# Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Interview with

**S. E.**
Pipefitter

April 7, 2004

Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs
Walter P. Reuther Library
Wayne State University

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Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Interview with S. E.

CARRIE WELLS : I'm Carrie Wells and we're here with S. E. on April 7th, 2004 at the Reuther Library. Tell me about your life before you entered the trades.

S. E.: I graduated from Marygrove College with a business administration degree and a minor in Spanish. My intention was to go into management — that was my goal, working for a corporation.

WELLS : Where were you raised, and what was your childhood like?

S. E.: I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. The location is Michigan [Avenue] and 12th Street, which is Rosa Parks [Blvd.] now. It's two blocks south of Tiger Stadium in what is called Corktown.

WELLS : And what kind of relationship did you have with your parents? Any siblings?

S. E.: My parents were strict. They were immigrants from Mexico. They came from Mexico to find a better life here, to give their children an education. I have five brothers and sisters. I am the second from the oldest. The sister that I'm closest to is the one that's two years different in age from me. The other ones, I mostly was the oldest and had to take care of my two younger siblings as I was growing up.

WELLS : What kind of attitudes did your family have towards women and work?

S. E.: It was the norm that we were to work. That was one thing that my mom always said, "Do good in school and get an education, because you have MANY years to work. So enjoy your life now, as a child." And that's what we did.

WELL S: And there wasn't any stress between traditional or non-traditional work?

S. E.: In our family, no. My dad was a laborer, and what he did was to give each one of us a college education. Each one of us graduated with a degree. I was the first one that graduated with a bachelor's.

WELLS : Very impressive. What kind of friends did you have growing up?

S. E.: We were in a neighborhood that was mixed with blacks and whites, Polish. We had Irish, we had Mexican, we had Puerto Ricans. We all hung around. I mean, we were comrades, that's basically how we were. We were all in the honors class, [laughs] so we all stuck together. And our thing was to always be better than each other.

WELLS : What kind of hobbies or extracurricular activities and interests did you have?

S. E.: Sewing was one of them. My dad was a tailor when he came to this country, so I sort of took up the trade at the age of eleven. My mom's best friend knew how to sew and knew how to do cutting with a pattern. My dad didn't know how to do that. My dad knew the old way of "sistema," with a measuring tape, just like the Europeans would cut suits and outfits like that. And I could never learn from that way. In a way it was too hard for me, because it was the metric system. That's how my dad knew a lot of his mathematics, was through the metric system. And of course, being schooled here, it was the old inch method. But mostly, sewing was my hobby, my major hobby.

WELLS : So you liked to work with your hands.

S. E.: I liked to work with my hands. One of the things that happened as I was growing up, my mom and dad didn't know about masonry, did not know how to renovate a house. We ended up buying a house in Corktown, a 1901 home, so there was to be a lot of renovations. And in order for us to keep the costs down, we had to do it ourselves. So we learned how to dig dirt out of the cement, haul it out, pick up bricks, masonry brick. We even learned how to do an extension on the roof and do roofing, because that was a way to save our money.

WELLS : What kind of jobs did you have growing up, out of high school?

S. E.: I started working at the age of fourteen. I started with the Archdiocese of Detroit, because I did go to a Catholic school. I went to Catholic school from elementary school all the way to college. It was always with the IHM [Immaculate Heart of Mary] nuns. I started doing clerical work and then I ended up as a counselor at the recreation center where I went as a child. From then on, I ended up doing work-study through Marygrove College. After that, I ended up working in a family business. It was an auto and truck repair shop — we maintained a lot of the vehicles for Eastern Market's food industries and Detroit Edison's vehicles that they couldn't maintain on-site.

MARGARET R AUCHER : You said this was a family business. Your dad?

S. E.: It was a family business, being that they were friends of the family and they always treated us like family, so they gave me an opportunity to work there. When I graduated from college, I came back to the neighborhood wanting to give, and the doors weren't open. Of course, in 1981 there was a recession going on. And myself, I didn't know what a recession was, because we were always short of money [laughs], so it did really affect us, until I started going out into the field looking for a job.

RAUCHER: Can you tell me your birth date?

S. E.: April 1st, 1957. [laughs]

CATHY DAWSON: I want to ask you a couple of questions about your trade. What is your trade, so that we'll know?

S. E.: I am a journeyperson pipefitter by trade.

DAWSON: Okay. Exactly what is a pipefitter?

S. E.: In the gas industry — I work for Consumers Energy, which is a gas utility company — basically what I am is a gas service worker that goes out to people's homes. If you smell gas, we come in and we detect where the gas is. If you would like to have repairs, we can repair it. It could be anything from tightening to breaking down the whole fuel line and redoing it. It's basically mostly dealing with one-eighth [inch pipe]. It could be anything from a gas line repair to gas logs to a gas grill all the way to the main commercial line, which could be four-inch.

DAWSON: Do you do any welding at all?

S. E.: No, I do not.

DAWSON: Okay. I'm going to ask you a little bit about your earlier life. Do you have any idea what attracted you to go into being a pipefitter? I mean, you seem to have done a lot. In your early life, you said you renovated your house and everything. You think that had an influence on you going into the trades? Or, exactly why did you decide — because you said you got a degree from Marygrove — why'd you change your mind and go into the trades?

S. E.: I ended up at Consumers as a part-time dispatcher. I was trying to sneak into employment as full-time. Then they stopped having part-time dispatchers and I had

to go into what is called the “Miss Dig” job, which was a clerical position, sending out orders to service people in the different fields of gas, electrical, water underground lines that would stake those little flags that you see out there. That was my clerical job. That was all part-time.

I had to either bid for a full-time job at the call center, which is customer service — I did not like working on the phone [laughs] with customers — or go into a union job, and that would be as a meter reader. That was the entry to a union job at the company.

DAWSON: And you bid on the meter reader job?

S. E.: I bid on the meter reading job.

DAWSON: How long did you stay in that position?

S. E.: I stayed in that position for four and a half years.

DAWSON: And then did you get into the apprenticeship to become a pipefitter?

S. E.: I went into the gas service department as a gas shop helper, which consisted of helping other people if they needed extra hands, either in installing appliances or — extra set of hands, that was my training. And maintaining the meters, we either changed the meters or going to the homes, changing the meters from the inside, updating them, and the same thing with the outside.

WELLS : Were there other women doing these jobs?

S. E.: Yes, there were. There were a couple other women that were already in the field. Mostly all the women at that time were on the afternoon shift, because the only way you could bid into the job was by seniority to obtain day shift.

DAWSON: Do you have any friends or relatives that are in the trades?

S. E.: I do now. [laughter] I have an uncle who was also a pipefitter in the past. He installed the big sewer pipes in the ground. He was also a mason. He worked for the Laborers' Union. He was constantly working all the time. And to this day, he could tell me everything that he did. He even helped build the new airport.

DAWSON: Did you have any friends in the trade when you started out?

S. E: No.

DAWSON: Okay. And you said that when you got into the trade, there were other women that were with you in the trade?

S. E.: There were other women before me.

DAWSON: Before you? Did anybody go through the process with you?

S. E.: At that time, no.

DAWSON: How did that feel, you being the only woman at that time?

S. E.: I had a lot of pressure, because I was always the type of person that, "Don't say 'no' to me, because I would say yes." [laughs] I always wanted to have equal training as they did. Whatever they had in training, I expected to have the same thing myself.

DAWSON: Did you feel you were given equal training?

S. E.: With the way the gas company trains, it's never enough. It's never enough.

DAWSON: So not just for you, for anybody.

S. E.: For anybody.

RAUCHER: Does the gas company sponsor the apprenticeship program?

S. E.: Yes. They have their own instructors, their own training school. That's one of the very few companies that train within. So you can come off of the street not having one skill, and they will train you. It's one of the very few companies that you end up being promoted from within and learn a skilled trade.

DAWSON: Is it still like that now?

S. E.: Yes, it is, so far, yes.

WELLS : Were you vocal when you felt that you weren't getting the same training as the men?

S. E.: Oh, yeah. Because some of my supervisors were male chauvinists. And I had some that'll close the door and that I'll kind of put my voice up on high and I'll let them know, "If I made a mistake, you tell me about it. And if you don't tell me about it, I will hear about it anyway." And I says, "Because how are we ever going to learn how to do the job right if we're not corrected and go back on the job to correct it?" So I never had no call-backs that I know of. [laughs]

DAWSON: When you went through your apprenticeship, how many, roughly, were in your class?

S. E.: There was probably fifteen.

DAWSON: Did fifteen graduate?

S. E: Yes.

DAWSON: That's very good.

WELLS : That is. How many women?

S. E.: Probably one or two, to tell you the truth.

WELLS : And so you went through an apprenticeship with two other women?

S. E: I went with two other men from the Livonia office, but we're combined all together from across the state when we get promoted within, and we go to the training school. So it was really a two-year process that we have from customer meter worker to installation person, which would be installing your appliances, to gas service worker, which meant that you would end up fixing furnaces, water heaters, air conditioning, items like that.

DAWSON: Talk to me a little bit about your apprenticeship. You said it was two years?

S. E.: Two years in order to move myself from a classification eleven to fifteen.

DAWSON: Okay. So what was that like? Was that all class work or was it on-the-job training where you worked with people?

S. E.: It was a combination of schooling and on-the-job. Every time that you mastered a sequence of the program, you would go on to the training at the next level.

DAWSON: Was it self-paced, or was there a regimented timing?

S. E.: No. It was a regimen.

DAWSON: Say you didn't pass a sequence, how did they handle that? Could you take it over or did you have to improve in the process?

S. E.: There was more reinforcement, more reinforcement.

DAWSON: Okay. So they would bring someone in to . . .

S. E.: They would have you do more on-the-job training.

DAWSON: How did you feel about the training? It was probably mostly men, I would imagine.

S. E.: Oh, yes.

DAWSON: How was that relationship? I mean, were there mentors in there at all who sort of helped you out a little bit, or was it always a struggle? What was it like, you being an apprentice coming into that field?

S. E.: At first I knew it was going to be a challenge. I knew what I was going to be putting up with, being a woman and being Latino. Seeing that there were a couple other women in the trades and they had been already labeled, I had already thought to myself, "I'm not going to be labeled. I'm going to do the best that I can."

I did have some confrontations, but they were mild, because the first thing I would tell them, "Would you like your daughter, your sister, your aunt to be treated that way? And they'd kind of reflect and go, "You're right." And I says, "I'm here to make money, to learn a trade. I'm here to get along. I'm not here to be real good friends. I'm here to do a job, just like yourself."

I was one of the very, very few, which made the men kind of surprised. If you're an apprentice, you're mostly the gopher. I carried the tool bag — that was my job. I carried the tool bag. I went back and forth. The first day that I went in, I had no training knowing what fittings were, because they had not sent me to school yet. So I hadn't used the technique of fitting. Well, I had already started looking into plumbing books and things like that, so I could be ahead of the game. But I didn't know my sizes, so when they said an elbow, a three-quarter-inch by one-inch elbow, I would go, right off the bat, "Okay, it's an elbow. Let's put all the elbows in the bag and let them determine," so I wouldn't be running back and forth. [laughter] So I kind of caught on real quick.

WELLS : Did the fact that you also had a college degree — how did the men . . .?

S. E.: They didn't know about that.

WELLS : Oh, you kept that quiet.

S. E.: I never let anybody know until a couple years ago how schooled I am. And especially management. When I became more involved in the union and started moving up the ranks, it was only then that they realized that I had a college background, that I was equal to them. So when they can talk up, I can talk up. When they can talk down, I can talk down. And especially upper management, I'm equal to you, you know, both degreed and as a union rep.

RAUCHER: But you consciously didn't tell anybody about it early on?

S. E.: No, because it wasn't important. To me it wasn't important, because many of the people that were there were high school graduates, that's all. And I wasn't going to say, "Hey, I'm a college degree," or anything, because it wasn't important. To me, I was there to work and I was there to learn a trade.

DAWSON: I'm going to ask this: What specific challenges have you faced as a woman and as a Latino, as a minority, in your field? Any stories you want to tell us about?

S. E.: [laughs] One of the things at the beginning, men out in the field — because I would go into new construction, to go and install the meter, and if it needed to be straightened up or if it needed additional work, I would take the time do it.

DAWSON: Did you work alone, or . . .?

S. E.: I worked alone all the time.

DAWSON: So you had your truck, too.

S. E.: I had my truck, my own tools — unless there was a two-person job, then I would request another senior person to come out. The superintendents on the job, the builder superintendents would always want their meters set, even though they didn't have the permit like they were supposed to. And I would always make arrangements, "Get that permit, and I'll come back. I'll come back the next day. You got to have it there, I'll do it."

They would sometimes come out and it would be all muddy and stuff, and I would say, "I'll do it. Put some cardboards down." Because the other workers that used to go out there would say, "I'm not going to set it. It's too muddy out there. I'm not going to do it." They'll just look at it and take off. Not me, I would take the extra effort to do it. Because if I'm there, why not get the job done?

I would always find that there would be construction guys that would come out and give me a hand. "Can I help you?" I said, "No. I can do it myself. That's what I get paid for. Equal job for equal pay." And they would just start laughing and looking, and they would be watching and watching. And then I would just sit there and go, "See. All done." [laughs] And I would just smile and take off and go back on the truck.

DAWSON: So you think they were asking you because you were a woman?

S. E.: Yes, and if I looked like I was struggling or something, they wanted to help. My husband — he also works at the same company in the same, more or less, trade, but on construction sites — would ask me how was my day. And I would say, "You know, I don't understand these guys on the job. Can't they realize I can do the job?" And he would say, "Well, they're trying to be helpful and stuff. It's just the nature of men." And I says, "But you know I can do the job." And he goes, "Well, don't give

them such a hard time. They're just trying to be helpful. They're not questioning you." I says, "Yeah, I wonder." [laughs]

Another thing that happened, when I was out to repair a fuel line leak, there was an elderly gentlemen that came downstairs and was watching me, whatever I was doing. And he says, "Have you done this before?" And I would look at him and I'd go, "You know what? This is my first day. How do you do this?" [laughter] You know? And then he would look at me and he goes, "Really?" And I go. "No!" And I'm like, "They wouldn't send people like that without being trained."

And I would make it a challenge to be done real quick and explain to him the whole nature of the job and give him that time, because they're entitled to know what I'm doing. I have nothing to hide.

RAUCHER: You do mostly residential?

S. E.: Residential work is what I do.

RAUCHER: So you do find some of your customers sort of — their mouths drop when you come to the door?

S. E.: In the past, in the past. Not anymore, because we are sort of a norm now. We're working the afternoon shift and the day shift. When I was coming in, you probably could count only one or two on the day shift. The majority of us were on afternoons.

DAWSON: Are you close to the other women in your trade?

S. E.: Yes I am. Because I would tell them if they have any trouble, I'll come out and help you. Because the men came out and helped me. If not, I would sneak over

there and learn some things that I didn't know. If I was lacking in training, I would seek my training with others that will show me how to do it.

DAWSON: So it sounds like your training was adequate, you felt it was very adequate for you to do your job, safety-wise, skill-wise?

S. E.: Safety-wise, we would always shut down a job if we felt that it was wrong. We'd always call supervision and challenge them, tell them, "This isn't right. I need another set of hands," or something like that.

DAWSON: So do you like working alone or is that just the nature of the job?

S. E.: It's the nature of the job. It was just like meter reading, so it's kind of what you were expected to do, work alone. See, on the gas service side, we do work alone. In the distribution and construction side, they work in pairs.

DAWSON: Okay. And I would imagine safety is an element on that?

S. E.: Yes.

DAWSON: Tell us about something that's been very satisfying about your work and something that's been frustrating about your work.

S. E.: One of the things that is satisfying is when you have the younger people coming to you, the younger males, where the males want to be trained by you, that's the most satisfying.

The frustrating part is getting the management to realize that the new generation aren't so service-oriented. They're more computerized, they're more technical. And when it comes to working with tools and stuff, they have no idea. They don't know how to swing the wrenches. They don't know the proper way of setting the meter. They don't

know how to use a proper tool for the proper job. Because a lot of it is they're being schooled too fast, because we don't have enough service workers out there fast enough.

DAWSON: So they're missing out.

S. E.: They're missing out, right, because of the budget and production and everything like that.

RAUCHER: Is it physically demanding at all, your work?

S. E.: Not really. That's one of the things the women have found — it's not as hard if you use the right tool for the right job. Sure, there are things that help — we have managed to bring aluminum wrenches into the field and they're more light-weight compared to what the guys used to do it with. A lot of the things in the past, and some of it still exists, is grunt work, which is physically demanding. Some of us women have learned to get the job done, even if it was cheating this way, cheating that way.

DAWSON: So what is the difference, that you can see, on how men would approach the job versus how you approach the job? Is there any difference that you can tell, other than like you were saying, the weight of wrenches?

S. E.: The weight of wrenches, and that we're more patient. We take more time in figuring it out. A man says, "No, we can't do it." [laughs] They're real fast to making the response rather than to look at the whole picture. That's the way I see it. That's my perspective.

DAWSON: Okay. If you had to do it all over again, would you choose this trade?

S. E.: I would have chose a trade, but I wished I would have gone into plumbing.

DAWSON: Why?

S. E.: Because there's more money in it. [laughter] And you can expand into the commercial field. In the commercial business side of it, that's where I would have liked . . . And I wish I would have started a lot earlier.

WELLS : So you only pipe fit with gas lines?

S. E.: With gas lines only.

WEL LS: No water lines?

S. E.: No, we do that at home. [laughter]

RAUCHER: Were you scared at all about working with gas when you started?

S. E.: Being that when I met my husband, who has more time in the field than I do, he worked on construction sites with explosions and fires and all that stuff, yeah, I was scared. And I saw the potential of it. But in residential, where I am, you are more apt to be able to control it, compared to their situation. They have to dig it up and pinch it off, which could be anything from a clamp to really big squeezers on the industrial end.

So to me, yeah, I was scared when I ran my first gas leak. I was terrified, because my husband would tell me the stories, the horror stories. And I thought to myself, "It's going to happen to me on the first day. It's just going to happen to me." And I admitted it to the people that I train, because I told them, "You make sure that after repairing a gas leak that you solved the gas leak, because you don't want to leave that place and find out the next day or later that night a house exploded and a co-worker ended up going back on the job and got killed." That's why you have to be very thorough in your job. There is no second chances, not like doctors. [laughs]

RAUCHER: Where do you think you got the confidence from to close the door on male co-workers or bosses and say, "Listen, you need to help me out here, you need to

work with me on this"? Was there something in your upbringing when you were growing up that gave you that kind of self-confidence, especially when there weren't very many women working in your trade?

S. E.: Well, I think it was my dad, because my dad always wanted us to learn how to change a tire on a car. He said that was one thing that you had to learn how to do. "If you're going to drive a car, you're going to learn how to change a tire. And you better know how you need to maintain that vehicle." Because my dad used to change his own oil and filter in the alley [behind our house] and change the tires and rotate them. I used to be the one that was with my dad all the time. I did more or less the guys' work at home. I didn't become domestic until I married my husband. [laughter]

DAWSON: Did you play sports while you were in school or anything?

S. E.: No. I was a nerd at school. [laughter] I was. Very quiet and very nerdy.

DAWSON: Your friends that you have, do you find that you can talk to them about your job, your non-traditional job?

S. E.: The friends that are in the trades?

DAWSON: Just your friends in general.

S. E.: Mostly, if it's my friends in general, we don't talk about that. We talk about personal issues. Friends from the job that end up being close friends, we try to keep that to a minimum. I have noticed that when we do gather and we are breaking bread and eating and enjoying ourselves and stuff, we find ourselves playing a game that we're very competitive with each other. We always want to strive to be better. One of the good things is that some of my friends that end up being close friends are the ones that I've trained.

DAWSON: Are you involved in union activities? Tell us a little bit about your background. I hear you're an organizer. Tell us about how you got started in the union, what made you get started in the union. Just tell us a little bit about how you feel about your union.

S. E.: Okay.

RAUCHER: What is your union, first?

S. E.: The UWUA, which is the Utility Workers of America. We represent gas, water and light. The company that I work for, it's Consumers Energy, and I work on the gas side. I started as a union rep in 1990 when I came into the service department.

DAWSON: What does a rep do?

S. E.: A representative is — they're the voice of the people against management. You protect the employees' rights, your co-workers' rights. You are equal to management. I became a union steward when a supervisor was talking down to me and he told me, "Don't lie." And I looked at him and I says, "You're not my daddy. How dare you talk to me like that." Just because I was younger and he thought he was a father figure, you know. But you don't treat your employees like children. And I thought my only way to change all that is to become a union rep and to be equal to them.

DAWSON: So after you were a union rep, what else happened?

S. E.: I became a union rep in 1990. In 1993, the president at that time, which is someone I really greatly respected, gave me the opportunity to attend conferences. One of them was the Latino Workers Leadership Institute, which is from the University of Michigan Labor Studies. He thought that this would be very influential and educational, since I was a Latina.

So I started to get involved in that, and from there, rolled on to the Women's Conference, to the Winter Leadership Conference and to the Black Men in Union Conference. And I have worked as a volunteer in all of those conferences, as a conference coordinator, an instructor/facilitator to being on the Planning Committee.

From there on, I started to be asked to be on committees. I have been on the Constitution Committee in our own local. I was just elected a couple years ago as alternate delegate and trustee for my local. And in 1999, I was given the opportunity to be a national organizer for our union, on the national level.

A friend of mine who was also an organizer told me, "Don't you realize you are an organizer? Why don't you start getting paid for it or being recognized for what you do?" In 2002 I organized 325 women at the company that I work for. They were the women at the call center who receive your calls when you call in regards to your bill or a gas leak or inquiring about the services.

WELLS : Congratulations.

RAUCHER: So the Utility Workers represent clerical workers or office workers as well.

S. E.: Yes they do. And they were the first group out of Consumers Energy that were organized with the help of Cathy's [Dawson] local, [DTE] Local 223, who had already established that. I asked them for guidance and to have their support to come in and speak to the women so that they knew that the UWUA did represent them.

DAWSON: We were talking about your union activities. Didn't you go to the George Meany Center and take some courses or something?

S. E.: Yes.

DAWSON: What was that experience like? Because I've never been there, but I've heard stories.

S. E.: The AFL school, which is called the George Meany School, I was given the opportunity to attend a class about women in labor. It was a class that taught women different skills on representation, the laws, also how to be creative organizers, how to do a project just like what you're doing now. It was kind of nice, because you kind of met some of the women that were leaders in different unions there.

One of the things that I was kind of surprised about was that there were two other women there from the UWUA and they had no idea that I was there. One of them is probably more progressive than I will ever be. She is one of the first Latinas from a membership of 4000 in Southern California. She represents Southern Cal Gas. I had seen her when she started as a financial secretary in her local and then move up the ranks, and seen how progressive she had become.

DAWSON: So now she's president, right?

S. E.: Now she's a president of her local.

DAWSON: And active on the national level.

S. E.: And on the national level. So when I met her, I had a picture of her in a magazine and she thought it was so funny, because I said, "Can you please autograph this?" And she looked at me and she goes, "Why?" And I says, "Because you don't understand. We don't see women like this in our union, because it's all white male that carry the ranks in there." It was something that she challenged and she came through. She always felt for the people, that was her main concern, to represent the people. It didn't matter if it's male or female.

RAUCHER: You're in a different local than Cathy?

S. E.: Yes, right. She's from Detroit Edison/MichCon. I am from Consumers Energy.

DAWSON: But we're from the same national union.

RAUCHER: But do you aspire to be an officer in your local?

S. E.: I was being groomed to be president of my local. I chose not to when I married, only because my husband works in the same company, works as a union employee. My husband, if they hurt me, they hurt him. He knows I put in 250 percent on any activity I do and he knows the hardship that I encounter in doing whatever I perceive I have to do. And for someone to come in and make the comment, "Oh, the union is not doing their job," or, "She's not doing her job," he takes it personally. And I didn't want to have that confrontation in my home life. So I chose not to be in as an officer. And also, I would lose touch with the membership. I'm better as an agitator and a mobilizer and an organizer. [laughs]

WELLS: Do you have any other volunteer activities that you do in your everyday life?

S. E.: I was a financial officer for the Wayne County Labor Council for Latin American Advancement. I am the current financial officer for the Michigan Chapter of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement. I have been involved with the Association of University Women. I also have been involved in the Coalition of Labor Union Women. Recently I was in the play, *The Forgotten*.

DAWSON: Tell us about that. What was that experience like?

S. E.: It was very relaxing, very relaxing. And watching people under stress and trying to do so well, and how they were focusing, they would ask me, "How come you're not worried?" I says, "This is the least of my worries. I mean, you either do it or you don't." And I never knew that I had the talent of singing. My husband would always say, "Oh, you can carry a tune. Yeah, you sing real good." I'm like, "Well, he's your loving husband. They're going to tell you, oh, yeah, yeah."

When I would sing at church, my sister would look at me and go, "I can't believe you're singing again." But I enjoyed singing. When I was growing up, we were in the fourth grade and we were the group that would go sing to [Detroit] Mayor Cavanagh, Irish songs. So my family could tell you I know all the Irish songs. So when St. Patrick's Day comes around, I'm Irish too. [laughter]

RAUCHER: Were there many women involved in these Latino groups that you said you were a financial officer for?

S. E.: Yes, but not in the ranking position. A couple years ago, my friend wanted to be president, and she says, "I'll be president if you become financial officer." So she did do a radical move, because she was one of the first women presidents on the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement. So, in the position of financial secretary, no, I was probably one of the first women.

RAUCHER: Do you think there is any cultural tension in the Latino community, as far as women, work, and that sort of thing? I mean, apart from just the gender thing, do you think there's any more of that in the Latino community than in the non-Latino community, just because there's sort of a tradition of macho or man-centered . . .?

S. E.: It still exists. It still exists. We're seeing it now in the high schools. As you can tell, the Latinos are still not graduating. You're seeing a lot of young ladies getting pregnant before they get married or before they finish school. There is no — mentoring isn't something that's being pushed over there. I would like to see more of that, because it would give them a sense of "If I did it, they can do it too." I mean, they just need to have the focus that they can do it, that reassurance, the self-esteem.

When I do encounter young ladies, I tell them, "Study. Go to school. Finish school. Learn your math, learn your reading, learn your English skills. That's part of life. If you don't know how to do those skills, how are you going to manage to do anything else? You're never going to improve your lifestyle. It takes a lot of work and a lot of patience, and a lot of closing doors. And you got to kick them and keep on doing it — don't settle for 'no." Keep on doing it until they say "yes." [laughs] And if not, you create your own "yes" in your own way.

WELLS : Do you advise other women to go into the trades?

S. E.: Yes, I do. Yes, I do.

WELLS : Younger women?

S. E.: Especially younger women. I think that if I would have been pursued more to go into the vocational school, I would have gone there. Because before I graduated from Holy Redeemer in the tenth grade, they gave us an Army test, which would more or less tell you if you were mechanically inclined or not, what were your strengths and weaknesses, and I came real strong on the mechanical side. My family wanted us to all have a degree, to go to college. And at that time, college was what it

was. So all of us in our family are college-educated, and I'm the only one that went into the labor movement and into the trades. [laughs]

RAUCHER: But your family ultimately didn't have a problem with that, your mother . . .

S. E.: My mother didn't know for a while. [laughs] She would come to the idea, "Why do you have to work at nights? Why are they letting women do that kind of work?" And I would turn around and look at her and say, "Hey, equal pay for equal work." And she would say, "Well, especially at night when you're going into one of the rough areas and things like that, you have more to lose than a man would." I says, "Yes Mom, but you also got to use your common sense and call for safety. You know, if you need backup and stuff you stop and you say, 'Hey, I need backup.'" Because as much as you would need someone to back you up out on that job, a man may need it, too, in certain areas.

RAUCHER: And when did you start working as a pipefitter?

S. E.: In 1990.

DAWSON: Why do you think there are so few women in the trades?

S. E.: Because we don't have the women out there to mentor. We don't see the women in the college and the vocational schools. I did attend Henry Ford Community College, and of course they still have predominantly males, and in some of the classes that I had I was the only female, in the heating and cooling department. It didn't bother me so much because I was already in the field when I was taking those classes. When I got into the field in 1990, I made sure I took a class at Henry Ford just to be ahead of the game, to be a little bit familiar with what I was going into.

DAWSON: So, mentoring, at what level do you think that will help bring women into the trades? You think elementary, junior high, high school?

S. E.: I think it should be elementary, because right now I have two godchildren, and the youngest one is eleven. And a lot of it is being mentored by her own mother, by making her do a lot of things working with her hands craft-wise, putting things together. They do real well. And also giving them that self-esteem on the end of the product, they can see how good a job they can do.

DAWSON: Would you want your godchildren to do what you're doing?

S. E.: Yes. I would want them even to do what their godfather does as a welder, as an artistic welder.

DAWSON: What do you think has made you successful in your job and in your union life also?

S. E.: Probably having the confidence, probably knowing that there's other avenues, and pursuing what you want, not taking "no" as an answer. If you have a failure, you pick yourself back up and try to struggle, make it work. Myself, I have run for trustee for the state council three times, and I would be the first woman on that state council. They're not ready for change yet. Still they're not ready, no matter how much . . .

DAWSON: Has a woman ever been on it?

S. E.: No.

RAUCHER: State council of . . .?

S. E.: State council is made up of officers that oversee twenty-four locals. They are the main body of the union here in Michigan. They are separate from Cathy's affiliation on her local, they're structured different.

WELLS : How have working conditions changed over the years in your trade? Easier?

S. E.: Working conditions, [laughs] I was just discussing that. We are doing more supervision work, more inspector work. We're overseeing contractors more. The last couple years I was an inspector over contractors, which were union contractors. But it was something different that they were seeing a woman overseeing their work.

I take my job real seriously. I am very pro-union, but who pays my paycheck is the company. I like the quality to be way above. I expect the contractors to do quality work as I would do quality work. I find myself as being a trainer to them sometimes, because sometimes they don't know anything when they're thrown out in the field.

RAUCHER: So you were an inspector for Consumers . . .

S. E.: For Consumers Energy.

WELLS : And did you oversee housing installers?

S. E.: Yes. when they changed the meter from inside to out, relocating your meter outside. I also was watching new construction, especially like over here on Northwestern Highway, up there north of Twelve Mile, they were widening the freeway and stuff like that. We'd make sure that they wouldn't dig into our lines, our high pressure lines. I was there also as an inspector to make sure that they did not ding our equipment or break our equipment.

RAUCHER: And you felt that perhaps you weren't getting the same kind of respect that a man inspector would have gotten from some of the contractors?

S. E.: Well, they gave me a hard time at first. And they challenged me to see if I knew what I was doing, if I was strong or not. So once they figured it out, which wasn't [laughs] too much longer, we were all on the same page.

RAUCHER: Does anybody have any other questions?

DAWSON: No. I'm pretty set. But do you have anything you'd like to say to future generations of tradeswomen?

S. E.: Stick with it.

WELLS: Hopefully there are some.

S. E.: Yeah. I don't know why they're not in the field. Does anybody know why they're not coming into the field? I know because of affirmative action, they were given opportunities left and right. A lot of them that were coming into the field were single mothers or low income, found a way out. I don't know what's keeping them from doing it now.

RAUCHER: But you still are in contact with or are friendly with and talk to other women pipefitters, whether it's through the union or your job at Consumers Energy. Do you folks at all discuss this sort of thing?

S. E.: Well, a lot of us come up from — we all started as meter readers. This is, like I told you, one of the very few jobs where you get promoted from within and learn a trade. We are totally different than the UAW or the Big Three, where they have to do the tests and score high enough . . .

RAUCHER: You mean pipefitters?

S. E.: As pipefitters, yeah. Or they have to take the schooling at Henry Ford and become pipefitters in an educational setting plus on the field. I don't know. I don't know.

RAUCHER: Do you meet those tradeswomen at the various conferences and things?

S. E.: I do. At the Women's Conference, we do. As a matter of fact, I taught a class with Cathy [Dawson], Women in the Skilled Trades, and we found they have the same issues, but in a different environment. They're probably pressured more because they're more confined inside, where I'm not confined inside. I'm more out in the field, which sometimes can be hard and sometimes it may not.

DAWSON: And I'm wondering if because you work alone that that makes a difference too, unlike working with a lot of men in a building like I do.

S. E.: Yes, right.

WELLS: And you get to interact with people in their homes, . . .

S. E.: On a one-to-one basis, exactly.

WELLS: . . . normal people, not other construction workers or other tradesmen. You're going to someone's house instead of going to be with another group of guys.

S. E.: Right.

RAUCHER: Although that could present challenges, too. I've often thought when you have people come out to your house that you just never know, right, what you're going to meet.

S. E.: You don't know what you're going to encounter. You don't know who you're going to meet. They may have a chip on their shoulder, and you represent the

company. The first thing that we're hearing a lot of is, "I didn't use that much gas. I didn't use that much gas," because the meter is spinning [laughs] and the bills are getting up higher and higher.

But you go in there and you show them how they're using a lot of gas. One of the things that I make a part of dealing with a customer is to train the customer, too. They don't know certain aspects of how the gas gets to their pipes or what line goes to theirs and where's the shutoff. And especially women, I take the time to show them where the main shutoff is and where the shutoff is for their appliance and even for their water. Because if they ever come home and the water heater is busted, instead of panicking, go down and shut that valve. Just make sure you don't walk into water and get electrocuted.

We're finding now that less maintenance is being done on their own home equipment. People are not maintaining equipment like they're supposed to, their furnaces, their water heaters, stoves and ovens.

RAUCHER: Did the company train you also to deal with the public?

S. E.: Yes, yes.

RAUCHER: Is it mostly women that you find when you go out to work on a home? Or, nowadays, there's so many women at work, maybe that's not the case any longer, huh?

S. E.: You're right. [laughs] The majority is still women at the home. And a lot of them are senior citizens that you find or senior citizens coming in watching their kids' home, coming in to let you in to do maintenance on their meter or to repair a gas leak or repair a furnace.

RAUCHER: Well. That's it? You're satisfied? You know everything that you want to know?

WELLS: Well, she had it all together. [laughter]

RAUCHER: Okay. And I think we're getting close to the end of this tape. So all right, well, thank you so much. You sure you don't have anything to add?

S. E.: No, nothing at all.

RAUCHER: No funny stories, scary stories, none of that?

S. E.: [laughs] No — no comment.

RAUCHER: She's very discreet, too, I think. [laughter] Well, thank you so much for joining us today.

S. E.: You won't have enough tape for all those stories. [laughter]

RAUCHER: We would have liked to have heard those. Now, I've got another tape if you're interested.

S. E.: Hey, R. [her husband]. Remember when the company gave me that cell phone, the first cell phones that came out with the big bags and all that stuff? Oh, my goodness, so the company gave me one, because they wanted me to start calling the customers before I go out and change their meters or anything like that. So all the guys at work was going, "Hey, how come you end up with a phone? You're a union rep, plus you got less time on it!" And then I looked at them with — you know, with the guys, you just, they're something else — I said, "You thought that this was my real job?" I says, "Call me. It's called 1-900-SEX-LOVE." [laughter] And they're like, "Really?" And I says, "Really. Try it. I can be Inga, I can be this." And I'm like laughing, "I wonder if they ever did call."

It was funny, because the man who became my husband knew the quality of work I did, because I was doing a change location and he was doing the digging at that time. And he couldn't believe it. He said that he was noticing my quality of work and how the meters were all straight and all my pipe work was straight and that I even had a miniature level and I would always have it on there.

DAWSON: Detail. Women are into details.

S. E.: I was detailed. And you know what? You would ask supervisors, and they would say, "Ah, don't worry. Just slap on the meter, we'll be back." And I'm like, "Oh, no. You'll never come back." I says, "No matter if the house is worth $100 compared to" — now they're half a mil or a mil — "they all should be straight." And that's how I train the guys — straight. It's your quality.