

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Unger, Laura

Interviewer: Debbie Goldman

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Debbie Goldman: [00:00:01] January 10, 2024. This is an interview with Laura Unger. Debbie Goldman is taking the lead in the interview with Jeff Rechenbach on zoom from Cleveland, Ohio. Laura and I are in Washington, D.C.. Laura, we'll start at the beginning. Tell us when and where you were born and a little bit about that community and your family.

Laura Unger: [00:00:25] I was born April 1st, 1949. I grew up mainly in Little Neck, Queens, which is the last town in Queens (in N.Y.C.) before you hit Nassau County. We always disliked a little bit the people across the border in Great Neck, the kids with cars while we had bicycles. My father was a defense attorney. He had multiple sclerosis though. So the last few years, he couldn't practice. He was in a wheelchair and died when I was 13. I still get choked up. I can't believe I'm getting choked up. He died when I was almost 14, and they were just liberal Democrats. Not very political. My father was an officer in B'nai Brith, the Anti-Defamation League. My mother was teaching English just as they started organizing the teachers union in New York City. She had mixed feelings about it because she felt a little bit that it restricted her ability to do volunteer work after work. But then the older she got, the more liberal she got. She was definitely pro-union by the end of her life; she was actually fairly [liberal]. She kept moving left as she got older and older, which was wonderful. I went to public high school, Bayside High School just at the time that they started integrating the school. It was a huge school, 5000 kids. They started busing people in from Jamaica and Flushing, which was more Black. I joined the Congress of Racial Equality.

Debbie: [00:02:26] In high school?

Laura: [00:02:26] I started going to demonstrations when I was in high school, basically influenced by two things. I think I had a neighbor – a friend who was very political, his family was political, and he'd gotten involved in things. Actually, he's now a fairly well known labor historian - Josh Freeman, he wrote the book on labor in New York. But also I had a counselor in camp who was probably one of the biggest influences on my life. His name was Paul McGowan. Nobody cares about that. But he sort of took me under his wing after my father died and really spent a lot of time with me talking politics and getting me involved in things. In fact a whole group of us. So I started going to demonstrations in the city when I was still in high school. I used to sneak into the city.

Debbie: [00:03:21] The city, meaning...

Laura: [00:03:22] N.Y.C. That when I was in high school, [I would] tell my mother I was doing something else, then go to demonstrations and try to avoid TV cameras.

Debbie: [00:03:31] What was your maiden name?

Laura: [00:03:32] My maiden name was Rose. Laura Ann Rose was my name.

Debbie: [00:03:37] Your last name was Rose. R-O-S-E.

Laura: [00:03:41] R-O-S-E. When I got married and took Nick's name, I basically dropped the Ann. And now my name is Laura Rose Unger.

Debbie: [00:03:55] What camp did you go to?

Laura: [00:03:58] It was a YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association] camp where I met him. And then I went to NYU [New York University]. I don't know how far you want me to go on this.

Debbie: [00:04:08] I think you're doing great. Keep going.

Laura: [00:04:12] I actually wanted to go to Cornell ILR. I desperately wanted to go there. Both of my sisters went to Cornell. They both went to Home EC (Economics) That's what it was called in those days. I refused to do that. I thought it was insulting. So I applied to ILR (Industrial and Labor Relations) and got rejected. They took six women that year, which I found out about 20 years later when I was on an advisory board for Cornell for Women and Work. There was a professor there. Everybody's introducing themselves with all their academic credentials, and I told them what my labor credentials were and said that I got rejected from Cornell in 1966. She patted my hand and said, "Don't feel bad, dearie. They only took six women that year." I wanted to stay in the city. Most of my friends were going to CUNY, the City University of New York, which was in Harlem. My mother was afraid of me going there. So at the last minute I applied to NYU, which was much easier to get into. I was not a great student. My mother got remarried then to somebody who could afford it. And I went to NYU.

Debbie: [00:05:36] Is that where you did your undergraduate or did you transfer?

Laura: [00:05:40] I did my if you can call [it] undergraduate work. That's where I did my political work.

Debbie: [00:05:47] What did you major in?

Laura: [00:05:50] English.

Debbie: [00:05:52] Talk about your political work, then at NYU, this is now what years?

Laura: [00:05:56] We're talking 1966 to 1970, which was basically the height of the antiwar movement. The year I got there, actually, they raised the tuition to \$2,400, which is like nothing. But we had a sit-in which I was involved in when the students sat in and took over the main building to fight against the tuition increase. I'm sure we lost. I don't remember, but I'm sure we lost. I got involved with NYU Students Against the War, and eventually, SDS, Students for a Democratic Society because I didn't think being against the war was enough. You know that was the time the Panther 21 were in jail and so I was very involved in the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement and the women's movement. I was looking for an organization that covered all the bases and that was SDS. We were involved in some labor things there. The maintenance workers went on strike and we supported the maintenance workers on strike. That was on the good side. On the bad side, I don't know if people remember. There was a riot of construction workers that marched up through Manhattan. We had been doing a lot of stuff in the 1970s, which was Kent State. They marched up and tried to beat up some of the anti-war students. So I saw both sides of the labor movement. But I was always interested in the labor movement.

Debbie: [00:07:49] Anything more you want to say about your radicalization through high school and college?

Laura: [00:07:56] I think that's pretty much it. Except that's where I met Nick.

Debbie: [00:08:00] Nick Unger.

Laura: [00:08:01] Yeah, my husband. He was actually studying physics at NYU, which was strange because he's completely not interested in physics. I started going out with Nick then. He has much more generational political background than me, and I'm sure that reinforced not only my activism then, but continuing activism through the rest of my life. There was no way to be married to Nick - we got married in (19)73 - and not be political for my whole life.

Debbie: [00:08:45] If you're willing to, can you talk a little bit about Nick's family background and his political legacy, which is very important.

Laura: [00:08:57] Yeah.

Debbie: [00:08:58] You don't want to. Okay. We can go on.

Laura: [00:09:02] All I'll say about Nick is that he comes from a multi-generational, left political family. His father was a lawyer who actually defended me when I got arrested for spray painting "Free the Panther 21" on a wall at NYU. He defended a lot of Puerto Rican nationalists. And his mother was also a writer and poet and political organizer since she was 16 or 17. So he has a long history.

Debbie: [00:09:43] Okay. You graduate from college. Tell us a little bit about your life before CWA. Before the telephone company.

Laura: [00:09:52] I had no intention of becoming an English teacher. I was not interested in it. And I tell you the truth. I hardly went to any classes in 1970. It's funny because I made Dean's List that year because all my teachers were picked because they were also political. So I had no right to teach English and I had no interest in teaching English. A group of us decided to become, tried to become, community organizers. We went to Saddle Brook, New Jersey. It was a complete flop.

Debbie: [00:10:27] I didn't hear - where in New Jersey?

Laura: [00:10:29] Saddle Brook, New Jersey, because that's where we could find cheap housing. That was pretty much a flop. I moved back to New York, worked a variety of jobs. I worked at Leviton, which is an electrical factory making dimmer switches. I was a member of IBEW. It was awful. The shop steward was basically the most senior person and woman in the office. And then she didn't do anything. When I got pregnant with Katie at the time, I called the benefits to find out what my benefits were. And they said - IBEW - "Everything's covered 100%, \$250 a day." They said, "Well, where does your husband work?" I said, "It's not my husband, it's me. I work at Leviton." "Sorry. Wrong number." The benefits at the factory were \$45 a day. A progressive doctor who was my gynecologist got me onto Medicaid because it was a minimum wage job. I was soldering electrical switches. I had Katie at Lenox Hill Hospital, my daughter. And when I went to get back to work, they refused to give me my job back. I went back to work after three weeks. I left work a week before I had her and tried to go back three weeks after because they had no maternity leave policy. They refused to give me my job back. Fortunately, that year, New York state had just passed the law saying that they had to hire you back after --

IBEW wouldn't do anything. I had to go to the Human Rights Commission on my own and they gave me my job back. And six months later I got laid off anyway.

Debbie: [00:12:34] How old were you and what year? How old were you when Katie was born?

Laura: [00:12:41] Twenty-seven.

Debbie: [00:12:43] Okay.

Laura: [00:12:46] I worked then at the New York public library, which was a great job. The pay wasn't so good, but it was AFSCME. We had wonderful benefits. We had good benefits. We had a tremendous amount of time off. I got to work in the 42nd Street library, which is a gorgeous place to work. I wasn't very active in the union there, but it was a good union job. I got laid off. I worked in a lot of print shops, mostly off the books, because I had learned how to do newspapers and cartooning and layout I guess during my time at NYU, because we had leaflets and newspapers and I was famous for doing beautiful banners. But I always made a spelling mistake, so I always had to go back and fix it. It was like my signature. I was able to get jobs at print plants because I knew how to do layout. One of the places I worked, they tried to organize, it was a big shop. Varick Street in New York used to be sort of the print capital of New York City.

Debbie: [00:13:58] What street?

Laura: [00:13:59] Varick Street. A lot of the stuff since has moved to Philadelphia and other places. We made a good to attempt to try to organize. But the problem was the shop next door had been on lockout for years, and there was one old woman retiree who was in front of that building every day with her sign saying, "We are locked out." I think that did more than anything to hurt our organizing drive. Because people said, "Well, what's the point?" But I did get picked to be on a committee to try to negotiate some things with the company. But those things never work if you don't have real power behind you. I worked at U.P.S. [United Parcel Service] I tried to get a job at U.P.S. as a driver in the truck. They were very discriminatory against women, obviously. I could lift 50 pounds at that point. I was very strong and I had a brown belt in karate, which I took when I was at NYU. They refused. They said I can work as a clerical, as a customer service worker, which was a horrible job. It was taking complaints and taking orders over the phone. It was very stressful. I used to smoke a pack and a half. But the good thing about it, I had pretty flexible hours, which I needed.

Debbie: [00:15:29] By now, did you have a second child?

Laura: [00:15:31] At that point, I had not had David yet. And it was not unionized. They never tried to organize the customer service workers, the Teamsters. The best thing about the job, it was near Broadway and a lot of actors would work there because they could run out and leave to do auditions. But, I think that job actually really helped me a lot because when I became local president [at CWA] and I started bargaining for customer service workers, I knew about the automatic systems. I knew what happened - because we used to have to do on average, I remember 2.5 minutes on a call. I still remember, you know, you never forget: "U.P.S., Can I help you?" The package has to be measured in a certain way, and you had to explain to people how to do it. And you had to tell people that they were never going to find their lost packages because that was before barcodes. So that was a very useful job for me.

Debbie: [00:16:39] Was it stressful?

Laura: [00:16:41] Very, But while I was working there, a friend of mine who had gotten a job at AT&T before me, said they were still hiring women under the consent decree [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission/AT&T Consent Decree, 1973]. They still had to - they had to fill their quota under the consent decree. So I applied to be a Comm Tech [Communications Technician]. Nick tutored me in math so I could pass the test. I was terrible at math. They tried to get me to take a job as an operator because I applied around Christmas time.

Debbie: [00:17:18] What year?

Laura: [00:17:20] This was 1978, the end of 1978. I asked them, "What if my Comm Tech job opens up?" Because I had passed the test. And they said, well, you know, if you sign up to be an operator, you're obligated to finish that out. So I didn't take the job. Then a couple of months later, I got called. The only other people in my class, because they put you through a training, were all women and a couple of vets because they were still hiring veterans. Those were the only men in the class.

Debbie: [00:18:03] Briefly explain what the consent decree was. It went into effect in 1973.

Laura: [00:18:12] There was a Department of Justice suit, right? EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] case against AT&T for discrimination and 99 point something percent of women were operators. The same percentage of men were technicians. There was clearly a pattern of discrimination. AT&T finally agreed, somewhat voluntarily, or involuntarily, to start reversing that. That meant that they hired a lot more women technicians. They actually hired some men to be operators. In fact, two of my officers in my local were men who had been hired as operators. The interesting thing, though, is that when the men were hired as operators, they were often either promoted very quickly to be Comm Techs or they were given the higher operator title like the SA [service assistant] title. I know that happened to a couple of guys in my local, but I was able to go directly into being a communications technician.

Debbie: [00:19:21] How long was your training?

Laura: [00:19:23] It was much shorter by then. It was really a joke because by that time they were already slightly beginning to automate things. So they really cut the - not nearly as badly as they did a few years later, but they cut the training down. But the first thing you had to go through was a program called D-18, which was basically you go through the modules on your own and, what I found out very quickly from other people, is that if you finished quickly, you had a chance of being put on the test board. If you didn't, and particularly with women, there were communications technicians' jobs that were still mainly clerical, which is things like reviewing tickets and doing trouble tickets, which is what we had to handwrite. They called it analysis on the tickets. I desperately did not want to do that. I wanted to be on the test board. So I think I was the first one in my class to finish D-18. And I got put on to a test board.

Debbie: [00:20:35] What's the test board?

Laura: [00:20:39] I worked for AT&T Long Lines at that point, so we tested long distance circuits. We never actually went out to the field. It was a huge board with cords. If a customer,

and we dealt with business customers at that point in that office at 33 Thomas Street in downtown New York City.

Debbie: [00:21:02] 33 what?

Laura: [00:21:03] Thomas Street in downtown New York City. Business customers would call in problems on their circuits and with different test equipment that we plugged into the test board. We would try to find out what the trouble was and either fix it ourselves if it was in the long distance network or refer it to one of the local companies, mainly Verizon for us. New York Tel at that point, I guess.

Debbie: [00:21:31] You would identify the source of the problem, which was a physical problem?

Laura: [00:21:37] Yeah. We didn't actually fix much of anything unless sometimes things would be fixed just by sending voltage out onto the line. But anything that had to be actually, really physically done. I mainly didn't do that work.

Debbie: [00:21:54] How many people were in your office?

Laura: [00:21:58] It was three shifts, and it was about 60 people on my floor. There was another floor of about the same amount that did the same thing. The building, the whole building probably had about 500 people in it at that point when I started.

Debbie: [00:22:15] When you began, how many women were on the test board?

Laura: [00:22:21] In my office there were maybe 5 or 6 out of 30. Upstairs there were a few more.

Debbie: [00:22:30] How was the relationship with the guys?

Laura: [00:22:33] You know, it varied. It was a strange time because the older technicians would wear suits and ties. They wore white shirts and ties even though they didn't have to. The guys who came from Vietnam were not going to put up with any of that. The guys who had been vets. And so there was a real dichotomy in the office between some of the older guys and some of the younger guys. At the beginning there was some trouble. I mean, in that a lot of the training was on-the-job training and some of the guys who were very helpful and some of the guys refused to help me at all. I remember one time where I had to put up what's called the patch, where you move a circuit from one spot to another. It was very complicated. One of the guys who refused to help me at all, Eddie McCabe, I remember his name. After I did that, he said, okay, you can learn. After that, not only did he teach me a lot, but he also became one of my big supporters when I started running for office.

Debbie: [00:23:52] So you kind of had to prove yourself.

Laura: [00:23:53] You really had to prove yourself and had to have a somewhat thick skin. I came out of the women's movement and stuff, but I'm very confident physically, I have my brown belt, you know. So, I got treated, I think, a little bit differently because of the way I carried myself. Yeah, I think so. And also, I got active in the union. The thing that sort of put a hitch in that is that two months after I started, I got pregnant with David, celebratory. So I knew that if they saw I was pregnant, they would take me off the test board.]

Debbie: [00:24:41] For health and safety reasons?

Laura: [00:24:43] No. Because of discrimination. I actually had just started as soon as I found out. I started wearing bigger and bigger clothing on purpose. I was told that a lot of people gain weight when they start working there anyway because, you know, people go out to lunch and they drink a lot. And then, I didn't tell the company that I was pregnant until I finished my last training class, they sent us to different places. I guess I was about six months pregnant. They sent me to Albany for my last training. I came back and I told my manager that I was pregnant. I was almost seven months pregnant before I told them.

Debbie: [00:25:31] You had David, now you had benefits.

Laura: [00:25:34] I said I had a few months. By that time, AT&T did have some [policy]. I think I lost service for it. I came back after about five months. Actually, I was bored stiff at home. I tried to come back a little earlier, but there was a transit strike in New York and I couldn't get to work, so I put it off for another week and came back.

Debbie: [00:25:59] You said that you think you lost service while you were out on pregnancy. Was that eventually resolved through a suit?

Laura: [00:26:07] The case that they filed was Verizon, we never got that settled in AT&T. So a lot of us lost. Not for the disability part of it, but for after, if we took any kind of leave time, we lost service for that.

Debbie: [00:26:26] If you took leave beyond the disability, the six weeks or whatever for pregnancy disability, because I think by then the federal Pregnancy Disability Act had been passed [in 1978].

Laura: [00:26:41] They covered that time, but they didn't cover the couple of months after I was allowed to take it without losing my job, but not without losing service.

Laura: [00:26:54] When I came back, and I was so touched because the guys, I only worked for a few months, and they did a collection for me. You know, the people were really wonderful. I started loving them. When I came back, the shop steward there, Bob Swanson, ended up deciding not to be shop steward anymore. A woman that I started with became shop steward, and I became the alternate shop steward, the assistant. I really jumped at that point into activism in the union.

Debbie: [00:27:31] Was that an elected position or volunteer position?

Laura: [00:27:37] It was only elected if somebody else wanted it, which they did. But I need to step back a little bit.

Debbie: [00:27:42] Okay, good.

Laura: [00:27:43] By the time I started in the phone company, there was a group in the AT&T unit called The Bell Busters.

Debbie: [00:27:53] By the way, what local were you?

Laura: [00:27:55] 1150. Bell Busters was a little rank and file group that was dissatisfied with local leadership. They had a newspaper which was well-loved. We did a “mother of the month” column focusing on a terrible local supervisor each month. We just basically reported on things

that the regular union newspaper didn't support. They tried to run a campaign for Local leadership). I think one person from the Bell Busters was actually the operator services vice president, but they hadn't run for president ever. I'm trying to remember exactly, but there was an election for president and, of a slate, and I think the Bell Busters slate lost. But they were really well respected. Those were the times when the membership meetings got fairly raucous and --

Debbie: [00:29:09] How many people would come to these meetings?

Laura: [00:29:12] Membership meetings? A few hundred. Which was good because the local was very spread out. It was New York and New Jersey, Long Island and when I first got there, we still had about 800 operators left from New York City. It was the New York City International Operating Center. We had clerical workers and we had technicians, and it was very spread out. So it was hard to get people in for membership meetings, but they were pretty big, big enough to fill a church, which is where we had them. So when I got back, the Bell Busters was still active. I got a lot of experience on the newspaper. The guy who won for president was Gary Whaley when I got back.

Debbie: [00:30:09] Whaley?

Laura: [00:30:09] Whaley. The operators had a walkout. He had a nervous breakdown, Gary did. He locked himself in the bathroom. His wife had to come get him out. So he dropped out. His vice president took over. His name was Chet Macey.

Debbie: [00:30:33] Chet Macey.

Laura: [00:30:34] And he, sort of I think, recognized the importance of the Bell Busters, and actually asked me to work on the local newspaper. That's when I started really working, doing some stuff for the local. I worked on the *Local Spirit*, and that became very important for both me and for, I think, a lot of people around the country because it was a lot different than a lot of the other local newspapers. We really tried to go deep into issues and it was well respected. That's when I really started working for the local doing the work on my local newspaper.

Debbie: [00:31:22] Tell us a little bit more about the *Local Spirit*.

Laura: [00:31:27] We won nine newspaper awards at the conventions, including five first place awards. I think one of the reasons I got elected secretary-treasurer the first time is because between the Bell Busters and the *Local Spirit*, where I wrote several columns and a lot of the cartoons, people really knew my name. So as hard as it was, because the size of the local, to get yourself well-known enough to run for office, everybody knew me because of the paper.

Debbie: [00:32:07] Was it only an AT&T local?

Laura: [00:32:09] It was only an AT&T local. We organized a couple of little Interconnect companies eventually. [Interconnect companies connected non-Bell lines principally serving businesses, institutions, or office parks to the Bell network.]

Debbie: [00:32:17] We're talking early 1980s. How many people in the local?

Laura: [00:32:24] When I think I first started we had about 2500. The local used to have about 7,000 because we had a large operators' center. But by the time I came, we had about 2400, 2500. It was a good size local, not one of the biggest by far, but it was a local that had very unstable

leadership. There was never an elected officer who got elected twice. Never. We never had a two-term president until me. It was a typical old boys local except for operators and some clerical support workers. The guys were happy to walk out anytime you asked them to. They were militant. But in terms of real leadership in the local, there really wasn't much. The local office would be empty in the afternoons because they'd be out drinking. So it was not a well-run local at all. And considering our size, which wasn't huge but was big, we really didn't have a lot of respect nationwide, which is one of the things that really I was able to change. One of the early things I did before I ran for local office, and I think this is important, was when they shut down the IOC, the international operating center. You know, the history of the operating centers when it started out, a lot of Irish women originally. Then they started hiring Black women in New York City. And by the time they shut it down, it was I would say like 90% Black. And they shut it down. I don't know why he asked me to do this, but Chet, the president, asked me to see if I can organize a rally in support of the shutdown. Because of my political history before and the fact that I knew about other organizations and coalitions, I was able to get some fairly high-powered speakers from other organizations to come. It ended up a much bigger deal than they ever expected it to be. For example, Al Sharpton spoke and this is the Al Sharpton that maybe weighed 350 pounds and was probably more controversial then. We basically took over Broadway south of Canal Street, had a very good rally. A couple of us were arrested for civil disobedience kind of things. I got arrested, I got handcuffed to Sharpton, which increased my street cred tremendously. Of course, it still shut down. We didn't save it, but because I think of the work we did, the NAACP ended up getting involved in that and most of the operators ended up getting hired, and a lot of them ended up getting hired at New York Telephone. So a lot of people were able to keep their jobs.

Debbie: [00:35:54] Do you know what year this was?

Laura: [00:35:56] 1983? 1984.

Debbie: [00:35:58] You mentioned something about an operator walkout.

Laura: [00:36:05] I think that was nationwide, Job Pressures Day.

Debbie: [00:36:07] Oh 1979.

Laura: [00:36:09] Right. Our operators in that building, they were wonderful. They were a very militant group and the vice president for operating services at the time, I just blacked out on her name. There was one who was actually on bargaining, I think. I just can't remember her name. Ann Walden. The one subsequent to her, Andrea Lupo, who was a Bell Buster, ended up becoming a Comm Tech. I think she was the main leader of the walkout. It was very successful and the techs came up and supported the operators. One advantage of where my local is that the Long Lines headquarters building was about three blocks from my office before they moved to Basking Ridge. It's a beautiful historic building.

Debbie: [00:37:13] What's the address?

Laura: [00:37:15] It was 32 Avenue of the Americas. That's where the operators were. You could really make a thing by marching around that building. They walked out and refused to go back in, and that's when Gary locked himself in the bathroom. I would feel bad about talking

about him, except he became a manager. Chad became a manager. Several of the old officers ended up becoming managers for various reasons.

Debbie: [00:37:48] You mentioned an operator who became a Comm Tech. When? In your experience, when AT&T was trying to hire women into Comm Tech, was it mostly off the street or was it promoting women from operators and service reps?

Laura: [00:38:05] I think it was mostly off the street. But there were some that got promoted. She got promoted a couple of years later, after the office closed, she would have lost her job. She didn't want to go to New York Tel. I should probably talk about that a little bit, too. This is so far back, this is going to take all day.

Debbie: [00:38:32] Okay.

Laura: [00:38:35] When she lost her job as an operator, she ended up taking the test and passing it and becoming a communications technician. At the time of divestiture [1984], they gave us a choice. Do we want to stay with AT&T or do we want to go to New York Tel because the kind of work they were doing in my office since we tested local circuits, they decided, under the agreement that they could go either way. The only reason I chose to stay with AT&T is that I didn't want to go into Verizon [at that time, NYNEX] I didn't want to go into local 1101. It was a very big local. They had very few women in leadership. No women in leadership. Very few women shop stewards even. I decided that if I really wanted to do the union work that I would love doing, I would stay where I was.

Debbie: [00:39:32] Did most of the Comm Techs stay or go?

Laura: [00:39:36] A bunch of them. There was only a certain number in the office who could go. I would say most of the people who had a choice went. The fact is when we went through all those layoffs and stuff, they didn't go through the layoffs. Some of them retired with that seven and seven deal. One of my best friends who actually ran for secretary-treasurer the term before I did, ended up going and actually ended up suing NYNEX for sex discrimination and winning. But I decided to stay.

Debbie: [00:40:17] I think we're ready to jump into your union office work. Jeff, did you have any questions up until this point

Jeff: [00:40:29] No. Keep going. This is wonderful. I'm really enjoying this. It makes me wish we had these discussions years ago, finding out more about people and their backgrounds.

Laura: [00:40:40] Yeah, it's almost like when you read people's obituaries.

Jeff: [00:40:44] Yeah, exactly. Except for we're still here.

Debbie: [00:40:53] So we will know what to write. Okay, so talk about getting elected to the first union office.

Laura: [00:40:58] My first office that I ran for was secretary-treasurer, and the previous secretary-treasurer had been there, and she was a good woman, but she'd been there for 20 years. She wasn't going to do anything new or different. Her name was Pat Meckle. Wonderful person. Her life was what it was. The union. She had no other life outside the union. But I just really felt that I certainly wasn't ready to run for president. And I really felt that I wanted to run for local

office. I ran, Bob Swanson, I said the guy who was shop steward of my local who ended up becoming my secretary-treasurer, was the head of the election committee. I won by 250 votes. After the election, she challenged the election. She discovered that the list she provided was wrong by 300 votes. She didn't have good addresses. The election committee had no choice but to agree with her. So I stupidly kept appealing it. I appealed to the local Executive Board, they rejected my appeal. I appealed to the membership. They found in my favor at a membership meeting. It ended up going to Morty [Bahr], who was the vice president of the district at the time, and he said, Laura, you know, I know this is crazy, but I have to rule in favor of Pat because if it was 300 bad votes for whatever the reason, the amount of people that didn't get ballots for whatever reason, and you won by 250, then you have to accept that. So I re-ran and I won by 700 votes. Because people were so furious about the waste of time and money. So I missed like the first six months of my term because the leadership stayed the same until the new election. So that was upsetting.

Debbie: [00:43:15] What year was this?

Laura: [00:43:16] This was 1984.

Debbie: [00:43:18] You mentioned addresses for members. So was this a mail-in ballot?

Laura: [00:43:23] Yes, we had a mail-in.

Debbie: [00:43:24] Okay. So secretary treasurer in 1984 and one other small question. You mentioned that Pat was the secretary-treasurer. Was that typical that the males were the presidents and women were secretary-treasurer?

Laura: [00:43:40] Yes, that was very typical. Also at that point, the local was big enough that all these people were full-time. They were all full-time at the local office. During that time, there was a strike in 1984.

Debbie: [00:44:00] 1983 right?

Laura: [00:44:00] 1983. So that was her last one. Then there was another strike in 1986. I can't remember if that was the strike that only went 28 days so that people didn't get the strike benefits or not.

Debbie: [00:44:15] Jeff, do you remember?

Jeff: [00:44:21] I'm terrible with years. We need Cohen here to remember that kind of stuff.

Laura: [00:44:28] Nick [Unger] remembered me handing out checks and that I was good at it. That's one of the things that made me well [liked]. I don't remember. But we did do a lot of stuff. We had the best T-shirts because I designed T-shirts. We did a lot of things. That might have been the Un COLA one, too.

Debbie: [00:44:52] The what?

Laura: [00:44:53] The Un COLA. That's when we had cost of living [adjustments]. They signed an agreement that that put it on hold unless such and such happened, and my local vigorously pushed to not sign, [reject] the contract, and we did the slogan "don't drink the UN COLA." And we did a big campaign around that.

Debbie: [00:45:16] Getting rid of the cost-of-living-adjustment.]

Laura: [00:45:18] Not a good contract because it got rid of the cost of living. Okay. So that was a good thing that we did during that time. But the main thing that happened during those years is that the person who ran for president, Jim Pratt, had been president once before, had been defeated and had come back. It was terrible. I mean, he was a wonderful, nice guy, but he was a gambler. He was addicted to gambling and he just didn't do a whole lot. And, so I ran against him.

Debbie: [00:45:53] This is what year?

Laura: [00:45:54] For the 1986 election. I ran against him, and I had a slate, a really good slate. I was running for president. Ron Tyree ran for vice president. Bob Swanson, who had been my original shop steward, became one of my best friends who actually was a Reagan supporter when I first met him, but stopped that pretty quickly. We had a wonderful slate and it was an unusual slate in that it was very multiracial. People said, well, did you do that on purpose to make sure you had several Blacks and women? And it wasn't that. It was that I really think I took the best people for the job. And we had a wonderful slate, and all of us won on the first ballot. We had a terrific executive board and were able to do a lot of things. One thing that I did was I insisted that everybody go back to work. The local had gotten smaller. As I said, there's no reason we can't all work at least a day a week. I just thought that was very important for the officers to be on the job so that they had to take the same shit that shop stewards got, because in every local, there was some discord between the people on the shop floor and the local leadership. You know, they would say, well, they're not doing enough or they don't understand. So I thought it was very important for people to keep working. So that was the first thing I did.

Debbie: [00:47:53] And you kept working?

Laura: [00:47:55] I would work, like one day a week, but at least it was enough that I had to show my face in the office. That was an important thing I did. Another important thing I did is I kept up with the *Local Spirit*, kept coming out, and I always had a column in the *Local Spirit* so people knew what I was, you know, some important things. Actually, I won a newspaper award for an article I wrote called, "Mother Jones, not Dow Jones". This is just sort of typical of the kind of issues we tried to take on. That was a time when the company was offering a lot of stock options. After you worked a certain number of hours, you got stock. And people are always asking about the stock and the options, and what should we do? I basically said, it's not the union's job to give you stock advice. In fact, you know, I believe that a lot of those plans were trying to split the loyalty of the members away from the union because they would say, well, you can't go on strike. What's that going to do to your stock price? You know, you have all these savings and stock and, it was really, I think, a way to discourage militancy. I wrote an article about it and it ended up being reprinted a lot of places and I won a newspaper award for it. But the most important thing in terms of what I did, I think, I had a daily tape which is a number that people could call. I would just talk for a minute, three minutes, depending on what the issues were, about stuff going on in the local, about stuff going on with the international, and stuff going on in the industry as a whole. It really became something that people all over the country would listen to. In fact, we had to get a better system because people all over the country, in fact,

some of the other local presidents resented it because they said my members are calling your tape and they're not calling my tape. But I think that was really important in terms of not just increasing sort of general knowledge and militancy, but getting people around the country to know who I was. It's like a diary. I gave a bunch of them to NYU [CWA archives at the Tamiment Library of NYU], because if you read them over time, it was almost every day. If I didn't do it, people would call me up and say, where's the tape? But it almost became a diary of the work that we were doing it. And we really went out of our way to be a militant local.

Debbie: [00:50:48] What did that mean?

Laura: [00:50:50] Well, as I said, we were near AT&T headquarters. So we would set up a picket line and leaflet whenever the board of directors came. Bob Allen once called us dinosaurs. Bob Allen was the CEO at AT&T. He called us dinosaurs. So there was a balloon store down the block from the local office, and we got these big dinosaur blowup dolls, and we marched in front of [AT&T headquarters], and we did that.

Debbie: [00:51:24] So you had fun as well?

Laura: [00:51:25] We had fun. We also did a lot of grievances. But we also did a lot of stuff. We did the shareholders meetings because a lot of times they would do them at Radio City Music Hall and I think we were one of the first locals that really took the shareholders' meeting seriously. In fact, the company threatened to arrest us. They used to do a lot more at shareholders meetings. They would have a family night the night before, where the families could come in and see stuff and get stuff. The company security threatened to arrest me at one of the shareholders meetings. We were just outside, they said we were blocking the sidewalk or something, and I said, please, and I put my hands up, please, arrest me. There's nothing you could do better to get me elected again than get me arrested at a shareholders meeting. This is like, fine. And of course they didn't. But we did the Bob Allen thing, which the national leadership was not in favor of because they're always trying to, I think, have a good relationship with the CEO. But we did the Stop Allen. We had Stop Allen buttons. We organized a demonstration at Bob Allen's house. When the layoffs really started heavily in 1991, which most of the East Coast locals ended up joining us on. He wasn't there that day, but we went anyway and we leafletted his neighbors. We said we're sorry to disrupt your Sunday but you should know that the actions that Bob Allen, your neighbor, is taking is impacting our families in a much worse way because of the layoffs.

Debbie: [00:53:17] Did this kind of militancy create any tensions within the local?

Laura: [00:53:24] Never within local, but within the international.

Debbie: [00:53:26] Talk about that.

Laura: [00:53:29] Never within the local. I was always very critical that I didn't think that the international was militant enough around the layoffs and against Bob Allen. They always seemed to be trying to play both sides a bit, wanting to fight things, but on the other hand, not pissing the leadership, the executives off too much. That was not something that as a local president I had to worry about. I felt like we just had to do every single thing we could to try to fight the layoffs. I'm not saying that mine worked. My local ended up with 350 people in it. But, we really never felt like we didn't do everything we could do.

Debbie: [00:54:28] 350 people.

Laura: [00:54:29] When I finally ended up coming on staff.

Debbie: [00:54:32] That would have been what, year?

Laura: [00:54:33] Because of layoffs. 2007.

Laura: [00:54:41] I just want to mention one other thing that I think we did that was very important, which was in 1991, which is right in the middle of the layoffs. There was a huge outage that affected the whole East Coast and they had to take airplanes down because the air control system was down. It was a major, major thing. Nacchio, who was the vice president at that point for operators services, I think. What was his first name?

Debbie: [00:55:15] Joe.

Laura: [00:55:16] Joe Nacchio stood on the steps of Thomas Street and blamed it on the technicians. We found that first of all, the people in charge of this particular switch that had gone down, that had caused the problem, that the switch was on a floor that the alarm system that would show that there was a problem was on a floor that had been vacated because there had been so many layoffs. Nobody even saw the fact that there was a flashing light. The guys who would have been in charge of fixing it, there were very few of them left, and they had all been sent to another building for some kind of class. So we basically showed a whole pattern of things that led up to it that could be tied to the layoffs, and none of which could be tied to technician error. We made a statement to the newspaper. We did a big deal, and we ended up having three of my members and myself on the MacNeil/Lehrer Report, PBS News Hour.

Debbie: [00:56:28] Radio or TV?

Laura: [00:56:29] TV, where we talked about what the real cause of it was the layoffs. We did a subway campaign. Candice at the national union helped me with the design of this thing.

Debbie: [00:56:45] Candice Johnson.

Laura: [00:56:47] We did a subway poster that we put all over the subways. It looked like the handle of a telephone but it was a bone. And it said, AT&T has cut its workforce to the bone. Stop the outages now. Something like that. And we put those all over the subways. So, again, it did change some things because Jim Carroll, who was the AT&T Vice President in charge of the network at the time, which was a national position, ended up spending a whole day with my shop stewards and walking around. I really think my local, for a few years there, I think because of that, did not have as many layoffs at least for the guys who worked in the network, at least, because we took that action.

Debbie: [00:58:06] That's a powerful, powerful story. You mentioned that 1991 was a time of a lot of layoffs. Had there been nicks and cuts up until that point?

Laura: [00:58:22] Yeah, I think there had been small layoffs and consolidations, but, I'm trying to remember, I think 1991 was really the time that we got hit heavy and some was layoff, and some was, they decided since our work was on a test board, and that work became more and more automated over the years. So instead of doing things on a test board, a lot of the testing was done on computers, so they could form these sort of mega centers where they could do testing.

They decided that the mega centers for a lot of the testing were going to be in Atlanta, right-to-work and Denver, right-to-work. [Right-to-work refers to state law that allows workers in a unionized workplace to opt out of paying union dues. Colorado has a modified right-to-work law.]

Laura: [00:59:16] So a lot of work got moved, some people got transferred. A lot of people ended up having to take transfers, different places and stuff. We had big layoffs, but we also had a lot of people transferring. Some of it was technological but a lot of it really had to do with the fact that they were moving work away. That was a really big hit to the local. Now over the years, there became a time in AT&T when there were layoffs every few months, but that was the big year for us where we really got killed.

Debbie: [00:59:58] Let's keep on with the local union and the relationship with the international and with the district. Talk about the ad hoc.

Laura: [01:00:15] The ad hoc was a group that got together before I was president. I believe it really got started at the time of divestiture. [1984] The Long Lines local presidents felt like there weren't enough of us. They were losing power. The AT&T Long Lines group was one of the earliest groups in the union. My local was the first local in New York City. A large local, they start organizing in 1935 or something. When we became CWA, we were local number One. I think there was a lot of fear among the local presidents that they were not going to be recognized very much anymore so I think they felt the need to gather as a group. In the beginning, I think it was a lot of just information sharing, because people didn't feel like they were getting enough information out of the national office, so they would share information about grievances or talk about arbitration cases that they won or arbitration cases that they wanted to get fought that couldn't get fought. It's really that kind of thing. They would do a little bit of planning what they should support at conventions, things like that. They weren't supporting one candidate over another or something like that. They were just trying to get their voices heard. At that time it was mainly men. There were a few locals in it that were AT&T operator services locals. So there were some women in it. I think Lois Grimes might have been there by the time I started. They changed over the years several times. But when I started going, I really felt like they were putting me through the ringer because I was very new. I was a local president. I was a woman. I remember my first meeting, they took me to a restaurant that they used to like to go to that was like, all hunting, had dead animals all over the walls. They ordered me Rocky Mountain oysters. I had no idea what they were, and I ate one and they said, do you know what you're eating? It's the balls of a cow, right? That's what it is. I guess they thought that I was going to start screaming or something. I said, oh, really? I took my knife and I stabbed one of them, and I ate it. They gave me a hard time at the beginning. But over time, I became very close friends with a lot of them. Many years later, I ended up becoming a chair of the Ad Hoc. But I think, again, what I tried to do at the Ad Hoc was try to get it to take more positions and make more demands on the international. I wrote a very early resolution on the need for mobilization activities. I have it somewhere I can't remember what year that was. Maybe 1986 or 1987. Here I had just become a local president, and I was trying to get them to support this resolution because at that point, it was already clear that we weren't going to be going on strike very much. And I really felt we had to do a lot more militant stuff on the job. And the Ad Hoc ended up supporting the resolution.

Debbie: [01:04:13] The resolution for --?

Laura: [01:04:14] A resolution for the C and T meeting.

Debbie: [01:04:17] Talk about C and T. What that is.

Laura: [01:04:20] C and T [Communications and Technologies] is basically an office of the national union that handled basically AT&T but not the local companies, which was why when the split-off happened, instead of us being one big group, all the local companies [were] represented by the districts, the only thing that C and T represented at that point was AT&T Long Lines. Well, what had been AT&T Long Lines, Western Electric, which was a national unit that eventually became Lucent. Eventually as things split off, it eventually handled Avaya. Every split-off caused more stuff to either be taken out of that office and moved into that office, depending on what. Originally, when it first started it was not an office with a vice president. It had a director that reported to the president. I know there was some contention about, I think Fred Fisher, actually somebody from my local, one of the early presidents of my local was the director for a short time. His name was George Myerskoff. I can't remember who all of them were, but Fred Fisher was one of them. And then Jim Irvine, I don't know if by the time he took the office, he was a vice president or he was still director in the beginning.

Jeff: [01:06:11] He was still a director. He was a Long Lines director. He defeated Beeman Pearson who had been the Long Lines director prior to that. It was under Jim [Irvine] and Ron Allen that they finally created, along with the public sector vice president slots, for those jobs.

Debbie: [01:06:29] Did you say Jim Allen or Ron Allen?

Jeff: [01:06:32] Jim Irvine and Ron Allen.

Laura: [01:06:34] Ron Allen was in charge of the Lucent piece of it. Jim was in charge of the AT&T piece of it. I guess when it got combined, Ron sort of stepped aside, let Jim be the vice president and he stayed. He was his assistant in charge of that.

Debbie: [01:06:51] So you had a lot of tensions with that office?

Laura: [01:06:54] Yeah. In fact, the first convention I ever went to, and I don't even think I was there as a delegate. I went there because my newspaper was going to get an award, and it was in Philadelphia, so Chet allowed me to go to pick up my award. They agreed to what was called alpha titles, which was a low level, the lowest level job we had, a title for what had been billing workers. The company had threatened to move their billing either to an outside contractor or give some of it to the local companies. Jim was told that if he accepted this very limited title, it would bring 11,000 jobs and he signed off on it. He announced it right after he got elected. People were screaming and yelling and jumping on tables. It was quite an interesting first meeting for me.

Debbie: [01:07:58] This was at the national convention?

Laura: [01:07:59] This was at a convention. He had made the announcement at a unit meeting at the convention. That was my first experience with him. But we've had conflicts over the years over what they would arbitrate, what they wouldn't arbitrate. In general, the fact that I thought they were being too conciliatory to the company and to Bob Allen over the years. I had a lot of disagreements.

Debbie: [01:08:29] Talk about the famous convention where you unrolled the long, long list of stipulations.

Laura: [01:08:36] Yeah. First of all, out of that, I want to set the record straight on something. That was Nick's idea.

Debbie: [01:08:42] Nick Unger.

Laura: [01:08:43] Nick Unger, my husband. You know, I've gotten credit for this for so many years. And I always tell people this was Nick's idea.

Debbie: [01:08:51] But you did it.

Laura: [01:08:52] Oh, I did it. I'm absolutely proud of the fact that I did it. I don't think anything like that had ever been done before. But just to begin at the beginning. There was a tremendous amount of dissatisfaction with the national office because we would bargain contracts and whether we liked them or hated them, we knew what they were. And then we would go in and argue grievances and they'd say, no, no, no, you know that the national office signed a stip on that.

Debbie: [01:09:19] A stipulation.

Laura: [01:09:20] Stipulation, which means that it's an agreement that they do outside of the contract, but carries the weight of an agreement with the company. And it just happened too often, you'd go and try to argue something. And I [the company] said, no, no, you can't go with that because we signed a stipulation. We discussed it a lot at the Ad Hoc. Something needed to be done. So I wrote a constitutional amendment that basically -- Now, we had elected bargainners at the time. The national parts of the agreement were bargained at that point by the national union staff and vice president. Then we had our elected bargaining committee. I put forth a resolution that said that before anyone could sign a stipulation that made a change or additions to the contract, they had to consult the elected bargaining committee.

Debbie: [01:10:32] Just consult?

Laura: [01:10:33] Just consult. Which was probably a mistake on my part. I should have said get the approval, but I didn't know we'd get as much support as it did. Now, this was absolutely opposed.

Debbie: [01:10:41] And what year is this?

Laura: [01:10:42] By the national union? I believe it was 1998. Something around there, 97, 98. I met with the Constitution Committee. There was a story going around that I had agreed to withdraw it because the executive board decided to do some kind of wishy washy -- They took, I don't know what they call it when they took a position on the executive board that they would try to consult the bargaining committee, something like that. I didn't think that was enough. I wanted it in the Constitution. I was told that I agreed to that. It absolutely never happened. I had one meeting with the whole Constitution Committee and told them that I wasn't satisfied with that, and that I was going to put it on the floor. The way the CWA conventions works is that if the Constitution Committee doesn't agree to your resolution, you need a higher percentage to get it. You can still put it on to the floor of the convention, but you had to have a higher percentage of

the delegates supporting it. So, when they announced that they weren't going to put it on the floor at the convention, I went to speak. And what I had done is I had taken and people again thought this was computer paper that I unrolled. I had my children up three days before taking every stipulation, and there were 87 of them and taped them together.

Debbie: [01:12:29] Child labor.

Laura: [01:12:29] Child labor. My kids loved doing union work. And still do. So the night before we got to convention, the people in the Ad Hoc and particularly my secretary-treasurer, Bob Swanson, who was six foot five, I told him to go find all the tallest people in the convention because we're going to be unrolling this and we did high up. So he went out and did that and found about 20 people to help. I went on the convention floor and as I was speaking in favor of the resolution, I held up this roll and it got rolled. It was in Los Angeles, I believe. The roll went from the motions mic all the way to the back of the convention. All the way to the back. And people were like, running up. Because I remember this one guy, Glenn Hamm, he was small and he was jumping up trying to hold on. People just loved it. We had this huge standing ovation. There were a few speakers against, but generally it won by a huge percentage.

Debbie: [01:13:50] Which meant that you had to get the delegates who did not represent folks at AT&T behind this.

Laura: [01:14:01] Yeah. So even though it was something that was clearly a problem and clearly people I think generally felt very possessive of their bargaining teams, that they elect their bargaining teams. It was bad enough at that point that we didn't have any seat yet at the national table. They eventually put one person, one elected member at the national table. I think people wanted their bargaining teams to have a little bit more power. The fact is it really didn't give them a lot more power. Basically in some places it became a very sort of pro forma kind of thing. We want to do this and we want to do that and they would tell the bargaining committees. But the fact is I have to give Jim Irvine credit, because once we passed it, he did. If there was any kind of thing that needed to be changed, he or one of his assistants got the team on the phone, and we talked about it. And if we had strong objections, he mainly did listen to them, but, that was a big deal. I've gotten called over the years to consult with the legal department and all that, about what was its original intention and what did it mean. I was always afraid that would be the highlight of my career at AT&T. But it really was very special. I think after that it became more usual for I think a couple of years later when the operators came in with masks, and people did to try to do-- I should say something about CWA conventions. My husband was in other unions where the conventions were absolutely orchestrated. Absolutely nothing happened on the floor of those conventions unless it was absolutely planned in advance. You know, nothing unexpected had happened. And the CWA conventions aside from being yearly, which was unusual, were quite democratic in the way they were run, and that people could do things. The company one year was sitting up in the balcony and everybody stood up and shame on you, shame on. There were things happening on the convention floor that were good and unexpected.

Debbie: [01:16:39] As a delegate, I know that you've talked with me about what it was like to be a delegate and the lobbying and maneuvering.

Laura: [01:16:49] Yeah. I was elected national bargaining in 1992. Two of the people on that were Donna Conroy and Annie Crump who are the two of the smartest, most militant women I've ever met. And they, along with Joanne Bell and a couple of other people really knew how to work the convention. And I mean work the convention. They really scrutinized the financial report so that they could ask good questions, they would organize a lot behind the scenes to get certain things passed or not passed and to get people to line up to speak on things. They really sort of schooled me a lot on how to do some of this stuff. So we really used the convention in good ways. I get very angry at the last few conventions I've been to because it just seems that people aren't willing to put in the work because you need to put in the work. You need to write your resolutions. You need to read the financial report and figure out if there's anything you should ask. There's things you need to do if you really want to make it a democratic convention. And I don't get the feeling now that there's a group of people out there who do that. The Ad Hoc started paying more attention. We had a person assigned to each district in case we needed to get ourselves together. We insisted on a table of our own that the T and T [the C and T office was later renamed the T and T, Telecommunications and Technologies, office] group had that instead of sitting with the districts, most of us sat at that table. But we always tried to make sure a few people stayed in each district so that we could talk to people in the district, so that we really paid attention to trying to get as much out of the conventions as we could. I really get the feeling that that's really gone by the wayside.

Debbie: [01:18:53] Very briefly, you said people would line up. Somebody who hasn't been to a convention. What does that mean?

Laura: [01:18:59] There's different mics. There's the motions mic, where you can make a motion. There's a For mic if you're for something and an Against mic, if you want to speak against. And then there's questions mic, which could be very useful too. But, generally they'll only allow a couple of speakers for and a couple of speakers against. [Frequently, a delegate would call the question after the first few For and Against speakers, and a majority of the delegates would vote to stop debate.] But over time, it got to a thing where it was almost like there were almost like demonstrations. If you wanted to show that you had a lot of support, you would make sure that the people that really wanted to speak were on the front, and then other people would line up. There were some times when the people would be lined up all around the hall side of the convention on the For mic or the Against mic. It was a way to kind of judge your strength. But the other thing about it is sometimes that would get confusing because somebody would make an amendment and you'd have to run from the For mic to the Against mic. So it gets confusing, but it also makes it very sort of visual how much support you have and how much you don't.

Debbie: [01:20:08] So we have big changes at AT&T and in the industry during the time you're a local president. Briefly, what's going on?

Laura: [01:20:22] Well since I started the main thing that was going on was layoffs. But, a lot of it had to do with the way the company organized itself into business units and cost units. Part of it was this group called McKinsey, which is an infamous consulting firm, who was doing a lot of the consulting with them about how to consolidate and cut costs and things like that. So in

every sort of aspect of our lives they were changing the way we do the work. The work was getting much more automated, which meant that people didn't get trained at all in the way they used to. People used to go through six months of training now were going through weeks of training. The customers, the call center stuff was going on where they were consolidating and exporting jobs [from] call centers. AT&T was trying to use more subcontractors. It was pretty much a bloodbath.]

Debbie: [01:21:35] So job security becomes a major issue.

Laura: [01:21:38] Job security was a major issue. That's when they started chipping away at people's medical benefits. That became a big issue. What they did to our pensions became a big issue. They moved from traditional pension plan to these cash balance accounts, which there was a tremendous amount of controversy over. In every way they chipped away, a lot of big things, but it was also small things, too. Like they would move offices from one spot to another so they could -- We had some offices that were 37.5 hours and some offices that were 40 hours, and they would move offices just like a few blocks away to try to change their hours from 37 and a half hours to 40 hours. In every sense, they were chipping away at both things locally and obviously on a big scale. Can I tell a quick story?

Debbie: [01:22:47] Of course.]

Laura: [01:22:48] We represented clerical workers at that headquarters building that's now the Sony building in New York City. They ended up selling it. They were our 37 and half hour office. They were moving them into a building that was owned by Prudential downtown, and told them that they were going to change the office to 40 hours. The contract was fairly clear that they could do it. I went to Irvine and I asked if I could arbitrate it; they said no. Jerry Klimm, you can't arbitrate it, you can't arbitrate it. It's been settled. They've done this before. So I wrote a leaflet that said to the other tenants of this building, the Prudential Building. Make sure you start locking up your pocketbooks because AT&T is moving into the building. If they're willing to steal 2.5 hours' pay from their own clerical workers, imagine what that they'll do to strangers. So I wrote the leaflet. I sent it to Diane Bradley, the head of labor relations at AT&T, and it was a Tuesday. I said this is going to be distributed all over that building on Thursday. And she came back on Wednesday and they left them at 37.5 hours. I made one copy of the leaflet. I never even had to print the leaflet.

Debbie: [01:24:24] It's a great story. Those are the kind of things that make you feel really good.

Laura: [01:24:29] Yes, it was really good.

Debbie: [01:24:33] Jeff, I am going to move into Workplace of the Future. Before I do, do you want to ask some questions?

Jeff: [01:24:43] No. I'm fine. I mean, time is flying by here. This is really great. I love this.

Laura: [01:24:51] I should back up. Just one thing that we didn't cover is that I was elected to the national bargaining team because I think of my work with the Ad Hoc and other things. I ran against somebody who was a really old friend of a lot of some of the leadership, the Ad Hoc. I mean like, C.H. Grizzle, was one president of the biggest local Atlanta. Roy Jones, who was the president of the New Orleans local. Glen Hamm was the president of ---]

Debbie: [01:25:25] Somewhere in Illinois, Oakbrook?

Laura: [01:25:29] So they were are all very close friends and had been on bargaining together many years.

Debbie: [01:25:36] All men.

Laura: [01:25:37] Well there was operator services person who was generally a woman and I believe even admin, which was the clerical workers, that was C.H. Grizzle's seat, it was a man who had that seat.

Debbie: [01:25:53] So you were elected to represent a particular kind of job title?

Laura: [01:25:59] Yeah. There was a plant seat. There was an operator seat. There was administrative seat. There was an at-large seat. I didn't even have that many clerical workers at that point and very few marketing workers. But one of the guys in the bargaining team who had that seat, people really wanted to get rid of him. Alcohol problem, people didn't feel like he was carrying his weight. And people felt that I should run for bargaining and the other seats were unbeatable. C.H. was not going to be beaten and Roy should not have been beaten. So they basically decided that I was the only person who could take on that spot, even though it wasn't my area of expertise really. I ran and won fairly handily, but it created some bitterness that went on for years. The president of one of the -- First of all, Roy Jones supported me and that was fabulous and took a lot of courage on his part because he really had to stand up against his friends. The president of the Syracuse local, John McCann, he supported me so that people who really stepped up to do that really had to take some garbage from their longtime friends. But from that point on, I was on bargaining. I was on in 1992 in the marketing seat. And then, as time went on, I think I mainly moved into the, I think I might have had the plant seat at one point or another, but I think I mainly moved into the at-large seat. I was on bargaining, basically every year as an elected bargainer until I went on staff in 2007. Then I was on bargaining as staff, which I did not like nearly as much as doing it, because we had some very contentious bargaining at the time. There were people who felt that the contract was signed over the heads of the bargaining committee one year, and people refused to sign it. One of the members was just browbeaten into changing her vote so that it ended up going for ratification. But the year after that, and many of us refused, and you had the power to do that. That's the key thing about being a local president, as long as your members want you, it really gives you a tremendous amount of power because you don't have to worry. You can speak your mind, and you can do things that you would not normally be allowed to do. And as I said, I never had opposition. Some of my board did, but I never had. And as I said, there was no a local president before me that ever had that situation. It just was so freeing being a local president, especially after I've been on staff and I could compare the two. But I compare them also with my family because my husband was always staff, and he would get fired all the time. He was constantly being told you can't do that. You can't do that. You can't do that. He worked for a lot of different unions. And if he wasn't fired, he was in trouble. My son decided to get involved in the trade union movement, and I really encouraged him to do what I did, go and become a worker. You know, work your way up. And he did not take that path, but he's doing okay. Once I was elected on marketing, and I always

got reelected even though people ran against me, I always got reelected. It made a real difference being an elected person rather than a staff person.

Jeff: [01:30:19] Let me ask just a quick question. Dial back to this 37.5 hour story that I love. Would a younger Laura Unger have distributed the leaflet first without calling Diane Bradley?

Laura: [01:30:38] No. That was really the tactic. I knew Diane Bradley enough, and she knew me well enough to know that I would pretty much do anything, because I had done a lot of stuff. We had done a lot. Aside from being in bargaining together, we had done a lot of stuff at those meetings and done some fairly outrageous things. So she had no doubt in the world that I would do it. And I thought once we handed it out, it was done that they could either it was too late. I was really just trying to stop it before it happened. And, once it was out there, you know. You know.

Jeff: [01:31:23] Yeah. And there's a nuance there that I think some people don't get all the time. You know, they'll shoot first and then try and solve the problem. I think that's important.

Laura: [01:31:32] I was pretty smart in those days, less smart now. Workplace of the Future.

Debbie: [01:31:41] There's a lot to ask about the various bargaining sessions, but let's start with Workplace of the Future. 1992 it was bargained. What was it? What was your attitude about it? As a local president, what did you do?

Laura: [01:31:58] This is another two hours. I always had very mixed feelings about it.

Debbie: [01:32:04] First explain what it is.

Laura: [01:32:05] Okay. Workplace of the Future was a program that was agreed to with AT&T. It was possible to give the union more input into decisions, that the company would share more information with the union, and the union would be part of these committees on a national level that hopefully would impact national decisions of the company as a whole. And then as it got further and further down onto the shop floor, would influence different things around the conditions of work. There had been a program before that was called Quality of Work Life, which my local had participated in somewhat for about a year. They sent a lot of people to a lot of training, and we tried to do stuff on the shop floor. In fact, Bob Swanson, my secretary-treasurer, was involved in it. Gary Whaley, the guy I mentioned, was appointed by Chet to be a trainer. As the layoffs kept happening, we, the local, decided at a membership meeting that we pushed to pull out of it. The day we pulled out of it Gary took a management job. So we've had some experience with that before. But I think the problem was, it was desperation. We had so many layoffs that I think even as skeptical as we were of it, and it was not a new thing in the labor movement. There had been programs very similar to it, the Auto Workers, and I had done a lot of reading about it, how the Auto Workers set up their training and did things. So there was experience which helped make me skeptical, but I think it was really a sense of desperation. We have to figure no matter what we were doing, the layoffs were continuing. We had no say, so let's give it a shot. That was our big kickoff meeting. Robert Reich [Secretary of Labor in William J. Clinton administration] was there and the leadership of AT&T was there and the leadership of CWA was there. It was this big kickoff. There was a lot of opposition at that meeting. The illusion of inclusion was the big thing that came out of that meeting. I agreed to be appointed to

one of the national business planning councils. I think we met maybe once a month or something like that.

Debbie: [01:34:49] Which business planning council?

Laura: [01:34:53] It was business. There was one for the network and there was one for business services, which included the techs and customer service reps and things like that. So I participated and I think I really did as a member of the Planning council, I think I participated as well as possible. I knew what kind of questions to ask and things like that. And my local also set up some local committees. I ended up spending an inordinate amount of time on this. It was set up in a way that the union got to pick all of the people who participated on a local level and also participated at the national level, so it did give the union some power on the job in terms of who we put on these committees and things like that. The local committees, I don't think, ever really panned out very much in terms of accomplishing much of anything in it. Then on a national level we did accomplish one very good thing at our planning council, which was a creation of a higher level title. It happened to be that the manager, this guy Bill Stake who was in charge of that business unit, was sort of willing to do more and when they created this new title and involved the union and in fact, we ended up with a title that was one of the highest titles that had been negotiated in years.

Debbie: [01:36:34] This was a title for the customer sales and service reps who were serving business customers. Right?

Laura: [01:36:43] So, I can't say that there weren't some advantages to it. On the other hand, I really think the union dropped the ball. One of the things I think that I read that the UAW had done is they had an independent training for the union people on the committees. The company and AT&T decided to hire jointly, well, there were two different things that were joint. One was the guy named Mike Maccoby who considered himself an expert in these kind of programs who I think is awful. He slept through half the meetings. He was getting paid a fortune. The other thing they decided was to involve Rutgers. And there were two people from Rutgers, Sue Sherman and Charles Heckscher. They had developed these joint training classes and things. I thought that was the wrong way to go. I really thought that we sent people into these meetings with these company people who have been there forever, have MFAs [MBAs], had all these consultants working with them, had all this stuff to support, as I said, McKinsey was involved in it up to their eyeballs giving advice about layoffs and things like that. The union people, some of them went in and they were just overwhelmed by that, despite the fact that they would try to put good people on these, they were good people. But they walk into these environments where they're so overwhelmed they don't have the education to understand a lot of the financials, they were sometimes captivated by their proximity to power. They were wined and dined. The fact is, they serve these lavish dinners sometimes. And, I just think it was hard for people to really make very much of a contribution. A lot of people and some of them were seduced, a bunch of them became management, they would see who was correct or not good and promote them. One of the guys on our business council took a promotion, one of the union people. So I just think we just didn't do our job. I mean, I don't know if we ever could have prepared people enough to really have much of an impact, because at some point, the company decided it was not worth the little bit of labor

peace it gave them, and they were going to move ahead with all the layoffs anyway. But, it was a very difficult time. And I really did throw myself into it. Probably too much. I was constantly writing papers and giving speeches and I felt like I spent half my time educating management about unions. So it finally fell apart because it wasn't going to change anything in terms of the AT&T trajectory.

Debbie: [01:40:10] And CWA formally pulled out. As a local president who was so involved in the Business Unit planning council and the different activities at the local level for you personally and for others of your peers, local presidents, did it sap energy? Did it sap militancy? That's the traditional critique of these programs. Can you give an example?

Laura: [01:40:43] I'm just trying to think. I can't remember ever deciding not to do something because I was on a planning council. But on the other hand, as I said, I think there was a feeling of some helplessness. You know that everything else that we had tried wasn't really working that well anyway. My board was a very militant board, and they raised questions about why are we doing this? Should we, should we? I was constantly having to convince them of whatever little gains that we made that we should stick to it. But, I'm not sure if it was the Workplace of the Future that sapped our locals' militancy or just the fact that we had sort of begun to run out of ideas. Which, you know, it's like at some point you say we're losing, we're losing one, we're losing.

Debbie: [01:41:46] The external forces were so big that you were fighting.

Laura: [01:41:52] Right.

Debbie: [01:41:52] A company in decline, struggling to find a business plan.

Laura: [01:41:59] You know what I realized I forgot to talk about. The fact that I ran against Irvine.

Debbie: [01:42:04] Let's hear about it. When was that?

Laura: [01:42:10] At some point I decided that someone had to run against Jim Irvine and some friends asked me to do it, so I did. It was 1999. On the one hand, I'm glad I did it. I think some of the critiques I wrote in my campaign literature were absolutely, absolutely on the money in terms of what I didn't think could be done and should be done. It was an issue of me being a woman. A couple of the installer local guys who were also dissatisfied said yeah we understand what you're saying, but I don't think a woman could do this job. They told me that straight up. I think that was certainly part of it. On the other hand, there is the power of the incumbency. There are a couple of big locals. There was one person who came crying to me afterwards saying she should have supported me. She was the very big local in Worthington.

Debbie: [01:43:28] Ohio.

Laura: [01:43:32] I'm not sure it was that local. Maybe it was Minneapolis, but anyway, she came to me afterwards basically crying, said she was going to support me but Jim offered her something and not that she really wanted. So there is a tremendous power to the incumbency. On the other hand, a lot of people really loved Jim. He was smart. He was well respected. I'm not going to take away from the fact. He wasn't like one of these slugs who didn't work hard. He

worked hard. You know, I probably gained a little bit more respect for him once I got on staff and realized how hard it is to run an office like that. So anyway, so I lost 2 to 1 around a great campaign. We had the best T shirts.

Debbie: [01:44:23] What did they say?

Laura: [01:44:24] It was LU, Let's Unite. It cost me about \$10,000 of my own money, but got me first-class plane tickets for Europe because I'd done so much flying around. I met a lot of local people around the country, and I'm not sorry I did it. The thing about it, though, is that Jim retired before the end of his term and appointed Ralph Maly who became vice president. And once I started to get to know Ralph and work with Ralph and, he's just a decent guy and never held a grudge, never held a grudge, which is really unusual. Never held a grudge of the fact that I ran against Jim, and eventually he's the one who put me on staff. But, I think it was important that I did it, and I think it was important that we had that discussion in the CWA about some of the issues, and it probably did help Jim and people in the group to think about things a little differently.

Debbie: [01:45:35] Jeff. I'm going to stop again to see. We haven't talked in detail about many triennial bargaining, so I didn't know if there's anything you wanted to highlight from that, either you, Jeff, or Laura.

Jeff: [01:45:55] No, let's just keep pressing on here. We still have ground to cover.

Laura: [01:46:00] My memory isn't great. I have friends who could tell you in this year of bargaining this happened. I could remember some highlights of things that happened, but the agreement for the commission plan was just a horror as far as I was concerned.

Debbie: [01:46:16] Talk a little bit about that.

Laura: [01:46:17] Commission based pay for one of the titles. I was one of the people who bargained it. We fought and fought and fought and did not want it, did not want it, did not want it. It was one of the company's major goals for that bargaining. They sent the bargaining team home at one point and called us back after the national Jim agreed to it with very few of the protections that we thought should have been in there.

Debbie: [01:46:49] This is an opportunity to mention a name of somebody whom you worked with, you mentored and worked closely with in the fight over that. And that's Mary Ellen Mazzeo. Talk a little bit about your relationship with her and her leadership.

Laura: [01:47:06] She was the president of that local in Syracuse whose previous president was one of the guys who came out supporting me. She became the president of the Syracuse local and she ended up with the marketing seat [on the bargaining committee], not the year I had it. Then I think Keith Edwards had it then Mary Ellen had it. She is the leader of the sales rep commission people. She was also one of my campaign leaders, she, Annie Crump, and Donna Conroy were the leaders of my campaign, and she became one of the most respected local presidents in the country, I think around both her work around the commission plan and trying to always make it better. And also, she really pushed herself to get an expertise around pensions. So she became sort of the bargaining team pension expert. We were just always friends. She said something to me when I told her I was going to do this, which is that I underestimated my impact on the next

generation of women. She's not that much younger than me. She's like 4 or 5 years, but she became president. A lot of women became local presidents over the years. I said when I started at the Ad Hoc, there were only a few women local presidents, and they were mainly operators and sales people. Now, a large number of local presidents from the AT&T group are women, and I think it did have an impact. I was never like a mentor, like my husband. I don't like to sit there and analyze people's performance and help them try to think about things in a different way. But, I think I tried to lead by example and that according to Mary Ellen, it had a big impact on these women feeling like they could do more than they ever had before, and to think about things in different ways. If she gives me any credit for that, then you know, that's probably enough of an accomplishment because she's fabulous. She retired a couple of years ago, but there are a few women that I'm proud that I had some influence on.

Debbie: [01:49:40] Any other names you want to mention?

Laura: [01:49:43] Well, I mean, like someone like Shari Wojtowicz, she's a loose cannon and made all the same mistakes that I made. But on the other hand, she's got a militant attitude to the company and is not afraid to speak her mind. There's a few of them that, it helped them. Just like it helped me to have Donna Conroy, Annie Crump. It helps to see examples of people who stand up.

Debbie: [01:50:20] Your decision to go on staff. Talk about that big mistake.

Laura: [01:50:30] It's interesting because, first of all, when Jim Irvine left and Ralph Maly became vice president, there were some people who encouraged me to run against him because he came out of manufacturing. People are afraid that he didn't know AT&T maybe quite that well. Bill Bates, who was at that point the head of the Ad Hoc, sat down with me and Ralph and I told them my concerns. And at that point to tell truth I already liked Ralph because he handled a huge case in my local where they tried to take my 37.5 hour tour away and I think I talked about this when I nominated him one year. He was just completely audacious. He asked for so much more than I would have when he helped bargain this solution to the fact many people were walking away with checks for \$3,000, \$5,000. It was incredible. So I had really gotten to respect Ralph over time. So when it came up, I really wasn't that interested in running against him. But I was concerned that 2002 bargaining was coming up. And I was worried about what was going to happen. We worked out a deal and that was that I would come down to Washington for a year before bargaining and help prepare for it, to come up with a mobilization plan to reach out to every local to try to figure out what their strengths and weaknesses were, to do some corporate investigation, to do everything I could. So, Ralph agreed right away and I mean that cost me a fortune because they wouldn't pay for anything. I paid for my transportation back and forth. I paid for an apartment, which is not cheap in D.C. Then it turned out that the people in his office were much less forgiving than Ralph was. The staff union complained that I was doing bargaining unit work. So they put me in the research department, and I did the work out of the research department. It was wonderful because I got to be friends with Debbie Goldman and Louise Novotny, that was good. I think we did a lot of good work. The funny thing is that we ended up extending the contract that year, and we ended up not having to bargain. The company maybe could see that we were more prepared, but we did end up extending the contract that year,

and we didn't actually go into a real fight at the bargaining table. After that, from that point on, Ralph really wanted to get me on staff, and there were no openings in his office. I don't know if I want to get into this. He tried to get District One to hire me and Larry Mancino and I were not --

Debbie: [01:53:59] Larry was the [District One] vice president then.

Laura: [01:54:01] Partially because I supported Jan Pierce when Jan Pierce was running because I think there was always a contentious relationship in general between the districts and the AT&T locals because they were mostly beholden to the Verizons and the local company locals. You know, Jeff. And Jan Pierce was always absolutely supportive of me. When I had the demonstration against Bob Allen's house, he was there as a speaker. He helped me get people. He was always very supportive. So I supported Jan. I don't want to get into this, but at some point, they split our local before I became president. They split the clerical workers in New Jersey away from our local. And Jan participated in that. He said if he had known that I was going to run for president, he wouldn't have done it. But the leadership in the local was so terrible at the time, that he did it. I didn't hold that against him, but Mancino held that against me that I supported Jan. Ralph set up an interview with me with Mancino. He asked me questions that I thought were inappropriate, like why we didn't merge with 1101, the big Verizon local. He asked me why I supported Jan. He asked me a bunch of questions. I was respectful as I could be, but I answered honestly. He played a role in the bargaining where I felt he had strong-armed one of the committee members. He complained to Ralph that I insulted him. But Ralph, as I said, was always very supportive of me. When an opening arose in 2007, he appointed me to be on staff.

Debbie: [01:56:06] And this was now after SBC had bought AT&T.

Laura: [01:56:15] I guess so.

Debbie: [01:56:16] Yes, that was in 2005. So it was very different. What were you responsible for?

Laura: [01:56:30] Aside from fact that there's the grievance backlog in that office that was just insane. That kind of stuff is a mess. But one of the first things he gave me and one of my first jobs, which was really fascinating, was the closing of Merrimack Valley [manufacturing facility]. I negotiated the closing agreement for Merrimack Valley. That's a giant that used to be a Western Electric plant up in Massachusetts. And it was the most depressing thing, by the time I got there, it was one of these factories that you looked down its miles and miles and miles of machines, and there were just empty floors and signs up about safety and productivity on these empty floors. There were about 300 people left by the time I took it over. I had to both negotiate a closing agreement and also settle all the outstanding grievances and stuff. And there was an interesting local president there. His name was Gary Nelson, who had done a hunger strike, I don't know if you remember him. So that was a really fascinating learning experience. So there were some things I accomplished in doing that.

Debbie: [01:57:45] What were you able to accomplish in that negotiation?

Laura: [01:57:51] We got people a better termination settlement. We just got people a lot of benefits that extended beyond the closing of the place. But it was closing, you know, it wasn't like we were going to change anything. I mean, this is a place that was so huge that when Ted

Kennedy was running for Senate, politicians used to campaign there. It was huge. But, there were other things that happened. AT&T at that point was closing down all the Bell Labs. And I had to negotiate all that and make sure that people were given jobs in other places.

Debbie: [01:58:36] Does Bell Labs still exist?

Laura: [01:58:40] It was AT&T labs, they called it at the time, but they had an office at Holmdel, which is a beautiful historic building. And there was one in Murray Hill, and there was another one, I can't remember where it was that was already closed down. So by the time I got there, the only one that was left of the labs building was Holmdel. And we had to bargain. What we represented there were the maintenance workers, just the maintenance workers. The scientists were not. I did a lot of work with Lucent. I ended up bargaining that contract, and I think we bargained a fabulous contract for Lucent. So I actually did my best work with Lucent, I think, which wasn't in my area of expertise.

Debbie: [01:59:27] But the plant closings were AT&T was moving offshore or they were getting out of the business because competition was driving them out of the manufacturing of telecom equipment?

Laura: [01:59:43] I think when we closed Merrimack Valley, they had pretty much gotten out of manufacturing. Lucent was consolidating, consolidating, consolidating, and look what happened. Lucent's gone. They got bought by Nokia and AT&T just gave its Nokia contract. I don't know why there wasn't much of a deal about this. I mean Nokia bought Lucent and made most of the technological equipment for AT&T for the big changes in the networks, the 5G networks and stuff. And AT&T just signed a huge contract I think with Ericsson. So like this whole history that started with Western Electric, that moved. Also they had installers nationwide who I represented, and we bargained the last contract. They basically got out of the installation business. They contracted out a lot of that work. That last contract was just a strange, strange contract because we had to basically oversee the dissolution of the installation group. And we did very well in terms of the guys' benefits. But it was just too hard that the installers were some of the oldest groups in CWA and Telecom. What I hated about being staff is this issue of editing, it's like everything, everything has to be run past somebody. You can't say what you want. I just felt like I had a bridle over my face, and I did not like that. I've worked with Ralph the best way I could. I was not that happy with the office, to tell you the truth. People in the office, they didn't like me particularly. Some of them still have the grudge from the past, and they resented the fact that I had such a good relationship with Ralph. I just found it really difficult. And I got to see how difficult it is to make changes. Because unless you're willing to discipline people, which nobody seems to be willing to do. I'm a good staff union member, too, but the members deserved better, and I didn't feel like there was enough that could be done to fix things. And I felt that every day I felt that even more so when Ralph left and I became Billy's assistant. You would think that that would give you more power to do what was right. I never felt like I knew how to fix things.

Debbie: [02:02:54] Billy Bates.

Laura: [02:02:56] Bates became a vice president for two years. He just finished out his term, didn't run, and everybody expected me to do it. They said, hell yeah, I think we're going to get Laura. And I said, no. I said, I was 66. I did not want to commit myself to work until I was 70. I

didn't think it was right to run for the job if I wasn't going to stick to it. And, again Nick would have wanted me to run for it, I think. But I just said I put my foot down. I said that I'm not doing this. I don't think I can. I don't think I could do enough in this office. By that point, the office was hardly representing anybody anyway. The size of the AT&T people that that office represented in terms of actually represented them was smaller than half of my local used to be basically. So I just decided it was it was time to go.

Debbie: [02:04:04] And what year was it?

Laura: [02:04:06] That was 2015.

Debbie: [02:04:08] Is there anything else in your notes that we haven't covered?

Laura: [02:04:11] Nope. I mean, there are some international conferences and stuff. I don't think they're that important.

Debbie: [02:04:21] Jeff?

Laura: [02:04:22] Pretty much done.

Jeff: [02:04:23] You know, I've enjoyed all of these. This may be the best one yet. It was really terrific. I really enjoyed this trajectory. And I think it is key to understand that you create change by putting changemakers in position to do that. So, you getting first elected president, local, but then eventually coming on staff is I think a testament to the union to say that we would bring people who had opposed us in the past into those roles because we recognize that they can be catalysts for change. First person I put on staff was Ann Crump and she had been always a radical within our district. But it was this notion of getting people in there that could really make things happen. So thanks for doing this. This is really terrific.

Laura: [02:05:18] The thing I would say is that I think what's important is the experience that I gained early on in the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement going through that whole period in my life, I think gave me, first of all before anybody in the CWA started talking about coalition building, that's what I understood, first of all, that that's what you had to do. You always had to work with other groups and, and I also just having a broader political perspective that even internationally understanding what was going on to the industry nationwide. So I think all of that was very important. One short story, if you don't want to limit that.

Debbie: [02:06:02] It's your time

Laura: [02:06:05] I had a building at 53rd Street and 10th Avenue which was in the middle of the red light district in New York. I mean just prostitutes all over the streets. AT&T had a slogan to try to get people who took phone calls to refer people to the right place. And it was called "Easy to do business with".

Debbie: [02:06:25] Easy to do business with.

Laura: [02:06:27] Everybody got this little note card that had all the phone numbers for everybody that would need to refer people to the right place, so they weren't sending people all over the world. AT&T put out a T-shirt that said, I'm Easy, and wanted people to wear them. So of course my women workers all reacted badly, but particularly the ones on 10th Avenue were getting all kind of shit if they wore the T-shirts. I immediately put out a call to the Coalition of

Labor Union Women and to the National Organization of Women to protest that. I ended up with an apology from AT&T. AT&T had this famous cover to their magazine called Focus, and they were showing how well they do all over the world. And that was a cartoon. And the cartoon for Africa was a monkey. I again immediately knew who to reach out to. You know which civil rights organizations. So, I think having that background really did help me and a worldview really helped me a lot. On the other hand, I think part of my strength was I understood how far to push that. I think one of the reasons Jan Pierce lost is he attempted sometimes do some radical political things that he didn't bring the locals with him to understand. In fact we had a discussion once at an executive meeting about some kind of something was going on in El Salvador. We had contributed some money. It was against the Honduran labor union people in jail, something had gone on. And one of my members raised his hand and said, who the hell is this Al Salvador? You know, and it was clear to me that I was making that mistake. I think the key to doing this work well is bringing your members along with you. And, I loved them, my members, I still go see them once a month if I can. And so also being absolutely open and honest about what your aims are and I think even when I was fighting against Irvine and raising stuff at the convention, I don't think I ever did it in a nasty, underhanded kind of way. I think that issue of being open about who you are and being principled about the way you do it is really the key to doing this work well.

Debbie: [02:09:26] It's a good ending, but I want one more thing on tape. And that's your relationship with the guys in your local.

Laura: [02:09:36] I love them. I love them. Every local has a group that you just know will always have your back. A lot of us, most of them are a little bit older than me, but they are retired and we still get to have a group called the Old Farts, which was always called the Old Farts but then somebody figured out it could stand for Federation of AT&T Retired Technicians, and they meet at a bar once a month. I am actually going up this month. I try to go up when I can, but we really did have a relationship. It was both political and personal, where we felt like I would do anything for them and they would do anything for me. And that's very unusual, I think. So that's one of the things I loved about being a local president. I just loved not every member, I have a lot of terrible members, but actually we went over a lot of people who had quit the union because they had bad experiences with previous local leadership, and some of them became my shop stewards.

Debbie: [02:10:54] I didn't ask this because this isn't always at the foremost of your mind, but one last question. How did you combine working, being active in the union, and raising two kids?

Laura: [02:11:11] Partly it was because the kids were always involved. I mean Nick. We didn't have any money. You asked me how we paid our bills. I have no idea. First of all, Nick was a husband who, when I had to start work at 7:00 in the morning, he was the one to take Katie to the babysitter. We lived in a neighborhood where the neighborhood women were our babysitters for \$50 a week, \$30 a week. Always we never had an issue Nick and I between who did what. Nick knew all the neighborhood women because he did the laundry at the laundromat. But I think the main thing is that they were always involved, my children, it's like we didn't have to leave them at home for a meeting. If one of us couldn't be there, the kids came with me. And I have pictures

of David on a picket line with the local T-shirt hitting his feet, and they're both on the picket lines all the time. And they came to meetings, and everybody in the local knew them. And my kids are about the same age (as Bob Swanson's kids) and they would just hang out together. Dinner table discussion was this. There was a question on there that you didn't ask of who's my mentor, and in fact Nick is a lot of that because our dinner table discussion, we didn't dumb our dinner table discussions down because we had two children there. They learned all this and grew up to be absolutely fabulous, progressive, wonderful people and weren't hurt by it. I don't know how people do it now with the cost of childcare, but the biggest difficult decision was when I decided to enter bargaining, because David was 12, which is a difficult age, and he didn't always get along so great with Nick at that point. And Katie was 15 and she was always perfect. That was a difficult decision. I did find that when I came home sometimes there were some problems. David and Nick could be a little contentious with each other sometimes. We bought a dishwasher because they were fighting so much about who did the dishes. But, Nick, if anything, was almost more supportive than he should have. He pushed me to do some things that I probably would not have decided to do if he hadn't. He really wanted me to run for Irvine's spot. I think we had a different attitude towards child rearing than a lot of kids now and they turned out fine. So, we balanced it. I don't remember exactly how we did it sometimes, but we definitely-- I think the key thing was that as much as we were part of their lives in terms of soccer practice and Katie did theater, and we tried to make it to every single thing we could, but the other half of that was that they were absolutely part of our lives and loved, loved being part of that.

Debbie: [02:14:47] Thank you. This is great.