Seattle Municipal Archives Interview
Bonnie Beers - February 2, 2009

Narrator: Bonnie Beers
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JULIE KERSSEN: This is Julie Kerssen. It is February 2, 2009, and I'm here with Bonnie Beers in her home in West Seattle. So, let's start by telling me your background – can you talk about when and where you were born and where you grew up?

BONNIE BEERS: I was born and raised in Seattle on Queen Anne Hill, actually in Interbay, and I went to St. Margaret's grade school. My parents' house is still there. I did everything from Queen Anne Hill, and then ended up going to Holy Names Academy – all-girls school, so I had lots of sports. Then went on to school at Western [Washington University in Bellingham]. I went to a couple of different colleges – Western, Shoreline [Community College], and then UW [University of Washington] – and then the Fire Department.

JK: What kind of stuff did you do as a kid – sports, you said?

BB: Right. I was lucky to go to a Catholic grade school, because we had CYO – Catholic Youth Organization, which they still have now. But if you were in a public school at the time I went, you didn't have sports for women. They had them for boys, but not for girls.

Early on, when I was a fifth- and sixth-grader, I would play baseball, we played volleyball, and we played basketball. We had volleyball when the guys had soccer, so three sports; [I played] every season. I was a really good athlete. There was another woman that was actually a more natural athlete, but I had this killer instinct. I was very competitive, even at an early age. And I was very talented. I was very good right away. I could pick something up right away, and be the best at it. So that was a natural ability I always had.

I learned a lot about teams through baseball, and that kind of carried me through my career. I realized it took more than one person to do things, and I was a real good team player. So that had a lot to do with my Fire Department career.

JK: So then you went to college at Western first, is that what you said?

BB: I did. I was at Holy Names and I went to Western. I had to pay my way through college, which was common then. My dad couldn't afford to pay for three of us. So I went to Western my first year, and played basketball there – actually, they were a big powerhouse in basketball.

Then I came back home and lived at home and went to Shoreline. Played basketball there, and then I entered the University of Washington and I played basketball there. And I didn't know it, but I was on their first intercollegiate basketball team in 1975.

So all those firsts were part of the times. Women's sports was just coming about. Title IX was talked about. I had hoped if I had stayed longer, I could have gotten a scholarship, but who knows? I was always athletic, and always playing, always outside doing stuff with guys.

JK: So you were used to palling around with boys?

BB: I was used to it in that I could compete on their level, see? And when I was at the UW, I would play the IMA [intramural sports]. I played pick-up games with my boyfriend. There weren't a lot of girls that did that, but I was good enough to do that.

So again, in those times, in the [19]70s, remember, women's lib was coming about, and so I thought – and my mom had told me – I could do anything. She used to tuck me in at night and say, "You can do anything." My mom – I get emotional – my mom was a very strong woman. She was from Ireland. She helped my dad build our house.

I, of course, watched. As a kid, you watched all that. And also, when my dad was building the house, I would bring him his tools. He was a carpenter, so I knew all the tools. So I had some non-traditional [experiences] just because I was following my dad around. And I was a real tomboy.

So all those pieces kind of fit in when I came into the Fire Department. I thought I could do anything. And, like I said, I was very naïve, I was very young. But all those things helped me, because I did pick it up. I didn't think it was a problem.

JK: So what did you study in school? What were you thinking of doing?

BB: I actually studied psychology. There was only a few things you could do at the time. I really didn't want to be a nurse – my sister was a nurse. I really necessarily didn't want to be a teacher, but I thought I could end up being a P.E. teacher, because that's actually what I was good at. But I really didn't like any of those options, so I got a degree in psychology, which at the time was pretty much worthless, because you had to have a master's degree or go into social work, or something like that. So it was just kind of a broad degree. I realized that in my junior year, and I thought, I need to figure out what I'm going to do. I'm going to graduate pretty soon, I need to organize that.

So that's one of the reasons I came in the Fire Department. I wanted something active, and I didn't really want to be a secretary. I wanted to do something outside of an office, so that was why I was in psychology.

JK: So how did you start thinking about the Fire Department?

BB: Well, my brother was two years older than me, and he was applying for jobs. A card came in the mail to my parents' house, where I was still living. What happened in the Fire Department, they would have so many people apply for jobs that they would only have a job test once a year. So you would have 3,000 people apply. They would save all those cards, and then send out the cards when the testing process was back starting.

So we got this card at my parents' house – to my brother – that said, "The Fire Department is testing and women and minorities are actively invited to participate." And so I thought, Oh, I could do that. That would be great. I didn't know there weren't any women.

Again, I didn't have a clue. And I also didn't know any firefighters, so I thought they just fought fire. I really didn't know a lot of what they did and what they were like. I was just walking into it thinking it's an active job, it's a really well-paying job. And because I was an athlete, I thought I'd be quite good at it.

JK: And they were saying at that point that they did actively want women?

BB: Right. On the card, that's what it said, so I thought, OK, I could do that. And so I applied for it.

JK: How did that go?

BB: Again, I was only 19 when I applied for it, so I didn't realize it was that big of a thing. I thought I was applying for a job that I would be good at. I didn't realize that there were no other women in the Fire Department. I didn't realize everything I did would be watched and be in the paper. It was just all new to me.

And I really didn't have an ego about it. I really didn't go into it thinking I was going to be the first woman firefighter. That was not anywhere. So all of it kind of just happened.

Everybody said I couldn't do it, basically. I'm not super big, I'm not super strong-looking, I'm not a body builder. But I'm tall and I'm pretty strong, and I'm really coordinated. So I surprised people in that I could do the job quite well. And also, I'm pretty fierce, I'm very dedicated, I have a really good worth ethic. So all of those pieces worked into that.

But yes, I was surprised. I was surprised to have women be vehemently against me. I went on an interview once – it was on KIRO – and actually, the interviewer told the audience I was quite attractive. A woman called in and said, "Well, I'd never let her rescue me. I would never do that."

And it's interesting, because if you see me in my gear, you can't tell that I'm a woman at all. You know, I'm 5'9" and I'm pretty tall. And so I thought, isn't that interesting that people were really against it. And now that's not the case; but it was the case in 1975-76.

JK: What were the reasons that people were against it?

BB: It was just because you were coming out of that mentality that women weren't supposed to do that. You know, women were volunteer firefighters during the war. Women had done a lot of things, but people forgot that they did all these non-traditional things.

And the other huge piece is the affirmative action piece of it. It's rather hateful, because it made it seem that – I scored in the 70s, which is passing. But see, in the fire department and the police department, everything was based on registers on because there were so many people, so you had to score 100. So if you scored lower, you were thought of as not as good. And that's [how] I was thought of – I was not competent, I wasn't smart enough, I wasn't any of that.

The sad fact of [that system], it really doesn't predict how good you'll do your job. It predicts how good you take a test. And that whole piece, that was a huge part of my career, fighting that forever. That was very difficult. That was hard, I think, for all women, the affirmative action. But without it, we wouldn't have gotten in. Because the strength component was weighted, and so the physical part of the test was very important. Also, they use military background, as they do now. You would get points for that. Most women didn't have that [background]. So you had a lot of things against you before you even walked in to take the test.

So those pieces made it hard to be in there. Basically kind of what I did is I just put my head down and thought, I can do this job. I knew I could do it, because after recruit class and getting into the stations, I watched and I thought, I can do this.

I just knew I would be consistent, I'd be extremely responsible. I was never late. I was always at work, I was never ill. All those pieces that you would say, "I want her on my crew." After about five years, they finally figured out, "She's OK. She's not here to screw around. She's not here to get a boyfriend, to get a husband. She's not here for any of those reasons."

But it took all that consistent time of constantly doing that. And everything I did was watched, and everything I did was kind of documented. But that's where the sports came in. I was very competitive. I was used to all that. I actually performed better when I had to. And that's true for sports – [I was] the clutch player. I was usually batter number four, I would hit the home run, I would do anything it takes to win the game, and that was really true in the Fire Department.

And actually, I could drill better than most of the guys. Even as a chief, you just enter into that other zone of really concentrating on what you're doing. And I wouldn't get nervous, I was fine. You had to have that because you were kind of "on" a lot. If you had been nervous, you would have never made it. Your stomach couldn't have handled it, because you were watched a lot and drilled a lot.

It's interesting when you look back now; all those components made it so I could be successful.

JK: Let me clarify, too, when you're talking about affirmative action making things more difficult, you're saying that people thought that you got where you were because you were a woman as opposed to that you earned it? Is that what you're saying?

BB: Yes, that's exactly it. And they still say that. I mean, even now. [On the entry test], I scored lower. My lieutenant and even my captain's test, I scored lower on the tests. What's interesting also about that now when I look back, I'm a generalist. I'm really good at common sense. Rules are there for a reason but I don't need them. I can figure out what the right thing is to do.

That's not how the tests are. They're very picky, trivial tests. I don't look at the world that way, and I had to learn. The first test I took – it's so different now – there wasn't a library of books. The books were not even published, some of them. Guys – people – just had them. You couldn't have access to them. And do you think they would give them to me?

And the other thing, you had to memorize. It was very intricate. I'd never studied that way – college is not that way – so I scored really low. It makes me sad – I scored 230 out of maybe 245 [people], and I was still promoted to lieutenant.

Now, of course, I realize that the people that scored maybe up in the 20s, they didn't get jobs because I did. That makes up for the fact that they didn't have women for 50 years and should have; but I'm sure it didn't make them feel very good, because they deserved that job. And I understand that now.

But on the other hand, I think during those years, there was no other way to promote women. Now women compete on an equal footing. They have for the last maybe 15 years or so. But in the beginning, you couldn't. You wouldn't be successful. You just had to be a brainiac and study and all this stuff… I just don't think it was going to happen.

So the affirmative action piece is huge. It was so huge that most of the women ignored it. It was like the white elephant in the room, and they pretended they came in without it. It was a very interesting way to behave.

Because you'd be one of the guys, yet you were *never* one of the guys. And that's another kind of piece I learned very quickly: I would never be one of the guys. *Never.* And that was OK. It was a really good job; I knew I'd be really good at it. But I didn't work to be their friend. They were hunters and fishermen. We're talking 1977. I drove into the parking lot at Station 18 in Ballard. All the cars were trucks with gun racks and campers.

So it was a very different world than what I lived in. These guys could fix their own cars. They were carpenters, they [had great] manual dexterity. They were extremely good at stuff – they were good at fires – but they were not college-educated. They read the newspaper; that's all they read. They worked two jobs and their wives didn't work. So it was a very different world then, and I understood that.

But I survived, because I was good enough. I mean, I couldn't tune my car up, but I knew how to change oil or change a tire, and I knew basic stuff that most women didn't know then. And they got that, because they thought I could do it. I know I'm better than some guys at stuff. I'm not maybe as strong, but I had the desire and I could do the things.

Once they worked with me and saw me, it was OK. There was always a test. And I learned that actually, my whole shift would get used to me, but if I worked another shift, it would start all over. If you talk to other women, after about five years, you were *really* tired of that. [You were accepted] with the people you knew, but once you went into another area, you had to do it all over again.

And that's what made it so hard to work overtime, or shifts that weren't your own shift. Because you'd get a lot of crap. And, you know, it kind of gets to the point where you think, Is that ever going to stop? And basically, it doesn't.

JK: Really?

BB: No, the scale of what you do is different than a white male. And so no matter what I did, it may be good, but it was never good enough. It's like Hillary Clinton and Obama. Look at the difference in levels. Still, what she

has is still not good enough to Obama, who doesn't have anywhere near the classifications. It's a very similar type thing. So I learned that kind of early on, too.

But you know what? I had a great job. I knew it was a good job, I knew I was succeeding at it. You just put your head down and did it – and I knew that, so it made it easier.

JK: Can you talk a little bit about the recruit class at the beginning?

BB: OK. The first time I came out of the University of Washington, I entered in the Fire Department, I believe it was [19]75 – I could be wrong on dates, but I'm pretty sure that's the first time. It was me and five other women. Two of the women were fairly strong – Lori Lakshas and LaDonn Usitalo – and I, and the other three were not at all. They had never done anything non-traditional, and I knew they'd never make it.

Everything was based on upper-arm strength. The sad fact for that whole class, because it was six women, there was a lot of media attention. The drills that we did – going through recruit class is like going through Army basic training. *Extremely difficult*. Very hard work.

I'd never done that before. I was in pretty good shape from playing basketball, but I wasn't [at that level]. I was losing weight because you didn't get to eat enough. You were working eight to ten hours a day. You were physically working hard a lot, so it was really demanding. You did do a lot of arm things, and I was not – I was a basketball player. My legs were really strong; my arms weren't. And grip [was important].

You have to understand, too – all the equipment's big. It was built out of brass and it's *big*. So it was all heavy. And all the stuff they had at training was all the reject old stuff, so it was even worse. It was not easy equipment. You had the junk, basically, that was left over. So it was not easy with the tools you had.

Anyway, so after two weeks, I knew I couldn't [do it] – I wasn't strong physically enough. They were making us do stuff repetitively, and guys had a better shot at it, because technique-wise, their arms were stronger – just to pick up the hose. Also, mentally, I didn't know how a pump was run. I knew I could put it in gear and double-clutch. I could do those things. But I didn't understand – in those times, they showed you, and then they expected you to do it. [snaps her fingers] And I was not that fast of a learner.

I actually right now could go put it in pump – I can remember 30 years later – but I'm not very fast at the get-go. And those were the requirements. They showed it to you, and expected you to know it. A lot of the people in my

recruit class had been firefighters before. They were older, they'd been around, they were more manipulative – I mean, using [manipulative] skills. So I was already behind.

It was *awful*. I was kind of in tears thinking, I don't know what I'm doing, I'm terrible at this. My boyfriend at the time was really good at that. He, at night, would show me. But I was so exhausted that I couldn't do it. And we were tested every day, written tests and physical stuff. It was too much.

So after the first two weeks [I dropped out]. We had to be there with our shoes shined, our hair cut, they had to be clean shaven, all cleaned and dressed, whatever. We had to be there, I think, by 7:30 every morning, and you'd didn't get off till 6:00 – and that was four days a week. So I was drained. Then the other women also ended up being let go, and there were various stories there.

Basically what it came back to – because the City was very committed – the Office of Women's Rights, the City of Seattle – to getting women in the Fire Department. They wanted to know why. "Basically," I said, "you need a head start program."

They had a trainee program, which I didn't know about, for minorities. But basically, they stayed out in the company and did stuff, and they got paid, and then they would come in the next recruit class. There wasn't anything like that for women. So they did start it. That's why some of the articles say I'm the "Six-Million-Dollar Woman," because they spent a lot of money figuring how to get women into it, and attract the right women into the profession.

So basically, it was a head start program to learn how to use pumps, what couplings are – you know, your hose couplings, male-female, increasers, reducers – all that stuff that – wyes, siameses… I didn't know that. I knew the garden hose. I didn't know any of that. And then also, ladders – how to carry ladders, what they were called, how to shift them. How to pump, how to use the engine to pump – all that kind of stuff. Where water goes.

Those are things that, in real life, they're not really anywhere. Unless you've been schooled in it, you don't know. So that's how they started the pre-recruit class.

I was painting houses. They got me a job in the copy department in the Public Safety Building. So I did that, waiting for the next recruit class. Then they formed the pre-recruit [class], so you got paid to do that, *and* lift weights, *and* chop with an axe. One of the requirements in recruit class was you had to chop through a telephone pole. Telephone poles are treated with that creosote, and they are not easy to chop through. Very difficult.

So every morning, I would go out and chop. I got actually quite good at it. Now, I'd be probably terrible at it. And your hands, you had to grip, and you could get blisters. See, if you weren't used to any of that… How many people chop? People don't. You use a chainsaw. I could do that. But no, they wanted you to hand [chop] – because that's how lots of times they opened roofs. Now they don't, but that's how they did it then.

So that kind of came in at the same time. I was also at the station. And, of course, they put me in Station 18 – which was in Ballard, which was a new fire station – because it had [two] bathrooms. The unfortunate part of that was I was put in a station that was not a busy station. So, of course, they'd bitch at you, you know. It's one of those things, they think they're doing you a favor, because it has bathrooms. But in reality, it was not a good station, because it was very slow.

So anyway, I was there before I entered the next recruit class. But by the time I entered the next recruit class, I knew all the stuff, so I was ahead of the game. And I had been through enough recruit class to know that I had to be in really good shape, so that helped. So when I did enter my class – and I was the only woman – I was way ahead of the guys for the first three weeks. But then they all caught up.

So it really was like a head start program, and it was successful. That's how most of the women came in during the [19]80s. But again, we cost the City supposedly a lot of money, and that was another big deal. You know, "Why are you spending all this money for women?" People didn't think it was important.

That's kind of the essence of how I got in there. I start again, I come in, and I'm successful in my recruit class. Of course, it was hard, and I was in the paper, and there was big [interest]. I was young, and of course talked to reporters and said good and bad, and they just printed the bad in the paper. I was naïve.

All those things that would go on – I was only [23]. I was really young. But I knew enough in the stations not to be a loudmouth, not to question stuff, just to do my job. If I really did have questions, I would quietly ask. I also knew enough to know that I would never be one of them. So I had to learn that I would never be invited sometimes to their parties, or I wouldn't be included.

The other piece was the [firefighters'] wives always kind of wanted to know what I was doing. You see, I'm entering into a social club that nobody else got to be in. Didn't figure that out till later either. Because I was sleeping in the bunk rooms with them. We'd jump into our boots and slide the pole; it wasn't like I'm checking everybody out. I wore my T-shirt and shorts. I don't know what they wore, or I really didn't try to stare at them.

But that was a big deal. The bathrooms were also a big deal. The comfort level was very different. I didn't have a locker room on my own, but I always wore my uniform to work, so if I had to change – like we had to change into our dress uniforms – I used the closet in the classroom.

I wanted it seamless. I didn't want to cause any problems. If you talk to all the women, all of us did that. We already knew we were a pain in the ass just by being there. We didn't want to cause *any* problems. We would figure it out.

And in a way, that was bad. Like at some stations, the women couldn't get in the bathrooms. Like Station 17, for instance. It was really a traditional old-style station with big bathrooms – for men. There was no women's bathroom, except maybe the officers' one. They didn't have a place to go to the bathroom in the morning. At seven in the morning, when both shifts were there, you would have 18 men and one woman, and she had to pee. And so, again, there were stories that they used utility sinks.

I mean, there was stuff that went on that shouldn't have happened. The City kind of maybe should have ramped it up sooner than that, but again, we didn't cause any problems. We were fine. It was already bad enough we were there. Causing problems? We didn't want to say there's no bathroom, so everybody kind of figured it out how to work it out.

So for my first year at Engine 18, I was again sent back to that place, to the slow station in Ballard. I grew up actually not far from it. I grew up in Interbay, so I knew the area. Very slow station. The unfortunate part of it was it was so slow that they would pick on me. I say "they" – the ladder company was good to me, but my own engine company was not. They didn't want me on their engine.

And it's very interesting – I knew more than they did, actually. Because when you're in the Fire Department, you don't have to do all the drills that you do in recruit class, so I knew all the stuff. They hadn't done it in years, but they could fight fire.

So anyway, I realized [that station] was not a good spot for me. They would pick on me. It was not fun. I didn't like coming to work. So I was detailed to Engine 25, which is Station 25 on Capitol Hill, 13th and Pine. Life was much nicer there, and so I put in to transfer there.

JK: Why do you think it was such a different kind of station?

BB: It was a lot busier. What's interesting about that – when you come in the Fire Department, you're a civil servant. You're on probation. Out of recruit

class, which lasts ten weeks, then they come and put you in an assignment. It's like the NFL draft. If you're a good rookie, you get a good assignment. If they don't like you, they'll put you anywhere. Now, pretty much, they just put you in spots, but then, it was very prioritized. And of course nobody wanted me. I was like a pariah.

So I go to Engine 18 because it had two bathrooms. Horrible reason. After six months, when my horrible newspaper article came out, I'm off of probation. And after that, they made probation a year. I tell people that it was because it wasn't long enough to fire me. That's really the truth. Well, I say it's the truth. I suppose I can't find anybody probably to ask that.

But what I did find out later, when I put in to transfer to Engine 25 – which was a very, very busy engine company, one of the busiest in the city, on top of Capitol Hill – the assistant chief, whose name was Black Jack Mancini, who did not want women at all, and who died actually only about five years ago – said, "Yeah, we'll put her there." He put me there and told the secretary, "We're going to fire her from there," because he didn't think I would be successful there. He *never* thought I would be able to fight fire.

JK: Because it was busy?

BB: Because it was busy. And that was *great*. Because I went up there and I not only fought fire, I was a really good athlete. I'd play sports with them and I beat them at stuff. And because it was such a busy station, you didn't have the nipping, you know, biting at each other. So it made life *much easier*.

In reality, any time you have a new person coming in, put them in a busy place. You see right away what they can do. They sink or swim.

So that was great. I had a really good officer, Lieutenant Heaton. So I started out on a whole other level again. Engine 18 was really hard on me. It actually made me doubt [myself], you know, because some of them were so mean.

JK: What were they doing?

BB: What they would do was they would talk really horrible in front of me – swear words, jokes, terrible behavior. I would be in the Engine 18 watch office, which faces Market Street. And I didn't realize how bad men were when they look at women. See, I was very young. They would rattle the Venetian blinds when a nice-looking woman would walk by. Stuff like that that. I didn't know guys did that. Real kind of animalistic.

And really, I was not included; I was separated out. It was clear I was not wanted there. And again, I have to clarify that the other firefighters that were

[stationed there] – they actually didn't like it at Engine 18 either. They thought the guys were jerks. And they were nice to me, and watched me perform. They understood I knew what I was doing.

But it was interesting, my own company didn't want me, and there was not a good officer. That's a huge piece, because if the person in charge of you, of your crew, doesn't want women, they're going to screw around and take off on that and not behave. That's true in the whole picture of the Fire Department.

So then I went to Engine 25 – I have a really good officer, loves fires. Mike Heaton grew up by Engine 8 on Queen Anne Hill. When he was like four or five, a coat fell off one of the rigs, and he took it home and he wouldn't give it back. He always wanted to be a firefighter. So you have this career firefighter lieutenant who's now my officer at Engine 25, and now I'm on one of the busiest companies in the whole city.

My life there was *immediately* better. It was still competitive, and people watched what I did, but it was a different sense. Because there were so many people – there were, I think, 14 of us. They still watched what I did, but they watched how I was a good athlete, I could compete, I was always there, I pulled my weight.

We had *lots* of fires, and that was the other key. I try to tell people, being on Engine 25, it kind of set that stage that she knows what she's doing, she can perform there, and kind of the word was out on that. People would still try to screw with you, but on the other hand, they couldn't find anything wrong. So that was a great place for me.

There was another engine there, Engine 7; so it was Engine 25, Engine 7, Ladder 10, Battalion 3 and an aid car. So there were a lot of units there, and Capitol Hill had lots of shootings and stabbings and fires. And they'd had a lot of fires in the riots of [19]68, so there was a lot of knowledge there of how to do stuff. So I learned all that quite well there. It was great for me to go there.

So I felt 25 was my home. I never liked 18. I never liked – even when I went back to work there, I still didn't like it there. For some reason, I always thought the energy or something was bad there. It was not a happy place. At 25, everybody pretty much was happy. They liked to come to work, they liked to do hard work.

I was at 25 for three years, and considered it my home. And then, out of that, I ruined my happy little house by taking the lieutenant's test. Chief Swartout was not the chief yet. I think he was still the chief of training, and I think Chief

Hanson was still the fire chief. Chief Swartout wanted me to take the lieutenant's test. I was only 25, with only three years in.

Firefighters at the time, having time in was huge to them. They didn't want a new firefighter to be a lieutenant. She didn't know enough. I didn't understand that enough. Probably, knowing what I know now, I wouldn't have taken the test.

JK: Did you have to think about it at the time or just you were encouraged to do it, and you thought, why not?

BB: Well, I thought because I was the only woman, I should. You know, a lot of what I did, being the only woman made me step up to the plate. Had I been in a group of 12 women, I probably would not have cared as much. But because I was constantly put in that limelight, that I represented all women – and it was not something that I had ever aspired to. I didn't really think about that. But I thought I should be a lieutenant.

I'm actually a really easygoing person. To be a leader – I mean, I'm a leader usually in the sports thing, but it wasn't necessarily that I was a leader at work, because again, I'm coming from behind. I wasn't a leader. I didn't know the stuff as good as a lot of guys. But I did it, you know. Yeah, you get more money [as a lieutenant]. But had I known how hard it was… Actually being the first woman [firefighter] was hard. Being the first woman lieutenant was a lot harder.

It was a lot harder, because actually, to be a lieutenant is really a hard position. Because usually you're one of the crew – when you were a lieutenant, you were one of the crew – but now, you're their boss. So it's probably the hardest transition there is in the Fire Department. Because, see, after that you're always an officer. It's that first jump.

And nobody wanted me as their boss. I had only three years experience, and they had ten or fifteen. You know, I understand that now, looking back, because as a chief, I didn't like to have some chief that I had trained be my boss. And, again, I didn't put anything like that in their face. I was very good at respecting where they were coming from. There was a line of being democratic, and also being the one in charge. Which, again, we get into ego. Much ego in the Fire Department. I have ego, but I saw how it got in the way.

So when I was promoted to lieutenant, that was very difficult on me. Again, where I placed on the test, I was very low on the list. It was covered all in the paper that I was an idiot. And no matter what I ever did, I never blended in. In my fire gear, you can't tell I'm a woman. But when I'm on a rig, you could tell I was a woman when I'd come close to you. And so I was always kind of

sneered at. Like if I'd go on an inspection– because they'd heard about this woman firefighter.

An interesting thing I did have happen. And it's interesting, because actually, the firefighters backed me, because my crews would finally understand I am actually a good officer. But people would screw with me a lot. I was on an aid run, I was sent on an aid run. And I was good at first aid work – my crews were good at that, too, and I worked well with them. I was a good team player.

And we had had a guy – I don't exactly remember now, but they thought it was [his] heart and we said, "No, it's this. We're going to code green you. You're going to go by ambulance," and called the ambulance. The ambulance *didn't believe me*, and so they called for a medic unit. And so we're in the cab getting ready to leave and we see a medic unit come in. And, you know, in the Fire Department, we relate to each other. We know the next unit's coming in, talk to them, give them an update. I didn't know what was going on, and the guys didn't either.

I did talk to the medics after – they wanted to know what went on and I said, "Look, we were going home. The AMR didn't believe me."

So the medics understood [that AMR did not trust my judgment. The medics did trust me.] And again, it took working with them. Because I knew enough to say, "No, this is a this," and code green the medic unit [that] this is somebody with this problem. I was good at first aid. I got to a point that I had credibility. But it took a while, you see, to get there.

So again, I had a lot of different arrows pointed at me. It was not only on inspections, and aid runs, and on the radio, it was also from the mechanic. I would get it from other places. So it would be sometimes overwhelming. And I thought, What did I do? I shouldn't have. This has been a nightmare. And at the same time, too, I was breaking up with my boyfriend. You know what I mean – there's never one thing.

But I have to say, because it was so hard on me as a lieutenant, I stayed a lieutenant. I stayed a lieutenant for ten years. I decided I was not going to play the game in the Fire Department, to be their puppet first. I had had enough. I was a good representative for the Fire Department. I did represent well – and learned. I didn't say negative things. I knew it was a really good job. I knew there were the negatives – I'd always known that. But I thought, I can't go through this again. It would *kill me.* I mean, it was very difficult on me. And so I decided I was not going to take a test for a while.

The Fire Department would always put us in the newspaper: "Seattle has the most women," blah blah blah. The fact is, yes. But they wouldn't put us in busy [fire stations].

And so it was on one hand, "We've got all these women, look how good we are, the Fire Department's doing all this." On the other, they would hide us. They wouldn't put us in busy places. And there was no policy. It was all a good old boys network of how you got transferred to places. All the downtown spots were old farts. They *never left*. People *never transferred.* If you transferred, there was something wrong, and nobody would want you. So it was, again, this NFL draft thing. And it was very secretive.

If you put in for a transfer, you could say, "I work in Ballard. I want to stay in Ballard"; you could end up in South Park. So it was very scary to put in [for transfer]. The whole transfer things was very secretive, and the fire chief had the right to do anything. Because you came in and it was like the military. So all those pieces were involved in that.

As a lieutenant, I actually went from Engine 25, which was a very busy engine company – I get promoted, everybody in the world finds out I was promoted, everybody's having a fit: "This woman is now in charge of a fire engine." And actually, 30 years later, when I was battalion chief, I filled in at Woodinville just two years ago. They had a huge fire and we sent a task force. I sat down at the table and one guy said to me, "I remember when you were promoted to lieutenant."

And I thought, Nobody knows, remembers, but etched in their brain are stuff that happened in my career, because it was a *big thing*. To me, I didn't know it was that big of a thing. But later when people would tell me that, I thought, *Jesus*. You know? I didn't realize it was that big of a deal.

I had another guy tell me my first time on the radio, first fire, a female voice, everybody stopped and listened to my report. So I had to be very good on the radio. But again, I'd had a good rapport with [the dispatchers]. When you work with A shifters, you work with the same dispatchers, so you get to know them and they get to know you. You can tell when they had a fire, how they would talk. So I had a good rapport with them. And see, you establish that trust. So that worked out good. But see, you have to start out.

There's a couple stories I'll tell you about [Engine] 21. Of course, they didn't want me. Engine 21 is located in Greenwood. It's always one of the stations they say they're going to close. It's surrounded by other stations, and it was always the rig used to transfer people.

See, in the Fire Department, if we have a class, we have to put a rig out of service; meaning, in your area, you might not have a fire engine there for a

little bit, so we can go to class. My rig – that rig – would pick up people and be a taxi and take them to class. In other places that have lots of money, like Phoenix, they will hire another crew and have them fill in while people go to classes. We've never had the money to do that here. We simply put a rig out, and have other rigs cover. Which means, if you had a heart attack that day, it might not be so good, but we take that chance, kind of go with odds.

OK, so now I'm on Engine 21. At that time, we ran with three people – a lieutenant and two firefighters. Up until the [19]90s, we ran with three people. Everything on the engine company, unless you're an ERS [unit] downtown, it's three people. So it was me and the guy in the back. We did all the work and the driver pumped. Basically, you give an order, you do it. You're not really ordering that many people to do anything.

There was two big things that happened when I was on Engine 21. One, Rick Benson was on the tailboard, a really good guy, liked to talk – knew what he was doing, but he drove you nuts because he talked so much. And Ken Norris was the driver. They were both hard personalities; they were not easy. Again, new lieutenant. You're dealing with all sorts of hard things.

One of the things that happened is, I was a new lieutenant and it snowed at Engine 21. They're using my rig as a taxi. There was probably four to five inches of snow. And Engine 21 is on the top of Greenwood. It's flat there, but it's all hills all around it. There was a class, and the class was down in the south end at Station 14. So at 8:00, I'm telling the chief, "We shouldn't be leaving. People are hardly driving! We shouldn't be going to a class. This rig shouldn't be going anywhere. What if we have a house fire?"

Again, a new lieutenant, I can't [argue] – the chief should know that, I shouldn't have to [tell him]. They said, "No, you're going to class, go pick up people."

In my mind, I'm thinking this is totally ridiculous. What if I had a house fire right next to [Engine] 21? Guess whose rear is in trouble for not saying we shouldn't have gone. And so I did as I was told, because if I didn't, I knew I would be in really big trouble. And for a guy to even be verbal about it, it would be one thing; but for me to be verbal, it was totally bad.

So I followed orders. But finally, by the time we got to Station 9, which was in Fremont, they canceled the class. I actually had guys on the tailboard hanging on. We didn't have crew cabs. This was a 1958 Mack. Can you imagine in 1981 having a 1957 police car? This was the same thing. I had a 1958 Mack, guys hanging on the tailboard. No crew cabs. In the snow. In my mind, that wasn't OK, but OK.

So that stuck in my brain. I thought, I'm not doing that again. But again, I'm a new officer; I'm going to go with their show.

Then the second thing that happened when I was on Engine 21 – and *lots* of things happened, these were just two of the ones that really stand out – is Rick Benson, his dad was dying. His dad was older. Rick lived in Ballard, or [station] 35's area, which is over on Blue Ridge.

We were at work. His dad's address comes in. Medic response. His dad's dying. The aid car from Aid 18 goes. They get in an accident on the way there. So then I call my chief. See, everything is chain of command. Now, it's much freer. Then, you could not move pretty much anywhere without asking.

I call my chief, I said, "Rick's dad's dying. I need to put the rig out of service. He needs to go home." The chief wouldn't let me.

So I didn't know what to do. I probably shouldn't have asked. I should have just let him go. But you know what? Again, I'm into the chain – that was what you were supposed to do. So Rick knew I would get in a lot of trouble if he left. He didn't leave; I don't know that I would have done that. But he stayed because he knew I would be in big trouble.

His dad died the next day. He did get to go home that day, but it was not right away. And I thought, Why is it we're better to the public than we are to our own firefighters? You would *never* let that happen. I should have driven over there in the fire engine. And I knew in my heart that was not the right thing. But again, how do I go against a direct order?

So again, all the time I was a lieutenant, I learned a lot of things. I was on Engine 21. Those were two big things that happened. I then moved to a truck company, Ladder 8. Nightmare.

OK, let me back up and say I was always on an engine. Fire departments, we separate our work. What I would do was handle hoses and put the water on the fire. Truck companies handle the ladders. They open the roofs. They do a lot more gear – and it's actually a lot harder. It's a whole different way to do stuff. It's more involving ropes; it's actually more brainy. Going to a fire and putting water on it is pretty easy. You just lay the hose and use the engine. Truck work is really a little more separate. It's ventilating. It's opening up roofs. It's learning how to use chainsaws, it's using rescue saws. It's a lot more hands-on. Manlier, really – a lot more.

I could do it all, but it was certainly not my forte. It was not something I would have chosen. Well, the chief knew I actually didn't like [Engine] 21. After three years, I was done. I was ready to move on. I wanted to go to Engine 6,

a busy, busy company near Engine 25 on 23rd and Yesler. This chief thought if I got to battalion headquarters, which was Ladder 8, that I could then move to Engine 6. The deputy one at the time had said, "I don't want, I will never have, a woman on one of my busy downtown companies." Of course, all this is underground.

And so I went to Ladder 8. I was only on Ladder 8 for a year, but again, you take a person who doesn't have any of the skills, never was on a truck company. It would be different if I had been assigned to one. Now, I'm in charge of one! So it was very hard. The guys, of course, didn't really want me there. It's the Station 18 [situation] again. Never liked it there anyway. So that was a hard year. I broke up with my boyfriend that year. That was just *really* hard. That was a hard transition. Life was very hard there.

But then, I get to go to Engine 6. I was there for three or four years. Probably the best years I had as a lieutenant. I say that in that I had lots of fires, I had lots of aid, I had everything. Man, I was in seventh heaven. This was where the action was.

I had a really good foundation, really good credibility. I was very good at figuring the right thing to do. I was good at going to fires. I could find the fire. I had a sense. And everybody could tell that. It was like, when I was going in, you could depend on my crew and me to do whatever you needed to do. It was not like we were screw-ups. You see what I'm saying? There was a very good sense of working with other rigs; you know, if you needed this, I'd get it.

So that took time to get there. And I had really good crews. We worked really well together. It's interesting: all my crews, we always got a lot of attention because of me, and they figured that out. But we always did well. In my whole career, 30 years, I never made mistakes on the fire ground. I mean, everything I did, you know, I was lucky, part of it. But I also knew how to do the stuff. And so Engine 6 was a wonderful place for me. I had lots of stuff happen there, always made good choices.

After Engine 6 – the other interesting part about being a woman, it seems like if you were on affirmative action, they seemed to drag us to the Fire Marshal's Office. That was doing an office job. I never verbalized it before – it was like you were being punished. Because, see, you were there for all the action, and doing all this firefighting stuff, and now… It's the fire chief saying that they're going to bring you to this office job, and you're going to be an inspector.

They would drag women and minorities there more so than they would white males. I always felt it was to screw with us, but I could never say that. So I got dragged down there.

JK: So that was the occasional job you did while you were –

BB: No, you were totally transferred from being out of the operations, which is combat firefighting, into an office desk job. It was called the Fire Marshal's Office, and it was hated. Because the other piece of the Fire Department was we worked a rotational shift, so we had lots of time off. We were at work a lot, but we had lots of time off. Fire Marshal, you worked a normal everyday job, which we hated.

I was in that for about… well, actually, until I was promoted to captain. So I was only there for maybe a year or so. But I really felt like, you know, I was screwed already, because I'm already a woman, and now I'm screwed again. If you had asked other women, our proportion of being there was way higher – there were probably only 30 women at the time, out of a thousand, and there were probably eight women down there. I mean, it was a lot more than it should have been.

So anyway, I did that. And then I was promoted to captain. Again, I should be in a busy company, but went to Engine 34, which is in Madison Park, which is not very busy. But I had a really good crew. I learned a lot there. If you followed my path, along with another guy whose name is Bill Hepburn, whose dad was a fire chief – if you were one of the chosen, you got all the cherry spots. I never got the cherry spots. I had to fight to get anywhere.

So [Engine] 34 is one of the places that I'd look at my driver, and by noon, we would have all our work done. Basically, in the Fire Department, you pay to have us there. That's what we're paid for, so if you need us, we're there. If you have a huge, big fire, we need people there, they can't be sitting at home. But we said, "Well, we're here," so we would drill. We had a good time, basically.

I was there for… how many years? A couple years. Then comes the hard part. Now, all this time – this was in the [19]90s, [19]89, I think it was – we had lots of women come in. We were always rated as having more women in the whole country. And, of course, along with it, we had a lot of EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] issues. Any non-traditional place is going to have EEO issues, especially if the people in charge don't say they want women.

Now, the Fire Department did say they wanted women, and compared to other fire departments across the country [they did]. If you look at the global picture, East Coast, old-time, old fire departments – very difficult to get women ingrained. West Coast, new. Seattle is new. So it was easier to get us in.

We're very rule-bound, quite strict. Compared to East Coast, and even San Francisco, very military. I mean, there were certain things that were absolutely … they had to wear a uniform. I mean, everything was clean, spotless. They were pretty meticulous. So that helped; all those rules helped.

Let me back up to being a lieutenant. I'm trying to think exactly the years. That's when the pregnancy [issue] also came about. Let's stop for a minute and then I can cap a little bit and go back. Is that all right?

[break in taping]

BB: I'm going to go back to two things: being a lieutenant and the pregnancy thing. And then also talk about other women. I think I'll do the women part first.

What's an interesting part was I was the only woman as a firefighter for my first year. So I was always happy to meet other women. Men didn't like that. It was an interesting thing. It was almost that if you were going to talk to another woman that you were against them. It was a very interesting thing.

So again, the Fire Department has 35 fire stations. Right now, it has four different shifts. When I came in, it had three. So even when we had 30 women, they were all over the place. They never put us together. We were rarely in the same battalion. So you didn't always know other women; it was very hard to meet and talk.

And guys kind of would watch if you did. Not only that, they liked rivalry, and they wanted you to badmouth other women. So it was very difficult. Lots of times, you didn't *know* other women. The hard part of this is anytime you're in an environment that you're the only one, you want to be liked. You want to get along. But now there's another woman, and what if she's not strong enough? What if she's not good enough? Do you badmouth her, or do you not say anything?

So it was apparent to me – because, see, I was pretty strong on my own. I really didn't need other women. I thought it was great to have other women, and actually, I'm good working with other women – but some of the other women weren't.

And also, acceptance. How do you get acceptance? Well, you can sleep with the men. You can marry them. You can bake for them. You can just let them walk all over you. I didn't do any of those. Even when I came in on Engine 18, it was a custom for the rookie to make coffee. I said, "I don't drink it, I don't make it." I didn't do any of that traditional stuff, because I didn't want to start a pattern of them expecting me to do that.

So I didn't do any of that stuff. But see, every woman in every occupation, you figure out how you're going to get accepted. So now we're talking about me in 1981 when I got promoted. Women are coming in, maybe 10 to a class; in the [19]80s we had lots of women come in.

JK: Did women come in right after you?

BB: Uh-huh, they did. It was a year, because some women flunked out, but I was alone for a year. Women figured out how to get accepted, and it was on their own terms. And so out of that, we got queen bees. You would think, oh, another woman, you're automatically friends. No. Women firefighters are very independent.

Also, you had all this attention on you, so some women didn't like that. They wanted to be the center of attention. In any other job, nobody would have paid attention to them. So there were some very different dynamics.

Of course, I didn't figure it out till later. Even men firefighters – you would think in the union, they would have tons of people at union meetings. No, out of a thousand firefighters, they might have twenty. So again, also they're very independent.

So it was not easy to gather these women together. Now I come to the [19]80s. Now women have been in 10 years – we're talking maybe [19]88, [19]89. They want to have kids. And the pregnancy issue was *so big*. But underneath the pregnancy issue was hatred for affirmative action.

So what happened is pregnancy was the face, but really all the hatred and meanness was against affirmative action. What happened is that I actually was covered [for pregnancy]. My pension is different than the other women's. I'm under LEOFF I [Law Enforcement Officers and Fire Fighters benefits], they're LEOFF II. Some people call [LEOFF II] "left out." If they got pregnant, they had to tell the department they were pregnant, then they would be laid off for a year. They didn't have light-duty jobs, so they lost all coverage, they lost their seniority, they lost their benefits. You would have better coverage if you were a firefighter's wife than a firefighter employed in the City of Seattle.

Out of that, we sued. There was an organization called the Relief Association, and they were there to protect firefighters. But they were old school. What's interesting about it, the women firefighters are super healthy. The idea that they would be sick during pregnancy – that would really not happen. They were worried we were going to go on disability and just lay around and do nothing, so they refused to pay, because it was based on women. They actually went directly against the law – they discriminated – because of pregnancy. So we sued them.

And of course that meant we were suing the guys. So that was a whole nightmare. And then other women went against it, because we shouldn't do that. We shouldn't sue our fellow firefighters, because that wasn't right.

JK: So some women firefighters were against [the lawsuit]?

BB: Oh, yes. What was interesting was actually the City should've come up to the plate. We could've sued the City. We had the Northwest Women's Law Center, who actually was doing the suing, so we didn't have to come up with money. In the meantime, there were three women who weren't working. And in the meantime, the City was realizing, "We've got to provide light-duty jobs."

We won the pregnancy issue – it was in the paper – but the men firefighters actually voted away their benefits so we wouldn't get any.

JK: So the relief organization went away?

BB: It's still there. It's still there. Most of the women quit – well, not most, some – but there was a huge animosity. It made this huge divide, because we had the gall to sue them. The thing is, they had the gall to go against what the law said.

Coming back to being a lieutenant, when I was on Engine 6, I explained the law to everybody I talked to. I said, "It is against the law to discriminate over pregnancy. If your wife was working, they couldn't fire her because she was pregnant." I said, "That's what they're doing. This is illegal. Here's the law."

I fought against everybody. I said, "This is the law. They can't do it. It says it right here. This is why." I said, "How many women firefighters do you know that are not going to work? They're going to work."

And we got light-duty jobs. Still they had to go into a different line of work for a year, but they were employed, they had seniority. Out of the pregnancy thing… it was really an awful time of fighting. It was really necessary. The poor women – actually, if you talk to Carol Solberg or Carrie Oliver and Gerry Kuaimoku… Gerry Kuaimoku did a lot. Not a unifier. People hated her. It's another sad story of personality. I'll leave it at that. But she needs to be mentioned, because she did a lot of work.

But out of the pregnancy thing, women went against other women. And what's interesting is, years later, they used all of those benefits. So it was a little pissy. I get a little pissy over it. I actually still think now – and that's why I'm trying to document it – it was a bad time. And the women, Carrie and Carol, had to live through that.

Poor Carol. She was out at Engine 31. I get longwinded, but there's a story every time. She was at a double house without a chief, which is Engine 31, which is out in Northgate. When you have a double house with 12 to 15 guys and no chief there, they act up. Not always in bad ways, but it's like, well, nobody's around to watch them. They were not nice. Her captain – she was off almost a whole year – eight months – he made her make up every night watch she missed for when she wasn't at work. No guys *ever* had to do that. That was all retribution. All the clothes in her clothes locker were trampled on. These were guys – she thought she was one of them. They wouldn't talk to her. She was never invited to parties after that. She was very much ostracized.

Carrie Oliver, the other one, was at Station 28, another double house without a chief. They were awful to her, too. She had to nurse her baby – she had to pump her breasts in the bathroom. I mean… if you could ever think of the worst circumstances to exist – at a time when you should be happy in your life that you have a child. They were *horrible* to her. Even out of that, she wanted to be a paramedic; she did get to be a paramedic, but it was only after a chief reversed the ruling. The oral board flunked her. *Because they didn't want her*.

So there was much retribution. There was no other way for us to do it. They wouldn't give them the benefits. If we didn't get the benefits, you'd have women that were off for a year without working. That didn't make any sense.

JK: And they both stayed in the department after that?

BB: They're still there, but they lost their seniority. See, they actually should have sued the City. They lost all their seniority for that year, and all their pay. The guys that came in with them are a year ahead of them. What do you do? The pregnancy thing, instead of unifying the women, divided the women.

JK: I'm curious, was it like half and half of the women were for and against?

BB: It was more like 10 of us for it, 20 or 30 against it. And there was a lot of "How can you do this? You don't represent us! We don't want you talking about this."

The thing is, it put pressure on every woman. Remember, you're trying to fit in, you just want to do your job, and now, the pregnancy thing comes. You're the only woman in the fire station, so the guys all go bitch at you. Well, maybe you're never going to have kids, maybe you're gay – whatever it is – but you're supposed to represent women. And they didn't want to do that. They didn't want all that attention. They were being yelled at, I'm sure, saying, "It's your fault! You're doing all this." And they couldn't handle it.

So to handle it, they went against other women. You know, I actually almost did the same thing with Lori Lakshas. I didn't go with her lawsuit against the Fire Department. I could have. So again, it's as an individual, where you are, what you think about. Maybe now if we asked all of them, they would say that was wrong. But people don't always have the strength to do that. And it took a lot of strength to do that.

And out of that, Carrie and Carol are some of my best friends in the Fire Department. I wouldn't have had that. But it was *very hard*.

We had a women's group and it was called AFFF, the Association of Female Firefighters, which is also the name of the foam we use, AFFF, to fight fires. So that was quite tricky.

Anyway, everything we did was watched. It was very suspicious. Politically, we did have ties to get some things done. But we lost all that. We lost all that because the women did not want us. Up into the [19]90s – I jump ahead now and say EEO things. Remember, women didn't want any problems? There were problems. There were two editions of questionnaires about the issues in the Fire Department. Two of them were published.

JK: Surveys?

BB: Yes. There were many issues that were coming to light then. Things were not being handled. I mean, I guess women think the longer they're there, it's going to get better. And it does. The acceptance does get better. But there was also certain things – we didn't get classes, we didn't get promoted to places. It was harder to get everything.

Even though, with affirmative action, they usually would say, "Oh, you're a woman. You're going to get this." That was not always the case to get a lot of things. To be a dispatcher, you might not be picked when you wanted to be. So having political ties was really important, because then you could use those.

So now I'm going to come to being a captain. I'm jumping again.

JK: I'm curious how you made the decision to do that, when being a lieutenant was so hard.

BB: After ten years of being a lieutenant – see, I realized that if women were going to get anywhere, you have to be in charge. And being a lieutenant is one of the lower rungs in the Fire Department. Molly [Douce] had already been promoted to captain. She was ahead of me; I think she was the only one. And I thought I couldn't learn any more. I had done everything. I mean,

I could have stayed and been a really good lieutenant. But for us to progress, I needed to be a captain or a chief. I figured that out.

And I knew I could do it. See, it comes back to being comfortable where you're at, and looking around thinking, I can do that. I knew how to study better there. I didn't pass as high as [I wanted to] – I would've liked to have been number one or number two, but I was much higher than I was the first times. And, of course, it was a big deal then, too.

So that's how I thought. I thought we needed to get higher. Because I saw that black firefighters had lots of chiefs. Minorities were up there, but there were no women. So now I thought, I should be the EEO Officer, the Equal Employment Officer. The person that was there before, a black captain – totally useless. He would be smoking in front of the station. Did nothing. Lots of times if there were issues, the woman would get transferred. And then there was rumor.

So there was a lot of crap. The women would be afraid to say anything because, you know, it's always their fault. You're always the one that's moved, whether you did something wrong, or some guy wasn't behaving right, or he was hitting on you or doing something inappropriate, the officer wasn't handling it. So in my idea that I could fix everything – and, you know, that's kind of where I was – I thought, I can be the EEO Officer. I had a college education, I could write fairly well. I didn't think it was that hard to do that. I was really good at personnel issues. I was good with people. So I put in for it, and I got it.

Chief Harris was the fire chief. He was a black fire chief. His personnel chief was Chief Dean, who's now fire chief, and he was my direct boss. We were total opposites. I didn't know that, because in the Fire Department, you have all sorts of people, all sorts of ways to be a boss. I'm the type of boss that if you had an idea and I had an idea, I would use your idea because it was your idea and it would be fine.

Chief Dean would never do that in a minute. He is a micromanager to the point of making you crazy. I'm the total opposite. Our whole thoughts and how we do jobs – total opposites. So I go in thinking I'm going to do all this stuff, and recruit women, and be able to figure all these things out, and help. He doesn't want me there. I mean, they say they want me there, but he doesn't want me there. So right off the get-go, I got that job in August and I was out of there by January or February. I was only there six months.

Any time I did anything, I was supposed to get permission. And I said to him, "Look," I said, "I'm a captain. I get paid $80,000 a year. I don't need to ask you for everything." Oh, he had a shit fit because I said that.

Then on top of that, now he has to go on vacation. Of course, he never would go on vacation, he was too important. He was actually the henchman for Harris. The personnel chief tended to do all the firings and discipline and sneaky stuff. He did all that stuff for Harris, so he would look bad and Chief Harris wouldn't.

So he was supposed to go on vacation, and the captain that was originally in that spot would fill in for him. So I'm thinking, OK, I'm going to fill in while he's gone. Oh, no. They were bringing in another black battalion chief from operations, who's never worked in personnel, who doesn't know anything about it. He's going to fill in for Chief Dean.

I called the Office of Women's Rights. I said, "This is what they're doing." So the Office of Women's Rights calls the mayor's office and the mayor's office calls the fire chief and they say, "You will not do this. She will fill in."

Again, I won. See, the other piece of being a woman in all those positions, I had to make sure they understood "You will behave." And if I didn't do it, none of the women would do it. So in my whole career, that was the case. I would call them on their shit. I had to. Because if I didn't, nobody would. So again – and I knew that – it made it harder, but it was like, I have to. I can't put up with that.

So I did those things. He did not like any of that. And I realized quickly that we were totally opposite on how we did everything. He wanted to micromanage everything I did. I didn't need a micromanager. I was good at doing stuff on my own. I didn't need any of that. We didn't get along.

So I'm there [starting in] August. January 5, Pang fire. I get paged at home, and I hear it. I hear it on the TV.

JK: Can you explain what that was, just for the record?

BB: OK. When you work in the office, you have a pager, and I had a radio.

JK: I mean the Pang fire.

BB: The Pang fire was the fire that four firefighters were killed on duty at a warehouse in downtown Seattle. We never had had anything like that ever happen before. We've had firefighters die; one was electrocuted in like 1972 before I came in, one had a heart attack. Nothing in a fire, when you were out on a fire ground.

The Pang fire was a large warehouse that actually was an arson fire that they actually knew was going to be set. They thought it was going to be set in December. The wife – the ex-wife of the person [who set it] – had told the

Fire Department, or told the police, and the Fire Department Arson Investigation knew about it. They didn't want to tell the firefighters because – again, that's that top-down [management] – because we would tell everybody. And she was afraid, if he found out that she had told, he would kill her. So there was an essence of not telling.

But what happened is that when that fire came in, it should have been announced at the get-go that this was an arson fire and to be careful. Nobody did that. We think different when we know it's an arson fire; we're much more careful.

So there's a lot of pieces of the Pang fire itself, but I won't go into that, because that's a whole other book. So I'm at home in Magnolia. My page goes off for the Pang fire. I have the TV on. I'm on the phone. I didn't get sent out on an initial page. I got paged later, when they figured out they had four guys missing. So they're calling in the world. They're calling in a 511 [fire].

I hear on the TV before I leave that there are firefighters missing. This is already 10 minutes into the fire. I get downtown. I'm listening, thinking it's already awful. I get down there. I go to staging. I already knew the guys were missing.

I go to this chief of staging. I said, "Let them call home. Let them all call their spouses at home to tell them they're OK."

Because again, you know your A shift. You want to know who it is, because you've already heard four people are missing. That chief was an asshole. He said, "No, go get Chief Dean's permission."

Well, see, I already knew he would say no, because it was me. Anything I did, he didn't like. Had it been a guy, maybe. I could read his body language. And so I went up to him and said, "We need to let them use the cell phones." They'd just gotten cell phones. This is [19]95, it's early.

He said, "No." I went back to the staging chief and said, "Yeah, he said we could use the cell phones." So everybody got to call home, use the cell phones. Well, I knew I'd be in big trouble, but see, again, my training in Engine 21, I was doing the right thing. I *knew* it was the right thing.

And I knew his reason – I could even see his one reason is, "No, they're going to tell them who it is." And no, we had said, "On the cell phone, tell your spouse you're OK and that's it." We didn't know almost who was injured.

I was the one that handled all the funerals and all the deaths and all the telling the people. I told Kilgore's wife he was dead. I mean, I did all this heavy,

stressful, *awful* stuff. I was doing all that, and finally after all the funerals died down – and it was a horrible time, and I couldn't cry, because, you know, I was doing all the bit – I organized the parade, I organized all that shit. Three weeks later, after it was finally all over, he comes in and gives me the paperwork that I have three shifts off for disobeying an order.

I called the union, and then they got involved. I should have filed a union grievance over it to document it. But you know what? See, I didn't want to. I thought, No, I'm not going to. I should have.

And so I just wanted out. I knew I could never work for him again. The fire chief didn't give me three shifts off, but the word got out that he had. They found out that I was going to get three shifts off for not letting them use cell phones. I was the only one that made the right decision. So I made him look like a total idiot again.

That one thing set aside my whole career on a different path, because from that day forward, now I was somebody that you couldn't trust. Because in the Army, or any military, I went against what I was supposed to do – even though it was the right decision, although the firefighters appreciated that.

And actually, it made it so when I went back to Engine 34, it was very – after the Pang fire, it was very hard for everybody. It was very hard to make decisions and do the right thing. Especially me, because I wasn't sure I'd done the right thing. I thought I had but, you know, it was hard.

So then I promoted to chief. And as a battalion chief, it was even harder. They promoted me. I was in charge of the south end. Busier than hell. I was the chief for 11, 12 years. All the foundation I had set into place as being a firefighter, a lieutenant and a captain, came into play as a chief.

But the Pang fire, those decisions, firefighters really respected me [for that]. They knew that I respected them, that I would tell the truth. Because out of the Pang fire, there was many lies. People lied. See, the Fire Department were family. The Pang [fire] was the changing point of being small town to a big town, to litigation to firing to suing [for] a lot of money. We'd never had any of that before. So it was very different, and I think that's when the City Law Department kind of sat up and thought, We're in trouble for a lot of things that the Fire Department probably has done here. We need to figure this out. So it became kind of a separate Fire Department. Upstairs was separate from the rank and file. And there's more lawsuits that have come out of that. And it's true in the whole world, in any occupation, you know, that dedication that we're family and we'll let it go – that doesn't happen anymore.

As a chief, though, I will say that because of the Pang fire, firefighters knew they could trust me. It doesn't mean I was easy on them. But also, it meant

that you liked to work for me. If you would work for me, I would work for you. And I had a really good rapport. I think Chief Dean hated that. [laughs]

The weird part of all of that was that they hated that I had the respect and the love of these guys that they did not have. All of this is unsaid. If you even asked them, they would not know about it, but that's kind of how I feel. Because it takes a long time to get that respect.

Even on the radio – I didn't have as much of an ego, but see, my officers knew – I had always told them, because this had happened to me – "If you have an issue, if I've given you an order that doesn't make sense or you can't do it, tell me and we'll change it."

No chiefs would do that, because you're not supposed to question people. But see, the fire ground is this fluid place. And sometimes, I might give you an order to get on this hydrant at this location. Well, that only means I'm assuming you came in this one way, where your station's from. Well, if you were inspecting, you might have come this way, and another rig would be here. Well, you have to say, "Chief, this engine is this, we're going to do this."

Now, if I had an ego over that, and that's disobeying an order, they're not going to say that. And so actually, it slows down the process. So my guys knew – I said, "Look, if you need to change what I tell you, go ahead. But have a good reason for doing it, you know. Do it respectfully. You're not going to be telling me what to do."

All my fires and all my 211s had a very orderly sense about them. I could tell that they really enjoyed working for me, and not only that, we performed extremely well. All my fires ran really smoothly. It wasn't an accident. I was very organized. I had a very good rapport with them. I would be at their stations at least once a week. I knew every voice on D shift. I knew everybody, how they worked, so all those things were very good. I mean, it was a pleasure. They liked working for me, I liked working for them.

I was a good team player. I worked well with other chiefs. It was like being in a game. You were at the Super Bowl every time you had a fire. No, I'm serious! As a chief, that's how you get your rewards. I mean, I couldn't go into the fire with them, but when they did a good job, I did a good job.

When you're performing under that type of pressure, you want everything good before you go in the door, because then you're even going to do better. Do you see? Because fires are a mess. We're going into buildings that you know nothing about. It could be a mess inside, and you could have arson – there's so many pieces that you don't know about. I made sure that everything that you did know about was good.

So I was a really good battalion chief. I worked, actually, too hard. I was an overachiever. I gave the Fire Department everything. But, you know, that's where I was. I didn't have a family. If I was married and had kids, I don't know that I could have survived, because I gave them kind of everything. Looking back, I say that. At the time, I thought I was doing perfectly the right thing.

But here, I'll kind of sum it up in the next ten minutes. I was a chief. I'd been a chief for how many years? We went through two other chiefs. We had outside chiefs coming in and out. A nightmare. Really, a nightmare. A nightmare, because again, Seattle had all these women. Do you think other fire departments had a lot of women? No.

So now I have outside fire chiefs coming in who don't know me at all. And you know what? They don't put me on the same scale as other white guys. They don't even put me on the scale as other women. I didn't suck up, which is another political [thing]. I was never a suck-up. So having two outside chiefs was detrimental to me. They didn't promote me; it was not good. It was just not good.

So anyway, our department is trying to transition to these other chiefs. It was a nightmare. Then while one of the chiefs was being selected, me, Theresa Purtell, Molly [Douce] and another woman go on the TV – it's in the interviews – and say we don't want the [candidates] from Seattle, because they're sexist, racist pigs basically is what we said. Actually, I should have known better. There were four of us sitting around, and they just took a sound bite. They didn't interview us. We were smart enough not to say their names, but I came out and said they don't like women. Of course, that was on TV, with a picture of Chief Vickery and Chief Dean. It's in the tape. When you see it, you go like this. [puts hand to head]

Of course, all the firefighters thought I did that on purpose. I never ever said his name. They didn't pick Chief Vickery or Chief Dean, they picked Chief Morris. Well, of course, you'd think Chief Morris would promote me. Oh, no. I'm screwed again, because again, I'm a woman, you're not going to get there. So I cannot win no matter what.

But Chief Morris gets aced out of here, and guess who is the fire chief and assistant chief? It's Chief Dean and Chief Vickery. Payback. He would do stuff like – this is typical – a fire engine actually from West Seattle was going to a class by the University District and hit a parked car; I think they hit the mirror. I had to investigate it because it was in my vicinity. I got in more trouble investigating it, because he said I didn't do it right. I followed exactly what I was supposed to do.

He said I was supposed to tow the private car away. Can you imagine the Fire Department – I hit your parked car, and then you'd come home and it'd be gone, because I hit it?

Anyway, so he wrote a memo saying I did it all wrong. He would constantly harass me doing that. But see, it never cost money. It was never enough to write me up, because I have a union. But it was harassment. And it was under-level harassment. I could handle it. I didn't like it. I now think I should have taken it as a joke, but you know, I was really dedicated, and I really worked hard, to have to deal the last years of my career with that kind of crap?

So anyway, I come to that, in that my last five years were not very good. It's not what I thought it would be. Instead of being a time of you being respected, and I should have been maybe in charge of the city, I actually was transferred. I was the supervising chief of Battalion 5, which had three truck companies, a tactical rescue unit, the hazmat unit. I had all this stuff. He transferred me out of that to Battalion 6. Not a supervising chief position.

But you know, it's interesting, when those things happen – I'd worked so hard in the 5th, I was always fighting. I was kind of tired of fighting. I go to Battalion 6, which is the University District. They're happier than hell to get me. They'd never had a good chief. There's lots of chiefs that are good and bad, but I had a good reputation. They were so happy to have me. Everybody loved me. It was like, I'd walk into the place – they all loved me. We had lots of fires. I had the most fun in my last three years, of basically leaving the trying to get to the top, and getting to a spot I'd never [reach]. I did apply, probably 12 or 15 times, to be a deputy chief. Never got it. So it wasn't meant to be.

But out of that, I had a lot more fun. I was a lot more respected. I tried not to be bitter. But everybody could see – I mean, in any way you could show firefighters what discrimination was, they watched how they treated me. They all said, "Why do they hate you?" And I said, "Because I went on TV against them." I didn't figure that out till later, though.

So out of all this, it's interesting now – I think without Chief Vickery being mean to me, I probably would never write a book, which is what I'm doing. So, you see, there's always good things.

But it was *very mean*. If you talk to the firefighters, they will tell you. They all got it. It's kind of this hard lesson that I had to go through, but other women won't. And it shouldn't really ever happen again.

I did get to retire, last year. And my retirement party – I actually told Anne about it, but I had 200 people at my retirement. It was like a wedding

reception. It was the best! I had tequila shooters. I'll have to show you the shot glasses.

The Fire Department, that tradition of having a retirement party for somebody that was respected and liked is kind of dying, but it was always that that was the respect that you'd show somebody. So the idea that I had all these people there was what I wanted. If you had a chief today, none of them would have a party like I had.

See, so I got the respect. They hated me in the beginning, and then they loved me at the end. But also, I think, my legend or my legacy is that I was a *really good* chief. I had a lot of hard stuff, but I just kind of plugged away at it. And you can't erase that. Whereas, Chief Vickery and Chief Dean will never be remembered like that. They'll never be in the history books like I will either. So a lot of it is ego, but I always think they didn't lead the right way. I always thought I would have been a really good leader. But there's only so much…

And after 30 years, I was tired of fighting. I mean, people look at me now and they say, "Oh, you look so healthy." I've lost weight. And it's because you carry that stuff kind of with you, even though you don't mean to. I mean, people would look at me, I don't really get nervous or anything, but I'm always pushing, I'm always pushing to do this right stuff, and that does take its toll.

So that's kind of the big, whole picture. One more thing that I'll end it on that's very interesting. I was talking to the head of the union, and they were just throwing out [names] – even the mayor was asking, "Well, who could be the fire chief if we're trying to get new people?" And I was one of the only ones they mentioned, because I have a master's degree in business, I have all the qualifications – but it'll *never happen*.

It's going to take a long time [to get a woman in charge], but I think it'll [happen]. Sometimes when things take a long time, it's good, because it's very solid. The Fire Department takes a long time for change. So in 30 years there, I proved women could do it. If I see the Fire Department [men] at the grocery store, they'll all come up to me if they recognize me, and talk to me, and they're very friendly. So I have a really good rapport with that. And a lot of people don't have that either.

So I've had a great career. Like I said, the hard part was my last five [years]; they were very hard on me. It shouldn't have been that way, but that's the way it was.

JK: Are you glad that you were the first [woman firefighter], or do you wish someone else had blazed the trail for you?

BB: I'm glad now that I was the first one, but I think I'm glad I was very naïve and didn't know a lot of the things I would run into. I just did as I did. You know, if I had said to you, "OK, you're going to be the first, and you're going to have to deal with all this stuff," I wouldn't have wanted to do all that. But I just worked into that.

But I did quickly realize that everything I did represented all women. I never thought of myself as a women's libber or any of that; it was just I was in that position. Men would talk to me, to get my point of view – and I thought, man. I was just a person, I was just an ordinary person. I didn't have any special anything. So it was very interesting. I didn't think it would be that way, you know; I had never planned that.

JK: What do you think of the department's recruitment of women now?

BB: I think it's really hard. I mean, we've almost got a hundred women out of a thousand. Well, you'd think we would have more, because there are a lot more athletic women. I don't know if it's because economic times, until this last year, were quite good and women could go into lots of other jobs. I don't know if it's because the Fire Department is so physically hard. Or lots of times, you have women in the military, but after they're done with the military, they don't want to come into another military organization. It kind of wears you down.

I don't have any good answers. I think affirmative action did get women in the Fire Department. It did prove women could do it. I don't know why we can't get more women and minorities in now. There are many women that came in in the [19]80s. They should be going, like I am. In the next five years, most of those women will be retiring, and there are not women coming in. So I don't exactly know the answer. Either they're just not interested, maybe they don't want to put up with the stuff that I did, maybe money-wise, it's not worth it.

And they did throw affirmative action out, so it is harder. You have to compete with men on their level. I don't know why they're not in there. I don't have a good [answer]. We ask each other that. It's not that we can't do it; we're actually really good at it. Half the population we deal with in Seattle are women. Who are you going to want – the other piece of it, going back to stereotypes, if you're going to have a baby, are you going to want six firefighters that are men in there, or me? Usually they want me. So there's a lot of pieces there that you relate to that your clients – the people you serve – want.

So I don't have a good answer. I don't know the answer.

JK: Something you talked about just a little, about the Association of Female Firefighters – is that the correct name? How that got started and what that was like…

BB: Let's see, how did it get started? Well, there was a national organization, Women in Fire Service. That was started very early on. I came in in [19]77; it was probably started in [19]79, I think. That was for across the country, because there was so few women – women were really isolated. They really didn't know anybody else.

There was a conference in Boulder, Colorado, and a bunch of us women went. I don't know if we had formed the organization yet, because I can't remember dates. But after that, we said that we would have it in Seattle. And so that worked fairly well.

A lot of women didn't like it that we had an organization, and knew it needed to be political and we needed to know the [City] Council people. That worked fairly well, [then there was] the pregnancy thing. So see, women were very suspicious of it. It was not unifying. They were suspicious. If I said I was having a potluck, they wanted to know what it was about, they wouldn't show up. They didn't trust us; they thought we were lying.

And because many women [during] the pregnancy thing went against [the lawsuit] – see, it was almost as if they wouldn't admit that they were here under affirmative action. It was that total "No, I'm not accepted, I'm going to totally not go there." And the fact is, this is how you got here, you know?

You're not going to be liked any better if you go against us. Because I think they thought they would be more accepted, and in reality, they weren't. Because guys see through all that. They're not going to like you for anything. They're going to like for what you are. If I stand up for my rights, they respect that. If you don't, you don't.

But [the group] was, again, loosely organized. A lot of other departments, I think, might be more social. If we had had one, my last five years would have been better. Chief Vickery would not have been able to pick on me. We could have gone to the mayor's office**.** The mayor's office didn't want to know about any of this. We had recommended them not to promote Dean and Vickery. Again, the mayor's office, similar to Bush and Cheney, they didn't care.

The fact that I had the Office of Women's Rights early in my career was a *great* benefit. The Office of Women's Rights now is called Human Rights. *Really, really* helped me. I never used it unless I *absolutely* needed to. And the Fire Department actually used it also in asking them, "We have this issue, what do we do?" So it was both ways.

So again, the pregnancy thing really divided the women. The women in the Fire Department are very independent. Maybe we would never have unified anyway. I guess I'm always hopeful. I always thought we'd be more up. I thought I'd be an assistant chief. I thought I could be deputy one. I thought I could be a fire chief. But that never happened.

I will say this – just one more piece. When I was a battalion chief, and Chief Dean – before he was promoted, he was passed over – he did put me at deputy one, because it looked good for him to have a woman in charge of the city. So I was in charge of the city, which was a huge accomplishment, for nine months. I ran a thousand guys. This other guy and I shared it, we shared the duties. [The other guy, Mike Junes, was promoted to Deputy I. I was offered the "office job."]

Changed over, Chief Morris came in, and deputy one was open. That was Battalion 1. That was the *prime* deputy spot. Every chief aspired to that. I was offered the office job in Battalion 3, which is in charge of paramedics, which is a very good job. And I told them to go fuck themselves.

I did that because I had worked for nine months in a job that I should have had. Maybe some women would have taken it. But I felt that if I took it, that was just playing the game that, Oh yes, we have a woman in the office, she'll handle all the personnel things. And I thought, No! I have worked too hard for this. I am not doing that. So I told them to go to hell.

I thought I could change Chief Morris's mind, but again, see, I didn't have any political ties. I should have gone to the City Council. The sad part about that is I was in tears, I was a mess. How do people help you when you can barely talk to them? I hadn't talked to them in five years, and now I'm going to go to their door saying, "I should be this deputy, they don't have one." I couldn't do that. I just couldn't. And so I was passed over.

But went back to being a chief. Again, it's this different road, but I should have been deputy one. That's the sad part. But there still isn't a woman that's ever been in charge of the city. Probably in the next three or four years, that'll happen. The sad fact is it should have been me.

But then the other part that Lieutenant Heaton, who is my close friend still, says, "They didn't want you. You would never have been accepted there. You would always have been the lone voice for the firefighters, and it would have been a nightmare for you."

And see, that's absolutely true. When you get appointed by the fire chief, you're supposed to do whatever he says. So I'm going to do everything Chief Dean says? I don't think so.

So I think that's everything. That's everything in a two-hour nutshell! [laughs]

JK: Thank you very much.

BB: You're welcome.

END
[This transcript has been edited.]