

Interview with Laura Kelber

J.L. This is Jane Latour on July 7th, 2005, interviewing Laura Kelber, formerly of Local 3, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

So. Laura, what ... what year were you born?

L.K. I was born in 1957 in Brooklyn.

J.L. Okay. Now, would you speak louder, please, because we have this faulty equipment--faulty powers. So you were born in Brooklyn. And what did your parents do for work?

L.K. Well, at the time I was born my father was working in, I guess the swing shift. He was a linotype operator, a defunct job now, at The New York Post. And my mother worked part time as an editor for a medical publication. And, I mean, actually they were in thee jobs because they had both been labor journalists, left wing labor journalists, and this, of course, was, like, right af--you know--during the tail end, I guess, of the McCarthy era and they had both lost their jobs at that point.

J.L. Wow. So you grew up with ... they were members of Unions or they were at least Union ??

L.K. Yeah. My father was in the Typographers Union. And my mother, I guess, was not in a union but--you know--they had been both labor journalists. My father had been a labor activist since the 1930's and still is at the age of ninety-one.

J.L. He's ninety-one too. Okay. So tell me about your education.

L.K. I went to Yale ...

J.L. Uh-huh.

L.K. and I majored in philosophy, so ...

J.L. Okay. That's good preparation for being a trade ...

L.K. Yeah. So I became ... What else was I going to do but be a construction worker. You know?

J.L. Yeah. So what year did you graduate?

L.K. I graduated in '79.

J.L. Okay.

L.K. And I was very, I guess, painfully shy and job interviews didn't come easily to me.

J.L. Could I ... I have a special question I'm going to slip in here at the request of a friend of mine who I was bragging about you to, and he was interested in what philosophy did you study? What were you interested in philosophy.

L.K. Well, there was this, I guess, now discredited German philosopher whose name begins with M--been a little discredited the last part of the century,--but-you know-Marxism. I mean, I ... I ... and political philosophy.

J.L. Um-hum, yeah, which they used to teach. Okay. So then you ... did you have any jobs prior to Local 3?

L.K. A friend of my mother's got me into some ... also some medical rewrite. See, a lot of the lefties, when they lost their jobs, they went into medical writing, still-probably still a hotbed of lefty ?? if .. So I ... I would rewrite doctors' papers into little ?? And then I did office temp work but ...

J.L. Wow. So that's a big switch.

L.K. Yeah.

J.L. So what was your motivation and circumstances for entering Local 3? How did that come about?

L.K. Well, I was ... I don't remember what got the idea into my head. I was thinking I should try to become a railway conductor 'cause then I could travel around. And my mother had a friend, Joyce Hartwell, who worked at ...

J.L. Oh yeah, All Craft.

L.K. She's from the All Craft and she asked Joyce about how I would get into a non-traditional job like that. She said she didn't know, but she invited me to join the All Craft program which was to train women into getting into construction.

J.L. Oh, okay.

L.K. So that's what I did and that's how I got ...

J.L. Okay. So how long did that program last?

L.K. I don't remember. You know? I mean, it was maybe six to eight weeks.

J.L. Um-hum. And it was down on St. Mark's Place then?

L.K. Right, in this great building.

J.L. Yeah. And was ... was it male and female or ...

L.K. Just female.

J.L. Just females. And so did you learn a lot? Did you like it?

L.K. Well, it was an introduction,-

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. you know--to-you know,--electrical, plumbing, carpentry and cabinet making, just--you know--a basic introduction. But then they actually helped us

apply to jobs. And I actually applied to the cement masons apprentice and I got in and I ... I actually, that was my first job in the trades. But ...

J.L. Okay. What was that like?

L.K. Well, they ... it was just working on the street out in Jamaica, Queens. You know? They were redoing the little islands in the middle of the street so it was an easy enough ...

J.L. Oh yeah.

L.K. I mean, it wasn't heavy duty--you know--construction site.

J.L. Um-hum. So how long did you do that?

L.K. Probably just for about a week or ... a month or two;--I don't remember;--during the summer.

J.L. Uh-huh.

L.K. I got an incredible tan,--you know?--

J.L. I'll bet.

L.K. And people said where'd you get that tan? I said: Jamaica.

J.L. (laughs) That's funny. And so now, at All Craft, was Joyce Hartwell the instructor or did she have other instructors?

L.K. She ... she had other instructors but--you know--it was her organization and it was really a great idea. She really got a lot of women into the trades---

J.L. Yeah. She did.

L.K. You know--single-handedly.

J.L. So then how did it come that you applied to Local 3?

L.K. Well, I guess electrical seemed the most interesting. And then, at that point my father was good friend with Harry Van Arsdale and--let's see,--he--you know--so he knew a lot of people at Local 3 and he asked if I wanted to put in ... words in for me. But,--you know--I ... I didn't. You know? I wanted to just apply with the other women.

J.L. Right.

L.K. So I went through the application process of--you know,--you had to wait on line for a couple of days.

J.L. And who was with you that we would both know--recognize some names?

L.K. Oh, no one. I didn't know anyone. You know?

J.L. You didn't ... Oh, okay. So ... But there were some women?

L.K. There were women. I didn't ...

J.L. Even know who they were.

L.K. I didn't.

J.L. Did you bond together? Did you stand together? Did you ... Or you just got on line in your particular place?

L.K. No, just got on line in my place.

J.L. Wow. Yeah. And it must have ... How did that feel with all these thousands of men? Right?

L.K. Young men who ... all these men who ...

J.L. Yeah, boy men.

L.K. You know? It ... it was okay.

J.L. Uh-huh. Yeah. And so then you had to go through the process of being interviewed and tested and all of that?

L.K. Yeah. And I waited on line, I guess, in the summer of '80 and I got called into the Apprentice ... I started the school before I started work, actually, in, I guess, February of '81 and I started work in March.

J.L. And so now how ... how did you feel about the quality of the training in the Apprenticeship Program?

L.K. Well,--you know--it was like sort of high school level thing and--you know--I mean, 'cause I was the only girl in my class--woman in my class,--like, most of the women were--you know--the only ones in their class. And,--you know--I quickly met the other women in the bathroom. That's where we hung out. That's where I met Cynthia.

J.L. Uh-huh. That's where I met Cynthia. So now, do you want to talk about some of your work experiences, going to work?

L.K. I have so many I don't even know where to begin.

J.L. Yeah. Right.

L.K. I mean, I had some very good experiences and some very horrible experiences.

J.L. Well, maybe we'll save the work experiences for talking about the child pregnancy ...

L.K. Well, that was ... I wouldn't ... Well, I mean, I wouldn't say my most memorable experiences mostly had to do with that. You know?

J.L. Yeah. So what were some of the memorable experiences? Give me a couple of good examples and give me a couple of, like, negative experiences.

L.K. Oh, I don't even ??

J.L. You know, one thing that interests me is just the whole idea of showing up for your first day at in March, '81. I mean, what ... what ...

L.K. I guess ...

J.L. Do you remember what your first job was?

L.K. Yeah. I worked ... Yes. It was the first three buildings going up at Battery Park City, Gateway Plaza, the apartment building and I didn't know what to expect. I thought--you know--could they rape and murder me? I had absolutely no conception of what it was going to be like. And it was a huge construction site.

J.L. Um-hum.

L.K. And--you know--I showed up at the front gate and I had on a little slip, the name of the company I was supposed to report to. So I asked some guy at the gate and--you know--he kind of leered at me. He said: I'll drive you over there. It was a huge, muddy site.

J.L. Um-hum.

L.K. And so he took me to a trailer. It was a company, National States, and there actually were some other women working there, including Evan [Ruderman] and Bruni [Brunilda "Bruni" Hernandez].

J.L. Is that where you met Evan?

L.K. Yes.

J.L. And Bruni? Yeah?

L.K. And--you know--the foreman was, like, talking to some other guy there: well, where should we put the girl? You know? So they said: Oh, put her in the mill, which was ... they had a huge shed where they pre-fabbed all the pipe which was then going to be put in on the decks on the buildings that were being .. You know? Three buildings were going up at once so it was a huge amount of pipe that had to be cut to certain lengths,--you know?--pre-fabbed and that's ... they did it in the mill so it was like a little factory kind of ... so I walked into the mill and the head guy there came right up to me and the first thing he said to me was: Are you Jewish? So I said: 'Yeah,' and he pointed to a sign that said Jewish Mill. He said: We're all Jewish here. They put all the Jews here.

J.L. My God!

L.K. And there was one black guy working there. I kind of looked at him. He pulled out a little Star of David hanging around his neck ... but ... and ...

J.L. How interesting.

L.K. Yeah. Well, there was lot of heavy--you know--ethnic racism as well. You know? You know, on any job they wanted to know your last name--you know?--

J.L. Yeah. Right.

L.K. figure out--you know--who you were.

J.L. Yeah. Where ...

L.K. A lot of jobs were very segregated,-you know?-young blacks ...

J.L. The Italians together ...

L.K. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah?

L.K. Black, Hispanic, Italian, Irish, Jewish, and the work was a lot--you know--divided out accordingly. You had the blacks in the boiler room. You know? You had ... you had the Jews doing ?? picking the little left over stuff maybe. And the Irish got the fire alarm system, which was the high prestige--you know--

J.L. Yeah. So ... so then how did they ... they responded to you okay and ...

L.K. No. No, they were sexist and constantly making a comment and ...

J.L. What's a nice girl like you doing ...

L.K. No, like, I'm getting out of shape. I should do some push ups. Hey, Laura, get underneath me--you know?-like that kind of--you know--stuff. You know?

J.L. Yeah. So tell me about a couple of other memorable experiences? I mean, did you have some people who really went out of their way to help you, teach you?

L.K. Yeah. I mean, I had ... there were a couple of guys in particular who I have very fond memories of working with who ... You know, one of them was this guy, John, who--you know--he and I worked together it seems like maybe half a year,---you know--just- you know--going from job to job. And,-you know--he taught me an awful lot.

J.L. He was a journeyman?

L.K. Yeah.

J.L. So you were his apprentice?

L.K. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah. The ... How was it with Bruni and Evan,-you know?--You were in the shanty. I actually have a photo of the three of you together in the shanty reading a newspaper. And, I mean, how ... did you ... Were you able to give each other much support or what was ... I mean, you were working all over this big site,-right?--so ...

L.K. Yeah. The reality was that it wasn't always very easy to work with other women and--you know--we ... we ... the support ... I ... I was surprised sometimes at the lack of support. I mean, it varied from person to person.

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. But,--you know--not all the women were feminists and-you know- there were also ... I mean, I think the men probably played women off against each other too. so,--you know-I had good experiences working with other women where we really supported each other, and then bad experiences where they were hostile or ...--you know?-so it was a mixed bag,

J.L. Yeah, right. Yeah.

L.K. I mean, throughout my career.

J.L. Um-hum. So now, speaking of the women, you participated in organizing with the Women's-what would you call it?--a caucus, the Women Electricians,

L.K. Yeah.

J.L. That group? And were you in on the early stages of deciding that that was important to do?

L.K. Well, when I came in, in '81 and I guess the first women came in, in '78,

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. So they--you know--there was just a small group of-you know-Cynthia--you know--

J.L. Melinda ...

L.K. Melinda and Jackie and--you know--Evan-that's when the group came in. And then I ... I think my group was, like, probably the largest group of women.

J.L. Which was how many?

L.K. I think when I came in it may have been over the course of a year as many as thirty.

J.L. Wow.

L.K. I'm not sure of that, but it was a huge difference. But they ... so they all knew each other,--you know-and ... but there ... there weren't that many of them.

J.L. Right.

L.K. But they-you know--they--you know ... I first went to a meeting that--you know ... I mean, Cynthia said: "we're having a meeting." You know? You should come to it. But I guess Cynthia and I really--you know-hit it off; became--you know--very good friends and--you know--we both were really into organizing and talking, so really we sort of then took over together and-you know--really pushed the organizing-you know?-meeting women, signing them up, getting their addresses and doing mailings and figuring out what we should do at meetings.

J.L. Yeah. So now with the ... with your class were you able to get a lot of participation from the women or how did that work out?

L.K. Well, it was a very--you know-mixed--you know-difficult group of women. You know? It's not ... it's not like walking into the sunset where everyone bonds and--you know ...

J.L. Yeah. Right.

L.K. They were a cranky ...

J.L. Well, they're tradeswomen.

L.K. Yeah. They were a cranky bunch and like I said, not all were feminists. A lot of them were gay and a lot of them were--you know-wildly homophobic.

J.L. Uh-huh.

L.K. And it was an extremely mixed race group,

J.L. Uh-huh.

L.K. And---you know--there were personalities that are ?? there were ... there were ... there are women who kind of sort of prostituted themselves on the job. You know? You have a huge range.

J.L. Range, yeah.

L.K. But women,--you know--they were having a tough time on the job. That's when they tended to come to meetings, ?? and so we tried to be there. You know? You know? And sometimes--you know--it worked out well. Sometimes they were just angry and wanted to vent. But,--you know--we ... we really ... we tried to just at least keep in touch with most of the women. And--you know--most--you know,--there. I really think that--you know--because of this group--you know--the women did ... it did help women meet each other and--

J.L. Uh-huh.

L.K. You know--they did have some ... somewhere to go.

J.L. One of the problems that women organizing in the trades oftentimes have is that they have no way to get in touch with each other and the union doesn't facilitate that?

L.K. Yeah. I mean, you didn't get any help ...

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. Actually, early on, Harry Van Arsdale did meet with us and we always tried to sort of keep--you know--quasi-cordial relations. Harry met early on with some of the women and I know we had some-Cynthia and I had a letter writing campaign just about a union issue, and--you know--about make some legislation that the union was interested. So we sent a letter--you know--supporting the legislation to a newspaper or something. And Harry Van Arsdale actually called me at home. You know? My room ... Some weird guy is trying to reach you. I don't know. What kind of creep is ... and it was Harry Van Arsdale calling me at home. He called me, like, at six in the morning to catch me before I went out to work and he said,--you know,--Well, I ... I have this letter here from this group

calling themselves Women Electricians. Well, it's very good that you're interested in supporting the labor legislation. But can I suggest that you-you know--worrying about this and just concentrate on learning the trade, so--you know,-so (inaudible phrase) You know? His son Tommy, of course, was ... was always pretty bad towards us and--you know-across the board bad with everyone and every issue (inaudible phrase) You know?

J.L. Yeah. Not like father, not like son. I mean ...

L.K. Yeah.

J.L. So, well, tell me about some of the issues that you all addressed that you had some successes with?

L.K. I don't know if we had success ever.

J.L. Was pornography an issue?

L.K. It is a huge issue because--you know-it's not like--you know--there was some pornography on the wall and you're like, Oh, well, I can't ...--you know?-I'm offended. But they tended to use it very aggressively, like, make a point of--you know--putting it, like, on your ... your coat, paint it onto your coat--you know--when your coat was --you know?--really ...

J.L. Yeah, as a weapon to

L.K. Yeah. Or like you ...

J.L. Or to sort of tell you you're not welcome here. You're in our territory.

L.K. Yeah. You walk in the locker and the guys start loudly reading out loud from a porno magazine or--you know--stuff like that. You know? So, I mean, it was an issue that we wanted it--you know--off the job. And,--you know--we wrote a letter to Tommy about that and--you know--he actually answered us and he said--

J.L. In written form?

L.K. In written form,-and he said that this is a personal matter for the membership and he can't interfere with the personal lives of the membership.

J.L. Well, I heard him testify at the hearings, Commission on Human Rights, and he said it's just part of the job and--you know- if you don't like it, don't work there because that's what men do,- -you know?-urinate in public ...

L.K. Yeah...and we--you know-I mean, the whole concept of a hostile work environment, and clearly that' what it created,

J.L. Was something that escaped him. Right.

L.K. And, yeah. And that it's--you know-part of the definition of sexual harassment.

J.L. Um-hum. So ... But did you ever get any remedy from Local 3 on the ... those issues related to the hostile work environment for women? Did they start responding?

L.K. No, not really. But--you know--you know--having the language to ... Know that--you know--you had--you know ... I mean, we wrote stuff up for the women about what to do and that you have a right to--you know--a pornography-free environment, harassment-free environment. So, I mean, I know it certainly emboldened me to know--you know--like, I[m working with these guys and I can say this is legally ... It's against the law.

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. And,--you know--sometimes you just have to tear the stuff down yourself. I mean, I once made a big deal on a job where there was--you know--some calendar in the GC's office and I had to be in there 'cause that' where the drinking water was and--you know--where the bathroom was. And I said: Look: this is offensive to me. Can you take it ... these were guys sort of sitting in suits in--you know--the GC's office and they were: Well, ... they made a big deal of just, like, putting a little piece of paper over the women's breasts sort of like.

J.L. Yeah, right. Yeah.

L.K. So,--you know--Well, I'm sorry. You know? I'm not just certain our-- .. So finally I just walked up and I ripped it off the wall and tore it up and threw it in the garbage. And,--you know,--say, now it's down. You know? And that's what you had to do.

J.L. So was there any retaliation against you in the sense of ... I'm writing about one woman at the Board of Ed who had a campaign against pornography and she was the Supervisor. She was a foreman,--fore-man. But,--you know--they really came after her because they were so ... they took such offense. But this sort of ... they were accepting it if you took action and ...

L.K. Well, I mean, it ... you had to know who was on the job. If you were gener--you know--generally well-liked on the job then you could do more. If you were on a job where everyone hated you and was hostile, that was not the time to do anything.

J.L. So you ... you were in both situations.

L.K. You had to take it on a case by case ... You know? You had to do it on a case by case situation.

J.L. Yeah. So what ... what would you say were some of the obstacles to the organizing you were doing within Local 3 with women, the shortcomings?

L.K. Well, I mean, the fact that--you know--first of all, the union didn't help us and that we were all spread out all over the place. We didn't work together--you know?--so there was no place where the women were all going to run into each other. Maybe at a union meeting.

J.L. And you went to the union meetings?

L.K. Yeah. Well, yeah. I mean, the apprentice meetings.

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. And ... but-you know--in Apprentice school there were two different--you know ... there were Tuesday/Thursdays and Monday/Wednesdays, so not even all the women would run into each other there. So,--you know--doing ... getting a mailing list was really crucial.

J.L. Um-hum.

L.K. But---you know--so there were the logistics. And then the fact that there just weren't that many of us and so when there's not that many then organizing becomes knowing who this person is and what it takes to get her to the meeting. You know?

J.L. Um-hum. Yeah.

L.K. Does she want free sandwiches? Does she want child care? You know ... You know ... You know? I got a ?? thing with ... I always thought we should, like, organize something to go out to, Chippendales,--you know,-the ... --you know,--hoot at the men, and ... but I thought that would attract a lot of the sort of the party girl types who ... we were having trouble getting. And then a lot of the gay women were really mad at me--furious: we're not going to do that, so it was very hard to get all of this--you know-get everyone on the same page. And we never ... I mean, but I feel ... I still think we did a lot in terms of collecting--you know-lots of personalities at one time or another. You know? They were aware of us and aware of each other so that was the good part.

J.L. You know, some of the things that come up are that--you know-racism, homophobia were--I don't know ... I mean, would you ... Did the group try to deal with issues of racism, homophobia or-just by trying to appeal to the particular personalities and their issues? I mean, was ...

L.K. I mean, I remember once, like, one of the women-you know-was was talking about homophobia and, like, then this other woman in the room said: are there gay people in this group?-you know?-and she ... You know? I think it was pretty impossible ?? to have any serious discussions about ... about that

J.L. Yeah. Yeah.

L.K. because, I mean, it ... the purpose was just to sort of be a clearing house for women to deal with stuff on the jobs and we weren't going to make the women like each other or be pals with each other. I mean, I don't ... I don't ... I think it ... it would have been really more destructive than anything.

J.L. Did you do any work with United Tradeswomen?

L.K. Not ... I mean, just in that we might have had some joint events or something. But ...

J.L. You weren't a big activist with them.

L.K. No. I mean, when ... There was a con-you know,-they had conferences that I went to,

J.L. Yeah. Um-hum.

L.K. You know,-you know-it was good to meet women from other places.

J.L. Yeah. Yeah. They did a lot of activities. Yeah. Okay. So now, let's switch to the subject of pregnancy and motherhood because ... Now, what year did you have your first child?

L.K. '88, March of '88. And,--you know-I worked-let's see-till I was I think my sixth month of pregnancy. And--you know--then ... I mean, there was a day when I just realized I couldn't bend down any more so I--you know-I went out on disability and--you know-it--you know--went fine. And, I mean, I remember, like, I mean, on the job--you know-first--you know-I didn't really talk about being pregnant. But I remember this one guy coming up to me and saying: You know, it's winter now and sometimes in the winter--you know--people start eating a lot and then--you know--suddenly it's bathing suit season and then they start regretting it. So I said, I'm pregnant. And he said: Oh my God! I had no idea. You know? (laughs) But then there was a weird situation ?? I got sent to this job and--you know--I was now, like, maybe five months pregnant and I assumed ... You know, by now it was out that I was pregnant and I assumed that the foreman knew I was pregnant. And,--you know--when I showed up there,--you know-I was the only woman and he said: Well,-- you know--I'm not going to give you any special treatment or anything. You know? I'll expect you work just like the men. So I said: Well,--you know--obviously if there's any real heavy lifting and all--you know-I'm not going to do that. So he didn't know I was pregnant. He was just talking like I was a girl and I'm not ...

J.L. Yeah, right. Yeah.

L.K. And I assumed he knew so I was saying: Oh, here ... You know? I walked in say I'm not going to do heavy lifting. So he was actually amazed when I told him. I don't know. I guess they thought it was like a beer belly I had. I mean,--you know-- ...

J.L. Like theirs. (laughs)

L.K. Yeah. But he had no idea. And,--you know,--and then I was ... I was embarrassed when I realized the ... the things that I had been saying that he--you know,--reinforcing all his ideas about women.

J.L. Yeah, right. Women. So the first pregnancy went well and that was Alex. Right?--your son Alex.

L.K. My sullen teenager, yes.

J.L. And now how many kids do you have?

L.K. I have three.

J.L. You have three.

L.K. And in between I had two miscarriages. And,--you know--of course there's no way to know whether they were work-related or not. But, I mean, certainly--you know--emotionally at the time I felt they were.

J.L. And you had a lot of ... Well, you did try to bring some actions. You had some cases with the State Division of Human Rights and you wrote to the union. Did you pursue any legal ...

L.K. Yes.

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

L.K. Well, you see, my second pregnancy I was working at an in-door location at the World Financial Center and-you know-very kind of clear, light, easy job when I became pregnant. And they knew I was pregnant ...

Side Two

J.L. Okay. So you were talking about you were at the World Financial Center. Right? Continue.

L.K. So anyway, it would have been a good job to be pregnant on because there was no heavy lifting. It was indoors in an occupied building. There were bath-clean bathrooms. And when I told them I was pregnant, very soon after they sent me to a construction job ...

J.L. And how long had you been on that job?

L.K. I'm not ... I don't remember off-hand, a few months ...

J.L. Okay.

L.K. But-you know--it was a sur--it was a surprise. It wasn't, like, you had lay-offs,--you know?--transfers were coming up.

J.L. Um-hum. So it wasn't just a reduction in force or ...

L.K. No, no, no.

J.L. No.

L.K. They--you know ... and--you know,--I was sent to this--you know--freezing cold--close to North Moore Street and--you know--there was some heavy lifting. You know? There were no clean bathrooms. You know? It was the worst type of job. And I--you know,--I was going to stick it out as long as I could because if you--if you left too early you only got ten ... got twenty-six weeks of disability so you had to at least--you know--stick it--you know--out to a certain ... so I mean, I was near the end of my third month and I had a miscarriage and I took it very hard. You know?-- you know?--because of ... You know, there's never any way you can--you know--be sure, but emotionally at the time, it's how I felt and it changed ... You know, I'd been complacent during my first pregnancy that--you know---you worked and you--you know? ...

J.L. You have to do it.

L.K. And so that when I got pregnant for the third time--you know--well, my first thought was I want to be put on a light duty job. I don't want to be on a--you know--a hard job.

J.L. And I ... I know that in reading through your papers, I mean, it was common practice to put men who had some kind of problem on light duty with different contractors.

L.K. In fact, I had been,--you know--when I was--before I was transferred to that construction job they--in ... in the interim they had put me on another indoor, occupied--you know--light job and on that job was a guy who had multiple sclerosis. He could only sit. He could barely work and the foreman kept putting

his arm around him saying, "I'm going to take care of you. Don't worry. And then they took me from that job and put me on, pregnant, and put me on the construction. So that particular

J.L. Exacerbated it. Yeah. It underscored ...

L.K. and that was for Forest Electric.

J.L. Which is a big company.

L.K. Yeah. And so I did ... I sued them and it ended up with just a sort of settlement. They were going to-you know-give me a little money, but I said what I wanted was a pregnancy clause saying no pregnant ... a commitment that pregnant women are entitled to light duty jobs. So ...

J.L. So did you get that?

L.K. Yeah. Part of the settlement they wanted was that I would never work for them again and I said, no, I didn't want to do that. They said they would pay me more if I said I would never--you know-- ... but I mean, of course, I'm sure they bas--just told the union anyway never send her to us again anyway but I didn't agree to it.

J.L. And so they did implement a clause?

L.K. Yeah, somewhere. But-you know--whether that helped other women or not I--

J.L. Anybody ever ?? Yeah.

L.K. You know,---I never really found out--you know--what the experience was for ?? who were after me and ... But anyway, when I became pregnant again with my daughter I was working for another company,--it escapes for the minute, the name, (unintelligible) but again, I told them I was pregnant. They immediately ... No, what did they do? They fired me that same day. And so I went to the union and I said, well, I got fired for being pregnant and I want--you know,--and I want to be put on a light duty job. And then I went through this whole thing where they put me--they sent me to the Coney Island train yards. You now? There's live track. It's heavy work. And--you know--the ... the foreman there said--you know--McCormick, the employment ?? must have it in for you if he sent you here with no-you know .. It's no place ...

J.L. The union sent you there.

L.K. Yeah. I mean, well, it's the Joint Board but--you know--it's the union.

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. So I went and I talked to Joe **Bectel** [from] the union. He was,--I don't remember what his position was,--he was sort of an up and coming guy and he said: Well, look. If you want to be put on a light duty job you ... You have to say that you don't want light duty. That's the only way. You know? And he gave me a run around. And he ... he ended up saying: so you know if you're going to have a boy or girl? If you have a boy he could become an electrician, so that ...

J.L. And if you have a girl she can become an electrician.

L.K. No, no. But obviously that's not ... and ... and I ...

J.L. Yeah, right. You ... Yeah.

L.K. But--you know--the ... basically I ended up not getting sent out and I ... I lost my medical benefits,--you know--because you had to ... Yeah, that was the loophole that you had to have worked--you know--six months straight to keep your medical benefits. So that's why there was that era where you have to make it till your six months. It wasn't just the disability.

J.L. Yeah. Right.

L.K. It was like a little loophole and that's what I ... I also wanted a clarification. You know?

J.L. Um-hum.

L.K. If you ... if you go out at three months can you--you know--what happens to your benefits? And you know--I would--you know--like, back and forth trying to get clarification, and they said: No, you lose them. And you know ...

J.L. So you were unemployed until your daughter was born?

L.K. Yeah.

J.L. Um-hum.

L.K. So I then had a law suit against the Joint Industry Board for pregnancy discrimination. And my husband is a lawyer so he was ... he ... he was ... his boss gave him permission to work on it pro bono. And he thought it best to have another lawyer ... It went to court. We went, and it was in Long Island. You know? The Federal District covers Brooklyn, Queens and Long Island. We had to go to Long Island every day for this trial which lasted about a week and was given a jury trial. I,--you know--I still think that somehow that Local 3 fixed the venue because--you know--discrimination in Brooklyn and discrimination in Long Island

J.L. Right. Yeah.

L.K. is different.

J.L. Um-hum.

L.K. And we lost the trial. It was ... it was horrific. It was heart ... You know? I mean,--you know--it was horrible. And the ... the union's lawyer was this--you know--nasty schmuck. It was a horrible, horrible experience. But then my husband appealed it and we won.

J.L. Oh. And would ...

L.K. Yes. Yeah.

J.L. Because? On what grounds?

L.K. The judge said that Tommy Van Arsdale did not have to testify; that it was--you know,--what had happened had nothing to do with him. My husband got it overturned on the basis that it ... it was relevant, and this decision was

actually featured on the page of--the front page of the New York Law Journal because it was a big deal.

J.L. Oh yeah.

L.K. A civil rights activist lawyer--you know-- called us up and said that's a great decision--you know?--'cause you're holding--you know--the head person liable for--you know? And it really--you know,--it was a great victory. And of course, it did--you know--involve a jury but involved--you know--legalizing it.

J.L. Impressive. Yeah. And ...

L.K. And so then they ended up ... so we were going to have a new trial where Tommy would have to testify and then the ... the union settled with us.

J.L. And what did you get?

L.K. Bare--you know? Well, barely enough to recover the legal expenses. But,--you know--it was still a victory.

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. I mean, it wasn't ... You know? And I also ... we asked for the language again as part of the settlement and they didn't want to do that but we had--you know,--so somewhere--I don't even remember--there ... there may be language saying women are entitled to light duty. The--you know,--the ... unfortunately, I don't know what happened to women after that.

J.L. You know, I saw a beautiful letter you wrote to Thomas Van Arsdale laying out all the issues for women--pregnant women--and--you know,--and then you did a summation at the end and I have a copy of that. And I just ... I was wondering if they ever responded to that?

L.K. I don't ... you know, I know I have that at home somewhere. I don't remem-- ... I have to see if I have a response from them.

J.L. Yeah, because it was ... and you also volunteered to take all the information and put it together into a brochure. Did that ever happen?

L.K. No, no, I mean, not--you know--not from them. I mean, we tried to write this stuff up,--you know,--and I ..I did most of the writing,--

J.L. Um-hum.

L.K. you know,--distribute it to ??

J.L. Yeah. So you do have a ... a brochure that you put together for the women, a fact sheet or ...

L.K. You know, we ... I don't know. I have to go through all my papers. We had fact sheets and stuff.

J.L. Good. Well ... Okay. So ... let's talk about the responsibility of the contractors. I mean, what do you think is the responsibility of the contractor to deal with these issues, the unions being--you know-- ...

L.K. I mean, I think ... Well, remember there ... it's a joint Industry ...

J.L. Right. Yeah.

L.K. So they ... they ? they sit down together and work out the conditions. So ...

J.L. It's s shared .. Right. Um-hum.

L.K. I mean, my suit was not against the union. It was against the Joint Industry Board

J.L. Right. Right.

L.K. which--you know--Tommy's the head of. But it--you know--it ... it--you know--includes employers and the union. And, I mean, I ... like I did sue the individual employer because they made the ... You know, once you're working for a contractor--you know--they're in charge and they can decide what they want to do with you so they are liable. But--you know--when it was a matter of the Hiring Hall then--you know--that ... not sending me to an appropriate job,--you know--then--you know--?? there. But they're ... they all have the responsibility, or should. You know?

J.L. So you ... you made the point ... one point you made in your letter to Van Arsdale was that you were a journeywoman and you could only imagine what it would be like for an apprentice. I mean, that's a whole other issue--of pregnant apprentices.

J.L. Yeah. And apprentices also have to go to Apprentice School, so it ... I mean, it ... I think ... I mean, I became a mother--you know--after the apprenticeship but I think it would be very ... It's very difficult--you know--some of the young women who are mothers and ?? and in apprenticeship and I think--you know--a lot of them probably got weeded out just--you know--just lack of personal support ??

J.L. Let's talk a bit about child care. What were the child care issues like for you and your family for this ...

L.K. I mean, I don't think it was any different than any working woman because ...

J.L. But you have ... One thing is that tradeswomen have to be on the job a lot ear--well, not... not all women.

L.K. You know, the ...

J.L. We ... we have a lot of members who have to be in the hospitals at seven and ...

L.K. Yeah. I mean, I think ... yeah, I think it's the ... I don't think it was dramatically different than the issues other working women have.

J.L. But still to care ...

L.K. In a certain way, I mean,--you know,--like, say, for a professional woman who has to be at work ... I mean,--you know- you're a ... you're a schlub

on the job and you say I have to leave early 'cause my kid is sick,--you know--usually they're going to say fine--usually they're going to say: Oh, whatever you can afford. We'll dock you. But,-you know,--so ... and also getting out earlier in the day was very helpful, rather than getting home at seven at night ?? so, I mean,--you know--it was a mixed bag. And I don't necessarily think the tradeswomen have it worse than other women.

J.L. Yeah. But women still have it rough,--I mean, families because it is a family issue.

L.K. Yeah, although ...

J.L. But women usually get--you know--charged with it. And what kind of child care arrangements did you make for working and having kids? How did you ...

L.K. Well, I-what I did was I stayed home-you know-unpaid ... I wrote ... You know, after my son was--my first son-I wrote a letter saying that I was going to take a leave of approximately-you know--six to eight months till he was weaned ?? And so, I guess, I didn't ask. I just said this. And the, when I came back, there were no problems 'cause I'm sure they didn't know what to say anyway. You know? But ... so I was home for those--you know--first months. And then I found a day care center that took the--you know--took him that young age; that-you know--took infants so--you know--I had a combination of--you know--day care programs and baby sitters. You know?: And--you know--I ... I mean, I was lucky I wasn't a single mother. I had working husband who ... so that-you know--I was able to do that. So I had it--you know--easier than--you know--a lot of women have it--you know?--particularly single mothers.

J.L. So what about sources of support for you? Well, your husband, obviously. But ... and you have a family around here so was that ...

L.K. Yeah, my ... my parents live (inaudible)

J.L. Okay. So ...

L.K. And,--you know--also--you know--my friends within--you know--that I made within ?? were supportive too.

J.L. Were there other women in Local 3 that were having kids and that you were familiar with the issues? I mean, you talked about sort of trying to systematize the information and the policies. How ... how many women ...

L.K. There were some women who had kids already when they came. And,-you know,-I mean, every woman had to have her own support system, a mother, a sister, a husband--you know,-to help. And,-you know--like I ... I'm not sure ... there were a couple of women who were pregnant and lost their benefits, I think around the time that I was going through this also, so, I mean, it was a real issue.

J.L. Yeah. So how long did you work at your trade?

L.K. Well, I was in the union--you know--I mean, with time out from--you know--from child--you know--births and lay-offs and stuff for eighteen years and I--you know--I, I mean, in fact, I've never formally resigned. I ... You know? And I sometimes think I should go back, like, just ... I mean, I have a ... a

knee injury but I--you know--I mean, I'm unemployed now. And if there is some big building boom in Brooklyn--you know--?? Maybe I should just go in.

J.L. If you could find a good contractor to work for or something.

L.K. Yeah. But what disturbed me most about the union--you know--right around the time that I left was that Tommy has really run it into the ground. He's ... he's dismantled so many of the things his father did to make it a great union. And what really bothered me ... Like, I remember one of the last jobs that I was on was that the safety posters on the job were put up by the Laborers Union. And the Electricians, when I came in, were the leaders of safety. You know? We have all of the safety ... We ran the safety show and we had the leverage to do something--you know?--turn of the power if they don't fix it. And suddenly the Laborers, who were always--you know--the ones who were always getting hurt,

J.L. The grunts. Right.

L.K. ... they're putting up the posters and that really said something. There ... there've been a lot of bad accidents too. There have been a spate of some deaths among Electricians and it just ... it disgusted me because if you don't have a good union you're in trouble--you know--in the construction industry. It's such a dangerous job. And,--you know--you need to be able to say no, that's too dangerous. I'm not going to do that unless,--you know--it's made safer. And if the union's not going to back you up, you ... you have no rights.

J.L. So such a ... such a dangerous job, electrician, I mean, potentially. I was asking Bruni about the whole question of dealing with ... I don't know. From me outside looking at it, the fear of dealing with major voltage. You know? I mean, was that ever an issue for you or had ...

L.K. Yes. Yes. I'm a ... I'm a big scardy cat

J.L. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

--- L.K. and--you know---some guy who just got a job in Local 3 ??said: "you'll make a fine electrician so long as you ... you get over your fear of heights and electricity. You know?

J.L. (laughs)

L.K. But--you know,--I mean, you learn how electricity works and--you know--I mean, it's ... in a way it's less scary for us than it is for, say, the other trades who they come into contact with it but they don't know where it's going to come from and pop--you know--you know?--so you learn on the job how to work with it safely. But,--you know,--it's still scary.

J.L. Um-hum. You know, with the women organizing and you're talking about the changes under Van Arsdale, Thomas, were democracy issues within the union ever a real subject for ... of interest for the women getting involved in any ... I mean, I realize that union democracy and Local 3 are sort of

L.K. I mean, the fact is, we were the only active rank and file group in the Local.

J.L. 'Cause everything else were, like, clubs. Right?

L.K. Official clubs. You know?

J.L. So ...

L.K. They eventually started an official women's club,--you know--that--you know--they co-opted some people to become ... You know? They shut us out, I mean, Cynthia and people ?? if they ?? and it was just--you know--an empty ...

J.L. Like a girls' club.

L.K. Yeah. I mean, they had a man in charge of ... as their sort of sponsor...

J.L. Official sponsor.

L.K. ?? and ... but we were ... we were the only rank and file club--you know--that ... at the time I was in it ... I mean, I ... you occasionally heard that some of the African-Americans would have some active club--rank and file club,--at one point or other. You know? I've sure there've been attempts to start up clubs. There ... there was ... we had an election and there was an opposition slate that a few people put together, but--you know--then they're good at--you know--scaring people.

J.L. Yeah. So what would you say were the satisfactions of working as an electrician and working in the trades as a pioneer?

L.K. Well, it's a great job.

J.L. In what sense?

L.K. You ... you you're doing something concrete. You can see what you've done--you know,--at the end of the day you've ... you turn the switch on and the lights go on. You're doing something that people need and--you know--that takes expertise. You know? You can take pride in your work. You know? I mean, that's. ... that's the electrical work at its best. And,--you know,--also when you're working--you know,--you work alone, you work with a partner or you work in a crew and can--you know--when you ... when you get along with the people you work it's a very good feeling. And,--you know--I still like to point out--you know--building and places I worked. I can ... See, I built that but I had a little help. You know? But--you know--I ...--you know,--it ... at its best it's a--you know--it gives you an incredible pride and it can be--it's interesting and--you know--you're ... you're wrapped up in your work: I have to do this. Now I have to do this. You know? And ... and--you know--electrical, I think, for me was the best trade because there were some technical aspects to it. I think it was more--you know,--there was more to think about or to learn in terms of--you know--how electricity works. And,--you know--I really liked it and I miss it. I miss it a lot.

J.L. Wow.

L.K. But,--you know--of course the down side was when everyone was treated like a grunt. You know? If you have a bad foreman, badly or the job was unsafe, harsh conditions,--you know--and the sexism and all that,--you know--that was the ... the down side.

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. But the fact that you moved from job to job was for me a plus because you didn't feel like you were in a rut. There was always something new.

J.L. So what ... what was your motivation for leaving? I know that you got a Master's recently and--or a while back in public health?

L.K. I mean, I guess after the law suit, which was--let's see--I guess in '93, I started feeling like there's no future for me there because--you know--I was now

J.L. A troublemaker.

L.K. A troublemaker

J.L. Persona non grata.

L.K. Lawsuit Laura.

J.L. Yeah ... Uh-huh.

L.K. And in fact, the first one ...

J.L. Did anybody ever cal you that, Lawsuit Laura?

L.K. Yeah, at the first job I went to after the law suit they sent me out to Kennedy airport. And some--someone told me that when I walked on the job a foreman for one of the other companies, and there were several electrical companies working on the job,--you know--he ran into the locker said: Stay away from her. She's got law suits up the yin yang. You know? He'll ... You know, you say hello to her she'll sue you. You know? But I remember I was working with this one guy and--you know--you know--I sort of confessed to him that--you know--I actually kind of ... before I came here I had a law suit against the Local and I lost but--you know--?? and he said--he looked at me and he said: Like let's ... let's put away our tools, and he--you know--he said: Let's find some place to hide. Okay, tell me everything. He was thrilled that someone had ...

J.L. Oh yeah. Right.

L.K. ... because so many guys hated the way they were treated by the Hiring Hall and he was--you know ... this was ?? a conservative guy,

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. And he was thrilled that someone had--you know--sued the Joint Board, even if I lost it. You know?

J.L. Wow. That's interesting. Shows you the potential. Right? Okay. So tell me about your assessment of women in Local 3? I mean, you're really removed from it now so you don't really have a sense of what's happening with the women now. Is that fair to say?

L.K. Yeah.

J.L. Do you have any information or ...

L.K. I,--you know--I talk to some of them sometimes, but things are really bad. I mean, they're bad for the men now. They're really bad for the ... for everyone because of Tommy, because of the economy. There's unemployment and Tommy has just ripped a--ripped down the union.

J.L. And how has that happened? I mean, in what ways are ...

L.K. In terms of safety,

J.L. Uh-huh.

L.K. in terms of--you know--fucking around with people,--you know?--you know,--not solving ... You know, if people get sent to a job they--you know--they have some problem with and then it's too bad. You know? If you ... you don't like it we'll keep you unemployed for six months;

J.L. So people don't ...

L.K. Punishing people with unemployment.

J.L. So people don't ... don't feel that the union's standing up for them so ...

L.K. And rewarding their friends with overtime.

J.L. Yeah. There's a lot of that.

L.K. Oh, there's a much feeling ... I mean, I talked to one guy who's in his fifties. He and everyone he knows are in his fifties, they're all going for early retirement they're so sick of being treated like garbage by the union. And it is ... so obviously, in that atmosphere the women are ... are suffering too, and--you know--in terms of bathrooms there's a ... You know, there's a--you know--it's ... the whole union's going down. You know? It's ... it's terrible. It's really terrible that this happened,--you know--with the wrong person in charge.

J.L. Nepotism. You know? What about the subject of affirmative action? This is another thing that's--you know ...

L.K. Not in America in this ... there's no affirmative action in America any ... I mean, this ... There used to be, I think--you know--back in the '80's and stuff affirmative action was, like, a real thing. It's ... it's been,--you know--with the Republicans and all it's been ripped down. And OSHA's been ripped down, EEOC's been ripped down. No one's enforcing this stuff any more. You know? and I used to feel that ... I mean, when I thought of ... I mean, I've considered trying to get a construction management kind of job, like--you know--work as a--you know--project manager or a super, and I think back in the '80's being a woman--you know--they would have realized we need to have some tokens. They don't need tokens anymore. I mean,--you know?

J.L. As ... as a pioneer,--I mean, as one of the first women who was ... had the courage and the guts to do this, how does that make you feel, I mean, when you look at what's happened to equality for women legally in the United States?

L.K. Well,--you know--it's ... it's lousy but--you know--these things go in cycles and--you know--what's happening how will--you know--it'll create the seeds

of another wave of people willing--you know--demanding rights and getting them. You know? It's a bad time now. (inaudible phrase)

J.L. So what do you think is the legacy of the pioneers of Local 3, the women?

L.K. You know, I ... I'd like to think that some people gave us credit for what we did. You know? I mean,--you know--I think most of us, or some ... some of us knew we were there because of the women's movement,--you know?--because of the Rosie the Riveters and--you know--during World War II but--you know--the women's movement

J.L. Right.

L.K. of the '60s and the '70s. We were only there because of that. And,--you know--I'd like to think that some women will look back on us--you know--and say that we did something for them. You know? A lot of us felt that we didn't--you know--people didn't appreciate what we did, but--you know--I'm sure sometimes--you know,--someone might--you know--well, those women who came in are great.

J.L. Could you talk a little bit about your feminist commitment or your--how you see feminism in terms of your life?

L.K. Well, my mother was---she passed away last year,--

J.L. Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

L.K. But she was an ardent

J.L. I always heard about her.

L.K. She was an ardent feminist theorist. You know? She was an activist and ...

J.L. Mim Kelber. Right?

L.K. Yes.

J.L. Yeah.

L.K. And,--you know--she worked with Bella Abzug. But--you know,--she--you know--for ?? She came up with the idea ?? Jimmy Carter to organize the first national women's conference, she came up with the idea ... she ?? created a motion ...

J.L. And did she participate in that?

L.K. Yeah. She set the whole thing in motion. She worked to get--you know--you know--everyone out there organizing it and it was--you know--she never got credit for it. She was very retiring--you know--personally and ... but she was a tremendous--you know--inspiration. You know? And she always thought in terms of what--you know ... I mean, feminism was not ... was not about a woman getting ahead or a woman getting elected.

J.L. Um-hum.

L.K. It was about how is this going to effect women,--you know?-- everything: how will it affect women. And,--you know,--so I mean, it's getting women into the jobs, it's not about tokenism; like you're getting--you know--a woman foreman. All right, maybe it's good, but--you know--it's just the critical mass,--you know--so that ...

J.L. It's about opening the door to ... right.

L.K. It's not an oddity for women to be in these jobs. It's normal. And we've never--we haven't achieved that.

J.L. Right.

L.K. But--you know,--I mean, I guess there ... there are ... there are other jobs where women have made more inroads, like,--you know--say emergency medical technicians maybe. There's more women in the police.

J.L. Right.

L.K. The military, I don't know if that's much of a ... a triumph, but ...

J.L. And there's twenty-nine female firefighters in New York. So ... Yeah. Blue-collar's got a long way to go but ...

L.K. I mean,--you know--because they're good paying jobs. You know? It's a ... You know, you see woman out there--you know--directing traffic because it's a horrible job. You know? There's always room for women in low-paid jobs but so I guess in construction, when the construction unions fizzle down enough it'll become more women-friendly---you know--(unintelligible)

J.L. Do you have siblings? [LK answer: Yes, three sisters.]

4-30

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