. Is he still doing that job?

J.J. Well, he left finally and he's running New York Sports Clubs or something which worked with the training this time.

J.L. Yeah. I read in the paper.

J.J. So ... But what happened was, Adrian Walsh who did the '88 and then the '94 because she missed the '88 test;-she missed a hundred by, like, six seconds so she hung around and--you know--and really cracked it in '94 and finally got hired, and Anna Schermerhorn, the same thing. And then the next test Anna really stepped up. It was Anna and Regina Wilson. It was Adrian, Anna and Regina Wilson and Susan Blake that came off. And Susan Blake went over to the other side, basically. You know? She became one of the guys and she has nothing to do with the women. And ... and it's kind of interesting because when you read anything that she said in the paper, it's--you know--all what the men have to say about her. She's the woman that passed the same test as us. You know? So, I mean, again, the same thing go--perpetuates. But Anna ... I just talked to her last night. She meets with four women and they go running every Saturday or Sunday because they're going ... they're getting ready to be called and into the Academy and they have problems with the run. But Anna's giving her own time to do that. And what's really great is she gives me credit for that. You know? And I tell her ... I said: You don't ... She has no idea how that makes me feel for her to say that. I mean, she was driven. She was the most stubborn woman I've ever met,--you know,-young woman, so she would have done it anyway, I think. But for her to say that--you know--that I inspired her a little bit--you know--was really nice. I get (unintelligible)

J.L. And is she active with United Women Firefighters? I know for a while she was.

J.J. Yeah She's ... she's ... She belongs to the organization. You know? Active with United ... What's great is that we have some of the younger women that have come in, like Francesca Smith was a Police Officer and just little things that I was able to tell her. Like, she--in her neighborhood she was a Police Officer working under cover and she kept running into people that she'd arrested in her neighborhood and she was thinking of moving to Long Island. And I told her ... So I had 1. I went to find out would she lose her five points if

she went ...--you know?--would she not get the five points. And ... and I explained the reasons why and they said: No. She would lose the five points.

J.L. Right.

J.J. So I went back to her and I was able to tell her, well, don't tell them ... You know? If you have to live there, don't change your address. You know? Keep your address here. You know? Make sure that you do everything that you legally can to make sure that you maintain the City residency. And she's in the Fire Department now. You know? So you need someone that can--you know,--that knows the ropes and can traverse it and that--and that they feel comfortable coming back and saying: This is what I'm thinking. And Anna has been great. You know? She assigned them mentors the same way that I did. You know? One of the things that I did that I really enjoyed seeing the fruits of was I got the list of women who'd taken the Fire Department test and then I weeded out the ones that scored a hundred. And I think on the one that I did at that time was they took the test in '98, I think, or '99, were twelve-twelve or sixteen women that scored a hundred. And I had them index card, and I would call them periodically,--you know--just to keep them interested and give them special attention because with the numbers of people that take the fire fighter test, the written test, the ones that score a hundred on the beginning with the written test are the ones that are more likely to get in,--you know?--if they score a hundred, or whatever's necessary, on the physical. But the ones that score ninety on the written test, unless you have an event like 9-11,--you know--they score ninety on the written and a hundred on the physical, that still wasn't going to be enough for them to be hired so ... But then you have a 9-11, where the Fire Department now goes through the list and they rest these people. So,--you know--it was just little things like that that, again, reinventing the wheel, someone that ... that hasn't been doing this where--you know--the trial and error and waking up in the middle of the night to jot things down, isn't going to be able to--you know--figure out. And I'm not questioning their ... their efforts or their motivations,--you know?--they want to do a good job,--but it's just that you haven't been doing it, you're not thinking about it,--you know--twenty-four hours, it's not ... it's a job and it's not a calling. So when they reinvent the wheel every time they have a new Commissioner ...

J.L. They don't pass it all on.

J.J. And that's what you're ... and there's no ... there are some books on it, but--you know--it's the little things.

J.L. Um-hum. So we have a new ... newly reelected President as of yesterday. And so this administration isn't big on affirmative action. But affirmative action is--it's weak but it's still alive. And what do you have to say about the importance of an equal employment opportunity approach to hiring?

J.J. Well, I ... it's definitely necessary that ... so that people can get their feet in the door that wouldn't otherwise be able to. But I think--I think times are changing in a way that ... that at least in this country, women are much more demanding and are a lot stronger than I was twenty years ago. They're ... the young women today believe that they can do anything. Well, a lot of them do. Enough of them do that they're challenging the powers that be. And as long as affirmative action is there;--as long as there are--you know--ways that they can get their foot in the door, then it will continue. But,--you know,--it's

kind-it's hard for me to really focus on that because I don't think about it anymore. You know?

J.L. Yeah. Yeah.

J.J. I really gave a hundred and ten percent when I was there and I ... I left the battle. You know? I'm not really in that war anymore.

J.L. I recently spoke to a class where the first question after I spoke to this class ... It was an adult education,-you know?--people trying to get a college education working all day,-and the first question was: when you look at the numbers of women doing these jobs, they're so small. And the student asked: doesn't that tell you that women don't really want to do those jobs? Now,- you know--

J.J. Hell no! It's not, because I think the one thing that I ... that I've always believed is that you do what you see someone that looks like you doing. So if the only people that you've ever seen delivering the mail are six feet tall--you know?-male or female, man or-if you've only seen six feet tall men or women and you're five four, you're never going to think that I can be a mailman or a mail lady because no one looks like you is doing it. And if you ... and then you read the newspapers today for anything it's always--you know--your .. your--especially in the sports section,--you'll always hear someone say: Well, I didn't realize that I could do that until I saw him do it, or until I saw her do it. I was watching tennis when I was six years old, and I saw Michael Chang win a tennis match and I'd never seen an Asian man win a tennis match before so I thought that that could make me,--you know,--I could do that. I mean, these are real quotes that I've read,---you know---just picking on tennis.

J.L. Right.

J.J. The Russian girls. You know? You've got four ... four top Russian women players now and they started because they saw Martina Navratilova,--you know,-her last name. She's Czechoslovakian but she's from,-- you know,-or Olga Morozova or whatever. You know? But they had role models. They had people that looked like them, sounded like them, that were from their country and they ... they had a sense that, well, I can do that. So what you've got is them saying, Okay, I can do that. But then, now you have to give them a means to do that. You have to have training camps. You have to ... and then you have to go to the organizations that run these things and say: hey, look! Let this kid in. And that's what affirmative action is. You know? You train them, you get them ready. They have the right mind set and you say: Hey, look! Just give them a chance. Let them get in there and see what they can do. And that's-- you know,-in a simplified version of it.

J.L. Okay. Well, I thank you very much. By the way, how tall are you?

J.J. Five four. (both laugh)

J.L. Thanks, JoAnn.

So you wanted to talk a bit about the culture at the fire house and what was special about it.

J.J. Yeah. You know, my twenty years in the Fire Department consisted of a lot more than recruitment and the union and--you know--the Fire Marshals and the Juvenile Unit. You know? It consisted of sitting around a dinner table with a group of men and then occasionally,--you know--a woman fire fighter. Once in a while I'd get to work with Margaret. But,--you know--we talked about our day, our days off, our vacations, what we were going to do for the holidays. We talked about politics. We argued,--you know--our points of view. We'd laugh. You know? We'd fight and--you know--the day would pass and you'd look forward to going to work the next day. You know? So it wasn't all dry. It wasn't all ... You know, I didn't go into work thinking about the United Women Firefighters or about the union. I went to work thinking--you know--I wonder if Brian's wife had the baby, or I wonder,--you know--if I can get a mutual so I can go play tennis tomorrow. It was--you know- ... For most intents and purposes it's a typical work place. The things that ...

J.L. Except that even with the fire house, because you sort of live together for,--you know,--and it's much closer, and also because of the nature of the job. So ...

J.J. And then something else that would always come up whenever,--and this was outside of the fire house,--but whenever I'd go to a party or a bar or--you know--out on the tennis court, I would often ... You know, if I said that I was a fire fighter the conversation would invariably turn to,--you know,--what do you think about it? What is your--you know ...--and after a while I realized--you know--that people were giving me a little too much credit. You know? I know about all of the young women that ... that took the test and worked their hearts off,--their butts off and their hearts out to try to become fire fighters that weren't able to for--you know--various reasons, an unfair test or--you know,--they weren't fast enough, but they would have been capable fire fighters. But because of the way that the testing was set up they never would. But I know that they took that heart and that energy and went and did other things. So while fire fighters are held up to this--to be heroes, I think--you know--anyone that ... that does their job a hundred percent, whatever it is,--you know--should be held up to the same ad--adulation. And so I ... I always try to--you know--change--change the subject: Well, what do you do? You know? Tell me about your job because I always felt uncomfortable--you know--taking the credit for something that I think a lot of people would have ... would have loved to do if ... if given half the chance.

J.L. Yeah. You were ... We're coming up on Thanksgiving and you had mentioned Thanksgiving in the Fire House so ...

J.J. Well,--you know--for most of, I guess--let's see,--for nine years I was involved in a relationship and then he left me and went and married someone else. So then for, I guess, for the majority of my time in the Fire Department I really didn't have a significant other so--you know--I would volunteer to work on the holidays. This was after my mother had died. There was no way she would--you know--let me volunteer to work and she was cooking Thanksgiving dinner. But--you know--we would have Thanksgiving dinners together. We'd have Christmas dinners together. We'd share New Year's Eve's and--you know--those were special times because you don't do that with all of the people that you work with. And we made it special because--you know--you were stuck there. You know? We had to be together and ... so ... You know? I've had fire fighters invite me to their homes for Thanksgiving,--you know,--so it's been very special and so it's not as dry as this interview made it sound but,--you know--it was twenty-twenty of the best years of my life and so I just wanted to end with that.

J.L. Okay. That's good.

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