

Interview Subject: Deborah Lehman Raught
Interviewer: Laura Ettinger
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So, today is July 12, 2008. And we're here in my office at Clarkson University in Potsdam, New York. This is Laura Ettinger here with Deborah Lehman Raught from the class of '78, a civil and environmental engineer. So why don't we start, Deb, with your childhood and talk chronologically here.

Okay.

Tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what your growing up years were like.

Okay. I grew up in North Tonawanda, New York with two siblings. I'm in the middle. My sister's a year older, and my brother's a year younger. So we were very close in age. My mother had been a nurse before children were born. My father was an electrical engineering professor at UB for a while, University of Buffalo, and then Niagara County Community College in Sanborn, New York. So we had a very close family; an aunt, uncle, and cousins across the street, grandparents that we went to every Sunday. A family cottage which I'm getting ready to go visit next week in Canada, Lake Erie in Ontario, Canada. And just a real close family setting. As I mentioned, my Mom quit working when the children were born. Interesting story about that. When my brother was a senior in high school, she had raised all her children; wanted to go back to work and she was always very supportive of my sister and me getting into the workplace. She wanted to go back to work. So she was a medicine nurse, and handing, dispensing medicine at the local hospital. And my father, who again was very supportive of me getting into the workplace, actually told my mother, "That's fine. You can go back to work, but no money you make is going to buy food for my table." (laughter) So he had an interesting perspective. But very close family and very supportive of higher education. And I guess that's how I got into engineering. I liked math and science, and my Dad was an electrical engineering professor, which I knew enough about that that I didn't want to be an electrical engineer! So that's kind of how I got into engineering. I just had a role model there.

What high school did you go to?

North Tonawanda High School. I went to a parochial school, a Lutheran school for the first eight years, St. Mark's Lutheran School in North Tonawanda there which was an excellent educational backdrop, I think, not just the religious aspects but a very small student to teacher ratio, so you got a lot of personal attention. And I think, as a whole, the kids that went to those parochial schools did better in high school. I think because of memory work actually. I mean, you get trained to learn in maybe short-term memory rather than long-term memory. So I say I was raised by Ozzie and Harriett! I had a wonderful childhood. (laughter)

And tell me a little bit more about North Tonawanda High School. What was the educational emphasis was there? So you would have graduated in '74?

'74 and that baby boomer class, my sister, brother, and me, we were the three largest classes, I think, that have ever gone through that high school. About 750-800 kids per class. And we couldn't even fit the ninth graders, we had two different ninth grade campuses; couldn't fit ninth through twelfth all in the high school. There definitely was a college prep route for the kids that wanted to go on to college. So four years of a language were required; I took four years of German. Came here and there wasn't a language requirement here which surprised me at that time. But there was pre-calculus, so I took that. So I was ready to come into engineering. So you could kind of find your route there. A big football town. North Tonawanda/Tonawanda we would draw 5,000 people to a high school football game, and that was the biggest high school football game around. So very sports-oriented. And I played basketball, volleyball, softball, in high school. But good prep for going on to college. If you had a father that was a professor, he was also my guidance counselor. And so I took the maximum number of courses that any child could fit into. (laughter) And he pushed hard. But I was able to do it. So it was good preparation for going on to college. I can't even remember what percentage of children went on to college. But, in '74 a large percentage of them did.

And when did you think that you wanted to go on in engineering? Do you remember?

Probably junior in high school. A very good friend gave—, my sister was one year older, and a good friend of hers, Diane DiFrancesco, she went by DD.

Yeah.

Do you know DD?

Yeah. Well, I got an e-mail from her this morning. Yeah.

Okay. Alright. She'd be another good one to interview, but she went to Clarkson. And my sister had visited her a couple of times up here and just said it was so pretty. And so I came to visit, and I just fell in love with it. I actually did not go to any other schools. I just decided I was going to come to Clarkson. And, also brought up on Lake Erie, we have this family cottage up there. I noticed the deterioration of Lake Erie over the years. A lot more pollution and dead fish and I got interested in the environment and Clarkson was one of the few at that time, although I didn't do a lot of research on it, that had an environmental engineering program. So the civil and environmental mix attracted me to the school. And the fact that it was a small school; growing up in kind of a small town outside of Buffalo, going to a parochial school with a close family, I didn't want to go somewhere that was huge. So I just felt comfortable here when I came.

Did either of your siblings go in engineering?

Yes, my brother did.

Uh huh.

Yeah. My sister had a 4.0 in journalism and met the man of her dreams and dropped out and then she went back to college later; but had children right away. My brother's a mechanical engineer. So, I'll have to ask him what attracted him to mechanical engineering. (laughter)

And did he go to Clarkson?

No. He actually started out as a forest ranger at Wanakena.

Yeah.

In mid-state? 'Til he broke an ankle in a skateboarding accident and then he went to the University of Rochester. And Syracuse for his master's.

So you came to Clarkson in the fall of 1974, right?

Uh huh.

And where did you live when you came here?

Moore House.

Moore House.

Uh huh.

Okay. And what do you remember about your first year here, or your first impressions of Clarkson?

Well, first impressions were there really weren't a lot of women around. But that never bothered me. I played sports all my life. I just never thought of it. That whole top floor, I was on the third floor of Moore House, right over here and we all got very close. Cindy was right down the hall from me, and we would walk over and go to dinner together. Just a very friendly place. There were a lot of mixers to get to meet people. I ended up rooming with the two suitemates that were on the other side of me and another lady for the whole four years I was here.

And who were those?

Mary Noon, Kate Haugstad, she's now Katie Jones, and then Karen Hitchcock, and she just recently got married again. So we had a lot of fun. It was a friendly place. It was a beautiful place. It was a small campus that you could get around easily. I don't know. That's about it I guess.

And was it what you expected it to be?

Yeah. It was. I expected a small college. I expected small teacher to student ratios, so it was pretty much as advertised. What I expected.

And did you stay in Moore House, or did the four of you move around?

We stayed in Moore House for two years. The second year was a co-ed floor. That was something new and different that we hadn't expected before. And Ed O'Conner's here [at Clarkson University at the 30th reunion for the class of 1978], he married a girl in our class and so we were reminiscing about the co-ed floor. And then, we went to the Riverside Apartments for one year, and then the ones down by the river, on the other side, by the hockey arena. I can't remember what the name of those are. They're kind of town, duplexes – upstairs and downstairs.

Yeah. Not Woodstock?

Oh, I think it was Woodstock.

And did you come in as a civil and environmental engineer?

Yeah. I did.

And what do you remember about your classes here?

Well, one of my first impressions that was a little scary, it wasn't even a class yet. Dean [Edward] Misiaszek gave his "Welcome to Clarkson Engineering" [speech], and I guess they do this to all classes probably in all schools, but I'd never had that experience before, and he said, "Look to your left, look to your right," and then, "In two semesters one of the three of you is not going to be here anymore." So, that was a little pressure and a little scary. The science center was pretty new then. So we had a few of the large lecture halls here. Dr. [Egon] Matijevic for chemistry. And then quite a few classes downtown. So there were small classes in the buildings downtown. Very friendly professors. Some foreign professors which that was new to me growing up in a small town in New York. And so that was interesting to get the diversity and the different perspectives. Several professors that had worked in industry before which was always good because that put a good balance to the message that they were giving you.

And [there was] one thing I didn't ask when we were talking about high school. You just mentioned growing up in a small town. What kind of student were you in high school?

I was a straight A student.

Okay. (laughter) You skipped that part of things when we were talking before.

Yes, I was a straight A student.

So, were you valedictorian of your class?

No. It was too big of a class. I was definitely in the top ten people. I don't remember.

Uh huh. Out of 800?

Yes.

Okay. And so, how did you experience the classes here in terms of how hard they were, or not hard they were? Because you were obviously used to being a great success in high school.

Yes. But I was also used to studying hard. I mean, I was taking accelerated classes.

Right.

And so it was about the same. I think some classes came easier than others, and so those you wouldn't have to work quite as hard. Other classes because they were new to me, maybe I wasn't picking up as much from the teachers that you'd have to seek out other information. But I worked hard. In fact, everybody would kid me about that.

That you worked hard?

That I seemed to work harder than a lot of people. But, I don't know, it just mattered to me.

Uh huh. And, you mentioned before we turned the recorder on that you were an inaugural member of the women's basketball—

Basketball and volleyball.

Right, teams here.

Uh huh.

So, what year were those teams founded here?

'74.

Okay.

They were intercollegiate at that time. I haven't gone back to research all that, but finding coaches for the teams was interesting because they didn't hire people to coach women's teams. I don't know if these numbers are right Laura, but I remember that we had 60 women in our class. Whether that was just engineering or everything, and that doubled the amount of women in the school at the time. So they finally had enough critical mass to form some sports teams. And so, Marilyn Johnson, who was— I don't even remember what her real world life was here, became our volleyball coach and she didn't know how to play volleyball. But she was a wonderful lady. And then, Dean [Norm] Smalling, who was Dean of Student Affairs or something like that, he became our basketball coach because his daughter played basketball at Brockport or something like that. So, in the early years it was tough going to find coaches, but it was fun and that was so much a part of my life that I was just really happy to find some teams to play on.

You mean, it had been so much a part of your life in—?

In high school. Yeah. I played basketball for Lutheran schools and then three different teams in high school. And, volleyball, power volleyball was just coming into play at that time. So, it was also a good way to meet a group of girls. I never was very active in SWE [Society of Women Engineers]. We can talk about that, as to why. But the sports teams were a way to network with fellow women here and have a good time. We were one of the only classes or schools, when we would go to tournaments that would actually take our textbooks on the bus. (laughter) And, those techettes [Clarkson women] were over in the corner studying while everybody else was sleeping or whatever,

You were at the tournaments?

doing other things.

And were you on both the volleyball and basketball teams all four years that you were here?

Yes, I was.

And pick one of the teams and tell me a little bit about your experiences here.

Well, the basketball, maybe I'll pick that one again because we were in our infancy stages of playing, and didn't have a lot of talent. We didn't recruit athletes here. We recruited students. We would go to play large state schools; Brockport's a good example. And we would get trounced. We would lose by 30, 50 points. So that was character building. (laughter) But we had a lot of fun. So going to tournaments and just all the camaraderie, and watching the talent develop over four years where we could instead of losing all the games actually have a 50/50 season. That was quite an accomplishment. (laughter)

That was success?

That was success. Yeah, that was success.

And what about the volleyball?

We probably had a little stronger volleyball than a basketball team. But still, we weren't really competitive; not like they are today.

Right.

But we didn't have, obviously, women's and men's locker rooms. There was one locker room – the men's locker room. And if they were using it, we couldn't go through the front door to get to the locker room. We had to go through the back door, through the snow drifts, and come in through the training room. We didn't have a trainer. We had to do our own laundry and

uniforms. I think maybe we were going to have to buy our own uniforms the first year, but then the school actually coughed up some money and bought our uniforms. So, when I hear the Title IX stories, we were before that. We learned, and somehow we did okay.

And what was the reaction by your peers here at Clarkson to these two teams?

Oh, they were very supportive and then the women's hockey team got started. I don't remember if it was freshman year or the next year too. But they were very supportive because we had a large group of girls and guys that would hang around together and they would all come watch us and cheer, and so it was supportive. Similar to girls' games now. You never had the spectators that would come in, but our friends were very supportive of it.

And what other kinds of things were you involved in here? Although that sounds like a lot that you were doing.

It really was. (laughter)

You mentioned you weren't particularly involved in SWE, or maybe not at all.

No, I joined. I also joined the Civil Engineering Society and went to some meetings and some events. I had sort of a different attitude about SWE, and it's really only been in about the last ten years that I've changed my mind. So I guess I can be honest about that. I didn't like calling attention to myself as a woman engineer. One of the early basketball stories, when my friend DD [Diane DiFrancesco] and I were playing, first weekend here, didn't know a soul besides her, we went over and we played basketball against two other guys and we beat them. And then that was the compliment that I got at the end of the game is, "You're not bad for a woman." (laughter) So that kind of stuck and I didn't want that kind of a label. So I thought the longer we call attention to ourselves as women engineers, the more we put a distinction there, the more the rest of the world and society will put a distinction there. So it took me awhile and, again, I work with Exxon Mobil, and that philosophy was very prevalent in my early years, but I've come to learn that, especially now, that we've got a lot of neat stories that we can share with people. And the mentoring, and the networking, and maybe get some of those people that might otherwise leave the industry to share how we did it. So I've changed my mind. But back then I was a member and went to a few meetings, but I just wasn't an active participant.

Were there other things that you were involved in at Clarkson?

In church, in a church group. I went to a Lutheran church.

Uh huh.

Way out in town. We'd walk down there every Sunday and back. And so a lot of activities in the church.

And did you go with Clarkson people to do that or that was on your own?

No. I just went by myself. (laughter) Again, I think it's the Lutheran background. I had to search out a Lutheran church to go to.

Uh huh. And how did you manage your academics and all these other things that you were involved in because your plate sounds like it was very full?

You just did it. I don't know, I guess I've always been a good manager of my time. So we would always have to schedule our classes early in the morning where some people would like to sleep; I'd get them out of the way and kind of treated class like a business. You know, you work eight to five, you get your homework out of the way, and then you would have time for basketball practice, and if you had your homework, then you could go out on the town; if not, then you could work in the evening. So I think you just have to learn to be a good manager of time.

Speaking of going out on the town, tell me a little bit about what social life was like here.

Well, drinking age was 18, (laughter)

Yes.

as you probably heard, back then. So, there were a lot of beer blasts and bars downtown to go to. A lot of the activities, socialized around drinking. I was not a member of a sorority. But we went to a lot of their [fraternity and sorority] functions. We had the 25 cent movie night on Friday nights, which what poor college student would turn down an evening of entertainment for 25 cents. We had the coffee shop, I don't even remember any of the names of the buildings, but one of the buildings downtown, Friday nights and Saturday nights they would have people in there playing folk music and guitars. On a cold night that was a great place to go to get away from the cold. We did a lot of volleyball playing outside and in the gyms. You know, that kind of thing. So you could find things to do and search out things to do. It was a lot of fun.

And what about the romantic relationships, the dating scene here?

Dating, it was interesting because of the lot of the—, maybe it was perceptions rather than reality but a lot of the guys that went here didn't want to date Clarkson women. They would rather go to the university, Potsdam State, and date those girls it seemed like.

And why do you think that was?

I don't know. I really could never understand it. So I started dating seriously a guy when I was a junior in college and we dated for two years. We tried to keep it going while he was in Boston and I was in Texas and that didn't work. But the first two years, it was difficult to get folks to want to date you once they found out you went to Clarkson. I don't know why. I never understood that.

Was the man that you dated seriously from Clarkson?

Yes. He went to Clarkson although he grew up near Buffalo as well. He was a chemistry major.

So, in terms of social life, was a lot of your time spent with other women here on campus? Or a mix of men and women?

A mix of men and women. We had this large group; everybody would laugh that we were a family. We'd walk to dinner together; there was about 12 of us. And so, it was a mix. And people would come and go. In fact, a lot of them are here at the 30 year reunion which is fun that we stayed together. We don't really stay in contact much between reunions, but at a reunion everybody wants to come back.

Do you regularly come back to reunions?

Yeah. I think I haven't missed a five year. I didn't come to the one year reunion, but every other five year reunion I've been to.

And what would you say were the attitudes of your male peers toward women students? You just mentioned one of them which is we don't date women from Clarkson. (laughter)

(laughter)

We go to Potsdam State.

And then again, it might have been perception because some of my group dated Clarkson women.

Right. What else do you sense were the attitudes of male peers toward women students here?

I can't really comment on that

Okay.

Laura because I just didn't notice any difference between other folks.

Yeah. And overall what would you say you liked about Clarkson? Obviously, you're still very connected with the school if you come back for a reunion every five years.

Yeah. I think the small size and I guess it's even smaller now than when I was here, I think about half the size.

About 3,000 students now, 2700 undergraduates and about 300 graduate students.

Okay, undergrad, okay. Just the size, the friendliness of the faculty as well as the town. The town really accepts the college. I think that's probably the biggest thing. You still feel connected even 30 years afterward.

And what would you say were the greatest challenges you faced while you were here?

Well I already told you my father, the guidance counselor, loaded up my plate. So, I don't even know how many hours I took, but as many as they let you take.

Yeah.

So that was challenging; just the amount of work and balancing that with other things. I guess initially being, I'm about five and a half hours away from home, but that was a challenge because being from a close family and then all of a sudden you've got to go find friends, and make friends, and find a new life, and that was kind of challenging. Those probably are the biggest ones. Just the academics and finding your way as a young adult.

And do you evaluate your experiences at Clarkson differently now? Or how do you evaluate them differently now?

I think those challenges would still be there. Like I say, I have three daughters, one's in college, the other one's getting ready to go to college, and so I've been touring campuses, one goes to Texas State in San Marcos, the oldest one. She's an accountant. Nobody wanted to be an engineer after watching their mother. (laughter) It's 25,000 people, and then my middle daughter is going to go to Baylor and it's about 15,000 people. And I'm just walking around thinking I would not want to be somewhere that big. But they do and that's fine for them. So, I think I still feel that I chose a school based on location and size that I would choose today for myself.

Uh huh. Knowing you.

Knowing me. Right.

So your senior year when you were trying to decide what to do next – how did you decide? What happened there?

Well, I didn't want to limit myself geographically which says something about how I grew from four years because moving (laughter) five and a half hours away was a challenge. And then, I moved to Texas. But I think my Clarkson education was a good door opener for a lot of different schools. And I was a good student here. I was first in my civil and environmental engineering class. So that probably looked good on a resume too. (laughter)

I'm sure it did. (laughter)

I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I mean, we had had some professors that had worked in consulting firms, so that kind of intrigued me. So I interviewed with a few consulting firms all around the country. I had, like, 10 or 12 different job offers. Late in my first semester my senior year I wrote a term paper on oil spills, and I happened to talk to somebody here with Exxon and I just got intrigued by the oil industry. So I interviewed a couple of different places with them. And then, I also interviewed with, like, Corning Glassworks, and Procter and Gamble. So I really

wasn't sure what all these industries did, so I thought interview with as broad a brush as you can just to get a flavor, and I learned as much talking to them as, I think, they learned talking to me.

And, so what was your first job actually? What did you—

With Exxon?

What did you do for Exxon?

I went to Kingsville, Texas which I'm sure you don't know where that is. (laughter)

I don't.

Way down in South Texas. I was a reservoir engineer. Reservoir engineers are the ones that determine how much volume of oil or gas is in each of these zones which we call reservoirs. They do economics for drill wells, for facility modifications. That was an interesting place being a Yankee and being a woman. They never hired two women in the same recruiting season before and so I was part of a test case for them. Can we really handle two of these (laughter) ladies at the same time? And I met the other lady in the ladies' room which was really an interesting place to meet her. As a reservoir engineer, you were responsible for keeping the wells on production, or helping the people out in the field that really did the work to keep the wells on production. And I had an old field superintendent tell me that I was going to have to slow down my speech pattern because he didn't hear that fast. (laughter)

(laughter)

And then, my first field trip out to the big oil and gas fields, at the King Ranch Gas Plant, they had a sign up there, and this was the order, "No dogs, women, or children allowed." That was posted on the gate of the King Ranch. And all the other folks, when you drove up with an Exxon car, the old gatekeeper would wave you through. When I went through with my mentor, who was another woman, you know, because she could talk to me. We got stopped, he had to call the head office, it would take us a half hour for these two women to get through the gate. So I probably had more experiences and challenges once I got to the workforce than I ever did going to school.

And did you expect that?

I didn't. I guess I never experienced that before. I mean, things had been hard, but I don't think they'd been any more difficult being a woman than a man.

Uh huh.

And it was for a long time.

And [I have] two things I just thought of.

Okay.

One is: so this experiment to have recruited (inaudible) two women – how did that work? Did it work out well?

Oh, it worked fine. It worked fine.

Yeah?

And they trusted in us, the next year where we were tour hosts to other women.

Oooh, wow.

And it worked out pretty well.

And the other thing is: how long did you serve in that position with Exxon as a reservoir engineer?

As a reservoir engineer? Six months. Back then, basically, they just whipped you through a lot of different assignments. Six months as a reservoir engineer, these terms may not mean much to you, then six months as a sub-surface engineer. And what you're responsible for there was all of the mechanical procedures to recomplete in another zone. If you were at 2500 feet, let's say, and you wanted to go up to another zone, how do you perforate the reservoir, how do you determine the permeability and the porosity to get more out of the wells, and a lot of those were based on computer programs. So I did that for six months. And then, I was in a gas forecasting group where we sold a lot of gas from South Texas to the Houston area to major industrial clients. And I did that for, I think, about a year. So I had two and a half years under my belt, and they made me a supervisor.

Wow.

So that was interesting. They never had a woman supervisor before in the Kingsville District. So I felt like I was paving the way. (laughter)

How many people did you have under you?

Eight.

So eight men, eight engineers?

Yes. Eight male engineers, yeah. And I did that for, I don't know, about a year or so, and then they moved me to another reservoir supervisor position. And so, that got me to about 1984. And then, I moved to the big city of Corpus Christi which was north of that, and I found my way into environmental and regulatory which really piqued my interest because of my environmental degree. And there were a lot of regulatory aspects, regulations about producing oil and gas, and how close the wells can be together, and what the producing rules are going to be with the Texas Railroad Commission. And I had to testify in front of the Texas Railroad Commission in

different hearings and things which sounds more impressive than it was. It's like a room this size [small], people sitting around, taking notes, and lawyers asking you questions. And I did different aspects in environmental and regulatory until '89 when I moved to Houston. And I'd already had one daughter by that time. Moved to Houston and stayed in environmental and regulatory for, I think, another eight years and I got to do a lot of lobbying with our office in Washington when the Clean Air Act was reauthorized. I did a lot of work on that, trying to determine the impact on us, and if it was a huge economic impact, what might be a better way to accomplish the same environmental goals at a cheaper cost. So, they, the people writing the bills, needed some kind of that definition of what is engineering. They needed some technical expertise that understood what the rules would do to the industry and how can we accomplish the same goals in a more cost effective manner. So I did that for a while, and then I worked in Exxon Company, USA. All this is on the upstream or producing side. I worked in Exxon Company USA, in the downstream aspect where I got involved for the first time in some of the fuel regulations and some of the research we had been doing even back in 1998 on more efficient cars and things. Then we formed a new company at that time. It was called the Development Company, that builds these huge projects in Brazil, and Nigeria, and Angola, and all over the world. And I was the environmental regulatory manager of a brand new company. And for a corporation like Exxon to form a new company was huge, and I was the regulatory group. I had a [rule] statement that said, well, we're going to make sure that we build these projects and construct them in a safe and environmental and regulatory compliant manner. And I had to put a team of folks together and build a group, put work processes together. I think that was the most rewarding assignment I've ever had with Exxon Mobil.

Why was it the most rewarding?

Because I got to figure out what it was. You know, I didn't follow in somebody else's footsteps. I had to figure out who I needed. It's like picking your team, right? And who's your number one draft choice when all of your wells are offshore. Well, you need an offshore expert, right? So, I think that's what it was. Just the challenge of paving the way rather than continuing something that was there before.

And so, what were the years you were the environmental regulatory manager of the Development Company?

From '98 'til 2003. And by that time I had been working in environmental and regulatory for about 15 years. And after that job unless I went to the corporate level, which I couldn't move to Dallas with my young family, it would really be hard to do anything new. I had a vice-president that believed I could learn some new things. So I moved over to our construction organization where, again in this company that I'm in, the Development Company, we build these huge projects, these big modules that you see offshore. We build those in Korea, sometimes we build them in Nigeria, for local content. We build them all over the world. We're a project management company. We don't actually do it ourselves. We manage engineering and construction contractors that do it. So I had to make sure that things were going right in the fabrication yards. So I learned a lot while at the same time I was managing a group of people. So I've changed careers here, what about eight times? All under the Exxon Mobil umbrella. Then I became the technical manager on a Nigeria LNG which is a liquefied natural gas and power

project based in Houston, but we were trying to build this huge plant in Nigeria. And so, I got to interface with the government, and we had two secondees from a national Nigeria oil company in our offices. My project manager assigned me the responsibility for figuring out what they were going to do and working with them. And I did that for about two years; we never built the plant. They wanted us to do something else. And this was still about September of last year. I wanted to stay in Houston for a while instead of traveling as much, so I asked for a job in Human Resources where they bring in a technical person to find the right people for the right jobs. So I also work on career development programs which I've always had a lot of passion for – especially with women. And right now I have a lady that recruits for our company who reports to me. So I do recruiting, and career development, and staffing of projects. So that's about my tenth career in 30 years with Exxon Mobil. (laughter)

That's amazing that you've been able to do all that

It is.

within Exxon.

And we were talking about marketing at that SWE meeting, that really is a marketing thing that, just about any major company that you talk to, the kids going through school now don't know that, and that's really a message. Because I have one retirement plan, one 401K, and I've changed careers about 10 times and done some pretty interesting things.

And so you mentioned that now you're not doing the traveling but before you did. I presume, for instance, when you were doing this project with Nigeria, you were going to Nigeria?

Yes. I was going; I probably made, I don't know, 15 trips over two years to Nigeria which isn't a lot because we were just talking, we were in the concept, selection, and development, and planning stage of the project. We never got to construction, and we would have had to build a lot of that in Nigeria, so then I would have had to go quite a bit. But you know, five/six trips a year, something like that.

And in which previous jobs did you do a lot of traveling?

The regulatory job I was doing a lot of travelling to Washington because that's where our lobbying office was. So I was gone for probably a week a month, when up there. And I was lucky I had a stay-at-home husband that took care of our girls.

Uh huh. And [let's] come back to husband and daughters.

Okay. Yeah.

Has he been a stay-at-home husband the whole time?

No. He worked initially.

Uh huh.

When our first daughter was born. Well, when I first met him, he was a police officer in Kingsville, and then we moved to Corpus Christi and he was a police officer there. When we moved to Houston, he had to quit the job in Corpus, and he'd had 11 years or something. We had one daughter, and I was expecting our second child. He worked for the metro-transit authority, which is the bus system, as a police officer. And that didn't work out too well because I was working days, he was working nights. And it just wasn't a good situation. And by that time we had two daughters and I was expecting a third. And the daycare with our salaries was just killing us. So he decided he was going to stay home; not a lot of men that would do that.

That's right.

Yeah.

And this transition to the HR position, how has that been? I mean, as you say, you've had probably ten different careers. That seems quite different from some of the others, but obviously for you also combines a lot of things you been interested in for a long time.

It really did.

How's that transition been to doing HR?

It was fun. I actually asked for the job because there were a couple of other positions that were more of the same, and I wanted to do something different. And again, I've always had a passion for this. So it was fun. There was more of an administrative load than I thought, so it took me about two months and I put a proposal, again justifying getting another administrative assistant to help me so I could do more strategic thinking rather than busy work. But it's different in that it's more day-to-day emergency problems, and your phone never stops ringing. You could work 20 hours a day and still there's somebody out there that's not getting the support they need from their HR department. I don't really answer HR related questions; I'm more there for the staffing part. Understanding what's really needed for the job because I've done and been exposed to a lot of the jobs, and what would be a good developmental option for other people. So to me, it's kind of a neat way to pull everything all together late in my career.

And do you know where you want to head next? Because I presume you have many careers ahead of you?

Yeah. (laughter)

(laughter)

Well, I've got one more daughter in high school. And so, my big decision while she's planning where she's going to college, I'm kind of planning where I want to go next. And one option – we've got a really neat project going in Papua New Guinea that's based—the home office for

that project will be in Brisbane, Australia. So I thought another year from now if I want to get the company to buy my house and go live in Australia for three/four years that it takes us to build these major projects, that might be a neat way to end out a career too.

That's amazing. And talking about career development, you're obviously now in a position of mentoring people, giving people, guiding people. To whom have you turned along the way for career guidance, if anyone?

Mostly men.

Uh huh.

Yeah. Because we really didn't have a lot of women role models, and I was long term friends with a guy that worked right next door to me from day one as a reservoir engineer. He was five years older, and he'd kind of been through the ropes. Along with my first boss, who I thought was just exceptional with people, he's still working and I'm really good friends with him. And then, this vice-president that told me I could do other things and he had the confidence in me to do that. He again was really a good person to talk to and a good sounding board. So I don't know how you find those people, but you just find some because it's all about the relationship really, more than what they know. You know, how do you get along with somebody.

And so you mentioned your husband and your three daughters. So when did you meet your husband? You met him in Kingsville?

It's now an ex-husband. (laughter)

An ex-husband. I'm sorry.

Yeah. Just a year ago. But I met him playing basketball in the gym in Kingsville, Texas. All the guys from work would go over there, all the Exxon people, we would play three or four nights a week. It was a good stress release and a lot of fun. And he was playing there. At that time he worked for an oil field service company; they run diagnostic tools in the wells and things. So that's where I met him.

And what years were your three daughters born?

The oldest was born in '88, and then the middle one in '89, and the youngest one in '91. So they're close together.

And your ex-husband was not at home initially,

Right.

did you have concerns about managing the work-life stuff at any point?

It was hard when he wasn't home, especially when you have children in daycare and they get sick. Well, as a police officer, it's kind of hard to call in sick, right? And it was a little easier for me, but back then, we didn't have the workplace flexibility that people have right now. And so, women with children were viewed as problems, right? In fact, there was even an administrative assistant, when I first moved to Houston, had been up there for a week, again was pregnant with the second daughter and got food poisoning somewhere and she was convinced that I was just calling in sick because my daughter was sick. "I" and this is a quote, "I knew having a young mother was going to be a problem." (laughter) This is from the administrative assistant who I'm sure had struggled with this in her own career. So it was tough and I was really thankful to have him because he did the grocery shopping, the cooking, it was almost like having a wife, and he was okay with that or so I thought. But, (laughter) anyway.

Yeah.

That's another chapter.

Yes. Let me just regroup for a moment because I was just thinking about something else. If you don't do the job to Brisbane, do you know other possibilities? Or, are you still—?

I'm still thinking. We have so many projects going on. Some in places where I don't want to go live like Nigeria. I was very fortunate in that planning stage to be working on the Nigeria project from Houston. More and more the government says, you want to do business in Nigeria and I respect them for this, you come to Nigeria, you be part of our culture. And even for a 65% premium and a lot of bonus money, that's not a place I want to go live. So it kind of depends. We've just finished up a project that was based in Milan. That wouldn't have been a bad place to live. We've also got some neat projects going on in Canada. So that may be another option. Or I may decide to just stay in Houston because I think my girls will want some place to come home to. But I've got lots of options open.

And another thing—, but I know we're going in different directions.

Oh, that's okay.

I was thinking about this: clearly early on in your career, you were still using the technical side of things but you were a supervisor as a very young—,

Right.

you must have been like 25 years old or something.

Right.

And then doing all this lobbying down in DC and all this regulatory stuff, now Human Resources. For you how has the engineering degree carried with you? I know you stayed in the technical world, but obviously are doing things that other people might not assume to be engineering.

Right. I think that's true. I think the engineering is the logical thinking, right? It helps you solve problems. And everything is a problem, right? Whether it's a technical problem (laughter), or you've got to get all the right information, and get a logical conclusion out of it. I think the problem solving helps, the way you can present and explain a case in a logical manner and what's your hypothesis and how do you prove it. That has helped. Just the communication skills, I think it's helped. You really have to understand enough about it to be able to put a person on the project, to be able to comment on regulations. So if I didn't have that background, I don't think I would have been credible, in the different fields that I've been in.

And you said specifically [in] the Human Resources job, they wanted a technical person to do that.

Yes. Everybody else in the group is HR. They do our performance assessments, they handle expatriate policies and everything. Whenever people ask me that question, "Well, Deb, you're in HR," and I said, "I just sit in HR," (laughter) I don't know the HR policies. But that's what they want. This is sort of a rotating job. People are in there about two years because they understand what the projects need and the skill sets. They've never put somebody at my level in that job before, an executive level person, and they were a little nervous about that because they said, "Well, she's over qualified for the job." But they've also found ways to get me into the career development aspects and to supervise the recruiting effort that they weren't able to do with other people.

So, in other words, you utilize your talents essentially?

Right.

And so that you want to stay for two years. (laughter)

I don't want to just type in spreadsheets for two and a half years!

Right. So obviously, you've been in technical fields now, specifically at Exxon, for 30 years.

Uh huh.

What have you seen change over that time? In a variety of ways. You take that however you'd like.

I've seen a number of different things. Maybe you've heard of this small spill we had called the Exxon Valdez, and that really is in a lot of textbooks on how not to run a public relations campaign. So I've seen our company grow which has always been founded on technology, grow into more, "Let's tell our story." We've been doing a lot of good things for a long time and rather than just keeping that story quiet, we found out that you've got to advertise and let people know what you're doing. So it's been interesting, watching people grow and develop that I have hired on. Watching and changing my own thinking about what I can offer other women in the field. Just to talk a minute about that. It was about five years ago, we had the senior vice-president of

the company who's one of these work 'til you die (laughter) kind of guys, talk to a lady at the time who's now my engineering vice-president, and said, "We've really got to find a way to help executive women stay here. What can we do?" So they got a small group of about 30 people, that's about all there were, women across the whole upstream, five different companies. And that's what they asked us. We had a little break out session all day long about, "Why did you stay?" and, "When did you think about leaving?" just to collect some information. And out of that, the people in The Development Company, there's only four of us senior women, we said, "Well, we've got to do something about this." We really did have twice the attrition rate in women that are about five to eight years. And that's, I think, when they're trying to start a family and getting into that work/life balance. And as a result of this team, the whole upstream team and my specific company team, we've done a lot of things. We've actually gone to the corporation, and we have changed our workplace flexibility programs. Where you can be on part-time work a little bit longer, flexibility isn't an "F" word anymore. (laughter)

(laughter)

You can actually use it.

That's good.

We've started a mentoring program. I started a women's global share, where people can just post, "I need a nanny in this part of Houston," or "I'm coming back to work after having a baby; how have you ladies done it?" rather than having to go find somebody. It's a generation thing too; the networking on the computer is so much better. To have been part of that and to see the company change as well as individuals change has really been rewarding.

And do you end up dealing with engineers, female engineers or male engineers for that matter, who are just coming out of college?

Yes.

And you're giving resources?

Yes. We do. The lady that works for me right now, that's coordinating it [our recruiting effort]. We do all the recruiting, and then we have new hire events for their whole first year. We help them form their networks and have quarterly events for them. For example, take them to an Astros ballgame where they get to meet people and things like that. Put them in touch with people that live in their neighborhood. We also put together an assimilation program for what kinds of things to do, help assign them a mentor, and then a buddy that's closer to their age. And have some tools and things that they can use and checklists. We do get involved in that, and we really have a pretty formal program for their first year.

And what differences or similarities for that matter do you find between young engineers, people just coming out of college now, versus what you remember of yourself back in 1978?

(laughter) Well, we actually put on some training about that. I got a consultant to come in and put on generational training because I think there's a huge difference; especially with my company and maybe that's because I've only worked for them for 30 years. I don't know. Maybe General Electric's the same. We're not going to find another generation of people like us that want to work 16 hours a day, right? Seven days a week. We're going to have to change the way and what we have to offer to younger people. They're multi-taskers; they think nothing of talking on the phone and typing and e-mail and having a conversation with you. And they're also not as apt to stay with one company. Not a lot of people come in to an Exxon Mobil, I don't think anymore, even in Exxon Mobil, thinking "I'm going make a career out of working for this company." So those are all challenges and you've got to find ways to approach them and change the way you interact with them, or you're just not going to attract the same quality of work force you need over the years.

I would assume you're saying [this] would apply to both men and women?

Men and women.

Yes, and probably not only men and women engineers, right?

Right.

But are there specific ways that the female engineers seem different to you, from again, what you remember yourself and your peers as being like in 1978?

I think they're more open to things. I mean, they've seen people that have gone through this. And we were kind of paving the way, right? And there weren't a lot of people that would like the lady today in our class, work somewhere else for two months while her husband's home with the children. And so, they're open to that more than we were. But for the most part a lot of these issues really do apply to both men and women.

Yeah.

They [engineers today] also are better at making their own networks than we were. Maybe it's because they've got more people to contact. They seek them out. I didn't seek out other women early in my career. I don't know why. I just didn't. And I think they're a lot better at that. Although they do need some help just getting comfortable approaching some of the older women.

Right. And you mentioned that few people today--I think you're probably right—would think, "I'm going to work at Exxon Mobil, or General Electric, or Procter and Gamble for my entire career." When you started back in 1978, what did you think?

Well, I did.

You did?

Yeah. I really did. I don't know why. I guess I'm a creature of habit.

(laughter)

And, I also felt like why would you want to leave a company? Well, probably because they were in financial difficulty or something. And surely, Exxon's never going to be in that situation. I guess I never thought that I might not like it. I don't why. (laughter)

And this is going back to your time as a reservoir engineer and a sub-surface engineer: did you like it from the beginning?

I did. It was hard work and probably culture shock; moving from Buffalo, New York down to Kingsville, Texas was something. But then we had a good group of young engineers, so that helped with that too. But I liked it. I mean, you don't like certain days, but if you're naïve enough to think you're not going to find that if you jump the fence to someplace else, you're pretty naïve.

Yes.

The one time I did think about leaving, and my only time I thought about leaving, was when I moved to Houston and I did not feel I was progressing as fast as some of my peers. And all my peers were men. I looked around, and Arco was another oil company. I don't know if you've ever heard of them, and they had a little more flexibility, they had some higher salaries and signing bonuses, and I seriously thought about looking at that. Well, about that time, I got a new boss, and I got a couple of quick promotions in a row and then it was no longer an issue. (laughter)

Ah. (laughter)

So it was really over money. Money and recognition I guess I should say, more than money.

And turning back to your personal life, what would you say have been your greatest satisfactions in your personal life?

Well, I think raising three girls.

Yeah. And are there other things that have been important to you in your life, in your life in Houston, or not only Houston but (inaudible).

Yeah. My church has always been important. I've been lucky enough to live in the same area, because a lot of people that you would talk to that work for Exxon Mobil have moved around a lot. And I've been very lucky not to have done that. So I've been with the same church since 1989 when we moved to Kingwood. So that's been a big part of my life.

Yeah. And what kind of involvement have you had in your church?

Teaching Sunday School. With all the kids going through the youth groups, you take them to the mall and go shopping at Christmas, and you drive them on scavenger hunts, and all that kind of stuff. So that's been very rewarding for me.

Sounds good. Are there other things that you want to add? Things that we haven't touched on that you want to add in any way?

I don't think so. I think it's a really neat project that you're working on because similar to how I've changed my mind about [being vocal about being a] woman in engineering. I think hearing people's stories, you learn a lot more than reading the college paraphernalia that you see on the internet, because these are real people and real experiences, and you know, a lot of success stories.

That's what I'm hoping for.

Yeah.

Thank you.

Yeah.

Well, I'm going to turn this off.

Okay.

Thank you very much.