Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Cathy Dawson
Machinist

Interviewed on March 8, 2004

Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs
Walter P. Reuther Library
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Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Interview with Cathy Dawson

MARGARET RAUCHER: I'm Margaret Raucher. The Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project is here at the Walter Reuther Library on March 8, 2004 to interview Cathy Dawson, a machinist and a member of the Utility Workers Union and I think also the chair of the Women's Committee?

CATHY DAWSON: Right. Women's Director for Local 223 and trustee.

RAUCHER: And I will start off the questioning by asking Cathy about her life before she entered the trades, when you were growing up, your family life and early influences on you.

DAWSON: Okay. I'm born, bred and raised in Highland Park, Michigan. I'm from a family of four. I have two older sisters and an older brother. I'm the youngest, and I never let them forget it. I consider my family as being very traditional. My mom stayed at home. My dad worked two jobs. He worked for Chrysler, Jefferson Plant — he was a painter most of the time he was there — and he was a janitor. He was there about thirty years.

When I think of early childhood I think of the village, that saying, "The village raises the child." That was definitely me. All the parents on the block were other sets of parents for me. We were a very close, close-knit group. My parents were the first — I think they were either the first or the second black family on the block. So when I was young, we were definitely in the minority. But as I grew up, especially by the time I got

to high school, we were definitely the majority. So I saw Highland Park go through all the different steps and all the different stages until the blacks became the majority there.

Most of the families on the block were traditional like mine, in the respect that the mothers stayed at home. There was probably two families on the block where the moms worked. One was a nurse and one worked with the school system. And of course, their kids were watched by the other moms who stayed at home. And so, even today all the kids are close because we all grew up together, so we all still come back. Most of the parents, they're still alive, they still live there on that one-block street in Highland Park.

ELAINE CRAWFORD: What street?

DAWSON: Prospect. It's one block long. It's between Puritan and Pilgrim, four blocks off of Hamilton. That's how we always describe it. Yeah, so it's home, and that'll always be home for me.

RAUCHER: Do you have any siblings?

DAWSON: I have two sisters and I have a brother, older.

RAUCHER: Yes, that's right, you said you were the youngest. And your sisters do what for a living?

DAWSON: My oldest sister is a teacher, and she's in the union. She works for the Highland Park school system. And as a matter of fact, I've given her some of the radical ideas we used at one time when we were working without a contract, because they were having problems and issues.

My brother is in security for the Highland Park school system and he's an officer in his union. It's so strange that everybody's involved in the union. My oldest sister isn't

because she's a paralegal, so she couldn't. She wants to, but she can't because she has all that sensitive information at Ford Motor Company.

But it's strange. We were talking about that recently, too, how all of us belong in a union and really work in the union. It's just really strange. But it fits, so we can go home and vent when we're together, "Well, this happened to me, and this happened to me."

MICHELLE FECTEAU: Why do you think that is?

DAWSON: I don't know. My dad was in a union, but it wasn't like he went to union meetings. It wasn't like it was a topic that was discussed a lot at home or anything. I don't know where that comes from. Sometimes I think it's because of how I grew up — it was definitely the golden rule, you treat everyone the way you want to be treated. And you're supposed to be nice and fair and kind to people. And I think of "fair" as being a word that we used a lot. So maybe it's somehow related to that. But we thought that was really odd. Different unions, too. How did all that come about?

RAUCHER: Did you have any idea when you were growing up that you would get involved in a non-traditional job, or did you grow up playing with dolls and girls and all that sort of thing?

DAWSON: Yeah, definitely, I played with the dolls. But I had an older brother who was closest to me in age, so I hung out with him a lot and with my dad, because I was the youngest and I wanted to be with everybody. But never would I have ever thought in my wildest dreams that I would have been a machinist. As a matter of fact, I went to school to be a teacher, so how this changed and how this happened was

extraordinary. I've always liked kids, and I always knew I was going to be an elementary school teacher. But that changed.

FECTEAU: What created that change?

DAWSON: Well, what happened was I went to Michigan State [University] for probably about three years. Finances became hard. I just couldn't stay in school. I realized that I liked children, but I realized that maybe I didn't like them all the time. [laughter] I'm thinking maybe I'd just like to keep them for a while and then go home. So it just didn't work out. And it's nothing that I regret, because I'm with enough kids to fulfill that part of me, so it's okay. And I'm sort of glad I went — well, some days I'm glad I went [laughs] — this route.

RAUCHER: Did you have any hobbies or interests when you were growing up that might have had an impact on what you did, the career you chose later?

DAWSON: I have thought about that. As mechanical as I probably got was if a bike was broke. And of course, probably just hanging around with my brother and my dad, because my dad was the type of person who fixed everything that he could. He thought he could fix everything, anyway. The radio was broken or something and I might question, "Well, what's that? What does that do?" But I don't know, when I look back, I think of it as really being sort of a traditional upbringing, as a little girl.

I did like sports, though. And I got that from my brother and my dad. To this day, I enjoy football. I'm crazy about tennis. I've recently gotten into golf, because I can't do anything else but golf. [laughs] But sports was always big in our house, so I understood football and I understood baseball, the rules, and basketball and all that. So maybe in that respect, a little bit different than some of my friends.

RAUCHER: What was it like growing up in a neighborhood that changed racially? I mean, when you were in grade school, you must have been one of the few black kids in the class.

DAWSON: Right, right.

RAUCHER: And then by the time you got to high school, that had changed dramatically. If you look back on that, what sorts of thoughts do you have about it?

DAWSON: It was so gradual that it was very natural. You really didn't notice it. When I look back now at my older sister, when she graduated — and she got out of Highland Park in 1967, I graduated in '72 — her yearbook, if you look at the pictures, she was probably still in the minority. But definitely when I got out in '72, definitely blacks were more of a majority then.

I mean, I think I see the difference because I'm an adult now, but going through that step and that process, I didn't really recognize it. Because you have to understand that everybody on my block in Highland Park, everybody knew everybody. And my mom was secretary of the school board forever, so it was impossible to get into trouble. But everybody knew who you were, so I don't know, I never really felt prejudice. I know it happened, though, because I could see it.

And then, it's strange, because when I went to Michigan State, I was back in the minority, big time, again. And then I think about the years that I had there, and it's funny because I was a minority aide for my dorm there. And that was the very beginning of when we had that at Michigan State. It's like an RA [residence aide], but you're a minority aide. And it's really funny to think about that, "God, you were fighting for people then, too, you just didn't know it."

RAUCHER: What does a minority aide do that an RA doesn't do?

DAWSON: Well, an RA took care of the people on their floor in the dorm. A minority aide would do the whole dorm, or you would do a whole section. It would be maybe six dorms, and you would be sure you reached out to the minority students, let them know what was going on, where things were. We started a black caucus in our dorm.

Interesting that I got involved, definitely involved in it, but knew I would never — and this is funny — knew I would never be the president of this organization, because I knew it had to be a man — very strange. And I made sure I worked behind the scenes to support him, because he didn't think he could do it. But I knew he could. I knew he had the potential, but he just needed a little boosting. But I never, ever thought that that was something that I should do. It just never crossed my mind at that age. Strange.

RAUCHER: So when did you go from that type of feeling to taking on a job and a role within the union that was male-dominated? I mean, it seems like that's a big jump. How did you get there?

DAWSON: Well, I don't know how that happened. Then again, it was gradual. I came back from Michigan State, stayed at home a couple of years, lost, trying to find myself, of course. I ended up getting a job at Edison, came into Detroit Edison as a clerk. That's how I got hired in, doing a traditional job.

I did what we called coupons. When a person sent in their bill, we called it a coupon, the little thing you would get, and I worked the adding machines. I could really go. And it's so funny, because it's still there. If I get on an adding machine, it just comes back. It may take me five minutes, but it's there — it's really strange. Did that for a

couple of years, very traditional, was still living at home. Didn't drive at that time, because we never had a car, so I never knew how to drive.

And the incident that changed me — I don't know why this is really, but it just sticks out in my head. I remember I was going home. It was a snowy day. I'm going to catch the bus, because that's how I got to work. And I was fully dressed. And it was a bad winter day. In those days, we had snow. So I'm at the elevator and I'm pressing the button. And my supervisor said, "Cathy, you need to work overtime." And I said, "Well, I can't," because I know the bus schedule, and I didn't want to go home in the dark. I said, "I have to go home." And she said, "Well, if you go home, don't come back." So, of course, I went back to work. I knew I would lose my job. But I was really mad.

So here I am thinking, "I don't know how I'm getting home." But I knew that I had to do this. So I stayed, and I took a cab home. And I was very upset, because I'm tight. I'm very thrifty, as my friends call me. So I took a cab home, and it was just a ton of money. So I knew then that I didn't want someone having that kind of control over me. I knew I was going to find a job where I could determine what my hours were going to be. It was very rare that I had to stay overtime, but it could happen again.

And then again, these are the same people who worked with me when I got a promotion in that field and I couldn't take the promotion because of the starting time. It was an hour earlier and it didn't correlate with my bus schedule and my friend, who was like a second father to me, would take me to the bus and wait for me until the bus came, because it was early in the morning. So I came and I told them, "I can't take this promotion because it messes with my bus schedule." And they let me come in an hour later, do whatever I had to do.

So I was sort of thrown when they came out with this, "You must work," at the elevator. And I mean, I must have stayed until like, 11:30 or midnight that night. But I was mad. I was really mad. So I decided to do anything else where I could have more control. And everybody told me that you have more control if you were in the union.

And I didn't know what I was doing. I did not know. A job came up at Warren Service Center, which is Warren and Livernois, and it was for a metal fabricator. I didn't even know what it was. I had no clue what it was. I was just mad, so I bid on it. And I don't think anybody else bid on it in the company, so I got it. And I did that, went through an apprenticeship, through Edison, for about three years. And I discovered that the work was physically too heavy for me, because you're working with the steel beams and you're sawing, you're punching. And it was just too heavy.

So right down the road, as I called it, right in the next building, was machine shop. And I sort of knew some of the guys in there, and they said, "You can do this job. All it takes is just your brains, that's all." In the metal fab job, there had been women there before. There weren't any women when I got there, but there had been two. In machine shop there had never been any women. And so I was a little apprehensive about that. I was like, "Ah, I don't know. You've never had any women down there. Where's my locker room going to be?" Did I really want to be bothered with coming into this kind of environment? But I knew that the work was better for me, wasn't as physical. I liked the thought of making things, and I had a good core group of guys there. So I went for it and applied for the job.

And I remember in the interview, one of my bosses said, "Well, have you ever worked from a blueprint?" And I'm like, "Blueprint? No." But then I thought, "Well, I

occasionally sewed." My sister is the real seamstress, but I got through high school, did what you had to do, but by no means am I a sewer. And I said, "Well, I've used a pattern in sewing." Now this is a roomful of men. There was probably six men. They all looked at me like, "What is she talking about? [laughter] She uses a pattern to sew!" It's funny now. They were just thrown. And they told me afterwards that they didn't know how it related, but after they thought about it, they said, "It's the same concept." You're building something from more or less a blueprint. A pattern can be a blueprint. That's how I related to it. So I got through the interview and got the job.

PAT NUZNOV: So how long was your apprenticeship?

DAWSON: The apprenticeship in metal fab, I think it was about two and a half, three years. In machine shop it was three years. Edison had their own school, and it was called a Technical Training Center. And you went there probably, I'll say, four or five times a year for a whole week. And you got all your basic book work there. And you had to take tests.

But the real core to the job was the on-the-job training. I mean, that's where you got all the training. Going to school, to me, was almost a waste of time. I just wanted to be left alone. "Let me stay on the job, work with these guys and pick it up that way." Because the only way to learn the job was to physically do it.

NUZNOV: So how did those men treat you? Were they open to training the first woman?

DAWSON: Well, I'm laughing. It was such an adventure. How long — well, this has been nineteen years now. Because metal fab had had women there, there was

already a locker room for women that was close. You didn't have to walk a mile to get to a restroom or anything.

In machine shop, I had to actually kick a group out of a locker room with a shower facility. And it happened to be the paint shop. So all those guys, they had to leave, because you had to have some kind of facility for Cathy, only Cathy, nobody else, just Cathy. So paint shop wasn't very happy with me. They weren't too pleased.

I did find out before I came down there that the machinists were told by the foreman, after they knew I accepted the position, "You get rid of all these, anything." Because they had the women in the bikinis — I don't know what they had. And they told them, "Everything has to be taken down. Now, what you have in your tool box, that's something else. But if you're going to open your tool box, and it's going to be open and it's going to be accessible to anyone in the shop, you're going to have to get rid of all these pictures. They're not appropriate." And that was huge, because they never worried about stuff like that before.

NUZNOV: And what year was this?

DAWSON: This was in — it was nineteen years ago, so this was in 1985, yeah. So you come into that environment knowing you're not too welcome. But they did know me because I was an officer already in the division. So they knew who I was. I was the recording secretary. But it was still different because I was coming into their domain, which is an all-male domain. And men tend to be a little macho, and they think women can't do what they're doing. It's almost like it's supposed to be this big mystery, being a machinist. And I, to some extent, thought it was, that you had to have something really special.

But you didn't. I mean, if you could think, you could do math reasonably, and if you had the heart to do it and you wanted to learn, anyone can do it. It's not this big, hard, unattainable goal. Present it right and instruct someone right, anyone can do it. But they sort of walk around a little cocky, I guess, I don't know.

But it was difficult for them, and I will accept that, but they didn't go through the pain that I went through. I know that if I didn't have that core group that I had mentioned that was in machine shop, I would not have stayed. There was just no way. They really stepped up. They let the guys know that, "If you mess with her, you're going to have to come through us." In my core group were three or four black guys in machine shop. My core group in metal fab were two white guys. They were really, really good to me.

And in machine shop it was always a thing for me trying to figure out if people didn't like me because I was black or people didn't like me because I was a woman. Edison in those days was going through a lot of — we had had a huge [employment discrimination] lawsuit — so I always struggled with that. Okay, what is it today? Is it the woman thing or is it the black thing? Sometimes I could get lucky, it would be the woman/black thing. It could be both. So it was just always an adventure trying to figure out why people were so upset that I would come down there.

I've heard the standard talk, "Well, you're taking a position away from my son, you're taking a position away from my nephew and my grandson." And I asked them, "Well, why didn't you tell John that? John is a white male. Nobody told him that when he came in. Why is it me?" So for me, the hard thing was trying to figure out if it was because I was black or if I was a woman, or both.

CRAWFORD: A friend of mine said not too long ago, "You know, maybe it wasn't any of those things, maybe it was her. Maybe they just didn't like me." And she said when she began thinking about that, she found it kind of liberating. [laughs] I think that would be really hard to say about you, but it was funny to me that she said that.

DAWSON: I never would have thought that, because I gave them nothing. The only reason I got involved in the union was because when I went to metal fab, the guys are always at the coffee pot. And they would break up when I would walk up to them. And I said, "Why do you always stop talking when I come around?" And they'd say, "Oh, we're talking union stuff, Cathy. You wouldn't be interested." And I'm thinking to myself, "Yeah, I would," because I didn't know anything about a union, basically nothing.

So an office came available and, of course, it was recording secretary and nobody wanted to type. I love to type. It was no big deal to me. That was just nothing. And I ran for it, and nobody else ran, so of course [laughs], I got the job. That was how I got involved in the union. I wasn't a steward first — I became an officer first. So I had a lot to learn, a lot to learn. And somehow I've been involved ever since. And sometimes I wonder why. [laughs]

CRAWFORD: What were your responsibilities as the recording secretary?

DAWSON: Just to take the minutes during grievances. Well, in those days, we were allowed to have more union people in on a grievance. And in those days, you have to understand, it was a different environment at Edison, as far as doing grievances. Now we do interest-based bargaining — IBB. In those days it was the old way, I call it. You're pounding on the table, a little more rough. The language wasn't clean.

So I had to toughen up, too, because that just wasn't how I was brought up. To this day, the only way I knew if my mother was really upset is when she said, "I'm going to beat your butt." "Butt" was her bad word." When she said "butt," you were in such trouble, [laughs] because she just did not curse. She still doesn't. So it took some time for me to get used to just the regular shopfloor language. And I knew that was me. I knew that this is the environment that I came into, and I was going to have to learn to live with that. And that took a while.

But what I did find was that they did try. And that's all I could ask. I mean, I would be in meetings sometimes and some guys couldn't talk, because they didn't know how to talk English without cursing. So I appreciated that, that you made that effort. And sometimes I'd have to tell them, "Let it go," [laughs] "because you're not getting anywhere trying to protect me. Just say what you need to say. My ears won't burn. I'll be okay." And every now and then I'd let one fly, and that pleases them, to say the least. [laughter] But yeah, I've learned from them, too. I've learned from them.

CRAWFORD: Going back to your apprenticeship as a machinist, when you first started, did you just stand over someone's shoulder while they're running their machine or did they give you a machine and maybe stand over your shoulder and instruct you? Did you start with something simple?

DAWSON: Right. A little bit of both. I probably started out sawing for weeks on end.

CRAWFORD: Sawing metal things?

DAWSON: Yes. Or filing something by hand for weeks on end. And that was to see if you really had the determination to stick with it — boring, monotonous, tedious,

dull. But you were an apprentice, so you get the low of the low. And I understood that. That never bothered me. It didn't bother me. Because some people, some apprentices, they want everything. It's like they want all the cushy stuff and all the good stuff. And I understand you have to eat dirt.

CRAWFORD: Why did you understand that?

DAWSON: Because that's what everyone had told me. There are certain things that apprentices do and you have to prove yourself and show them that you can do it, and then it'll be okay. Because all of them had done it, so they want to see you do it, and it continues on and on. So of course, when I became a journeyperson, I would break that up. I think apprentices should get overtime. This thing we had where they didn't get overtime, I felt, "They're human beings, too. They need money." You go through the whole list, and you need somebody to work, there's always work that an apprentice can do.

Like making the coffee — and I don't even drink coffee — that's big for me. So after I started making a few pots, they weren't too thrilled about me making coffee because I don't drink coffee. I said, "Well, I don't know how to do this." I had to be taught how to make coffee. It's so funny. So to this day that's my pet peeve, I won't make coffee.

But a lot of the apprenticeship was that they would show you how to do a job, because when you work as a machinist, the hardest part about the job is setup. How am I going to set this piece of material, whatever kind of piece it is? And you always have to consider what type it is: steel, aluminum, copper, brass. How am I going to hold it in the machine and make cuts on it and how am I going to hold it securely so it won't come out

and hurt you or hurt the machine or hurt the piece? So that's always the hardest part, because if you start machining something the wrong way, you'll never get it right.

So it's thinking out totally the whole process, all the steps of how you're going to do it. And to me, that's the hardest part. That's where all your brain work comes in. And then there are your natural abilities: how fast can the machine turn, how much pressure can I put on it?

And everyone makes mistakes. Mistakes are the best way of learning, because you never forget. I remember the first time my piece came out of a mill. It scared me. I mean, it happened so quick. It just fell out. It just shot out. Thankfully it didn't hit me or didn't hit anybody else. But it happened so quick. And I'm just milling, and it just, pchoo! And I'm just looking at it like, "What happened?" I'm in a daze.

And of course it makes a loud noise, so everybody knows it. So everybody huddles around you to make sure you're okay. And then of course, they laugh, too. And I'm just standing there looking at it. And the whole time I'm thinking, "How could this have happened? I did everything right." And I'm going, "A, B, C, D. What did I do?"

So then after a while, I realized that I was really sort of nervous, because I thought I could get hurt. So you have to go away from the machine, that's what I had to do to, go far away and just sort of chill out and relax. I will admit I didn't go near that machine for a couple of days, because I didn't trust it anymore. But I went back to the machine, of course, because you have to get back on that machine.

But mistakes, everyone makes them. And to me it shows that you're productive when you make mistakes. But that's the best way to learn.

FECTEAU: When you made that mistake, do you think you were treated like one of the guys would have been if they made a mistake or were you treated differently?

DAWSON: Yeah, they did. Treated me the same, yeah. Made jokes. I mean, at the weekly meeting, safety meeting — "Well, the only thing that happened this week was Cathy shot something out of a machine." I mean, just the standard thing. But the first thing was, "Are you okay?" That was the first thing that everyone did. After they'd come and look, they wanted to see if you're bleeding or you're cut.

CRAWFORD: What exactly do you make? I've seen grinding machines, but I have trouble picturing what a machinist would make for Detroit Edison.

DAWSON: I meant to bring my brochure — it's in the car — and I could have just showed you pictures. Do you know what a lathe is? You have any idea?

CRAWFORD: Yes.

DAWSON: Okay. A lathe can come in a little size or it can be huge. I mean, lathes make airplanes. So you can imagine how big a lathe can be. In a mill, that's what you use with the end mill. And it goes in a circular motion and cuts the material away. Where a lathe moves, the material moves. It goes around, around and around, and you're cutting like this. So your tool is steady, and the material is moving. On a mill, it's the opposite. Your tool is going like this, and the piece is held.

So what can I make? I can make anything. I can make that coffee pot. I can make that bottle. I can make this table. There isn't anything in this room that probably is not made from a mill and a lathe, drill press, anything in a machine shop. You can make that chair. It's absolutely everything. As long as you give someone a blueprint, which is

the specs on the sizes that you want to keep, that's what you can make. The sky is the limit.

CRAWFORD: But what are the things that are made by people in your job at Detroit Edison?

DAWSON: Well, shafts. We have power plants at Edison. We have substations. So if something like a shaft . . .

CRAWFORD: A motor shaft, a pump shaft?

DAWSON: Sure. Any kind of a shaft. You can make that. We have a lot of little parts that we make that are for substations. And to tell you the truth, so many things we make, we have no idea where they go, because we haven't been to that facility. It's just that we know that we have to make this particular part. So I might not have seen what I make, where it's installed and who uses it. A lot of times the guys — and we call them "substation guys" — we make a lot of small parts for them. And small parts, I guess, are maybe the size of manhole covers. We've made those.

In the power plants we have these turbine valves. A lot of times they're so big that we can't make them or refinish them. What we really do is maintain them. So when they come offline and they're tremendously hot, hot, hot, they'll bring them to the shop, and we'll tear them apart, and we'll take specs on everything, because we have to see if there's been any wear, which of course there has been. And then, according to what the engineer tells us, maybe we have to build it up. Maybe our welders will have to weld material on them. And then we have to bring them back to the correct size, depending on what that is, or maybe it needs a hole drilled. We'll do that.

But as far as what we make, your job is never dull. I mean, you may see that job come back every other month or you may not see it for another year or it can be a one-of-a-kind thing. We do a lot of threading on different materials. That's the fun of machining, too, because I know I can't thread an aluminum piece like I can thread a steel piece or a stainless steel piece or something that's even harder, or copper, which drives me insane, because copper is just so — when it comes off, it's very irregular. And copper is one of the worst cuts you can get. So when you do copper, I flood it with oil, keep my tool very cool. But there's so much that you can do. We really need to go on a tour. That's what we really need to do. You really need to see.

CRAWFORD: That would be great.

NUZNOV: So you work essentially with metal.

DAWSON: Right. Or plastic or rubber.

NUZNOV: Really?

DAWSON: Yeah, you can do that, too. It's really any material. And every material is different, how many RPMs, what tool to use to cut it with. Everything is different.

And now we're in the age of computer numerical control equipment — we call them CNC — and that seems to be the future of machine shops. So now you have to go back to school to learn computers; it's like, never ending. But they've created another job for people, because some people just write programs, they don't machine. You always need the skills of a machinist even though all the equipment is CNC, because if the computer breaks down, what are you going to do? You need those manual lathes and mills. You got to know how to operate them.

But the CNC equipment is fascinating. It's fascinating. You just draw the picture, you put in the dimensions, and you press a button, and it's sh, sh, sh, sh, sh, and it cuts, and it comes out the other end exactly like that picture — and I mean, it's dead-on, size-wise. It's fascinating.

RAUCHER: So machinists aren't trained the same way, obviously, anymore, as they were when you came up.

DAWSON: Yeah, it's a little different now, a little different. And it's funny, because most of the people you get now from the outside, they don't want to do this dirty stuff that we do, like when you have to pull apart a pump, they don't want to do that stuff. They want to make the nice pretty clean parts, where you don't get dirty. But we're a maintenance shop. You're going to get dirty. It's loud and you're going to get dirty. But they're more into making nice shiny new parts, which is fun, but that's not our bread and butter. My job is to make sure Edison works. Whatever they need, that's what we're there for.

CRAWFORD: Do you make a lot of parts for equipment that maybe is not manufactured anymore and therefore needs a replacement part?

DAWSON: Sure, sure. If we're the only ones that know how to do it or we're the only ones that can provide for it on our equipment, sure, sure. So that keeps us steadily employed. It's called job security. [laughs]

RAUCHER: Are you still the only woman in the shop?

DAWSON: Unfortunately, yeah. I'm the only woman machinist at Edison, period, unfortunately. And I find that strange. But I guess I shouldn't, because I went through the apprenticeship in '85, and that was after the big lawsuit. And I recognized

that Detroit Edison had to open up. They said they would. And I had perfect timing when I came in there. So, after I went through the apprenticeship, there was probably one or two — I think there were only two more people. And then Edison, like most of the industry, they stopped their apprenticeship program, which was how minorities and women got in. So when they stopped it for, I'd say, fifteen years, I still haven't gotten another apprenticeship in machine shop. I've gotten it in metal fab, I've gotten it in electrical shop, but I haven't gotten it in machine shop. And it's so frustrating, because I sort of feel you grow your own. And usually, as a rule, when people go through an apprenticeship at Edison, they stay in the company.

But it's a different mind set now. A lot of the people, the guys coming in now, they're not looking for thirty years. They're looking for maybe five, maybe two. "But if somebody down the street is paying more money, I'm gone." Whereas, I guess my generation, we didn't look at it that way. I went to Edison because I wanted a job until I retired. And next year, twenty-five years, so I just want ten more, that's all. But it's a little different now, so I guess everything changes.

CRAWFORD: But it almost sounds like Edison changed first, for them to not be willing to continue their apprenticeship program on a regular basis said, in a way, "No, we're not interested in investing in the future."

DAWSON: Right, right. And that was the excuse, the money was too much.

CRAWFORD: And when you guys retire, "Well, we don't have anybody to do it and we're going to have to give it to somebody else."

DAWSON: Exactly. And it's almost like if all that knowledge isn't transferred, we're in trouble. For example, we're having a problem with our power plants now doing

coal mills. And we do the coal mill shaft. It's a huge thing, huge. And for some reason they've been breaking a lot. And I mean, we have brought the whole assembly piece in, which is probably as tall as this building. And we have measured everything. We have checked the run out. And on our end, we can't figure out what's wrong. So the only thing we can conclude as machinists is that someone twenty years ago knew how to set this piece of equipment in, and they probably did it by feel. They had worked there so long that they knew if they heard that coal mill make a certain sound, "Ah, we need to do this, we need to do that." And that knowledge wasn't transferred.

So now we're going by the book, because we don't have anybody who was there ten, twenty years ago. So now, sometimes you can't make a new part to fix an old part. It just doesn't work. You can give me a print and you're telling me you want this piece to go into this. And if this piece is sort of worn out and it's not brand new, eh, maybe I need to make this dimension a little bigger or a little smaller. You can sort of figure it out.

But now, trying to make everything exactly like the print, it's just not working. So I think our fear is that all that knowledge went out the door and we didn't capture it. And we're just getting coal mills that break and break. So I don't know how to solve that problem. It's a costly one.

NUZNOV: So, day to day on this job, are you glad you became a machinist?

DAWSON: Yeah, I am glad. It makes you look at things differently. I look back on it, and first of all, I am amazed that I've been there that long, that everything you've been through — the good, the bad and the ugly — and you're still standing. Now, I don't really have any problems with the guys, because now I'm their chief steward, I'm

a trustee. And I would never take anything from them now. But then, I'm forty-nine. It's different for men when you're younger.

RAUCHER: So what kept you going? Since it doesn't sound like it was always this easy.

DAWSON: Well, what kept me going in the beginning was my great niece, I had her. I got her in '85, and I raised her for five years. So in my head, I knew I needed to provide for her, and this was a great paying job. And the hours were great, they were flexible. I could work overtime if I wanted to. I could work seven days a week, twelve hours a day if I wanted to. So in the beginning, it was money, because it was just me with her and I wanted to give her whatever I could. So it was to provide a home for her.

And when I think back, I did so much better with money when I had her. I mean, I had [snaps fingers] everything just set, because I always thought of Stephanie first. I would think of Stephanie before I would think of me. And now that I'm just out there alone, it's like, "What did I do with all this money?" [laughs] But that was my main reason for staying with it, I think more than anything.

I don't know. I really marvel that I had enough guts to do it. I don't know what even really got into me to do it. I really don't.

CRAWFORD: How did your family feel about it? How did they react to it?

DAWSON: My dad was a little upset, because he said, "I know what you're going into." And he didn't like it, because I'm the baby. And I play the baby role, there's no doubt. I let them know I'm the baby. So he was really, really, really worried. And I was lucky to have him, because I could talk to him about everything. Anytime something bothered me, the times when I couldn't figure out if it was because I was a

woman or if it was because I was black, we would sit down and we'd talk about it. And he always made me feel better, and always said that, "If you want to leave this job, it doesn't mean you're a failure. This just wasn't for you. Don't be afraid to walk away. Don't think you have to stay there to prove something." See I'm talking about my dad, so I'm going to get upset now. [Cathy's father died shortly before this interview was taped.]

NUZNOV: That was wonderful advice, though, to know that if you did fail, it wouldn't change who you were or how your family felt.

DAWSON: Yeah, yeah.

CRAWFORD: And how did your mother feel about it?

DAWSON: She didn't really know what I was doing. [laughter]

DAWSON: Even today — now she knows a little bit more, but she really didn't know or understand. And then, also, because Mom has never really been in a working environment, she probably thought everybody was going to be like my dad to me, [laughs] because I'm her baby, I'm Cathy, right? And I would never, never tell her what went on. I couldn't. Now I can. I couldn't back then, because I don't think — I don't know what she would have done. I just wouldn't have worried her like that. So I put all the worry on him, my dad.

RAUCHER: And what did go on? You said you had a kind of core group that insulated, but obviously there were some bad times.

DAWSON: There were. You always felt like you had to prove yourself. And it was always the same sort of guys, the loud guys. And unfortunately I had a leader, for

whatever reason, we didn't click. And I remember when my foreman went on this special assignment for a month, and that meant that the leader was in charge.

And this is the only time I remember — he gave me this job and he told me to make it to whatever size on the blueprint. And something happened to this piece. Anyway, I didn't do it right the first time. I had to send it to the weld shop to get welded up, and then I had to re-machine it. Well, when you send it to the weld shop, it's going to get harder, it changes the whole structure of the steel. So it just was not working. I could not get the sizes right for whatever reason, I don't know why.

And he was just on me, on me, on me, "Well, why can't you do this? Why can't you do that?" And I didn't like him anyway. And in my head, I mean, we had issues. But I have to say that he had issues with everyone. He wasn't just picking on me because I was a woman or I was black. This was just a nasty person, period, to everybody.

So I remember, after I did it about four times, it was 3:30, which was the end of my shift, so I went home, and I didn't come in the next day. I called in sick for probably the next week, because I just didn't want to deal with him. And I was feeling really bad. I just couldn't do this job. And I was on this kick where I wasn't going to ask for help, either. I had to prove myself and I had to do it.

I think when I came back, somebody else had done it, so he was off of me for a while. But he probably went on somebody else, since I was gone for a week. And this is a T-grade union person; he was my peer, but he was my leader. So I remember when my boss came back, I told him, "Never again will I ever take a work assignment from him. Never again have him tell me how to do a job, never again have him show me anything, because as a leader he sucks. He's not helpful."

Because the leader is supposed to help people. And I was still an apprentice. And I just knew I could never go to him. He was the type of person who, if you asked him a question, ten minutes later he'd go around the shop telling everybody, "Oh, I had to answer this question she didn't know." I didn't like stuff like that.

So once I told my boss that, I was cool. He was off my back, because he was told, "Don't even bother Cathy. Don't go near her, don't talk to her." And I didn't care how I got that to happen; it made me feel better and that's all I cared about at that time. He was a bad apple. But you have them.

FECTEAU: I'm still curious about when you said sometimes you were treated wrongly and you couldn't figure out if it was because you were a woman or you were black, and coping with that. And you talked about your father and he gave you some great advice. What was that advice?

DAWSON: Well, he told me I didn't have to prove anything to anybody. He also said, "You don't have to take anything from anybody, either." Because, believe it or not, I'm a shy person by nature. I know some people find this really hard to believe, but I am. If I could really be me being me, I wouldn't be in the spotlight or anything. I would be the type of person who works behind the scenes, gets things done. That's my comfort zone. But sometimes you're thrust into greatness, as they say, so you don't have a choice. [laughs]

But just getting used to how men think, getting used to . . . Men gossip twenty times worse than women. But their gossip is different. It's hurtful. It's more hurtful than women. Women like to laugh and stuff, but men sometimes, well, the guys I was working with — not all of them, but some of them — would like to just pick at that hot

point that you have. There are some things that you know in a person that you don't need to go there with them because you know that's something that's going to set them off.

I worked with a couple of guys who liked to always go to that hot spot. And with me, when you push that button on me, I sort of lose it. And I don't like when I lose it, because I recognize that you have more control over me than I do, and I don't like that. But when I lose it, it's not very pretty. It just goes. [laughs] So just learning how men are, and men are different than women in a working environment.

But they have their pluses, too. I remember asking my dad, "How do you do it? You and a guy are arguing, and I mean really arguing, about anything, and then five minutes later you go buy each other a cup of coffee. Everything is cool. How do you do that? Because I'm going to tell you right now, you're not going to come in my face and argue with me and fuss and cuss and then think in five minutes we're going to drink coffee? No, no, no, no, no. I don't work that way."

And men do it, and they tell me they do it because they have to — this is business and you have to leave it that way, you can't take it personally. And I said, "Well, I tend to take things more personally." So just trying to figure out how to fit into a man's world, it changes you. It's made me harder, but maybe I needed to be. It's given me more strength. But it has changed me — some of it good, some of it bad. But I survived. And I think they survived too.

FECTEAU: How does your non-traditional job affect your relationships with men and women?

DAWSON: With women, my female friends, some of whom I've had since birth, I don't really talk about my job. I've learned not to talk about my job, because they

cannot relate. I can talk about union issues. They seem receptive to that. But as far as my job, they have no clue. They don't understand a machinist. I can sometimes tell them about the difficulties I have as far as being a woman or something like that. I can do that with them. But there's just no way I'm going to get them interested, really, in my job. I get this blank face. And the more I try to explain, I get a bigger blank face, so I've learned not to really talk about it.

And that's okay, because I do that with my male friends. They're more accessible to it. It's funny, because I've actually gotten to know all my female friends' husbands very well. I can talk about my work life with them, and they're very interested. So all the husbands love me. [laughs] That works out well.

As far as my family, with my family I can talk about anything. I do get some blank stares from my sisters, but they don't have a choice. They're family, they have to listen. [laughs]

As far as relationships with friends, it just varies. Literally half of my life now is union. I was on my [machinist's] job today from 7:00 a.m. to 2:00. And that's it for the rest of the week, because I'm doing union activities. And this is a contract year, too, so things are really busy. So I'm not on my job very often now. Out of a year's time, it's probably three, four months, because I'm doing other things.

So when I think of what my job is now, it's in the union. I think of my boss as my president of my union. I don't necessarily think of it as my foreman anymore. My real boss is my president of my union, because that's who I directly report to. So more of my life is away from being a machinist.

So when I go back to be a machinist, it's like this newfound joy, because I don't get to do it often. So now it's good. It's really good. But I'm there enough, because I am their chief steward, so I do have to be there. But now I'm called part-time and they tease me about that. But it's okay, because I enjoy my work with the union, all the headaches and . . . That's my passion anyway, so it's good.

And plus, it sort of saved me in a way, because I always know I can get away. And then with age, wisdom comes, too. You think of things differently. Things that affected me back then, if I had all this common sense and knowledge that I have now, things that bothered me a long, long time ago . . . When I went to machine shop, this guy said, "This black bitch is going to come down and have super seniority over me." I had to have my dad walk me through this, because I was pissed. Now, [laughs] somebody would have to probably protect him from me. But that was many years ago, so you learn.

FECTEAU: So, how did you get involved with the union? When did you first reach out to be more active in the union?

DAWSON: Well, the whole reason why I wanted to become active is because all the guys who I've talked about wouldn't talk to me, and I wanted to be talked to, because I'm a nice person. I wanted to know about the union. And at that time the chairman of my division was in metal fab and we became great friends, and I got involved on that level, being recording secretary.

I was recording secretary in my division for, I don't know, nine years. Went through a couple presidents. Then George Manoogian was the president of my local. I ran for an election and lost. And I just lost it at the hall. First of all, I couldn't believe that I could lose, because I knew I knew my job and I did it well. You know when you

know you're doing something right. And I was helping people. At that time I was just, "Use me, use me, use me. I'm here to help." [laughs] So funny.

But I lost this election. And then to find out how I lost it and how certain people on my E[xecutive]-Board conspired to make sure I lost it, and these were people that I thought were friends. And here I am this nice girl from Highland Park. I thought everybody loved me and that if I thought you were my friend, you were my friend, to the point where I even extended my family to them. And I just couldn't believe what had happened.

So anyway, I lost. And it was a concerted effort that I should lose, too, as I found out. So, when I found out, I was at the union hall and I was just in shock. I really was. And I cried. I had made this vow never to cry in front of the guys. At least at work I could go into the locker room, just run away, and then you could cry. But I was in such shock that I had lost, and by this huge amount, this huge number, that I just broke down. And I couldn't control it. Just tears, heaving, the whole bit. And guys don't know what to do when women cry. They just — even though you conspired to get me to this point, you didn't know what to do with me then, because I couldn't do anything.

So, George Manoogian happened to come in then — he had a General Council meeting that night. So he was trying to talk to me and I couldn't talk, because I was too emotional, I was crying. And when I get like that, I'm just waving my hand — nothing would come out of my mouth. The only thing that came out was, "Leave me alone," [laughs] because that's what I wanted. And I didn't mean it for him; I just wanted everyone to leave me alone. I needed to get through this myself.

So anyway, that night at General Council, I was the only officer from my division that went, because for whatever reason, the ones who conspired against me decided not to come and the other ones were so pissed off that I lost that they didn't want to come to General Council. But that was my last meeting, so I had to be there.

So I'm out of office, and this is November of whatever year. And at Christmas time, George Manoogian sent me a card. Now George Manoogian was my president. Even though I knew him, he was still my president. And in those days, the president of a union was what I considered — it was like I wasn't on his level. Because I had images of what people should be, and he was the leader and I respected him because of him and because of his position. And I know that sometimes I do tend to put people on pedestals, but that's how I am.

So here's this president of the union sending me a Christmas card. And he was writing this wonderful message to me about, "You lost the election, but that doesn't mean anything. I know who you are," just totally pumping me up, how much he respected me. And I'm like, "George Manoogian!" First of all, it freaked me out that he could write like this, [laughs] because I'd never seen this sensitive side of him before. And for him to have taken the time to have done that was just astonishing to me. I knew he knew me, but I just never thought he thought all that. I was like, "Gosh!" So that really made me feel good at Christmas.

And then probably that January, he made Kim Francisco and I Women's Directors. And what's funny is, when I think back to it, all the people that conspired against me so that I would lose this office — and they knew it hurt me, because I did take a week off of work after that, because I couldn't face them. It took me a week to build up

my nerve to go back to work — they did all that, and yeah, I was defeated and they saw it, but you live through it. And in the end, I got a local office. So now I didn't have to report to them on anything. So now it was like I would be gone or I would have things to do, and they had no control. They didn't know what I was doing. I don't have to report to you, you're on a divisional level, I'm on a local level. And I'm sure I might have done a couple of things to let them know that. [laughter]

It's just funny how things work out. So it would be like, "Where's Cathy going?" Or, "How come she's in a meeting with them?" And no one would know, because it was no one's business but mine. So that's why I say mistakes, things that sometimes put you at your lowest, I don't know, maybe they build you up and make you a better person.

George saw something in me that I would have never seen. That's why I made a comment before about how sometimes you're thrust into doing greatness or whatever. He literally did that to me. I'm very paranoid about speaking in front of people. I mean, it was like, "You want me to speak in front of General Council? All these officers? You cannot mean this." And then telling me, "Yeah, you're going to do that. And this is what you need to do." And I'm amazed that I even did it. And I don't know how I did it. But now, you talk in front of General Council, it's no big deal.

But it's amazing what others can see in you and what you don't see in yourself. And that's not to say that I don't get nervous, because I still do. But if you get prepared, you do what you have to do. And I've also learned that you're not going to be perfect every time, and that's okay. But if I can speak on something that I believe in first, that's usually the easiest thing to do. If I believe in it in my heart and soul, and that's usually something to do with my union, it comes out okay. People understand that message. So

George Manoogian did a lot for me, because he had faith in me when I didn't have faith in myself. So it meant a lot. Yeah. So every now and then when I see him, I tell him that. He goes, "Quit talking about that." [laughs]

CRAWFORD: So is your full-time job now as an officer?

DAWSON: No.

CRAWFORD: So you're still working as a machinist.

DAWSON: Yes. And I really never want to lose that, because my theory is that if I stayed away from the shop all the time, I wouldn't know how membership felt. I'll always have an arm out to membership, because I might not be there a lot, but I'm still there sometimes. Local officers often ask — especially when they're running for office [laughs] — "What is everybody saying about me?" Because they have no idea, because they're not there. They're at the union hall. They're not with membership. And membership will let you know how they feel. So it's always good to be there. And I'm glad I'm there. And I don't ever want to be full-time. I still want to be on the shop floor.

FECTEAU: I'm curious to know the reason people opposed you when you were running for recording secretary.

DAWSON: I could never understand it. Some of the guys said, "They just wanted to try to break you." That was something that, unfortunately I wore on my sleeve, and they knew how much it meant to me and they wanted to take that away. They wanted to see my reaction.

FECTEAU: They thought you didn't know your place, is that it, or you were getting too cocky?

DAWSON: No. I just think . . .

CRAWFORD: . . . that it meant so much to you.

DAWSON: It meant so much to me that they just didn't want it to mean that much. And sometimes men are strange. And it was just to sort of bring me back down to earth, maybe. Maybe you're right, maybe it was the thing where they wanted to let me know that, "We can still control you."

But I think what my problem was that I let them know how much it meant to me. And I learned never to do that again. Yes, I'm very proud of the union, of what I do in my union, but it wouldn't destroy me not to be chief steward, not to be trustee, not to be Women's Director. You can't destroy me anymore. If I don't get it, I don't get it. I'll go on and do whatever. It's not like I'm going to stop being a good union person. But I promised myself I would never let it mean that much to me again. And I haven't.

FECTEAU: So when you became chief steward, what do you think it was that got you elected and what was that like?

DAWSON: I don't know, because I did run against somebody, surprisingly. And I don't know what that was. I don't know if they thought because I'm a woman that I could just say whatever I wanted to say. And I don't think it's because I'm a woman, it's just that I've been there so long that what are you going to do? You're a boss and you did something wrong. What are you going to do with me? Because of course I would consider that retaliation, and I'd get you another way anyway. So I don't think I had as much fear to ask a hard question or get in their face as maybe they had at that time. I'm not the type of person that's going to get in your face and cuss you out, nothing like that. But you're going to hear me, even though you might not want to, until I get my

question answered. We can be here all day. I don't care. I've got plenty of time. So, I don't know, maybe they saw that.

CRAWFORD: How often do you have elections and what are your campaigns like?

DAWSON: On a divisional level and on a local level, they're every three years. The divisional level is chairman, vice chairman, chief steward, recording secretary and treasurer. On the local level it's president, vice president, recording secretary, treasurer and there are three trustees. And we recently changed our constitution. And our E-Board consists of the chairs in each division. And we have eleven divisions. My division is Warren Service Center. So we've expanded our E-Board now.

And to be elected in a division, only your division votes. In my division there's only eighty of us. And we're lucky in the sense that we all start work at 7 o'clock and the end of the day is at 3:30. We're all in one work location, so it's very easy for me to do business. My foremen are right there. My foreman's boss is right there. If issues come up, we can get on them just like that. So we have an advantage over say substation or OPT, which has over 1,000 members who are all over the place. So it's harder to reach out and touch, whereas with us, it's obvious that we've developed a relationship with our management. We get new people in, we've got to break them in, because we do work together with our managers. I mean, it's to the point now where we do a lot, and they go along with it because what we say makes sense. So it's good. It's good.

RAUCHER: You're Women's Director of the local.

DAWSON: Right.

RAUCHER: You're the only woman machinist, so what are the other women doing in this local? And what do you do for them as Women's Director?

DAWSON: That's a good question. [laughter] When Kim and I started being Women's Committee Directors, there were only, I think, 120 to 140 women in Local 223. And all of those women did what we would call non-traditional jobs.

DAWSON: Out of how many total members in the local?

DAWSON: Oh, at that time it was probably like, 3,000, 2,500. Kim and I were amazed that there were that many women. We were like, "Where are they?," because they obviously weren't coming to union meetings. They weren't officers, so you wouldn't see them at General Council. And that's how I met Kim. She was an officer at General Council. And we just clicked. But she worked in the power plant.

So our first thing was, "We've got to get these women together so that we know where they are and who we are and where they exist." And we wanted to bring them down to the hall, because the union hall is our union hall. Your union dues pay for it. This is my union hall. And we might have been a little naive. We wanted everybody to feel about the union like we did, probably. I'm sure we did.

So with the help of Wayne State University — Geri Hill really, Geri did a lot — they came and helped us try to get our Women's Committee going. And it worked great in the beginning. We had meetings down at the hall. This was under George Manoogian. And then it dwindled out. They just stopped coming, for whatever reasons. You had child care issues, you had family issues. You had another life outside of Edison. So it got to the point where Kim and I would be having meetings and it would be Kim and I, or one more person. So we sort of thought this isn't going to work.

So Edison is a twenty-four hour operation. That's another thing. We've got shift workers. So how do you reach out and touch people? So by this time, we had a new president, Mike Langford. Mike would see me and Kim talking and trying to figure out what we were going to do. So he went to management for us and said, "We need to have women's meetings on company hours, because they can't get anybody to come in the so-called after hours." So the company agreed. And we were like, "Huh?" We were shocked, but happy. "What's wrong with them?"

CRAWFORD: Wow.

DAWSON: So the first thing we did was a survey, just to try to find out where they were, what they wanted, because we didn't know what the committee should be. And we knew in our heads and our hearts it wasn't our committee, it was Local 223, the Women's Committee. So we wanted to find out what the women wanted, what did they expect of us and what did they want us to do. Because we didn't want to be saying, "Well, we're in charge and you're going to do what we say." We didn't want it to be like that. We wanted everyone to feel like they were part of it.

Well, I learned in my first experience on surveys, ten percent coming back is good. That just did not sit well with me. I was really upset. Geri's explaining to me, "This is normal. This is okay." But I was skeptical. So it really never took off. And I can't even tell you why. Maybe it wasn't a good time to get all the women together. Because we had a lot of women in the power plants, so they were probably working second and third shift. But it just really never came together.

And it was really difficult making them do something. You didn't want to be — I didn't feel right telling someone what to do. I wanted them to volunteer. I wanted them

to participate. I wanted their help. But it seemed like the only way we could do that is if you were just telling them what to do constantly. And then, by that point, it was like, "Well, I can't do it if I've got to tell you what to do." So it just didn't work out. So we really don't have meetings anymore. And now of course, we're not in the real partnership mode, so we really don't have meetings now. So it sort of faded out.

FECTEAU: Well, your union has really expanded and taken over a lot of the female-dominated . . .

DAWSON: Right. Well, now, it's like 1,100, 1,200 women. This is going from 140 to 1,200, and these women absolutely being in the traditional field, quote, unquote.

FECTEAU: So how has that affected your Women's . . .?

DAWSON: Well, what I found and what I do now is, because there are eleven divisions and each division is like its own little kingdom, I've decided that it's best that each division has their own Women's Committee, because you know what you need in your division. What I may need in my division might not work in OPT and what would work in OPT will work in Power Generation Division. So what I found is best is if each division shapes and forms its own Women's Committee. And then if you need something, if I can help you, you know I'm here and I can do it.

But the committee thing just did not work out for me. Maybe it will later. I always think that maybe we should try it again. I'm working with the company now in a woman's network that's with the unions and the company, and this is the second year. And it's start, stop, start, stop. I can't get the budget commitment. So it's difficult.

RAUCHER: Do you have any sense, though, maybe even from your survey, that there are special grievances that women have as women, or is it that they're all so happy and content on the job that they really don't feel they need anybody to advocate for them?

DAWSON: Well, one of the questions that I found interesting was the question of isolation that came up for women. And I knew there was a sense of isolation for women in non-traditional roles in Edison, because I knew what I felt. But what I found was interesting was women who had just organized when we did the survey — we had 500 women in OPT and most of them were customer reps — they put on the survey that isolation was a problem. And I thought, "Isolation, how could they be isolated?" And me and Kim were like, "Do you get this? They work with women. They should be happy." I couldn't understand. "What are they talking about, isolation?"

So we had to ask them, "What do you mean, isolation?" And they felt isolated because they were in a cubicle. And they felt isolated that way. So their isolation was different than how I would have thought of isolation, being the only woman. But to them, even though they worked with 400 women, because they were in cubicles they felt boxed out and isolated from each other. And I thought, "That's really interesting. You work with a floor full of women and you still feel isolated." It was strange.

RAUCHER: Would the company ever respond to something like that by redesigning the work space for these women?

DAWSON: Well, they have. It's just, we don't want to go into how I feel about the company and how they treat CR's. [laughs] That's a whole other issue. [laughs]

RAUCHER: What's a CR?

DAWSON: Customer rep. Yeah. That's a person you get on that phone when you call Edison, the hardest working people at Edison. [laughs]

RAUCHER: And they take a lot of grief, I'm sure.

DAWSON: Yeah, yeah. They do. It's a job I couldn't do. I honestly couldn't. I don't know how they do it. And the knowledge they have to know. You have to know everything about the company. And then you get people, who I can imagine, like me, where you know I'm an Edison employee. They're like, "We know, we know." But it's a hard job. They get yelled at pretty bad. And they still want to help. I couldn't do it.

CRAWFORD: What effect do you think deregulation has had on the company and the company's relationship with the union, or maybe all of that bigger stuff out there filtering down to you as a woman employee and a woman in a non-traditional job?

DAWSON: Of course, I don't think any employee at Edison does not think about that. That was the reason why we did a five-year contract five years ago, because we thought we'd be through the deregulation, we'd be through with that whole phase. And we didn't want to worry about having the contract negotiations going through all this deregulation stuff.

But who knew California was going to happen, that fiasco out there? Who knew? Who knew a lot of things? It is scary for me as a woman, me as an Edison employee. Things change. And sometimes I've been known not to want to change. [laughs] But it's a different world out there now. It's not that security, let's say, that I felt with Edison twenty-five years ago, because I don't know what the future is anymore when it comes to electricity and the whole issue. And now we've got the gas company, too, because we

merged with Mich Con. But it's a little scary, because of all the wheeling and dealing that's going on.

The blackout, now that was really, really interesting for us as a company. When the blackout happened [August 14, 2003], I was at the Star Theater with one of my friends watching a movie. We're sitting in the theater and it goes jet black, right? Well, people started using their cell phones, and nothing happened. They were saying they couldn't get a signal. So then I got scared. I said, "What do you mean, you can't get a signal?" I pulled out my cell phone, and I'm like, "Oh, no."

So we're in this huge theater, big theater, the biggest theater, it's the Star in Southfield, and pitch black. Now, I got my little key chain [laughs], this Edison key chain that has a flashlight on it. So I got everybody down, right? It was like going up the steps, going down, getting everybody down. So we all make it to the lobby and we're safe. And they're telling us the story about, "Well, there are lights out from here to Florida." And I'm thinking, "This is more than a normal power outage," because I'm used to losing power — not personally, but I'm used to losing power.

So when they were telling me things like that, that cell phones weren't working, my first thought was, "Go to Edison." And that's where I went. I went straight to Edison in Southfield, because I knew if anybody knew what was going on, it would be Edison.

But the whole deregulation thing, it's almost like I think the employees would just like to know what's the plan, or if there is no plan. I wish it could be like we could predict the future, but we can't, because I don't know what's going to happen. Am I even going to be employed in a year? Who knows? Who knows what's going to happen? So I don't think anybody is feeling very secure these days in Edison. We think we're the

best. Of course we do, because we're the best. [laughs] But that doesn't mean we'll be here.

It's funny, because five years ago we always felt like we were going to be one of the, say, five to ten electric companies in the country. We were going to be the one that was going to be standing. And now, I mean we still think we are, but I don't know. I don't know. So deregulation, I don't even know what that is anymore. We've been deregulated so many times, so many different ways, I don't know what's going to happen with that. But it doesn't leave me with a warm, fuzzy feeling.

I have a friend who works for the phone company and we swore that she would never leave them and I'll never leave Edison. But she called me the other day and said, "I'm leaving the phone company, so I'm telling you to leave." [laughs] I'm like, "No. I'm not going. I'm not going." So it's scary in a way. It is scary. But at least I know I've got a skill. I can take it somewhere else if I have to.

CRAWFORD: And if you had to bet on affirmative action and whether unions will be a major factor in ten or fifteen years, what would you say?

DAWSON: Well, and that's a question we ask a lot, because as we were getting ready for our contract year and we were sitting around looking at each other, we were thinking, "Everyone in this room is our age. Where is our youth? Who are we going to leave this union to? We're not going to be here in ten years. Who are we going to pass it on to?" So that's always been a problem, how do you bring people up into the union? And I mean, young women and young men, how do you get them interested, wanting to serve, wanting to be there?

Half of them don't even know the history of the union. I've had to tell people, "Why do you think management gave you vacation days?" I said, "Do you really think they woke up one morning and decided, 'Oh, I just think I'll give all my employees three weeks' vacation.'" They really believe that. It's like they have no knowledge. A lot of the youth think, "Unions, oh, you're gangsters, you have beer and whatever at your meetings and you don't do anything." And that, if it's possible, is more scary than the whole deregulation thing to me, because I don't know who's going to take over this union when I'm retired, hopefully. I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen to the union.

FECTEAU: I wanted to ask you about the future. Why do you think people might not be getting involved [in the union]?

DAWSON: Well, in talking to the young women — and most of the young women I see in my unit are customer reps — they always tell me they want results right now. "I don't want to wait, Cathy, until next month," or, "I don't want to wait until next week." And I tell them, "I wish I could give you results instantaneously like that. But sometimes it takes a meeting or two or three or four to get what you want. Sometimes you have to wait." But if it's what you want — it's like picking and choosing your battles. They tell me that we're a little too slow and I always tell them, "It's okay to tell me that you might not like something that we're doing or you'd rather do it differently, but you need to tell me how you would do it differently and then you need to get involved to help see that it happens. Don't sit back and say, 'I don't like that,' or, 'That didn't work,' or, 'You're taking too long.' You need to step in there and then you can understand what everybody is going through and how things work. And hey, maybe you

can get in there and change it. But until you put yourself in that position, it's easy to be out there on the outside and go, 'It's not working out.'"

But a lot of it, to me, is that they want results like that. [snaps fingers] Or maybe you joined the union for the wrong reasons. Sometimes people think of the union as, quote, unquote, Jesus Christ, the end-all of everything. Well, you have to work and it's hard work. It's not easy. When you say things, it's not that I don't hear you, because I do hear you, but I need you in here with me, because unless you're in it on the inside, it's going to be difficult to make changes.

RAUCHER: Well, what is the future, do you think, for women machinists? Do you meet other women machinists who are not, obviously, working for Edison, but in other lines of work?

DAWSON: I think the first time I met a woman machinist was when I went to a Midwest Summer School for women. And I think it was the one that was in Michigan. But that was many, many years ago. But I had been a machinist for, I don't know, maybe seven years, and I had never met a female machinist.

So when I went to this conference, there was a lady from, I think she was from Ohio. She stood up and introduced herself and she said she was a machinist. It was just love at first sight for me! [laughter] It was like I looked at her and I couldn't wait until the meeting got over so I could zero in on her. I mean, it was just ridiculous. We were talking the same language. Wonderful. It was just wonderful.

So I remember reporting back at General Council about the conference I went to, and telling them and I'm getting all excited, "I met a female machinist!" And I'm going

through all this and I'm all exuberant, right? And I look at my audience, and it's mostly guys of course, and they're wondering, "What is Cathy going on and on about," right? I get this look. And I went, "Wait a minute. You guys work with each other. Think about this. You do your job every day and you have other men that you do your job with. How would you like to do your job and be the only male and not know any male that did that job? That's why I'm excited." I said, "It's taken seven years to find someone." And then you see these light bulbs. "Oh, okay. Now we understand." And I'm thinking, "I have to just break everything down for you?" But sometimes you do.

For instance, my boss always was upset that I would be in the office so much talking to my clerk. Well, Cheryl was the only female that I had at work. So if I did something on the weekend or if she did something, we wanted to talk about it. Usually when I take my boss in my locker room or take him to my union office, you're in trouble. It's like if I say, "Meet me in my locker room," they're like, "Oh, God, what have I done," right?

And I had to explain to him, "I don't have anyone to talk to at work. Every now and then, yeah, I need to talk to Cheryl. Leave us alone." I said, "Think about it, Tommy, you're with men all day. You talk to men all day. Does anybody tell you you can't talk to them? No. So why do you come to me and Cheryl? Because we stick out. Because we're the only women, you want to stop us from doing it." I said, "It's not fair."

It's just like how sometimes they would get upset, the bosses, when I would be around the other blacks. Well, there were only two or three or four of us. I say it's only natural that we migrate. I said, "You don't get upset with the white guys when they're

together all the time, but you come to us." I said, "You need to think about that sometimes." So, sometimes, just pointing things out helps.

And after that, they never bothered me and Cheryl If anything, they'd come in and you'd look at them and they'd go [puts hands up, palms out, in front of face] [laughs] and go the other way, which is fine. Go away.

RAUCHER: Have you met other women machinists, though, since the woman at the school, who are in the Detroit area?

DAWSON: I have, yeah. And it's always fun, because I don't work with any women and there aren't any in the company, that's always fun.

FECTEAU: This is one of the questions I absolutely want to make sure we ask: Why do you think there are still so few women in your trade in general and also in particular at Detroit Edison, especially when there are so many women in lower-paid traditional work? How come they're not coming into the higher-paid non-traditional work?

DAWSON: Well, a lot of it has to do with apprenticeships. If you have an entry-level apprenticeship, that's how you would get a lot of women in. We don't. Now, in the other skilled trades, like in substation and the power plants, they're getting in that way. But they have apprenticeships. We're still fighting.

I love Focus: HOPE. I've gone to Focus: HOPE with the VP of my company, every VP of this company since I've probably been there. It's a wonderful program. They have top-notch equipment. These kids are brilliant. There are women — I mean, I have never seen so many female machinists in my life. And to get into the program you go through all these skill tests. You have to be there every day, you have to be there on

time, or they kick you out of the program. They do drug tests. I mean, it's just magnificent. And every time I go there, it's funny, because I know I'm going to get upset later on, because you're not going to grab one of these kids and bring them into the company.

FECTEAU: Why do you think they don't pull people from Focus: HOPE?

DAWSON: I think because they're dumb, stupid. [laughter] Just no vision. It's just ridiculous. You had President Clinton — President Clinton came here and went to Focus: HOPE, and said, "This is the best darn program I've ever seen in my life." I mean, these kids are just extraordinary.

Now I will give it to the auto companies on this, they go in there and grab those kids — they go get them, because they have sense. I don't know what's wrong with Edison. **FECTEAU:** Do you think it's racism?

DAWSON: Could be. I mean, it's not like our company has completely resolved the racism issue. Edison is Edison. We just recently had a lawsuit, but that was more of an age lawsuit, because they reorganized the company wrong. And it wasn't on the union side — the union had nothing to do with it. But there were millions and millions and millions of dollars spent on that, because you didn't do the right thing. And it always seems to be so simple: Do the right thing, you don't get sued. But sometimes we tend to NOT do the right thing. And it's frustrating, very frustrating. Why they haven't gone to Focus: HOPE, I just don't know. They won't open the door.

CRAWFORD: It's like a pre-apprenticeship training program, right, that weeds out people already?

DAWSON: Oh please! They're beautiful people. These kids, they want to learn, they want a job. I mean, they've proven themselves. We should just be . . . Always what stopped us is that when you work with Focus: HOPE, you have to give that commitment that you're going to have jobs for these kids. And I can't blame them. They have a 100 percent placement rate. We won't step there. Why? I don't know. We just won't do it.

FECTEAU: So do you think there's so few women because the company won't recruit them or do you feel women are resistant to going into those trades?

DAWSON: Well, the standard answer I get is, "We can't find them. [laughter] We can't find any anywhere." They'll go recruit, I don't know, Florida, or wherever. And I'm like, "This is Detroit. You have the most diverse city around here. You've got a little bit of everything around here. And you can't find anybody?" I just find that hard to believe.

FECTEAU: You've mentioned things like building partnerships with groups like Focus: HOPE. Are there any other ideas you have for bringing more women into the trades or more diversity into the trades, but in particular women?

DAWSON: One thing that my little group does, and it's my management of my little group in Warren Service Center, and they've done it for years and year and years, I mean, they've gone out and they've talked to high school kids and talked to middle school kids. They've even talked to elementary school kids.

But the difficulty is, and what I have pushed back on, is that I'm not going to talk to kids and lie to them. If you're not going to hire them into the company, why build them up? Why go out there and give a presentation and then there are no jobs available?

You've got to have both. You can't just go out and say, "We're a great company and we want you," and then nothing. Because the kids are going to go, "Well, how can I get a job in your company?" "Well, right now, there aren't any positions open." And that's been the line forever and ever and ever.

FECTEAU: Is that true that there aren't positions open?

DAWSON: Well, see now there really aren't, because as of last year, we had the hiring freeze, because of everything that's going on in this whole deregulated world. It's affected us greatly. We're cutting back on everything. Our standard line is, "We can't even have doughnuts at our meetings." This is really bad for us. [laughs] We can't function without doughnuts for a long meeting. But they're cutting, cutting, cutting, cutting. That's like the pat answer if you can't get anything, "Budget, budget, budget." We hate to hear that word.

But things were not happening before the budget cuts when everything was going fine. I don't know, it's like you try to hold them to the fire, but it's aggravating going to an orientation meeting at Edison and there's no diversity in the room, and you have twenty-five new hires. Well, what's going on? Why does everybody look the same? Why aren't they [Edison] asking that same question? So of course, you put it to them, and they look at you as though you're just negativity, and you're always bringing . . . "Well, no, I won't have to bring that out if you do your job. I shouldn't have to be saying these things to you. This is 2004." But we still have a long way to go, yeah.

FECTEAU: Are there things that the union could do?

DAWSON: We need to get them in the door. We need to get them in the company, and then we can get them in the union. But until they get hired in . . .

CRAWFORD: How is the ethnic or racial makeup of the union in terms of the leadership?

DAWSON: As far as the leadership, four local officers are white male. Now, because we've expanded our E-Board to be the eleven chairs, there's one woman, one black woman, and the rest are white males. Trustees — obviously I'm one, and two white males. I look at our General Council today as compared to years past, and it's much better. So people are stepping up. Women are stepping up, maybe haven't broken into the top, but they're getting there.

CRAWFORD: But there are no black men in leadership positions?

DAWSON: No black men, which I always find interesting.

FECTEAU: The civil rights chair, right?

DAWSON: Human Rights Division chair, Craig Massey. At director level we have more diversity — I'm Women's Director, Craig Massey is Human Rights Director, John Hill is Assistant EAP Director. He's a black male.

CRAWFORD: But in terms of elected officers?

DAWSON: Elected is June Heath, who's chair of Meter Division. I'm a trustee, and that's elected. We used to have a couple of black men as chairs. But at that time, they weren't part of the E-Board, because that just recently happened. But as a whole, yeah.

FECTEAU: No white women either.

DAWSON: Yeah. So it's like Craig and I have to hold you to the fire all the time. So it gets to be hard. You do that to the company, you do that to the union. It gets

a little wearing. I know Craig has been called "One Note Craig" sometimes. But he's got a passion behind what he does.

And we are, as a union, I always think of us as supposed to be better than the company. We should be setting the example, because sometimes the company fluffs off. But how can we get into the company's face and tell them what to do unless we do it? So I expect us to be better. Are we perfect? No. But it's a lot better than past years. But there is room for improvement. And that's part of our job, to get into our president's face and let him know that. So we do it.

FECTEAU: If you were president of the local . . .

DAWSON: Which I would never do! I would never do it! I couldn't do that job. [laughter]

FECTEAU: . . . or adviser to the president of the local, what would you suggest they do to increase the amount of women going into these non-traditional jobs and also into representing women in the union?

DAWSON: Well, I don't know how they would do it, but somehow they've got to open up some apprenticeships, more than what they have. And I think what's been happening in the last few years is the company has recognized that the Baby Boom generation is getting ready to retire and you're going to lose all this knowledge. Somehow you have got to get some people who want to work here and continue on. So I think that's why it's opened up a little bit in the last three years, because we've been telling them all along, "You've got to get some apprentices. You've got to get some youth in these jobs."

Because really, right now with us having our contract up in June, there are, I'm sure, from 800 to 1,000 union people wondering what's going to happen and they've probably already put in their retirement, because you can always pull it back, and they're waiting for June. If you don't keep the same health care, where they never have to pay an increase or anything, you're going to retire. And if we take a hit on a thousand skilled trades people, that's huge. But it can happen. But I don't know, sometimes talking to Edison is like talking to a table. They're stubborn. They're just stubborn.

FECTEAU: Do you think that's because they consider themselves, like a class thing, superior to the workers?

DAWSON: Well, you're a monopoly. I mean, we never worried about competition. We really didn't. So now [laughs] it's like, hello, we've got to deal in the real world. I mean, we used to go to the Public Service Commission and get our rates and we moved on. Now, probably in the last five years, the company has gotten the worst press it's ever gotten. Everybody's got a knock against Edison. The blackout didn't help. We're the bad guys now. So now we're in a bind where we need to change things with the Legislature, and people may not be listening. I don't know. Tony Early is out there giving his speeches, and that's all I hear when I drive to work in the morning. He's everywhere. But nobody is certain what's going to happen.

RAUCHER: Well, it's late and I guess it's time to say thanks to Cathy and to ask if there is anything you want to add to the interview.

DAWSON: No. I guess I just worry about that next generation of union women at Local 223. I know we've had a couple that went to labor school, and that's great. But

we just need more. And I don't know how to get them involved. So I'm open to suggestions, help, anything. I worry about my union in ten years, I really do.

NUZNOV: I'd just like to say you have great courage.

DAWSON: Well, it was handed to me. And not to say that I'd do it all, by any means, because like, I would never want to be president. [laughs] But I think of it as being a gift that's given to you and you're supposed to take care of it. And actually, when I leave, hopefully you leave it better than the way you received it. But you have to give it to somebody. And I'm worried about that.