

Interview with Kay Webster

J.L. This is Jane Latour on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2004, interviewing Kay Webster.

So Kay, tell me a bit about your background, when you were born, when, your parents?

K.W. I was born in Buffalo, New York in 1953 and my father was a carpenter and also a cement worker and did the layout of buildings. That was his job, and ... and in Buffalo that's no joke because the weather is so cold. And then my Mom was, for a long time, a housewife and mother and then moved into working for the Post Office eventually, after my father quit his job ??

J.L. So they were ... Were they both union members?

K.W. He was a union member initially and then was ... It's complicated, but he was ... organized crime being involved in the union, he stepped out of the union and ... and wouldn't go back. Actually, he was kicked out of the union because he went to work for a friend of his and they kicked him out. He was non-union for a good chunk of time.

J.L. And your Mom was in the union?

K.W. Yeah, the Postal Workers Union, yeah.

J.L. So to just go swiftly into the area of concentration, what was your motivation for getting a job in the trades?

K.W. Well, when I first came to New York I was a waitress and the money wasn't very good after a while, and I thought if I'm going to take harassment I might as well get paid better. So ... so I actually went to a trade school,--it was All Craft,--for a little bit of time. I knew ... I knew how to do carpentry before then and I was doing some carpentry before then, but ...

J.L. How did you know that, from your father or ...

K.W. From my father, yeah. Um-hum. And so I could do--you know--build walls. I could hang doors. I wasn't that great at it but I could--you know--I could ... I could get some work--you know--as--you know--demolition and basic carpentry. But I decided that oddly, there were a lot of women carpenters in the ... on the periphery and so I decided to take up plumbing. And there was a guy who ... we did a few jobs together, and actually, I think one of them was for Marty, [Pottenger]--and then I wound up just doing freelance plumbing on the Power East Side really,--you know--earn as you learn and making very little money, like, sometimes three dollars an hour. It was rough, rough, rough, but ...

J.L. Well, tell me about All Craft. How did you hear about them and what did they ... what kind of program did you go through?

K.W. They ... they had a great ... At that time,--I can't remember--it was called CETA: Comprehensive Employment Training Act, and there was money at that time to do that kind of training. So I went through a very short, like a month long, thing and ... and then just really, by the seat of my pants, learned and worked and finally hooked up with someone I had met who was a contractor and then I did ... and that's where I really learned new construction. Before that I was working on galvanized pipes that would fall apart if you breathed wrong. So ...

J.L. So now, did you apply to the Plumbers' Local in Manhattan?

K.W. Yes. Let's see. At that time there was ... At that time there were two ways of entering the union. One was through a training program and the other was apprenticeship. And I was initially let in the training program.

J.L. That's what they called the trainees and that was through New York State.

K.W. That's right. And ... and there were problems with the training program that--you know--you could--technically you could be training forever and not ever be admitted and it was just seductive in a way even. It was started out as something that was actually supposed to work and then it wound up being a catch-all to sort of keep people of color and/or women non-apprentices.

J.L. So what did you have to do as part of that program? Did you have to report to a certain place, go to classes ...

K.W. Yes. There was a once a week class at the Plumbers union. We had very little preparation for it. I believe, actually, the guy ... We got in through All Craft,--there were two women, myself and Rosa Manuel,--and she left after the first few weeks because we got in there and there ... we had no preparation. We walked into a welding class where the fumes and we had no idea what we were doing. She was wearing open toes shoes and--you know--it was absurd. And there was always an atmosphere of heavy tension in the room.

J.L. And how many ... I mean, most--ninety-nine percent male? Right?

K.W. There was one woman on the site and that was me after Rosa left, which was shortly thereafter. And the classroom portion which we took after the welding, I never felt like I really learned much welding. We were doing oxyacetylene. I didn't really get ... We walked in, in the middle of that. The classroom portion was very hostile. I walked into the room one day and there was a picture of a woman spread-eagled--you know--on the board with a plumbing term written to ... pointing to her crotch saying ... it basically means 'from a putrid source.' You know? And--you know,--and so I walked up to the board and tore it down and threw it in the garbage and sat down. But I was really shaken. It was ... It was ... It felt scary being there, even though I think some of the guys had no ill intention but just had--they had no concept of what it would be like for a woman to walk in there. And I was in my early twenties so it was, like ... I mean, I was ... I--you know,--I remember the welding class ... I went to the bathroom,--we had to use the teacher's bathrooms; there were no women's rooms there,--and threw up and then just had to look at myself in the mirror and say: go back and do it for your Mom. You know? She had to do this when she was in the Postal Union. She was the only woman on the line and I ... she had to have the job. We needed the money, so I just steeled myself and said you're going to go back in there. And eventually they were supposed to put us on a job and they, of course, never did. And the funny part was the excuse was always there weren't ... there weren't any women's toilets, which I thought was funny for the Plumbers union to say. (laughs)

J.L. Right. Pipes are always the problem with the Plumbers union.

K.W. Well, it was a--you know--what you have to get a Johnny-On-The-Spot and label it female. You know? How hard is that?

J.L. Rather difficult. Yeah. So the content was all about plumbing. It wasn't about theory or codes or ?? how to be a plumber?

K.W. No, not ... Yeah, not ... not ... that was the first year.

J.L. And it wasn't hands on? Or did they show you, actually, what ...

K.W. It would have been eventually, I'm sure. I mean, the welding was the first thing we walked in on and that was hands on. And ... But I assume it would have been eventually. It's just we ... I ... I didn't last long enough. I took them ... I went to ... I filed charges at the Commission On Human Rights at that point.

J.L. Um-hum. And did anything ever come of that?

K.W. I'm trying to remember. There were so many ... Nothing came of that, but then I applied for the Apprenticeship Program and that was ...

J.L. And how did you hear about that? Through All Craft or ...

K.W. Through ... I can't even really remember.

J.L. Okay.

K.W. It might have been All Craft. It might have been just through the union thing, although I think I had stopped going to classes by then. It was just ... It was scary to go there. It was at night. There was nobody around. It was a deserted ... It was a back entrance,--you know on--I can't remember the street,--twenty something.

J.L. Yeah.

K.W. And ...

J.L. I went there as a union observer once and that was scary,

K.W. Yeah. Yeah.

J.L. And that was broad daylight.

K.W. Right. At that time too, they had links to organized crime and--you know--that got cleaned up a lot. But I won't say any more. Anyway, it was ... it was an interesting thing--place to be. But, yeah, I heard about it somewhere and then I stood in line, got my application, took the test ...

J.L. Were there other women?

K.W. There were. From All Craft there were other women and other women did get in that at that point. But they listed me ... I had the ... the interview and I remember distinctly one of the things the guy said in the interview: 'These are not the hands of a plumber.' Meanwhile I was doing plumbing. I was working non-union doing a lot of plumbing, actually. I was working every day so I thought that was interesting. You know? (laughs) But he could tell by my hands. And ... and when I got back my test scores they said: 'you tested low.' You know? You didn't make it into the hundred and eighty something. So I ... I went after that. I found out I had to write to the State to get my score and they said, no, you tested high. You ... Where you failed ... where you had

trouble was in the interview. So I wound up filing charges and the result of that was I was offered a second year apprenticeship and I was offered ... My main point was to get the discriminatory testing--those interviews knocked out as a ... as a way to intervene.

J.L. A tool. Right.

K.W. Right, which ... that was the agreement. I never went to the apprenticeship thing. I was ... I was warned by some of the guys there: 'don't come back here,'--you know?--not in an unfriendly way. They just said: 'We don't think ... the young guy said: 'don't go back there. They're talking about you,--you know,--not being on a site with these guys.' So I said: Okay. And by that time I was ... I was already in the non-union job,--you know--we were doing this one project of a hundred and forty-three units; it was a big job,--and I was the ... the manager. So you know what I mean? I was, like, why am I going to go to the second year apprentice work under these hideous conditions when I actually have a group of guys that I'm working with that are actually pretty good and I'm earning enough money.

J.L. And so that was ... What year about was that? Around '78--something like that?

K.W. Yeah. It probably was around '78ish. I can look up those ...

J.L. So it ... but it was residential. Right? So that's why it was non-union and ...

K.W. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And ... and it also minority contractors. I mean, there was a lot of trouble with the unions at that point. I mean, I felt ... I had wanted to go the union route for a lot of reasons and I always recommended it. You know? There were women ... somewhere in here I also did a stint teaching at All Craft, teaching plumbing, 'cause I knew enough of the bas--I knew enough to teach the plumbing and actually, it was really fun. And I always told them: 'You don't ever want to learn the way I had to. You know? It's like just by the seat of my pants.' It was nerve-wracking to be a woman out there. I mean, thank God some of the suppliers ... this guy Greenberg used to always be so kind to me. You know? He would help me. And,--you know,--I said: 'You just don't want to learn that way. You want protection. You want to built ... You want to build a pension. You want to have the insurance. You want somebody to train you so you really know.' So that's the reason you want to go. But I, at that time ... there had been a woman prior to me, a Chinese woman, who they kept talking about and I never met, but she left after a year.

J.L. Because ... they talked about her because she was good at what she did?

K.W. No, no, because she was a woman and they were--you know---

J.L. Still amazed.

K.W. Yeah. And she left after a few years and I don't know why but I'd like ((unintelligible)) so,--you know,--I felt like I had ... I didn't really have an option there. But I wanted the training ... I wanted the test changed. I felt like that's something I could leave with in good conscience. But it was also at the time--you know--it was still true of a lot of the ... a lot of guys of color couldn't get in those unions, a lot of women couldn't get in those unions, and it was a tough choice, I mean. But I didn't feel ... You know, it's

a different system. It's not like ... When people hear of unions they hear of, - you know--like, the production line, -you know?-workers together, but that was ... really came from a guild system. It was father/son, and--you know--had its own problems because of that.

J.L. So now, with the Trainee program was it mostly minority men? Were there white men in ? or just minority men?

K.W. There were ... Well,--you know--there were supposed to be mostly minority men. There were a lot of white guys and I never quite understood what all was going on there. At the time I remember researching it and [Mayor John V.] Lindsay had started and then he folded on it.

J.L. Right.

K.W. And really had it become,--you know,--not ... not consequential. It wasn't doing what it was supposed to do.

J.L. Well, there was a lot of opposition to it from the unions and eventually ...

K.W. A lot.

J.L. Yeah.

K.W. ... until they reworked it to serve them ... their own purposes. But it meant that the guys of color who mostly got in would be trainees forever. You know? And they often would offer a little bit higher pay as an inducement which, -you know,--you know--for a lot of us we were of an age ...--we were in our twenties or middle twenties and at that point you had to earn enough to live on. And a lot of those white guys' kids were living at home, -you know?-so they could earn a salary of five dollars and twenty-five cents an hour as an ... as an apprentice and not be ... not a problem. But for a lot of those guys, they were families. They were trying to survive on their own and they had to take the higher--slightly higher pay but, of course, they got screwed in the end because they were not necessarily tracked for--you know--the Apprenticeship which would move them forward, one, two, three, four years and then you're a Master and stuff like that. So , yeah.

J.L. About the All Craft, how ... how was the training there? Was that ...

K.W. It was ...

J.L. What was the program like?

K.W. It was okay. It was okay. That's actually where I first met Evan [Ruderman]. She was in my ... I was teaching plumbing and she was a student there and she was a rebel. And there were problems with it. I mean, it's--you know--a government program. But--you know, -Joyce Hartwell who ran it was a complicated person but really dedicated to women getting this thing. You know? She had run Lady Carpenter for years and years, and she's an interesting human being but feisty as hell, -you know?-just did ... did push the thing forward very strategic in her own odd way, but chaotic. And the training I got was okay. The training that we got eventually was much better, that I got to give, 'cause it was two months long. I think it was a two month ... It was longer, but we had equipment, we had space, we had--you know-material. We could ... women could do

so much hands-on work. I mean, they could cut and spread pipe. They could use a saw. They could ... You know. They used the tools much more so ... Often women just don't get that chance so it was a pre-apprenticeship. That was the understanding. We were just trying to get people ready to be able to even try to catch up to what the guys had been doing for--you know--since they were seven years old. So ... And it was mostly women of color and low-income. So ...

J.L. Well, tell me about your on the job. What ... Now, were you basically usually in this non-union job? You worked for one contractor? You mentioned this big building.

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. Did you keep working for this one contractor?

K.W. Often, yeah. Yeah.

J.L. Do you want to mention the name of the contractor? I mean ...

K.W. No.

J.L. Okay. But were you basically the only female or did other women come in?

K.W. At one point we hired another woman. She didn't stay long, but she did ... she did hang out for a little while. Yeah. She was actually the girl friend of one of the guys and she ... she was good, I remember, really good, but she had other interests so she moved on. But ... and the guys I worked with were unusual. They were an odd crew but a great group of guys. And the general contractor, the guy who ran the whole project, was ... I liked him. You know? He was ... You know? He was ... they were all ... couldn't figure out what to do about me. I mean, that was my what ...

J.L. Why?

K.W. What? But the jobs were always ... You know, we had ... everything in New York has to be to code and a licensed plumber has to sign-off on it and that's how we would do it. I mean, my guy had a guy to sign off. So everything had to be to code and--you know,--just so, and I loved that part. That was great.

J.L. 'Cause it was challenging?

K.W. And we got really good at it,--you know--because we were putting in units and most of them were the same. But ... And mostly things,--you know,--they went okay. There ... You know? The ... the one time,--you know,--since I was the one more or less running it, my boss would come in and talk to me about what had to happen and then I would go talk to the GC and we'd go through the blueprints. But often he would come to our place, but occasionally I would go to his. And the first time I went there were,--you know--I went into ... The shanty was just covered with naked women, just floor to ceiling. And ... and I was ... You know, we did the blueprints thing, and then I ... after we were done I went over to one of the pictures and I said: Oh, nice legs, and he was so embarrassed that the next day he took them all down. They were all down. You know? Like, I was ... I was always trying to find a way not to--you know--go ballistic and--you know--figure out how to reach them in a way that they could--you know--not feel bad about themselves but also recognize that maybe something should change. So that was great.

J.L. Um-hum.

K.W. And I remember one time coming up in the elevator with one guy who I was sure hated my guts and didn't want me there. And he ... we were coming up in the elevator. It was a dark building. You know? It was under construction. There's nobody around. And he reaches into his jacket and I thought, okay, this is it. Like, I'm going to be dead but this guy's going to be hurting and ... and he pulled out a picture, a wallet, a picture of his child and he was just a very shy person and had never ... so I learned something from that, that, like,--you know--I also had a jumpiness about me and my worries ...

J.L. Assumptions ...

K.W. Yeah, that had nothing to do with what the guys may have been thinking or feeling or anything at the moment.

J.L. So what about ... Well, since we're on the subject, let's talk about what were the main sources of conflict in ...

K.W. You mean ...

J.L. Basically you were working for the same contractor so that's a plus because you have a crew and you don't have to keep re-establishing yourself.

K.W. Yes. Right.

J.L. Did you ... and you were working so you were actually learning the trade and learning all your skills and ...

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. Did you ever take any more courses ... did you ...

K.W. I did, yeah.

J.L. Yeah.

K.W. I did. I went to Brooklyn Technical College.

J.L. Oh yeah.

K.W. And took some--you know--blueprint stuff and ... But the regret I have,--you know--is if I could have gone the union route I would have ... I felt that the depth of my knowledge about plumbing would have been just different,--you know?--

J.L. Yeah. Yeah.

K.W. Just really different. I had to really fly by the seat of my pants always, which I /// therefore,--you know--I'm ... I'm very handy. You know? It's, like, things don't daunt me. It's, like,--you know--doing old construction in the Lower East Side is where you're really working with galvanized pipes that are so brittle. But I loved to do that work 'cause I could make a difference in somebody's life,--you know,--it's, like, a real difference, not just changing the color of their toilet--you know--this month. You know? That,--you know--get them so they have running water. You know? I ... I loved doing that and--you know,--fix their toilet. You know? So I'm very good at that

stuff. But I could tell, working with other guys that, like, they had just more ... more depth, more physics, and more ... they just got to be accomplished at it whereas I was a good, solid worker. I could manage things. I was good at, you know--that's, like, real people skills thing. I could run the crew. I could think well about the whole project. But then we had our genius plumber,-you know?--who would solve problems. And I resented--you know-not getting that ... getting to have that education.

J.L. How were the men about sharing their skills?

KW. The men I worked with were great and I, in turn, was great with any mostly young guys who ?? would bring on. There was always a little hesitation on their part,-I mean, does she really know anything?--but I grew up in a construction family so I feel like it's in my bones. I don't feel ... You know? There's certain ways I feel very competent physically. But the real conflicts ... there weren't many, except occasionally you'd find a guy whose very insecure and had trouble with having a women around, just ... One guy who was just, I mean, partly had a drug problem which probably exacerbated it, but--you know--just ... That was the worst I'd ever encountered was this guy who was just relentless-relentlessly nasty-mouthed. And in a non-union job, again, there's a little less protection in some ways, except my boss who was great. And a lot depended on that. You know? Like, if we walked into a room the two of us, and we started talking about the job, the guys would always look at him: tell him everything, look at him,--you know?--never ... just totally ignore me. But he was great. He would just--you know-make it very clear by just ... he'd finish, he'd pause, he'd turn to me and say: so what are we going to do. And that alone, like, it changes the dynamic and without him ... said a whole lot.

J.L. And was that the general contractor? That's ...

K.W. That was my direct boss, my contractor,

J.L. Okay. Yeah.

K.W. ... the plumbing contractor. The other guy just ... He eventually couldn't believe it that I knew things, but eventually he started talking to me like a regular person. You know? He just ... You had to get the job done so he wasn't going to go through a whole lot of stuff. And he was a decent guy,--you know,-just unprepared for--you know--that, which was fine, very little nastiness. But then you encounter it, it's ... it's ... it's deep,- you know?--it's deep. It's, like, it's your every day job. There's a ... the one guy who I finally ... I couldn't think of anything to do. I really couldn't. I ... I ... I'm very resourceful in that way and can turn things around. I've been working in the trade for a long time. And I finally just ... I was out of my ... I was at my wits end so I just told him I have a brother whose six foot four. He's ... he's a cop and he's going to kick your ass if you talk to me like that again. An then he stopped. But,-you know--that's the only time I ever had to do that. You know?

J.L. His attitude changed? Not really?

K.W. No. No. He just got ... He just stayed away. Yeah. He got worried. Fine.

J.L. Tell me about your sources of support and how ... how were you getting support in terms of doing this and ...



K.W. Well, you know, there was Women In The Trades for a short period of time. I remember going to a few things of theirs,--but United Tradeswomen was really the ... the ... the best sort of ... the most comprehensive. We had so much fun.

J.L. How did you hook up with them?

K.W. Boy, I don't remember.

J.L. Okay.

K.W. (laughs) I don't remember. It's just you ... you kind of knew of it after a while. And Marty [Pottenger] and I, I think, started going. We did ... We did some things when there was a conflict in the group at some point, tried to help their ...

J.L. ... conflict resolution type ...

K.W. Yeah, sort of type things. Yeah. Yeah. We tried to ... to help them sort it out. It had gone a little too far though.

J.L. Do you remember what that conflict was?

K.W. Yes. Somebody was attacking the two people who were in charge,--you know?--accusing them of I don't know what, but it was ... it was a mistake. It's like, that thing, whenever people attack a leader of an organization like that, a progressive one, it's not that the leader didn't make mistakes. They might have but it was beside the point. It was, like, this was about disrupting and destroying the organization, which it ultimately did, which was a shame.

J.L. So you think that that ... that conflict was ultimately responsible for it ...

K.W. Oh yeah.

J.L. Yeah.

K.W. Yeah, because Lois [Ross] and Irene [Soloway], who were heading it, who did, I thought, a terrific job of thinking about the group and just the motivation and--you know--both of them were just entirely sincere and entirely hard working. You know? And this woman came along who had an agenda, I think,--I don't think she knew what it was,--but it was, I think probably just problems with anybody who looked like they were in charge. And we needed them to front us and they did a brilliant job of fronting us and it wasn't exactly a power grab. It's like,--you know--there wasn't that much to ... You know? But they ... for a long time it was just the source of ... the place for women to come and--you know--try to find a home. And we had a good collection of people. I mean, it had its troubles but--you know--it was the only game in town at that point.

J.L. I'm always struck by how creative and imaginative the programs were, just ...

K.W. Yeah. Yeah.

J.L. What were some of the things that you attended that stick out in your mind?

K.W. Well, there's one that I was involved with that was just the whole thing on harassment. We just ... really, we got great people to talk about it, come in and talk, both experts who ... from one end of the scene. But then the women themselves,-you know-could talk ... And that was the great thing about it. It sort of gave a voice to the women. It was ... You know, we knew what the trouble was and we had great strategies for figuring it out; that it was just a place to come and talk about all that. So,--you know--how to deal--you know,-deal with stuff like that. And I ... I do think the key thing it provided, though, was just a ... a place where other women who were having similar struggling ... You could not feel like it was just you. And [it was]often hard to talk to other women about it because then they would attack the men who were these working-class guys who you might have a fine relationship in some way, but the sexism was horrific. You know? And,-you know,--so it was just nice to be with a group of women who were--you know,-had made those decisions and were fighting those similar battles; You didn't have to explain a lot. You know? Like ... Or people saying: why in the world would you want to do this? You know,--and not understanding the art of it and the beauty of it and the fun of it and the just being that powerful and self determined. You know? So ...

J.L. So did you eventually make a decent living doing plumbing?

K.W. I did, yeah. I did very well with plumbing and it suited me.

J.L. It suited you. You liked it?

K.W. Um-hum, very much. I still like it. I still do my own. You know? I do plumbing in my house. And then I have a friend who was recently going to divorce her boyfriend finally because he made a mess of it, so I went over and fixed it. You know? So I love having ... I go ... I fix my Mom's stuff. You know? I don't ... I don't earn my living at it, but it was ... I love it. I love construction. I loved it. I love knowing I can do that. I mean, it's ... I still work on the house. I build all the time, so--you know ... I just built my son's room, so it's great. You know? It's such a great ... great feeling.

J.L. Now, you worked pretty consistently?

K.W. For a chunk of those years I did, and then towards the end it started to get harder. There were fewer jobs. And the contractor I had worked with just didn't want to do the work anymore,-he sort of drifted away from the work,--and-you know,-the group of us had sort of ... He had been the ... he had been the contractor so he would find the jobs. And so,--you know--...and I just didn't ... I ... I did some contracting on my own,-I did a few jobs,--but the headache of it is ... was never something that I enjoyed and-you know,--I can't believe sometimes the things I was doing ?? But, yeah, so it's ... Yeah, so the work dried up and that's when I eased out of it too.

J.L. Okay. And what year was that about?

K.W. Oh, I can never remember. When did I start? I was in it for about fourteen years, I'd say.

J.L. Um-hum. I wanted to just ask you a couple more things about United Tradeswomen.

K.W. Yeah. Yeah.

J.L. What do you think they accomplished besides establishing a place for women, which is not insignificant?

K.W. No.

J.L. But what are some of the other contributions?

K.W. Well, I think that they were ... they were a force,--you know--that in the city ... they hadn't quite turned the corner to become--you know--something that people would have to reckon with, but I thought that was right around the corner and that's sort of one of the wonders I had about why the attacks happened when they did. You know? I'm not generally a paranoid person but I ... So ... but they were ...

Side Two

K.W. ... That it ... it allowed women to be in the trades. You know?

J.L. To survive and to keep going?

K.W. To keep going. It's, like, just the fact that you knew there were these women who did it was often enough to just ... It kept us in the trades for longer than I think we would have otherwise. And I know some unions did--like the Electricians did a ... a better job of having women's groups, although there were struggles within that as well, just 'cause they got pitted against each other in all kinds of ways. But that was the beauty of United Tradeswomen. It's, like, for the longest time we actually had a core connected group that just allowed all of us to stay in, maybe longer than we would have survived otherwise,--you know,--'cause most of us were the only women anywhere ...

J.L. Right.

K.W. ... in a three mile radius in our jobs.

J.L. Did you attend any of the demonstrations? They had a couple of demonstrations. They had one at the Convention Center and they had one at AT&T. They had ... One was the pots and pans demonstration?

K.W. No. No, I didn't.

J.L. Okay.

J.L. So now, were you conscious of other organizations? I mean, All Craft was one. But, like, NOW, the New York City Chapter of National Organization For Women, was also working on behalf ... trying to get women into the jobs, law suits, things like that?

K.W. No.

J.L. You weren't conscious of?

K.W. No, not at all, which is odd. You know? But I also ended up working for Non-traditional Employment for Women.

J.L. Oh you did?

K.W. Much later. Yeah.

J.L. After it was, when Women In Apprenticeship training, or some--WAP, some of the first ...

K.W. Yeah. Yeah.

J.L. You worked for them after they changed their name to NEW?

K.W. After that, yeah.

J.L. And what did you ... teaching or ...

K.W. Yeah, I did. When it was first Women In Apprenticeship Project, that was viewed by many suspiciously as a kind of a wedge to ... I mean, I don't know whether it was deserved or not, but many people--many women viewed it suspiciously as a ... a union inspired thing that was guys trying to set up a ... a counterpoint to United Tradeswomen. So it was a--you know,-it was an interesting relationship. It was Mary Garvin, I remember. So tricky. But they did do ... as ... as All Craft was starting to expire ... there were dicey relationships with all of these. I ... I don't know if I really want to ...

J.L. Still are.

K.W. ... want to talk about that because it's just the internalized oppression and you kind of hate to do that. But,--you know,--with limited funding and limited resources there was bound to be tension there. But we tried to do a consortium for a while. We ... we almost did it.

J.L. I know. It was so exciting! I've ... I've just seen the papers.

K.W. Yeah. It was ... It was ...

J.L. It looked pretty amazing.

K.W. It was almost there, but it got ...

J.L. And it looked like it was going to be grant writing for it.

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. I haven't found any papers that show that they actu--anybody did a grant.

K.W. We finally jettisoned those things. But anyway, I don't know what I would have had. But ...

J.L. But what happened to that?

K.W. It fizzled, I think just the personalities involved couldn't finally make a go of it. You know? Joyce Hartwell, Mary Garvin, one would have ...

J.L. Strong personalities...

K.W. (unintelligible) (laughs)

J.L. Okay.

K.W. And ... and Joyce Hartwell, to her credit, I feel, always had a picture of the class component of things. A lot of the women--you know--and the race component. A lot of the women that could function in the trades turned out to be white and mostly middle ... from middle-class backgrounds. And that was tricky because ... and I don't know that that ever got fully ...--you know,--that never got fully tackled. But Joyce would keep her eyes on the prize on that one and I always respected that and I thought she really did get that. And Non-traditional Employment For Women eventually, I felt, took hold that under Martha

J.L. Baker.

K.W. Baker, yeah. Martha, I thought, was ... Martha understood--you know-- ... she was ... had fought sexism in many venues so she was very clear about certain things, and racism. She understood that racism and sexism were bad and this was good. This was helpful. And when ... so when she was at the helm there it ... it did feel like a good place to work.

J.L. And that's when you worked there?

K.W. Yeah. I worked there. I taught shop for a while 'cause Marty [Pottenger] left the job. She was going to do other things so I took over. And ... and then I became a project manager for different projects, teaching Pre--Apprenticeship for formerly homeless men and women to go into the trades. They actually worked out a deal with the trades unions to let these folks in. It was a big partnership. It was involving the Prince George Hotel. So ... and also to the survivors of domestic violence, we did a big project.

J.L. And that was through NEW?

K.W. Yeah, and New Destiny and ...

J.L. You got grants. Uh-huh.

K.W. Yep. And it used to be called Victims Ser-- ... No. No, but they changed the name. New Horiz--Safe Horizons.

J.L. Right. Safe Horizons.

K.W. Yeah. Yeah. That's what it is. So--you know,--I enjoyed teaching there. I enjoyed teaching the women, and especially domestic violence survivors. That was a great project. You know? It was ... it was a great concept and a lot of the women ... You know, they're never funded quite long enough, 'cause it would take a really long time to really do what needs to be done. But it was ... I felt like,--you know--man, you get women just ... If you just taught them how to change a washer it changes your life. You know? You know what goes on behind the wall. It's different.

J.L. So the funding got cut for it?

K.W. No. That's still on-going.

J.L. It's still going.

K.W. Um-hum.

J.L. Yeah. 'Cause one of the big components of TANIF and the reauthorization which it hasn't been, as I understand it, as of now, but trying to argue for more ... more funds for training and--you know--

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. Republicans aren't keen on that but it could be so important.

K.W. Well, yeah. And it's an interesting time with the ... the Welfare,-- you know--Welfare to Work stuff and the amount ... You know? We're ... We haven't seen the--you know--full ramifications, I think, of that. You know? The ... I mean,--you know--it's typical. It's, like, the women who I knew ... It had got such a bum wrap,--you know?--Welfare Moms, I mean, just a targeted group if ever there was one, just horrifically targeted. And all the women, very few exceptions, were so dedicated to finding work despite the fact that they weren't going to get their child care paid ... I'm just going to turn it down. You know what I mean? But so,--you know ....

J.L. Right. It's ...

K.W. So they had the triple whammy. You know? You're a parent. You're a single parent. Often you have kids. You've got no training skills and--you know ...

J.L. Now, I ... I wanted to ask you that. I didn't put that on the list of questions I sent but I was thinking about it. And you have a son now.

K.W. Um-hum.

J.L. How old is he?

K.W. He's six.

J.L. He's six. The difficulties for women in the trades with young children, I mean, now that you're a Mom and ...

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. I mean, enormous. Right?

K.W. Enormous. Yeah. It's, like, the hours. Where do you find child care for those hours to get to a job at five, six in the morning? You know? Just what I used to come home like at the end of the day sometimes. I'd be furious,...

J.L. Furious?

K.W. Furious and exhausted. I'd (growls) You know? Not even just ... There's the sexism and all the other class stuff that you're putting up with, but also there's just the physicality of the job. I mean, you hurt yourself, basically using your body as a tool until it wears out. You know? And I could tell, like, that used to ... I could understand why a lot of guys wind up kind of cranky at the end of the day. I understood my father better than I ever had. You know--you know,--getting up at four in the morning for him,--you know--doing cement work in the freezing cold, now I know. So,--you know--for the mothers, I think, boy, I don't know how they do it. I really don't. And ... but they are of the higher paying jobs,--you know,--so--you know--your choices, ... It's, like,

they're higher paying and they're also just ... they just change something for women to know that you could.

J.L. Yeah.

K.W. You know? So ...

J.L. Yeah. Just ... I see women down at the World Trade Center site walking ...

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. I saw an ironworker yesterday and just--you know--see them walk with their hard hats and their pride and their tools, it's great.

K.W. Oh God, yeah.

J.L. So I wanted to ask you about what ... your thoughts on the contributions of affirmative action. And it's a very contested terrain really, but what are your thoughts, having been a pioneer?

K.W. Well, the reason I got into the ... my first entry into the Plumbers Union was because the ... there was a guy who was leaving for the West Coast and as a joke he got us in. So (laughs) gee. You know, I think you have to do something to level the playing field. There's just no way around it; that it's not a level playing field and ... But you have to do it in enough numbers and you have to ... because to pick people off one at ... one by one ... It takes ... It takes a lot of somebody to be the only one. You have to have terrific drive. And it's not quite fair,--you know--that that's how it is. You know? The ... It takes somebody who has just by chance or luck or whatever, to have a support system that works for them. So I would say affirmative action, but it had to be done--you know--in a way that actually works. You have to do it in enough numbers so that people aren't alone trying to figure that stuff out. You know? The survival rate is very low. And,--you know--I mean, I'm in contact with somebody now who, from one of the projects that we did, and just experienced--you know,--it wasn't just sexual harassment. It was sexual assault. And it took me a day to actually get that it was sexual assault, which I was shocked at,--you know?--the level of crap that we're sort of used to putting up with,--you know,--that ... just by--you know? That's what you do in the trades. It's almost like ... It almost filters from the men. It's like the men are used to being abused by their bosses down their bodies and so it's an environment of just ...

J.L. And a culture that's very harsh.

K.W. Yeah. It's a heavy, mean ... I mean, that's one of the reasons women are threatening. It's, like, they're, forever, like, doing stuff at each other to prove that they're not gay. You know? Like ... It's hysterical,--you know? If they could see themselves. But it's a very harsh culture and it,--you know,--it ... a lot of women will try to take on that harsh persona, which--you know,--I really felt like,--you know--I--you know-- ... It felt second nature to me 'cause I grew up in a family like that, but there really has to be a better ... You know? Like, for women to come in en masse and help to change the culture and for me to contribute their ... what they know. That's what you'd want ideally it's, like, to have a culture that made sense and that people weren't being abusive to themselves or each other. But I think the only way that happens is the--you know--the amount of people that are brought in. Because if you do two or three ... And this young woman I'm talking to now,--you know--

I'm trying to actually go through now a legal thing, boy, it's stunning to me that this can still be happening. You know? And I don't know how much you've found just listening and talking to people, but-you know--I don't think she's an isolated incident. You know?

J.L. That's why I'm doing the book because I used to be an advocate ...

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. ... and I know it's still ...

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. And we're far from critical mass.

K.W. Yeah. We are far from critical mass. (laughs)

J.L. So any ideas about how we might--a prognosis how we might get those numbers or ... I mean, short of revolution?

K.W. Yeah. There!

J.L. That's the answer.

K.W. Right. Well, how did they do it in the Soviet Union, I keep wondering. You know? It's, like, they just hired women. You know? I mean, it's ... it--you know--it starts from way little. I mean, my son sees me and he thinks all women do construction work. I'm the one who does construction. Dad does other things. You know? Dad cooks. And it has to start that early and that's just not ... not in the books. It's not in the ... You know? It has to--you know,--sort of be in the culture that has to be ... You know? I ... I think the ... the way they did it in the Soviet Union was they said: we're going to now hire women to do these things. And it would take that big of a mandate. It seems so impossible. I'm trying to really--you know--realistically, like, what ...

J.L. Somebody told me that there's more women in non-traditional jobs in children's books than there are in non-traditional jobs.

K.W. Yes, right. That's true.

J.L. Do you see that in books for ...

K.W. Occasionally, yeah, you have the liberal sort of, like, let's pretend thing. But it ... it's good. I'm ... I'm happy. I'm happy. You know? It's, like, yeah, show us doing things and see if that doesn't help this next generation. Yeah. It's a complicated ... it's complicated, like, what would really turn it around. I mean, it is a mind set. But it's also internalized. I mean, women have ...

J.L. Oh yeah.

K.W. You know, I ... I watch this, like, 'cause in the training, for instance, like, women would lift weights and sometimes the woman would lift weights and then just ... a couple of



things, and then she'd say: I can't. And then I would just say: Yeah, let's try it. Let's try some ?? And sometimes she'd have to cry really hard. If she cried really hard,--and I can't tell you how many times this happened, like, for a couple of minutes,--suddenly she could ...

J.L. Adrenaline or ...

K.W. No. It's our heads. It's, like, that she really believed she couldn't do it, but she could. I mean, I've ... I saw a lot of these women. I saw that they did. But the minute they did this, it's, like, there's such an internalized message of ... of incapacity. And if they could just be gently pushed and ... and get to cry some about it,--'cause it always seemed to take that,--or yell or something, then do-do-do-do-do-do-do! I can't tell you how many times I ...--you know?--in the training program. So there's a built-in thing in our heads that says we can't do it. And that was one of the joys of teaching, actually, is, like, yeah, you can. Take that saw ... and then watching a woman finally--you know--be at home with a tool is just--you know ... boys grow up from the time they're seven with that stuff. You know? It's not inherent. It's just practice. And ... but there's an internalized message here and then there's--you know--institutionalized message out there.

J.L. Have you ever thought about ... I guess they have all kinds of educational credentials that you need, but I'm thinking of vocational schools. You know?

K.W. Yeah. Wouldn't that be great. I actually ... Yeah. When I taught at All Craft we had to go and do some training and that's when it occurred to me, like, hmm, maybe we could--you know--just do ... it ... it ... Part of it would be really fun, yeah, really, really fun to do. Yeah.

J.L. Rebecca Lurie is doing a program ... You know?

K.W. Yes. That's right. Yeah. Yeah. And she was at the Carpenters union for a long time, which was great.

J.L. Right. Um-hum.

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. So you're concluding comments on the women's movement and organizing in this ridiculous political climate we're in right now, there's never been a greater need. But do you have any ... I mean, you ... you are still an organizer. Right,--I understand? What are you organizing now?

K.W. Yes, I'm still an organizer. I organize this neighborhood mostly. I'm co-chair of a big Community Garden that's on the next block and we are trying to keep the--you know--old-time neighbors here.

J.L. Um-hum.

K.W. Like, we just had a great success with the guys across the street, the SRO, getting them representation 'cause their landlord is trying to get rid of them and these guys (unintelligible)... they're great guys. They have a family. It's their neighborhood. Everybody thinks they're transients. These guys have lived here fifty years. This new group is the transients.

J.L. So we're on the Bowery between Prince and Houston. And what street is the Community Garden on?

K.W. It's on Rivington and Chrystie,

J.L. Okay.

K.W. ... Chrystie ?? Rivington and Delancy. So that's a big bulk of what I do now, trying to keep--you know--get the divergent communities here, Chinese, Dominican/Puerto Rican, white whatever's and the African heritage group which has been a strong component of the Garden for a long time. So we're trying to make us more of a group and it's terrific. I love it. It's my avocation. And I also, in my son's school, I'm heavily involved in the Parents' Association. It's a neighborhood school. It's a public school. It's a great school. It's--you know,--mostly Chinese, low-income. So,--you know-- ...

J.L. What school is that?

K.W. P.S. 130.

J.L. Okay.

K.W. It's a great school and it's a grade school, and it really is. So that's the big bulk of what I do now, and a lot of trying to organize around [being a] Mom,--you know?--a lot of ... a lot of that. And I think,--you know--working in the trades--you know,--it just ... I realize the thing it teaches you is don't quit. It's sort of ... I was saying about the lifting weights. It's, like ... I remember so many times I'd have a wrench and I'd ... I'd feel it, like, I can't do this. Let me get one of the guys. And then I'd just say: No. You're going to do it, and then I would move it; I'd budge it. And just that ... It's like, they don't quit. It's like I feel about a lot of the projects I do here, like this one that was successful. I just know, like, the one thing I can do is persist. I can be like a drop of water,--you know?--like, just drip, drip, drip forever until you move this thing that makes sense to do. So vis a vis the women's movement,--you know--it's gone through different transmutations I think the--you know,--pardon the language, but as capitalism gets more ferocious all the oppressions have heated up, and I think what young women experience today is probably something I can't even quite imagine,--you know,--in terms of the subliminal and outright barrage of messages about--you know,--what it means to be female. And I think we have a big fight on our hands and ... but I also feel like, never before, in the history of the world, have more people known more about what's actually going on ever in history,-- you know?;--that we actually do have more information than we're ever had: more access to it, more ... we know something now. We're not ... You know? So there's this climate of--you know,--reactionary,--you know--that's heavy in the country, but there's also this concomi--you know--there's this counterweight that more people are more organized and I see it in this last election,--you know--that the election was ... It's kind of a manifestation of all of it. It's ... it's not like we had a ... a truly, truly big alternative, but it was a better alternative in my mind. But--you know,--there's a ... there's a progression and it just ... You know? It's like Arundhati Roy said: "he's the best organizer we ever had, this President." So ... and I think in the world wide movement there's great hope, I mean. You know?--just ...when I went to Beijing in '95 the ... it's just stunning what people are doing. And I was in Durban in 2001 for the racism conference, the UN conference, and there ... The world is moving. You know? The world is moving. There were three thousand ?? women,--you know?--

-the untouchables,--three thousand! You know? They had organized themselves to get there. That was phenomenal. They put their agenda on the map. You know? And ... you know? So I ... I just feel like we're not the only place that we ... we ... we have to--you know? There's other ... the world around us is organizing as well. And so,--you know--we got our work cut out for her. It's, like, I ... I feel strongly like,--you know--dig in locally;--you know?--really nail your feet to the floor locally and understand what's going on in your own neighborhood and fight your battles there. And then keep your eye on the global things,--you know?--that you have one hand in both, or something. Yeah. I'm ... I'm quite hopeful. You know? I mean ... I mean, I get ... I get to be. You know? I'm a Mom. You know? I don't get to bury my head so it's like,--you know? He ... he pushes it and he ... he lives life with great joy every day, even after the election. You know? He still ...

J.L. What's his name?

K.W. Lee.

J.L. Lee.

K.W. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah.

K.W. I'm a lucky woman.

J.L. You are. It's wonderful to meet you. And thank you for your interview.

K.W. Yeah. ?? Jane, really. I am so thrilled that you're doing this book. You know? I was ... In talking to the young woman I was talking to,--you know--after she told me what had happened, and I just ... I knew you were doing your book and I thought: thank God. You know? Just ... It's just ... It's a thousand points of light. You know? It's, like, whatever ... whatever we have to push on,--you know--the ... you just ... that this issue doesn't get left alone,--you know?--like, as if we accomplished something. And so I thank you for the evening.

3-30□