

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Hawthorne, Velvet

Interviewer: Jeff Rechenbach

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Velvet Hawthorne Interview – April 23, 2024

**Jeff** [00:00:00] I'm Jeff Reichenbach. I'm here today with Velvet Hawthorne. We are going to talk a little bit about her history with CWA. We're also joined by Debbie Goldman and our producer Hannah Goldman, who's running all the technical aspects of this. And where are you at right now, Velvet? I'm in Cleveland. They're in DC. [Interview conducted on April 23, 2024.]

**Velvet** [00:00:20] I'm in Asheville, North Carolina in the mountains.

**Jeff** [00:00:23] Okay. Beautiful.

**Velvet** [00:00:25] Beautiful here.

**Jeff** [00:00:30] The way we've done these, we found it useful to get a little bit of the background of the individuals we're talking to. It's kind of fun learning about that for us anyway so a little selfish motivation there. Why don't you tell us a little bit about your childhood and growing up and where you grew up and that sort of experience?

**Velvet** [00:00:54] I'm the second of four daughters and I was born in New Hartford, New York, which is outside of Utica and the Syracuse area. We say central New York, but it's really northern New York. I went to elementary school, middle school, and high school in the same school system. I was pretty involved in my school's activities. In fact, in eighth grade, I ran for class president, but I was defeated by one of the guys in my class. I was still interested in staying involved and making changes even in my school when I was young, I was definitely not shy. When I was in high school they would call me down to the office when a new kid started school in the middle of the year and they'd say, Velvet's here to show you around. I was the “welcome wagon” rep. I never had a problem making friends or meeting people. I was friends with all the different groups of people in my high school. We had the athletic, academics, music and the drama groups. So I was really kind of a social butterfly. I always accepted people, and have you ever noticed the kids in your school that were the outcasts or the ones bullies picked on? I always tried to befriend them. I'm an empath. I always hated the feeling they must have been feeling and so I would reach out to them.

**Velvet** [00:02:10] While in 8th grade some guys were passing out these flyers and I said, what is this about? It was a notice to join youth ice hockey. I always skated. My dad had an ice rink he built in the backyard. I said to my mother when I went home that I wanted to sign up for youth hockey. She said, well, they don't have a girls team. I said, I know, but I don't see why girls can't play. So she went and signed me up. And for three years I played youth hockey. For three years I was the only girl. They did a story about me in the local newspaper too. I had a nickname, Henrietta Hipcheck. It was a great experience, I was the first and only female player in the league for 3 years.

**Velvet** [00:02:48] My mother always said you can do whatever you believe in. My mom's always been very influential. She is very strong-willed. I was very much the same way. She was always doing things that most women probably wouldn't do and she was very independent. My dad was too. He came up with ways to fix things around the house that were not always normal, we called him MacGyver! He taught us a lot. My mom worked a lot of different jobs, Her union job was a school bus driver for about 8 years. She was a Teamster and so that was my first experience with unions. They didn't talk about unions growing up. They didn't really teach us about unions in school. I went to college at SUNY Delhi, in Delhi, New York. I went to school to be a park ranger because my parents took us camping all the time and I fell in love with the outdoors and I wanted to

do that for a living. But realistically, you don't make any money in that field and there's very few jobs. You actually have to know someone to really get a job in that field. I worked one summer after I graduated in a state park but I wasn't making much money. It was minimum wage. So I supplemented that by waitressing. That's what I did before college. When I was 13, I started working. I was working at a little arcade where I would serve soda and snacks to the kids after school, vacuum and dust and clean the pinball and foosball machines. I always wanted to make my own money, I was a saver. My parents instilled the value of a dollar in us and how to be frugal.

**Velvet** [00:04:36] I worked as a waitress after I graduated college in 1981. Then in 1985, a friend of mine worked at Empire Airlines in the call center and she told me they were hiring. I went and interviewed and they hired me because I had experience working with the public as a waitress. They knew that they needed someone on the phone to take reservations that could interact with people in a positive way. I started working in the Utica office. There were like 35 of us total that took reservations at Empire Airlines. We were a small airline. One year into my job with them, Piedmont Airlines bought us. Piedmont was a decent company. They gave us a little bit more money. I think we were making \$6 an hour back then in the 1980s. Then after that, US Airways merged with Piedmont and PSA at the same time. PSA was a west coast carrier. None of these airlines were unionized in the customer service division of the airline. I can say that when I worked in the Utica office and whenever there was some new policy change or something happened in the office, you'd be in the break room and everyone's constantly complaining. I decided, I can sit here and complain or I could go see the manager and see if there's anything I could do to affect change. So well before I was involved in a union, I always wanted to try to make it a better place to work. I would go into management and say, everybody's upset about this new policy. Is there anything we can do to change it? Maybe do this? And I'd go in there and make suggestions. I never really thought about a union but we had mechanics that were working in our building and they were IAM [International Association of Machinists]. We would see them in the break room and they'd talk to us and ask us if we were interested in joining the union with them.

**Jeff** [00:06:29] Let me stop you there. Before we go too deep in the weeds on the union side, I want to get a little bit more about your background.

**Velvet** [00:06:36] The union.

**Jeff** [00:06:37] No, the growing up piece of it. Tell me a little bit more about some of the jobs your mother did. You said she had a number of jobs over the years.

**Velvet** [00:06:46] Oh my gosh.

**Debbie** [00:06:49] I'm going to ask one key question. I'm sorry to jump in. When were you born?

**Velvet** [00:06:54] 1961.

**Debbie** [00:06:55] Thank you.

**Velvet** [00:07:00] My mom, when we were little she worked in a grocery store as a cashier for a while. She would go to work when my dad would come home. Then she was a Tupperware lady for quite a while. She would go do Tupperware parties, and she worked her way up into a management

job. She did that for a while. Then she decided she had this wild [unintelligible]. She wanted to have an ice cream parlor. There was an old pharmacy in our village, and he had an old-fashioned ice cream soda fountain in there, but he wasn't using it. He had just the pharmacy end of it. So he leased her that part of it, still had the pharmacy, and she ran the ice cream parlor. So I worked there as a soda jerk for a while with her. Then she drove a school bus for the New Hartford school system for I think about 8 years. Then she decided to get her real estate license. So she went to class and got a job as a realtor. She worked until she was 75 selling real estate. She's just a go-getter, I'm telling you. Really cool lady. She's 88, still drives, goes to church, goes to the grocery store, lives alone. Still lives in New York state.

**Jeff** [00:08:18] And what did your father do for a living?

**Velvet** [00:08:20] My dad passed away last year, but for many years he worked construction. Then he worked in an Italian cheese company owned by an uncle and his brother, my uncle through marriage. They owned Caruso Cheese Company in Utica. They made all the Italian cheeses and my Dad would drive the refrigerated truck and go deliver the cheeses to all the different grocery stores and restaurants. Eventually they went out of business. Then my mom heard about this company called Freihofer's Baking Company which was like Entenmann's. They were based in Albany. She told him to go apply for this job. It was a great choice for him because he ended up working his way up into management with Freihofer's. He had a great pension and he worked there till he retired when he was around 60, 61, because he had some health problems. He liked that job but he worked crazy hours and we got free bread and cake every day. He would bring bread and Danish and all this delicious German bakery goods home.

**Velvet** [00:09:24] They always took us camping. We weren't wealthy. I never flew on an airplane until I was like 19 or 20. But they would take us camping. And we did go to Florida one time and go to Disney. We stayed in the campgrounds because we had a camper. But he was so handy. My father had a little workshop and he remodeled this old farmhouse we bought. We would help him, we'd be out there with the hammers, and he put up a basketball hoop and we played basketball. He had a boat, took us waterskiing. We all learned how to water ski, including him. Growing up we had a great childhood. We lived out in the country. Most people think when I say I am from New York, they always assume NY City, but we were in farm and dairy country where I grew up and we had snowmobiles. It was so much fun. We had a really fun childhood.

**Jeff** [00:10:16] And you said you're one of four kids.

**Velvet** [00:10:19] One of four girls. So I'm number two.

**Jeff** [00:10:22] That's what I was going to ask, where you are in the pecking order.

**Velvet** [00:10:24] Yes. My oldest sister was a special ed teacher, so she was always in the teachers unions in New York. And then she moved to California and was always involved in the teachers unions in California also.

**Jeff** [00:10:38] Let's skip ahead now to where you started to go with your airline involvement. Let's focus it on there. I'm sorry. One more question. What position did you play in hockey?

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**Velvet** [00:10:54] I was a left wing.

**Jeff** [00:10:55] Okay. All right. Very good.

**Velvet** [00:10:57] And I was lefty, too, because I'm right-handed. But I played left, I still skate when I can.

**Jeff** [00:11:05] Okay. Very good. So you're working at Empire Airlines. They're taking over or merged with Piedmont. Does anything happen to your call center at that point when they merged?

**Velvet** [00:11:21] We grew immensely. We had 35 reservation agents and Piedmont hired a little over 300 people. They expanded the office. We were upstairs between two hangars where the mechanics did their work. We were still in Utica and Piedmont, had a call center in Winston-Salem [North Carolina] and Nashville [Tennessee]. They had a couple of locations with call centers. I can't remember exactly how many they had but they had about 4 or 5 call centers.

**Jeff** [00:11:53] So Piedmont is dramatically bigger than Empire at that point.

**Velvet** [00:11:57] Yes.

**Jeff** [00:11:58] They are now the dominant player in this merger. Tell me again, how long was it Piedmont before U.S. Airways came along and merged? How long was it just Piedmont that you were part of?

**Velvet** [00:12:12] It was one year with Empire Airlines. I started in [19]85. Then the very next year Piedmont Airlines acquired us. It was a hostile takeover because the CEO of the company at Empire did not want to sell but the stockholders, basically, and the board of directors voted to because they doubled their investment. It was \$8 a share. They bought us for \$16 a share, if I remember correctly.

**Jeff** [00:12:35] Wow.

**Velvet** [00:12:38] He was not happy about that at all.

**Jeff** [00:12:42] And so on.

**Velvet** [00:12:44] What was that?.

**Jeff** [00:12:44] No. Go ahead. Go ahead. You're going where I was headed anyway.

**Velvet** [00:12:49] Within probably four years then U.S. Airways or US Air at the time is what they were known as. They had previously been Mohawk Airlines. There were multiple mergers throughout the years. So then US Air came in and acquired Piedmont and PSA at the same time. It was a huge merger. It was the largest airline merger in history between the three airlines. It was a huge undertaking and they didn't do the best job because financially it was a struggle for them. They did bring us up to the US Air wages, which was a little bit of an increase for us. They had an 11 year pay scale for the non-represented people at US Air. They recognized our seniority at Empire, which was good and so they gave us our time with Empire and Piedmont. Our starting pay was around \$6 an hour and we topped out in our 11th year with US Air at \$17.88 an hour. But once

you hit that, you stagnated. There were no raises for years and years. I went five years with the same rate of pay. There were other things happening. They froze our pension in 1991. We had a pension. Piedmont froze it for the nonunion folks but they weren't able to do that to the pilots and flight attendants and mechanics who were already represented. They had to negotiate that and the company did not succeed. But they froze our pension. It comes from the PBGC [Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation]. By that point we had 11 call centers across the country. There were 5,000 reservation agents. The airport employees in customer service also were not represented. There was a lot of talk because the airport employees worked side-by-side and interacted with the pilots, flight attendants and the mechanics and they were definitely more in favor of having a union than the call center people were because they were exposed to it. We were not.

**Jeff** [00:15:07] So for context, let's talk a little bit about that work. So the call center work, those of our generation know, this is where you used to call in to make a reservation or change a reservation. All of that work was done principally domestically at this point I'm gathering. Did they have any overseas call centers or all the work was in the United States?

**Velvet** [00:15:33] Well, we did not at that time that I'm aware of.

**Jeff** [00:15:40] What's that work like? Let's talk a little bit about that call center work. Describe your day.

**Velvet** [00:15:49] You would come in and you had to sign into your phone immediately. You had 15 minutes to a half-hour to read any updates, any new information, anything that's changed and then you just plugged in. I was in what we called a general sales office. So we got just general domestic sales calls. We got two paid 15 minute breaks and an unpaid half-hour lunch. Your time was tracked for your 15 minute breaks and lunch, if you were late a few times you would get written up. Everything was timed and you went to your break, You couldn't leave the building. Management was very strict about attendance. They secretly tape-recorded your calls and then they'd call you in and go over your call. You'd have to listen to it. I can remember they'd record me. When I would talk to a customer I'd sometimes say, "Alrighty, let me check those flights for you." I was told I shouldn't say, alrighty. They said, you sound too folksy. We want you to be more professional. They were very strict about our clothing. Even though no one really saw us, we couldn't wear casual clothing. Here's the funny thing. They would send people home if they had on a pair of pants that had grommets on the pockets. They would send you home. They said if you don't look professional, you will not sound professional.

**Velvet** [00:17:13] We had to bid shifts. Everything was seniority. So if you didn't have good seniority, you never saw a weekend off which was funny because at Empire it was fixed days off. But Piedmont, for a short time we enjoyed what they called a rotating schedule. You would have 2 or 3 weekends off, and then you'd have to rotate in and have a weekend where you worked. We liked that. But when we merged with US Airways, they had a fixed schedule. So they put a vote out for us to vote whether we wanted a fixed or a rotating schedule. We lost. We were outnumbered. So we went to a fixed schedule. For years I had to bid a 6:00 am shift in order to get a day shift, I had to bid Tuesday, Wednesdays off. We did have some flexibility. They would let you trade days off with people to a degree. You could get someone to work for you or trade days or shifts.

**Jeff** [00:18:10] Was this a 24 hour --.

**Velvet** [00:18:11] I worked holidays and I worked nights and shift work.

**Jeff** [00:18:16] So the office was 24 hours?

**Velvet** [00:18:18] It was, yes, 24 hours. And they gave us a little premium for working the night shift.

**Jeff** [00:18:26] Are you in a cubicle or is it just an open bullpen?

**Velvet** [00:18:30] Yeah, they were little cubicles and you had a headset on with a mouthpiece. Sometimes you could hardly hear these customers or sometimes they'd come in and they're screaming. I think I have hearing loss from that job. It was a long, tedious day.

**Jeff** [00:18:53] How did you actually book them a flight?

**Velvet** [00:18:57] We used the SABRE system. We had a computer system when I was hired. I didn't work there when they'd have these posters that looked like airplanes with seats. When someone booked, they'd take a card and they'd go stick it in for the seat on that particular plane on that day. That's how they kept track of it. We had a mainframe system. It wasn't a PC. We leased it from the SABRE system which was owned at one time by American Airlines. We had the low-end package. It was interesting because we had to use these big huge books and they had like tissue paper thin pages, and it was called the OAG, the Official Airline Guide. If someone wanted to fly us to JFK and they were going to pick up British Airways to go to London, I had to pull this book out and look up what the minimum connecting time was. It was a huge book. It contained every single airport in the world with all the minimum connection time. London might have had seven pages and you had to look at the connecting times between which countries. It was a tedious chore to do that. They also timed our calls. They timed how long we put people on hold. If you put someone on hold to check something, they would tell you you're putting people on hold too long. It was a stressful job. They also would pull up and review your sales reports. They would ask, did you ask for the sale and right away ask for their credit card? They wanted us to ask for the credit card immediately, tell people, "we'll hold this for you." You get 24 hours to call back to purchase. They stressed the length of your call was very important, how long you were on the call, and then they also stressed did you get the sale?

**Jeff** [00:20:53] Did they have standards for how long the calls should be?

**Velvet** [00:20:57] Yes. You had to reach a certain percentage and you could get written up on a [discipline] level if you're not performing at the level they want you at. You get people that want to talk to their customers. How are you today? That kind of thing. They want you to get right to it, ask for the sale and get off the phone and take the next call. If you go unavailable [to take calls] to get a sip of water, blow your nose, whatever, all that ticks, all of it ticks and they watch all your stats. Those were sometimes very stressful to see.

**Jeff** [00:21:32] Sure. You mentioned you're in the sales office. What are the other disciplines within the call center universe at the airline industry?

**Velvet** [00:21:42] It was attendance which was very, strict. Usually after three absences in a rolling calendar, you get put in a verbal warning. It's a rolling calendar so you could have seven absences and lose your job. If you're in probation, you can't be sick once, you can't be out [once] in six months during probation [or] you'll lose your job. They'll let you go. So that was really strict.

**Jeff** [00:22:07] Is there a separate office that handles, like, flight changes or that isn't just sales?

**Velvet** [00:22:16] No, we had a desk that you did out [bound] calls. This desk was what they called the reissue. If we had a schedule change, which happened a lot every other month, they would change our schedules and we'd have people that were booked. So sometimes you would be put on what they called the queue desk, and what you would have to do is they would just pop queues up of reservations, and you'd have to call that person and say, I'm sorry, your flight at 8:00 is now leaving at 11. Or, we no longer have that non-stop flight. Now you're going to have to make a change of planes in LaGuardia or something. You had to be the bearer of bad news usually and people didn't always like to hear that. That's all automated now. You don't even have to talk to a person. They just send that stuff to you. But this was all before the internet was really popular.

**Jeff** [00:23:04] Right.

**Velvet** [00:23:04] People didn't book their own reservations. We did have one Spanish desk that we could transfer people to but it wasn't in our office. It was another location within the U.S.

**Jeff** [00:23:17] Yes. Okay. So, US Air takes over. They're now the dominant carrier. They've got Piedmont, they've got PSA, they've got whatever others they've picked up over the years. What are they trying to do to consolidate all that work? Were there call centers that were being closed?

**Velvet** [00:23:40] Oh yes. Yes, definitely.

**Debbie** [00:23:41] Jeff. Can I ask a few more questions about the work before we move on?

**Jeff** [00:23:46] Yeah, sure, sure.

**Debbie** [00:23:47] Thank you. This is going to be a lightning round. A bunch of questions. Do you remember how long you were allowed to be, on average, on a call?

**Velvet** [00:23:59] If I remember right it was supposed to be under three minutes.

**Debbie** [00:24:05] Did you have to overlap? In other words, you'd be typing in information while you were taking the next call.

**Velvet** [00:24:15] That's why we would go unavailable because we sometimes didn't want to keep the customer on the phone so we would go unavailable to finish or complete the record, whatever it is, we had to put notes in it. That was always looked at. But yeah, a lot of times if you're trying to finish up and then another call would drop in automatically as soon as that person hung up, you got another call.

**Debbie** [00:24:39] What kind of training did you have?



**Velvet** [00:24:43] It's funny, they gave us two weeks of training. The worst part was learning the airport codes because you had to memorize them, and there were a lot to learn. After two weeks of training, they put you on the SABRE system. I remember having this little tiny notebook with a flip chart with cheat tabs so that I could find all the entries, because the entries would be massively long to put in different information. They never made sense. It was always some kind of computer language, obviously, and I'd never worked on a computer until this job. You had a lot of entries you had to learn, a lot of them that you didn't use a lot so you always kept a little book next to you to keep with them.

**Debbie** [00:25:27] So it was very skilled. You had to learn a lot of information.

**Velvet** [00:25:30] Yes. You did.

**Debbie** [00:25:32] Did you have adherence? You had to adhere to your schedule and if not, you might --

**Velvet** [00:25:38] Adherence applied to your call times, adherence to your schedule. Yes, all of that, in between calls, how long were you available or not available to the customer? How many bathroom breaks you took.. That was annoying because you're having a cup of coffee in the morning, and then you come in, you get your water, and you don't always go to the bathroom when you have your break. Sometimes you have to go and they would talk to us. You have too many bathroom breaks. So then Piedmont came out and put what we used to refer to as the "pee pee" sheet. That's what we called it. We had to put down what time we came, took ourselves off the phone, how long we were in the bathroom, and what time we came back. We had to write that down and turn it in every single day.

**Debbie** [00:26:26] Was there a lot of turnover in the call center?

**Velvet** [00:26:34] Not really. No. Not really.

**Debbie** [00:26:40] What kind of discipline would you get?

**Velvet** [00:26:45] Our discipline was either on performance or attendance or if you did something egregious to someone else or you got an argument in the breakroom, they might write you up. But you only got three absences before you went into a verbal warning. If I got the flu and I was out for three days, that counted for three absences. It was difficult. You almost felt like you had to go to work when you were sick, because once you hit your fourth absence, you got put in a level 1 and then level 2 after the fifth absence.

**Debbie** [00:27:34] And what's level three?.

**Velvet** [00:27:36] You could be out seven days and lose your job in a year.

**Debbie** [00:27:39] Level three means --

**Velvet** [00:27:40] Level three is you're right on the edge of being fired after you get another absence. We didn't have family leave [job-protected Family and Medical Leave] at that point. So there was no family leave in place until [19]90? I can't remember what year that started. [19]95, [1996], I don't know. [It was 1993] Level three was the one step before your final warning and that was it. We did lose people to attendance even if they had a serious illness.

**Debbie** [00:28:11] The last question and thank you, Jeff, for letting me intervene here. You talked about before computers, which was before you started to work. I'm trying to picture that. People would get up and walk [around]. Since you're doing planes far in advance, how did this work?

**Velvet** [00:28:34] Back then I don't think they booked more than a month out is what I believe happened. I was never in that but I know they told me how it used to work. You'd take the call and you had these little cards and you would put the name of the person and their phone number and all that and then you'd say, do you want a window or an aisle? Then you'd walk over and you'd slide it into this little pocket and it was the representative of a seat on the airplane and there were all these big boards with these airplanes on them, every day of the week through the month, so February 1st or the 28th or whatever. Yeah.

**Debbie** [00:29:13] You started and there was a computerized system. I assume you were networked into some kind of a switch that connected --.

**Velvet** [00:29:21] There was a mainframe system. It was not a PC. This was 1985, there was no personal computer, no mouse or anything. Everything was a mask. When you pulled it up, everything was already pre-populated. You just type in the information that way.

**Debbie** [00:29:47] You were in front of a system that was connected to the mainframe and the mainframe was in your building?

**Velvet** [00:29:54] At the time that it was Empire, yes. But then as we merged, then it went to these main massive headquarters where they maintained them.

**Debbie** [00:30:04] Can you identify any other major technology changes?

**Velvet** [00:30:12] Well, I think they improved our headphones, they got us better headphones so we could hear better. No, nothing really that I can remember during those earlier years.

**Debbie** [00:30:27] Once you had PCs, was there any change in what the employer was able to track and monitor?

**Velvet** [00:30:38] Not much different, really. I'm trying to think. I can't think of anything that was really different. They pretty much stayed with the same type of statistics that they used on us.

**Debbie** [00:30:48] Did people think it was a good job?

**Velvet** [00:30:52] People liked the benefits of the job, meaning you could travel. That's what most people liked about it. But people got very stressed out. It was a very stressful day when you're there knowing that they could be recording me and listening to everything I say. So you have to be really careful. You're always worried. Even when you were not on a call and you were talking to the

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person sitting next to you, maybe when there's a lull in the calls and you talk to them, they're listening to that, too. They could listen to it. We used to sit there and try to put our finger over the little mouthpiece, so that I could say to them, hey, could you pick up a turkey sandwich for me or something? You didn't want them to hear you, oh, I went out last night and we were dancing. You don't want them to hear any of that. You had to be really careful because they were listening.

**Jeff** [00:31:49] Debbie acts like I'm in charge here. Don't let her give you that impression.

**Velvet** [00:31:56] He's retired. He's not in charge.

**Jeff** [00:31:59] I'm not in charge of anything anymore. Do you still know your airport codes?

**Velvet** [00:32:06] Most of them? Yes.

**Jeff** [00:32:07] Okay.

**Velvet** [00:32:08] And I probably have learned more because of all the years that we've added more cities.

**Jeff** [00:32:13] All right. All right. YYZ.

**Velvet** [00:32:16] YYZ is. Oh, shoot. Now you got me.

**Jeff** [00:32:20] Okay.

**Velvet** [00:32:21] That's not Canada. That's not a Canadian city.

**Jeff** [00:32:24] Yes, it is.

**Velvet** [00:32:25] It is. Yeah. All right, so I know Montreal and Ottawa. YUL and YOW. YYZ is that Toronto.?

**Jeff** [00:32:32] Yes it is.

**Velvet** [00:32:33] Yes. Okay.

**Jeff** [00:32:34] I deliberately picked one that would be close to New York State.

**Velvet** [00:32:38] Okay.

**Jeff** [00:32:38] Yeah.

**Velvet** [00:32:39] I thought Canada started Y's for some reason.

**Jeff** [00:32:42] IAG.

**Velvet** [00:32:46] IAG. Shoot.

**Jeff** [00:32:47] It's another New York one. All right. Niagara Falls okay. Let's move on.

**Velvet** [00:32:52] Well we never really flew in there. We flew to Buffalo.

**Jeff** [00:32:54] Okay, I didn't know.

**Velvet** [00:32:55] Okay. We never flew to IAG so I never learned that one.

**Jeff** [00:32:59] All right. So let's get back to this. I was just trying to explore a little bit about what happened when US Air takes over. Is there call center consolidation? What does that look like and what impact does that have on the people in the call center you're in? And I guess ultimately their perspective on organizing and doing something about it. Go ahead.

**Velvet** [00:33:25] Well, when US Airways and Piedmont or Empire and Piedmont merged with US Airways, at that point, we had a call center in Syracuse, New York, which was only 45 miles from Utica. I always believed that eventually they're going to shut one of them down and I kind of assumed it was going to be Utica. So before that even happened, I told my husband at the time, I said, I'm going to look into other cities. I'm tired of the cold weather here. So I explored all the reservation center options. Pittsburgh, Orlando, Nashville and San Diego were still open because that was a PSA call center. I ended up putting in a transfer for Winston-Salem. The reason I did that was because they had all these different specialty departments. They were one of the biggest call centers. They had the military desk, the human remains desk. They had the group desk, the rate desk, the international desk, and each floor had different departments. I wanted something a little more challenging. I was burnt out from just, I want to go to Florida, I want to go to Disney. That's what they call up and request. I wanted to move somewhere warmer. So I convinced my husband to move. I put the transfer in and it was a different environment down there. Being in the south, everyone got a kick out of my accent. They said, "Oh, she talks fast. She's from New York," and here they are all these southern women. I used to talk to a lot of the agents down there while working in Utica because they would help me with a rate problem or something, I would call and talk to them. I can remember when I got down there, they're like, "You're Velvet, we've been talking to you for years." Winston-Salem was a very big call center and it was a smart move on my part. I moved there in 1990 after I put the transfer in. I'd been working for the airline for five years and it was a voluntary move so I had to move myself. But it was a smart move because not much long after I moved, maybe 6 to 8 months, they closed Utica. There were over 350 people there in Utica. They said, these are your choices. You can move voluntarily to Syracuse. A lot of them commuted that 45 minute drive, roundtrip was an hour and a half. So a lot of them did that but a whole bunch of them came to Winston-Salem. A lot of them did, like 60 or 70 of them came to Winston-Salem. And the funny thing about that is with all the mergers and all the reservation centers closing, Winston-Salem was one of the only ones left. We had three centers left after the consolidation and that was it. We had Pittsburgh and I think it was Winston-Salem and Orlando. Then eventually they closed Orlando. So then we were down to two call centers, Pittsburgh and Winston-Salem when it was US Airways.

**Velvet** [00:36:31] We also had reduced the number of people because a lot of people didn't want to move. At that point, the internet was starting to become popular. There wasn't really a need for so

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many people. I don't think they had started outsourcing to Mexico City yet or to Manila. At that point, I'm trying to remember when that happened.

**Jeff** [00:36:59] So where does the union come in on all this? You mentioned earlier that you were not shy about speaking up.

**Velvet** [00:37:07] No, not at all.

**Jeff** [00:37:08] And confronting management.

**Velvet** [00:37:10] Right.

**Jeff** [00:37:12] When does the notion of doing this collectively come in?

**Velvet** [00:37:14] In 1995, I got a phone call from Josie Esposito, and she was in the San Diego office, and she was a PSA agent. They used to be Teamsters in that office and then when PSA was bought out, they lost their representation because they didn't end up trying to have an election to organize all of us, which is what would have been required. Josie was definitely interested. She somehow got my name because I had gone to a couple of informational meetings, maybe at a Denny's with some other union groups, and I think maybe the Teamsters had come to talk to us, United Food and Commercial Workers came to talk to us. But we were in the south. The women that I worked with would come in and say "Oh my husband said that I should not be part of a union." And I said, well, your husband doesn't put up with what we put up [with] here. He should come and see what we do all day. But anyways, Josie got in touch with me. She said, are you interested? I said, yes. She asked if there's more people interested. So we started getting people interested and then Rick Braswell [CWA national organizer who led the US Airways campaign] started having these conference calls with the internal organizers nationwide. He included the airport and reservation agents. You got to know everybody and built a support group. Eventually we'd have 70 or 80 people on these calls.

**Jeff** [00:38:34] Okay, just for a second.

**Velvet** [00:38:36] Yes.

**Jeff** [00:38:37] To the airport people. These are the people at the counter and also at the gate that coordinate your path through the airport to get on the plane. Is that we're talking about?

**Velvet** [00:38:49] These are the ticket counter and gate agents, the customer assistant reps that would drive the handicapped and also the city ticket offices were included as well which were located all over the big cities. We used to have those, you don't even have them anymore. We were considered by the National Mediation Board [NMB], which governs us under the Railway Labor Act, a class or craft. Anytime you interacted with a customer or passenger, we were considered part of the passenger service group. That's how we were grouped together to organize and have an election.

**Jeff** [00:39:35] Under NMB rules, the gate agents, the ticket counters, and the call centers are all considered to be one class of airline workers.

**Velvet** [00:39:45] They called it a class or craft. Yes.

**Jeff** [00:39:47] Okay. Okay, good. That was just for context.

**Velvet** [00:39:54] What's really interesting about that was when you go to a small airport, let's use Greensboro for example. Greensboro airport isn't a huge airport. They were doing not only just the ticket counter and the gates, but they would also go outside and load the bags. When the IAM [Machinists] had organized the baggage handlers slightly before we organized, they were still in negotiations. We needed a fence agreement to figure out our seniority because people were told you have to make a choice. You're either going to work inside the airport, in a small airport like that, and you're going to just work at the ticket counter and gates, or you choose to work out on the ramp with the IAM. But they gave us a cutoff date. We were able to achieve a fence agreement with the company before we even started full negotiations and working on our contract language. The decision was; I've got ten years, I work the ticket counter, but if I go out to the ramp after they get their contract, I'm going to start at the bottom. So I want to keep my ten years and I want to go work on the ramp. We developed this fence to protect our seniority. So vice versa, if a person out on the ramp wanted to come into customer service, they had to do it by a certain date. And then once that date hit, if you did a transfer, you were now in a different class or craft, and you would start at zero on your seniority for bidding and vacations and that type of thing. So it was really important to get that. Of course the company fought us about it because they didn't want that division in the small airports. That meant they would have had to hire more people.

**Jeff** [00:41:41] They wanted that flexibility.

**Velvet** [00:41:42] Right.

**Jeff** [00:41:44] Okay, so let's talk about the Braswell conference calls. Talk more about those and what they led to.

**Velvet** [00:41:49] They were amazing. They were very informative. We connected with people and were able to kind of network. At one point they were asking us to basically put our names out there. He [Braswell] said, we're going to make a list of people who want to be interim shop stewards. The companies at that time, if you had a grievance they would let you bring a coworker in. So we became those people. We put our names on a list on the bulletin boards. My name was up there. Management knew that I was out there talking to people about the union and I wasn't really afraid. I had a decent work record. I didn't think that they would come after me. Actually, I did get some pushback and I had a threat one time, which was from one of the managers, one of the supervisors. She pulled me into this office and said, we found this reservation, and it was a domestic reservation, but I worked in international reservations at that point. They were trying to intimidate me. I brought in one of my coworkers, we sat there with our notepads and I said, I want to see this record, and I want to know what you're accusing me of. So they were really trying to intimidate us. But after that, they just kind of backed off in Winston-Salem and some of the other cities. Orlando was pretty bad. They really intimidated the people down there. But I stood up to them. I said, I'm a good employee, that isn't my reservation and they walked out of the room, said, sorry, we made a mistake. That's how that ended. But it was scary. I was very passionate about it. I was like, we need a union. We don't want to lose anymore. They wanted to take pay cuts. Whenever they wanted to take a pay cut,

they just took it. We knew the other groups had the right to negotiate and the company was obligated too. So that was part of it and just having a voice at work to be able to just affect change in just our everyday job and what we did. It was really important to me.

**Debbie** [00:43:57] Why CWA?

**Velvet** [00:43:59] You know, it's funny, we did talk to some of the other unions. We didn't see a correlation between us and the Food and Commercial Workers Union and the IAM [Machinists] ; they really weren't that gung ho about organizing us. I can remember one of the guys saying, oh, they just don't want a bunch of women because we were a higher percentage of women in those jobs. I did go to a couple meetings. They had a big cookout and they invited us to it. They just weren't organized enough to really start something with us. The first person that I actually worked with, and I got to remember her last name. She worked in the Charlotte local. You remember Bonnie Overman? She worked with Bonnie Overman and she was a telephone person. She worked out on the lines and she came and met with us on a regular basis. She was deployed to come help us. She was in Charlotte. She would come to Winston-Salem and work with us. She was my first interaction with someone who was a union rep who was trying to help us. [Sandy Weaver from the AT&T center in Charlotte.]

**Debbie** [00:45:06] Was she a service rep?

**Velvet** [00:45:10] She was a service rep. [correction: service technician]. She drove a truck and went out and did service. We didn't have many of the call center people come and talk to us. I don't know why. But anyways, she was very influential. Rhen, I'm trying to think who else came. Rick[Braswell] was probably the driving force. Everyone really respected Rick and he was really good at what he did. The company even respected Rick. They even said that to me. He left a good impression.

**Debbie** [00:45:48] Who was Josie Esposito?

**Velvet** [00:45:51] Josie was a reservation agent in San Diego and she was one of the people -- Rick had developed a 50 person council and we did elections. We actually did it democratically in our locations. If you wanted to run for one of the positions on this council, this bargaining council, we had elections within our own office. I was an alternate, I was on the council, but I wasn't originally on the bargaining team. We had two reservation representatives and two airport people. Josie was one of the reservation people on the bargaining team. Rick had four people to begin with. And I was on the council.

**Debbie** [00:46:39] This is once you already had the union?

**Velvet** [00:46:43] Yes, once we already had the union.

**Debbie** [00:46:44] Going back to when you said Josie called you. Was she one of the early initiators?

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**Velvet** [00:46:52] We credit her with the first person that made the phone call to CWA. We say that she was that person. Yes. If it wasn't for her, if she hadn't called me, I don't know if I would have known about it when I did.

**Debbie** [00:47:08] So the initial organizing came out of San Diego?

**Velvet** [00:47:12] For the CWA. Yes. For sure.

**Jeff** [00:47:18] I want to do a couple things for context. You're going to have the opportunity to review and edit this at the end. If you want to call Bonnie Overman and get the name of that woman that came to all these meetings, it would be nice to give her a little recognition so feel free to do that and that once we go forward. But you talked about the bargaining team or the bargaining what do we call them?

**Velvet** [00:47:52] The bargaining committee of 50 people.

**Jeff** [00:47:57] Was this organized before you actually got recognition? Before you actually won your elections?

**Velvet** [00:48:05] Well, if you remember, we had three elections.

**Jeff** [00:48:08] Right exactly. That's why I'm trying to put the context in.

**Velvet** [00:48:12] It was after we had won our first election.

**Jeff** [00:48:17] So let's talk about leading up to that first election. The one we lost. But I'd like you to talk a little bit about how the rules are unusual and while we lost, we didn't really lose. So can you talk a little bit about that?

**Velvet** [00:48:35] So if you worked at the phone company, your typical election process is if you have 100 people that work at this particular location for a non-transportation industry, and 20 of them vote for the union, ten vote against it and the other 70 don't even cast a ballot, They have a union. Okay. [20 for, 10 against, majority of those who vote win.] That's different. That's the NLRB that governs that. But in the transportation industry which is governed by the Railway Labor Act, it's all of the people in the entire country that do that job. So in our case, it was 8 or 9000 people that were considered part of the class or craft. They mailed everyone a ballot that was eligible to vote and you had so much time to fill it out and mail it back. Our first election happened right near Christmas, too, which was very difficult. People would get it [the ballot] thinking it's junk mail, throw it out. The first election I believe we had 46% [of the unit voting yes]. But in the transportation industry, you have to get 50% plus one of those 8000 people to cast a ballot. If you did not cast a ballot, they counted it as a no vote. So that to me was very unfair. If I didn't cast a ballot, I don't care, so I shouldn't have any say in this. But that rule made it very difficult because we were spread out all over the country to get people to get the word out that you need to cast a ballot, you need to fill it out. It's going to come in the mail. So communication-wise with people, if they hadn't sent us an email or we didn't have any way to reach them, we had to go out there personally and go visit these locations, which I did a lot of on my days off. I'd go to call centers and we'd stand outside and hand out flyers. We did that for almost a year.



**Jeff** [00:50:40] Does the ballot that gets sent out by the National Mediation Board -- this is for some context here -- do the ballots actually say yes for CWA or no for no union? Or is it just yes CWA?

**Velvet** [00:50:58] Actually it'll say CWA. And I think the IAM got themselves onto the ballot.

**Jeff** [00:51:03] Okay. Right. Right.

**Velvet** [00:51:05] You could pick the IAM or you could do a write-in. I know a few people wrote in stupid stuff like Mickey Mouse or whatever, but they just didn't take it seriously.

**Jeff** [00:51:17] You didn't have to proactively vote no because if you didn't send that ballot in you were voting no.

**Velvet** [00:51:22] Just threw it out and then [it]s a no vote.

**Jeff** [00:51:25] Okay. So we win that election.

**Velvet** [00:51:28] No, we lost that.

**Jeff** [00:51:31] But for all intents and purposes, we lose by NMB rules.

**Velvet** [00:51:35] Yeah.

**Jeff** [00:51:35] So the overwhelming majority of people who voted [voted] for CWA.

**Velvet** [00:51:40] Yeah 46% I think that was. Yes.

**Jeff** [00:51:42] So 46% of everybody that worked there.

**Velvet** [00:51:46] Yes.

**Jeff** [00:51:47] Not 46% of all the ballots that were returned.

**Velvet** [00:51:50] That's correct.

**Jeff** [00:51:51] Okay. So, we have to regroup now and try this again. What happens? How do we get a second election? Talk a little bit about that process.

**Velvet** [00:52:02] There's a set of rules that the company is not to basically intimidate us and hold closed door meetings to try to put fear in us about unions. But we had definite proof, we had people write statements. Rick had gone out and talked to people and we got people to write statements, and in some of our locations, it was very severe. People were threatened. We were able to prove to the NMB that the company violated the rules and intimidated us in many locations, and we asked them to give us another expedited election and to tell the company that you need to abide by these rules. Eventually the NMB did agree to do that but then the company challenged it. The company said,

no, no, no. You're violating our freedom of speech. The NMB ruled against them and they [[the company] appealed it. But while the appeal was going on the NMB went ahead and sent out the ballots and we won that election by like, I don't know, 55% or something. It was 57%, if I remember right.

**Velvet** [00:53:17] I think I sent you guys the timeline that I put out for the steward training that I did. So we went ahead and voted and started our process. In 1997 we were working on getting our committee together, getting all of our proposals ready. The company was required to start negotiating with us. So we're negotiating. We've got I don't know how many articles completed, but we were a year and a half into it. And they [the company] won one of their many appeals on a technicality. So guess what happened? We basically were without a union at that point. The NMB said oh, some judge somewhere said, yeah, the company's right. So now there is no union. So everything we had worked on basically was put on hold. And what was funny was after that happened, the company put out a letter to all of the employees and said, many of the things that were already negotiated, we're going to go ahead and implement those. We're going to give you this and we're going to give you a raise in a couple months. They never signed it. Technically, there was no guarantee. They kept backing out of these promises which was a benefit for us because it definitely convinced the ones that were on the fence that, yeah, I think maybe we would have been better off with the union. Then we went to the NMB and we said, fine. We want another election. So we had to wait a year because in between elections, you have a one year wait before you can have another election. During that time we worked on getting the support we needed, letting people know these are the things the company has agreed to. These are the benefits, the advantages we're going to get. That move by the company where they promised all this stuff and then showed people they really weren't going to stick to their promises helped us get one of the largest turnout. We had close to 84% of the members that voted yes in that election. So we went back into bargaining again.

**Jeff** [00:55:35] Again, just so people understand this process that you're going through because it is unique. It's different from a traditional organizing drive, a traditional [NLRB] organizing election. The NMB, the National Mediation Board, is appointed by the president. Is that right?

**Velvet** [00:55:56] Yes. There's three people that are in charge at that level.

**Jeff** [00:56:00] And at this point, we're in the mid-nineties. So the president is Bill Clinton.

**Velvet** [00:56:07] Yes.

**Jeff** [00:56:08] So we've got a board that potentially is friendly and has said they [the company] did some unfair things and so we're going to give you another election. We run the second election. We win the second election. The company recognizes that they're not going to win anything at the NMB so they go to the federal appeals court to try and get this stopped. That's where the election actually gets overturned by the courts, not by the NMB.

**Velvet** [00:56:38] Right.

**Jeff** [00:56:39] Okay. So election three[is a] huge win. People recognize now the stall tactics that the company has been deploying and acknowledge the need for having a voice to deal with what's going on in that industry, which is in some upheaval at that point as well.

**Velvet** [00:56:56] Yes.

**Jeff** [00:56:57] Okay. So talk about now you've won the third election. You're back into bargaining. How quickly do we get a contract then?

**Velvet** [00:57:07] I want to say it was another 8 or 9 months. We were down to the three major issues like every labor contract. It was pay, benefits, pension, 401K maybe. We weren't getting anywhere with the company on those last three things. It was down to the big money items. We were going to be done with it at that point and the company just wouldn't agree. Well, it's funny how politics played a huge role in this, and Bill Clinton did too. A lot of people don't know about this. The company, Stephen Wolf was the CEO at the time of US Air, really wanted the London Heathrow route. They had a Gatwick route, but they could not get into Heathrow and they really, really wanted it. Well, Morty Bahr [CWA president] had someone get ahold of someone, maybe it was Bill Clinton, one of his aides, I don't know, and set up a meeting for Stephen Wolf to appeal to the President to try to help him get the British government to somehow give us a slot, one slot in London Heathrow is what we wanted. And if we could do this, they would agree to all these other things. And luckily it happened. And luckily that political activity that happened to get that London Heathrow route got us our last three items in the contract. We got one of the best contracts in the industry. Honestly, I can say that. So it was an interesting lesson for me. I had no idea how much politics were involved in what we were doing.

**Jeff** [00:58:55] Oh very cool.

**Velvet** [00:58:57] It was an education for me for sure.

**Jeff** [00:59:00] You've got a contract now and you're still working in Winston-Salem?

**Velvet** [00:59:05] I was working in Winston-Salem and I got a message or a call from Rick Braswell. He said we're looking to bring in two staff that were on the bargaining team. To go back, there were four people but after three months of bargaining, Rick realized he needed more people with more information from the small cities, from the specialty departments. So that's how I got invited into bargaining and I was brought in as a resource person. Then I was there through the whole thing. But Rick had decided, well, not Rick, but the [CWA] executive board needed to have some people with airline experience in staff jobs to basically enforce the contract, police the contract. Because we knew the contract, we knew every word of it pretty much. We knew the intent and we had bargaining notes, we knew what they said when we were bargaining. So he contacted me and said this was in December of 1999 and said, I'd like to enter your name as one of the people to consider in this position. There were a few other people also, probably 4 or 5 people. But in the end, I was a little skeptical. I said, do I have to move to Washington? My family's here, my husband has a business, and my daughter was just 8 years old. I told him I'm interested but I really don't want to live in Washington. Well, it worked out. I ended up staying in this area and I worked out of the Greensboro office. Jimmy Smith, VP [vice-president] of District 3 offered me this position and the other person was Tim Yost. He was an airport person and I was a reservation person. They wanted that balance so that we had that experience. But I also had to know the airport contract language, which I learned in bargaining. I learned as I was traveling to bargaining all the time, I would go out of Greensboro or Charlotte, and they knew who I was, and they would share with me

all the items they desired in the contract. So I learned the airport job pretty quickly and understood what their issues were. I think the same for Tim. He learned the reservation stuff as well because he had to deal with the Pittsburgh office where he was located.

**Velvet** [01:01:14] We both went to training, we went to staff school and two weeks of training, which for me was amazing. I was like, oh my gosh, there's a lot to learn here. But you really learn. I had great mentors in my office. I had Jimmy Gurganus and Wallace Weaver and they taught me way more than I even learned in staff school. They were great to have as my coworkers in my office, they were wonderful. I can say that without them, I don't know if I would have survived. But it was an exciting job. Pulls you in a million different directions with all the things you have to do. But I kind of like that. It was so much more exciting than the job I was doing. I love to see the changes that we were able to affect. That to me was a huge reward, just seeing the better pay and benefits that we got. People just couldn't comprehend the changes. They just didn't, especially the new people coming in that didn't know what we went through to get representation. It was a matter of educating people about what we went through so they would appreciate having a union.

**Jeff** [01:02:33] Sure. Describe a little bit of the day to day work that you did as a staff representative working with the airline units within CWA.

**Velvet** [01:02:43] Well, in the beginning our biggest chore was to get shop stewards. Without shop stewards, managers could do whatever they wanted because people weren't aware of all the intricacies of the contract and the things that the managers are supposed to follow, especially in the small cities, the little airports, Myrtle Beach, whatever, they were doing their own thing. So we had to go to these locations and recruit people to become shop stewards. Then we had to train them. We had a massive drive to get about 600 shop stewards across the country and even that wasn't even enough. That was a chore and also teaching them how to write a grievance, all of that stuff and how to interact with management. We even had to teach management. We'd go to these airports and say to management, look, I need to show you in the contract where you're doing this wrong, and just kind of relate to them. But we also had to set up locals, which was a huge task because there was some question as to whether to merge us into existing telephone locals or create our locals. The executive board decided they were going to create airline locals. We had 7 new locals, one in Charlotte, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, DCA, Florida, Winston-Salem and Dayton Ohio. The west coast folks in Districts 7 and 9 were merged into existing CWA locals. We had people now running for local officer positions and many had never been in a union before. That was a huge training issue we had and just training people how to do this was daunting.

**Jeff** [01:04:56] It wasn't Pam Tronser, was it?

**Velvet** [01:04:59] No, no, no. She worked in the DC airport and she was our local president there. She was very good too.

**Jeff** [01:05:06] Yes. Yes.

**Velvet** [01:05:08] We had to start from fresh, brand new locals. That was our first task and then just getting people to file a grievance.

**Jeff** [01:05:20] You're doing all this and you've never been a local officer yourself.

**Velvet** [01:05:23] Never.

**Jeff** [01:05:24] You've come right off the call center in Winston-Salem, and now you've done two weeks of training, and now all of a sudden, you are going to train these people how to be a steward, how to be a local officer.

**Velvet** [01:05:39] Right. What was nice was in the beginning, Jimmy Gurganus would come with me and he would teach steward training with me the first couple times I did it just to get me used to it. He was so funny. He was the best and he was a great teacher. He really taught me a lot. He always used to say, you leave the dance with the one you came with. He always said that. If you're a shop steward and you've got someone in there with you that you're representing, don't sit there and start agreeing with management. You need to be there for that person. That was always a fun saying. You leave the dance with the one that brung ya. That's what he would say.

**Jeff** [01:06:18] Yes. Very cool.

**Velvet** [01:06:22] He was very instrumental in helping me learn how to do that.

**Jeff** [01:06:27] What else do they have you doing then as a staff rep? You've sort of evolved then. You've at least got your site stewards. You've got some locals set up. What is the task now?

**Velvet** [01:06:40] You also have to get people to sign a dues card. We had a closed shop in the airline industry, you tend to have a closed shop. That's usually the norm.

**Jeff** [01:06:53] Tell us what a closed shop is.

**Velvet** [01:06:56] A closed shop means that you're either a dues-paying member and you sign up to be a member of the local. Or you can be what they call an agency fee payer, where you do not want to be a member for some reason, whether it's religious reason or just your own personal reason you don't want to be in a union. You then become an agency fee payer. You're still paying dues of some sort and it's usually the same amount. But some percentage of it can go to a charity of your choice if you'd like to donate some of that money. Then there are the religious objectors as well. So you have like three different categories. You're either a member, an agency fee payer or religious objector. But in non-transportation industries, you don't have to sign a card, there's no agency fee issue. [She is referring to the procedure in “right-to-work” states, largely in the south and mountain states. In states with no “right-to-work” statutes, employees in non-transportation industries can opt to pay an agency fee to cover the cost of union representation but not join the union at full dues rate. ] This is all having to do with the transportation issue. I think mainly it came about because years ago the railways, if they had a strike in New York but California wasn't striking or vice versa you had a strike in California and this train was being sent with carloads of rail cars full of stuff, when it got to California, they weren't going to unload it because they were on strike. So they all had to be working in concert. And I think that part of it also, like if you want to strike in the airline industry, you have a 60 day cooling off period, and it can be basically stopped by the president, which he did to the American Airlines pilots. I don't know if you remember that, but they tried to strike and [Bill] Clinton said, can't do it because of commerce. It interrupts commerce and is basically the main reason for that. So teaching people about the contract and how to understand it and find what you

need in that contract and know what the rules are, that was just about the steward training part. We would go to the airports and rent a big room, like a conference room, and have people come in and sit with us, and we would go over the major parts of the contract to teach people how to use your contract, how to find what you need, how to write a grievance. That was all a huge undertaking for us as well.

**Jeff** [01:09:21] You mentioned a little while ago that this was sort of an eye-opening experience for you in terms of political action.

**Velvet** [01:09:29] Yes. And I enjoyed that a lot because I didn't realize how much we got involved. And we did get involved with trying to get protections for our folks. You know, when 9/11 happened, the flight attendants and pilots were able to get the Air Rage law passed. We had customers that had assaulted our agents. They missed their flight. They were drunk in the airport. We had one guy in New Jersey who had his neck broken. So Rick had us put together all the examples of the violence that people face from the general traveling public. [Senator] John Kerry, Massachusetts, was the one who introduced the bill for us. We lobbied very strongly to get that passed and it was successful. Then we went to the company and we said, now that we have this law, we want you to post this on the podium so the customers know. They refused to do it. They would not post it. They said, oh, well, like assuming these people are all going to do something bad and we don't want to give them a bad taste in their mouths about it, so they would never post. We asked them to print it on the ticket jacket, which you used to get when you got your ticket, but the company refused. We said, well put the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] warning here that they could be in trouble if they assaulted or interrupted our duty to secure the door. Because people would try to run through the door or we'd shut the door of the aircraft and it's backing off and these people missed their flight, and they'd start screaming and yelling and throwing computers and just terrible behavior. I know you saw it during Covid too, but it was worse. We had a hard time getting the company to enforce it. So we would have agents, especially [in] Philadelphia for some reason, we would hear stories of a customer losing it and trying to assault one of the agents, and a manager would walk over and go, oh, Mr. Jones, we're just going to put you in first-class for your trouble. They were rewarding these people for bad behavior. So we took it a step further. I used to go to these meetings every two months with the CEO and board of directors. It was labor-management meetings, and I got other groups to support us. We said we want a No Fly list. We want a company No fly list. It took us a while but we convinced him. So anybody that assaulted one of our agents or did something, whether it was on an aircraft or whether it was in the airport, they actually did create a No Fly list and it worked. So they did listen to us, it was very effective also.

**Jeff** [01:12:07] The bill you're talking about is commonly referred to as the Airport Rage bill.

**Velvet** [01:12:11] Airport Rage bill. Yes.

**Jeff** [01:12:13] Yes. Yes. Okay. Very cool.

**Velvet** [01:12:15] It didn't just help us. It helped all of the airline workers, whether they were union or not. That's what I used to tell people. We started to organize other airlines. We'd say, I don't know if you realize this, but this Airport Rage law, this Airport Rage bill was brought about by the union, by us and it protects you whether you pay dues or not, you have this protection.

**Jeff** [01:12:35] Right, right. You mentioned 9/11 just a few minutes ago. Talk about the impact that that had on call centers, the gate agents, and all those workers.

**Velvet** [01:12:50] It grounded aircraft and grounded all airlines. It basically caused a financial burden on most of the airlines because they weren't flying or people just weren't traveling as much, whether it was out of fear. But they had shut down pretty much. We reduced our schedules. So financially, it was very damaging. I know it hurt us because we ended up filing Chapter 11 [bankruptcy] shortly after that

**Jeff** [01:13:17] We is US Air.

**Velvet** [01:13:19] That was US Air and a couple other airlines. I think America West also did. They wanted us to come to the table before they filed Chapter 11 and just start giving stuff up, like massively giving stuff up. All the other unions went to the table except CWA. We said until you file chapter 11 we're not giving you anything. We're the lowest-paid in the industry of all of the groups that you have in this company. We're not the problem here. Your CEOs were getting bonuses at the time they were laying people off and cutting our benefits or trying to anyway. We actually went to federal court. I don't know if you remember that, but I testified, Tim testified, a bunch of flight attendants did. Because the judge was trying to decide, they [the company] were looking for about \$500 million in concessions, something around that amount. We went and said until the high-level managers start taking some cuts and stop getting these raises, we're not willing to negotiate that. So the judge kind of split the baby. Instead of 500 million he told them you can do 250 million. I can't remember the exact amount, but it helped a little. But it still was very damaging to a lot of people because of the pay cuts. We did negotiate what we wanted to give up once they filed Chapter 11. So that gave us a choice of what they took and we decided on what to give up in negotiations. We're going to give them five sick days. We're going to give them holidays. We didn't want them to touch our pay. The smartest thing that Rick came up with during that time was a snap-back agreement. We were the only union on the property that got one. All this stuff that we gave up comes back automatically after a certain date. The other unions, they had to go back in the next contract and try to get it all back. So we got everything, our sick days back, our holidays back. Oh, and the biggest thing was during that time they wanted to outsource a percentage of our call centers and we were fighting it. But eventually we said, okay, here's the deal. You can outsource. You're not going to lay off any of our folks. Okay. All their jobs are guaranteed. You can outsource these call centers, meaning they wouldn't be hiring a lot of people for a while. And you have until a certain date to bring this work back. We said it's guaranteed to come back and it's going to be union work. It's coming back. It's got to end. And this is a funny story. About six months before that date. Doug Parker came out and said, he's the CEO of the company at that time. He said, we're going to bring the work back because we just feel like we should. [Barack] Obama was in office at the time and he was encouraging companies to stop offshoring and bring work back to the United States. The airline advertised we're going to do that out of the bottom of our hearts, we're just going to do this. Little did Obama know or the political folks said, oh, that's just great. When I found out, I got in touch with Larry Cohen, our CWA President at the time. I said, they're inviting this guy to this luncheon at the White House to recognize the company for bringing this work back to the United States. I said that's not the whole reason why they're doing it. Someone in our legislative political department got in touch with someone at the White House and we Ron Collins [CWA chief of staff at that time] got invited to the luncheon to represent CWA, and they sat him right next to the guy at US Airways, and he let them know this was a negotiated return of jobs to the US with the union. It wasn't out of the

goodness of the heart of the airline. I thought that was pretty interesting and we let people know that too. We said this work is coming back because we had this in our contract.

**Jeff** [01:17:37] Yes. At some point during this time, the AFA [American Flight Attendants] merges with CWA. What's the interaction like there? I mean, does that help?

**Velvet** [01:17:49] Well, yeah. Rick had us go to a luncheon with the AFA reps and talk about the CWA. I remember telling them, I said, I love working here. I love having CWA as our representative. I talked about our research department. I said they bend over backwards for us. We got everything we needed, we had the support we needed and they did decide to join us.

**Jeff** [01:18:47] What else do you want to tell us about your experience over the years in the union dealing with the industry?

**Velvet** [01:18:54] I can say that arbitrations were very difficult. If you had someone that got terminated and you feel like their case merited an arbitration, it took a while. If you got terminated the company would drag their feet to do a first-level hearing, second-level hearing, third-level. We had to go through the grievance steps. Then the last step would be to go to arbitration. You get a neutral arbitrator. The company has to be available on a certain day and the arbitrator. We would say I'm available tomorrow. I would tell the arbitrator we're ready to go. The company would say, oh, well, we got all these other cases. We only have one attorney dealing with the IAM. They would blow us off until 6 or 8 months. This person would be waiting to get their job back and it would be over a year before we could even get an arbitration. The airline was horrible about following through with arbitrations and then we'd finally get the day and we'd be a month out and then they'd contact me and say, oh, we're going to offer them a little deal here. In other words, it was like they waited till you were on the courthouse steps to try to make a deal. That happened a lot. Very seldom did we end up arbitrating. But contractual cases, we did win some really good overtime cases where the company was forcing mandatory overtime in the airports. Nick Manicone was our attorney at the time in the very beginning. His background was in the transportation airline industry. He was very instrumental in helping us win a bunch of our contract violation cases. But they took forever. It was not a speedy process. People did get discouraged and that was hard to keep people interested. I don't even want to bother, I'm not going to file a grievance because it's never going to go anywhere.

**Velvet** [01:20:41] I'll give you a tidbit about one of the mistakes I made early on approving arbitrations. I knew this person. I started working with her from the very beginning in 1985, and she was a good agent, but she messed up and she got recorded saying something very damaging or discriminatory on the phone. She had no other violations but they terminated her. I decided I'm going to take this because I know her, she was a good employee and I didn't have a great case. I think it was more emotional that I took it. So I learned my lesson as a new staff rep that it has to be a really good case to win because your chances are 50/50 usually, especially when you have a neutral arbitrator. It was difficult. A lot of times when you're doing a discipline case, it's just the staff rep facing off with a company attorney. But our advantage was that the attorney knew nothing about what we did, and didn't know the rules. A lot of times we had a lot more knowledge than that attorney did when arguing the merits of the case and what we did as our job every day in the workplace.



**Jeff** [01:22:01] This sort of sparked another thought that I had and a question I want to ask. Talk about the impact that the internet has had on call center work in particular in the airline industry.

**Velvet** [01:22:18] At one point, we had over 5,000 reservation agents. When it was all said and done with the internet and people doing their own reservations online, making changes online, we basically went down to about 1,500. In the end there were about 1,500 reservation agents. The other interesting thing was we had a frequent flier call center that dealt with our frequent flier issues. If you had points, you wanted to use them to book a ticket on another airline. That office was in Winston-Salem and there were over 150 people in there. We wanted to, I forgot the term, we wanted to bring them into our contract. There's a term for that. I just forgot what it was. [accretion] The company said they don't handle passengers. They're not passenger service. I had to actually go to the NMB to argue this. I said, look, I worked in reservations and I would get a customer say to me, well, I'm going to book this, but I also want to talk to someone in the frequent flier department about my points, and I would have to transfer them and they would talk to this customer. So my example was, yes, they are passengers because I would transfer these people to that department. So they ruled in favor of allowing these people to be brought into our contract. It was the first time that had ever happened so it was kind of historic. We got them in and they had the same contract, but there were a couple of sections, articles that were specific to them because they did something different than we did.

**Velvet** [01:23:59] But as far as the airport environment, [the internet] definitely reduced the jobs. The biggest thing that reduced jobs in the airport were the kiosk machines. When you walk in the airport, you just check in, you tag your own bag, the whole thing. That reduced a lot of our jobs in the airport environment. When we were switching over systems, like Y2K and all that was happening, we had a major failure with those systems, with those kiosks and for three days people couldn't fly. We couldn't even get the planes out because we couldn't print tickets. We didn't have enough employees that could manually handle these people because the system had gone down and we had lost multiple like thousands and thousands of reservations were just gone in thin air. These people were showing up to go to a funeral or go to a wedding or whatever. We had no record of them. We had nothing. I can remember going to one of the labor meetings and I was very emotional. In my presentation, I gave examples of my members being taken out of the airport on stretchers because they were being verbally assaulted and screamed at out all day long, three days straight. People were lined up down the sidewalk at the airports trying to get someone to help them. I said we need more employees. We are short-staffed. And it's funny, one of the board of directors members, I remember his name, Herbert Baum, he used to be the CEO of Dial Corporation. He used to always sit next to me in these meetings and he seemed so interested in the job, what we did and what I was bringing to the meetings. He said, I agree with Velvet, because I fly all the time and it seems like I'm always standing in a long line because you don't have enough employees. After that meeting, Parker agreed and they said we're going to hire a thousand more airport workers. I was so excited that I could help relieve the stress at the airports. A thousand probably wasn't enough, but still, we were just excited to hear they were going to finally hire more people. So that was very, very helpful.

**Velvet** [01:26:11] We went through two more mergers. We went through America West and what they tried to do to us there. America West, they were in the process of organizing with the Teamsters, and they were making top pay of \$13 an hour and we were making like \$21 an hour. We didn't know for sure what they were doing but the company came to us and said we need to take

another concession. They came to us three times. We went through three different concessionary give-backs while the company was struggling. One of the proposals they threw on the table was our top pay was going to go from 21 down to \$13 an hour. We were like, there is no way these people are going to agree to this. It's not happening. What Rick decided to do and Larry Cohen was president then too, was we were going to do a strike vote if they were going to try to force this on us. I'll never forget this. They had hired some million dollar union buster firm to come in and get us to give all this stuff up, and we'd be in these meetings, this was in Crystal City, Virginia, right in D.C. We're in this room with no windows. It's very foreboding and we go in there with this box of all the ballots that were returned, we had 80 something percent of the people vote to strike. We put them in a box and we walked into that bargaining room. When Rick tipped that box up on top of the desk and dumped them all out and said, we are not taking that pay cut, 87% of our members are not in agreement, and they will strike if we give them authorization, they are going to strike. It worked. But I will say the drama that came out of this guy, he stood up. He had the bankruptcy notebook, which was 10 inches thick with all these rules in it, and I'll never forget what he said. This was comical in a way. We all kind of giggled, but he took the book and very violently slammed it on the desk and he said, the blood of your members will be on your hands. We all just thought, this guy's lost his mind. I'll never forget that, ever. Anyways, we succeeded in not taking that pay cut, but we did agree to \$17 an hour, which was less than we were making before we had a union. That to me was a huge, huge slap. I mean, all the work and all the years we worked to get from 17.88 an hour top pay to 21, \$22, and then we dropped back to \$17. But that was also part of the snap-back. The agents are currently topped out at like \$32 an hour now with the last contract. I started at \$4.50 an hour doing that job.

**Debbie** [01:29:09] What year was that you just described?

**Velvet** [01:29:15] It's on that sheet I sent you, and I can't find it. It's on the history sheet in there, and I'm trying to remember what year that was. 2005, 2004. In that period, 2004.

**Jeff** [01:29:31] It looks like.

**Velvet** [01:29:32] 2004, I think it was because that was right before we merged with America West.

**Jeff** [01:29:37] Which was 2005.

**Velvet** [01:29:39] The interesting thing about merging with America West, it was 2005 because I don't have it printed, but I was just trying to see where it was in here. The interesting thing, I don't know if you want me to talk at all about forming the association with the Teamsters. That was an interesting process. I don't know who came up with it, probably Rick Baswell and Larry [Cohen], I don't know. When we were merging with America West, the Teamsters had just had a successful campaign organizing customer service, passenger service at America West. They were much smaller than us, though. The next step in a merger is if there's two different unions representing the same class or craft in the two airlines, you're forced into a runoff election. We weren't sure that it would stick because we had people that were upset about the pay concessions we had to take and the different things that had happened over the last few years after 9/11 that I don't know if there was that confidence that we would continue to maintain our representation if we had this election. So the CWA and the IBT [International Brotherhood of Teamsters] got together and decided, let's create an association. The company did not want to recognize it. They were like, no way you're not doing this

because we wouldn't be forced into an election and that was their chance to get rid of the union in passenger service. So the decision was we would split the country down the Mississippi River. They [the Teamsters] would have all of the west coast and we would have the east coast. It was a lot of planning, a lot of meetings, a lot of trying to figure out who is in charge, when they are in charge. We formed this association and the members did have to vote for that. They did have to put a vote out on it and it was successful. So we were able to continue with that. Then we had to sit down with the Teamsters and figure out, okay, we already have a contract, but these folks here at America West, maybe they don't like everything we have, or maybe there's some bonus or benefit they have that they wanted to add. So we had to sit down and negotiate to incorporate them into our contract, but also try to include things that they would like to see added. They had some different rules such as their scheduling rules and the way they did their shift trades and things like that and their holidays. Then we had to put our seniority together. I know that America West wanted two years for every 1 year because they were a more junior company. We told them we're never going to agree to that. That was a proposal they wanted. The Teamsters said, no, they want two years and the company wasn't going to give them the two years for every one because that meant they'd all get a pay raise. Their pay raises were merit and we were on a pay scale now, an 11 year pay scale and we topped out. You could be sitting next to someone with ten years seniority and they could be making less money than someone at America West that might have been there five years. It just depends if your supervisor likes you or not or your manager. Some of them thought, well I'm a good employee and I always get a raise. I don't need a pay scale and some people just don't deserve that raise. But we were successful in convincing them they needed to be on a pay scale. A lot of them got huge raises immediately, like they were making \$13 top of pay, top scale and a lot of them jumped to \$17. There were so many intricate rules that we had to work out. And then we had another merger. But we almost merged with United. Do you know that?

**Jeff** [01:33:33] I do know that that.

**Velvet** [01:33:35] Was it Delta?

**Jeff** [01:33:38] No, it was United.

**Velvet** [01:33:38] United. Okay. All right. That was not successful. They did not want to merge with us. You know what happened during the potential merger, the company kind of was looking the other way. They weren't paying attention to running US Air, US Airways. All their efforts were being put into this merger. In the meantime, we're flailing over here and we had a financial issue again. That was, I think, our third concession that we had to go through. It was amazing. It was like a roller coaster ride every other year. It was just crazy. I don't know if you guys know this, this is a just trivia, but Doug Parker, when he found out that day that the merger was not going through, didn't get approved, he went out and got a DUI and got put in jail. Do you know how many of the unions tried to use it against him? Like, oh, and you still got your job and if it was one of us getting fired in our job. We heard that all the time from our members. Doug went to jail for DUI. It was crazy.

**Jeff** [01:34:54] Quite a career.

**Velvet** [01:34:55] Yes. Definitely.

**Jeff** [01:34:58] Debbie, do you have some questions?

**Debbie** [01:35:01] I was intrigued by something you said. There was a merger with American Airlines, which I'd like you to talk about, because as I recall, negotiating that contract and particularly dealing with the work-at-home agents was a big issue and a big success.

**Velvet** [01:35:18] It was huge. We had tried in previous years, the CWA, tried to organize American Airlines. We had 2 or 3 elections. They were not successful. American was tough. They ran some tough anti-union campaigns. They spent millions and millions of dollars so that their customer service would not vote in the union. This is interesting. When we merged with American, they really needed the approval for this merger to go through. They asked not just our union, but they asked every union to go and lobby. We had over 300 appointments and we went to DC and we were put into groups. We had a pilot, flight attendant, mechanic, customer service, and then a company manager person split up into these huge groups. We had over I don't know how many people showed up. It was very well organized, but we went and visited all the representatives and asked them to please vote to allow this union to go through because a lot of people might be out of jobs if it doesn't happen. That merger did go through only because of the help of the agents and the employees. We went and fought for this merger. We asked the company to not run an anti-union campaign and give us the ability to organize the American Airlines agents without any pushback. They did agree to that and they held to that. They did not run any anti-union campaign. I spent nine months in the Miami airport organizing Miami folks because that was one of our largest locations. They let me go through security. They let me go sit in the break rooms and talk to the employees. I was shocked but that was the type of relationship we had developed with the company at that point, because they were appreciative that we helped get the merger accomplished. So that was not so difficult. But then there were definitely hiccups with trying to get them organized.

**Velvet** [01:37:43] When you talked about the work-at-home group, they were a tough group to organize because many of them worked from home and how do we get access to them? We had to go door to door. Raleigh had a lot of work-at-home folks. I think there was one up in Connecticut and Miami, I think, had one. So we had to go find out where these people were and go knock on their door and talk to them about the union. They were treated almost like sub-contractors. We had to show them, they were on a completely different pay scale, they didn't get the same holidays, vacation, sick time. They had a much lesser pay and benefit package than the people that worked in the call centers and at the airports. We were telling them, look, you'll have a voice at the table. You'll be able to negotiate what you want. So we did convince them, the majority of them didn't vote for the union, but we had enough where we won the election. We were able to negotiate with the company and we got them pretty much almost the same pay and all the same benefits, and we said the company had to pay for their internet, their separate internet. The company had to pay for all their equipment. So there were a lot of things that saved them a ton of money. But then over the years, they [the company] realized that for some reason the productivity wasn't as good when people were working at home. So they started pulling them all in. They were going to get rid of it. And then Covid hit. Now most of our call folks are at home. They've shut down the Winston-Salem office. It's no longer operating. People are working out of their houses. They just completely emptied the building out a couple weeks ago. It's gone now. They used to have some management people in there to do training. They're going to work out of their houses. So all their training is going to be online. What a change. They're still making the same benefits and they're still making the \$32 an hour top pay.

**Debbie** [01:39:58] Do you have any advice of how you keep a strong union when it's work-at-home call center workers?

**Velvet** [01:40:05] That's difficult. Communication, a newsletter, sending out emails and updating people, doing some zoom calls would be helpful so that they can connect with other people because you're in your home all day, you don't know what's going on out there. So I think those are very helpful, conference calls, zoom calls and I think newsletters, that type of thing would be your best bet. Because you really can't go door to door and visit these people. It's just too hard.

**Debbie** [01:40:38] I have one other question. In the information you sent us you said "I served on the labor-management committee at American Airlines. All the unions sent a rep every other month to meet with Doug Parker, CEO and the board of directors. CWA convinced the company to set this up after they wanted the board of directors seats back from the unions. These meetings were very effective in fixing many issues." Talk a little bit about this.

**Velvet** [01:41:12] During the bankruptcy in return for concessions, the CWA said we would like some seats on the board. They went back and forth about it. But I think we got three seats, the pilots, flight attendants and our group got a seat on the board. We appointed this woman to serve for us. With the merger with American, they needed those seats back. They needed those board of directors seats back and they wanted to eliminate them. And so the CWA said, and I know we initiated this, the CWA said, look, we'll give the seat up but we want to have interaction. You need to hear from the front-line people on a regular basis. We want these meetings. Each union group got to send one person to go to these meetings every two months. In these meetings, we weren't allowed to talk about grievances, but we were allowed to talk about operational problems, problems with human resources, which was always, always an issue at the airline. Hiring, staffing issues. One time I brought up an issue in Miami. I had already tried to meet with the director of the airport and she wasn't willing to work with us on it. I always made sure I tried to fix it first before I went to them and brought them an issue. I would survey all my local presidents, the seven local presidents I had every month. And I'd say, send me your biggest issues that are not grievances that you want me to bring to these meetings. I have a list and I'd print up a list for them as well. I would go in there with these major problems. I'd always start out with my first thing is I would thank them for any of the things they resolved from the last meeting and report on how well those were working for the members and it really helps the morale if they recognize that you're fixing these problems. For example, the No Fly list was very important to people and that was accomplished through these meetings. The hiring of the thousand extra agents that was accomplished in these meetings. But also I invited the other local union leaders to meet. Let's meet the night before and let's see what common issues we have so we just voice it as one group. HR [human resources] was always the biggest problem. You'd file a complaint with HR about a manager or something was happening and they just would be a rubber stamp. They would just send us a form letter. It was always while we did the investigation, we didn't find anything. We got tired of it. It wasn't just our group, it was going on with all the groups. So we said to the company we need something done about this because it's ineffective to even go to HR. We don't even bother anymore because it's just ineffective. It wasn't perfect, but we were able to convince Doug Parker and the board that we needed some relief in HR when we had problems. We had managers who would show up drunk at the airports and they didn't care. I brought that to him one day about this one manager who was harassing the agents, came back from his lunch break and he was tipsy and falling over himself, and they'd let

him know when they were coming so he would not be drunk. I said to Doug, you need to send someone and not tell him you're coming and you'll see this guy. And they did. They showed up. He was drunk. They escorted him off the property and the agents were like, okay, this is effective. We see that the union is doing these types of things. It isn't necessarily a grievance. But it was an HR issue. So that was some of the things that I really enjoyed about being involved in that. I could get right to the people who needed to make these effective changes.

**Jeff** [01:45:12] Velvet, any last thoughts?

**Velvet** [01:45:19] I see the unions are starting to gain some ground in organizing and that's very encouraging. I retired in 2017, but I still keep up-to-date on everything. We had the nurses here in our local hospital just organized a couple years ago. They're having trouble getting a contract too. I've done a few informational pickets with them. I still try to stay involved legislatively. I go out and try to knock on doors when we're having elections to get people to vote. So it really influenced me. It was a huge benefit and it influenced my daughter. She's 32 now and she is such a pro-union person. She joined the union at her school in California. She's a social worker and therapist. She called me up and she goes, mom, I'm a member of the union now. She's very excited. She's always supported me in what I do.

**Jeff** [01:46:13] Thank you for all you've done for our union and for the cause. This has been terrific. I can't thank you enough for spending these two hours with us. It's been eye-opening for me, a real insight into the industry that you've talked about, but it's been fun as well, so thank you for doing it Velvet.

**Velvet** [01:46:33] Yeah, well, I enjoyed it. Thank you for asking me. It doesn't seem like all of that could have happened in that amount of time. Seventeen years that I was a staff rep. I was on staff for 17 years. I also worked in [AT&T] Mobility for my last couple of years, I did Mobility which also I found very fascinating. It was a completely different industry, and I had to learn all the lingo and everything else, but I enjoyed that too.