Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Interview with

M. G.
Electrician

May 22, 2006

Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs
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Interview with M. G.

MARGARET RAUCHER: This is Margaret Raucher and we're here at the Reuther Library on May 22, 2006, to interview M. G., who is an electrician at the Flint Engine Assembly plant.

M. G. Flint Engine South.

RAUCHER: Flint Engine South. And we'll get into more of that as we go along. So I wanted to start the questioning by asking you about your life before you entered the trades, when you were born, where you were born, about your family, growing up, that sort of thing.

M. G.: Okay. Well, I was born so many years ago, I've nearly forgot. [laughter] I was born originally in Texas, what we call Weslaco, Texas. That was in the 1950s, July 17, 1950. I was fifth in my family to be born. We were a Hispanic family, a Mexican family, a migrant family that traveled the circuit, that traveled the route of migrant workers as they do. Originally there were fifteen children in the family, but only twelve survived. And it was about the middle fifties that I remember being old enough to pick cotton alongside my parents in the fields as a child. And of course it was very difficult work and very strenuous work.

But through word of mouth or through the grapevine, they heard that there were better jobs in the Michigan area. So they drove to Michigan for a better life, to look for a better life. I remember being small enough and young — I wasn't quite five years old. It

was May of '55 and we drove in a huge truck. There was a whole caravan of us, Mexicans, Hispanic folks, that were in this truck driving to Michigan.

And it seemed like it took forever. It took days. I remember being injured, somebody stepping on my hand, one of the adults, because we were so crowded and packed in this truck. But we drove and we wound up in — I think we were up north for a time in what they called Pinconning and in Caro. And there my mom and dad picked sugar beets for a time until my dad could get into the plants.

And I know that he must have worked there for the summer, because by September we started school in the Flint area at the Buell School, which, unfortunately in the last few years, has developed a history. I believe there was a child shot there — a six-year-old boy shot a little girl there. But my time there was back so many years ago, when things were far more — it was a different age and more innocent time.

And I didn't speak English when I first arrived in Michigan — I only knew Spanish — but by September of 1955, I spoke enough English to be able to start the transition into the English-speaking schools, so my brother and my sister and myself, we started school in the area. We had an older sister who stayed back with my grandparents. She was five years older than I. She stayed back in Texas. And she didn't come back to live with us until I was thirteen. In the meantime, my father began working for General Motors. And I believe he started in what we call Chevrolet-in-the-hole, which is in the historic part of the plant.

RAUCHER: Can you say that for me again?

M. G.: Chevrolet-in-the-hole, Chevrolet Manufacturing. But that since has been torn down. That was torn down last year. I live in that area, and to see it now

demolished, now gone, is just really heartbreaking, because that's what happened to our old engine plant as well, our old V-8 engine plant.

So anyways, he began working in the plant and life became better for us, although we were quite prolific in the fact that there were at that time just a few children, but it evolved into twelve children, but not until — the last child I think was born in 1964.

So we moved to various parts of Flint. But when we first came to Flint, I do recall that we stayed with relatives. And the community reached out to us, they helped us to work into that transition of trying to get our own house. And it was difficult at first, but the community was so kind and so good to us and our relations that were here were so good to us that that was something I never forgot. And because of that, I'm involved in community service work.

But my dad was a mechanic. He was kind of a self-taught mechanic in the fact that he himself never attended school, but he was quite well-versed in the mechanical area — he just knew, he just had that knack for it. My mother was a homemaker. She only went to sixth grade — because she was one of the older members in the family, she had to go work in the field. And she left school to work in the field, which is what my father did as well. They both came from very large families.

So we lived in Flint, we lived in Mount Morris. That was in my younger years. We wound up in Grand Blanc. We were the first Mexican family, non-white family to move into an all-white city. But actually, as I recall, that was back in 1960 when all these things were evolving between blacks and whites and here's this Hispanic family that moves into Grand Blanc, which of course stands for "big white," or "large white." [laughter] But here we were, this little brown Mexican family. And they were really

very good, very gracious to us. I remember in the early 60's my sister was hit by a car and nearly killed and the community reached out to us again. They were very kind, very gentle, wonderful to us.

We attended parochial school for many years, and I think that that helped shape our moral standings. We were Catholics. And then I, my family, went to public school from ninth grade until twelfth. For many years, I didn't know who paid for this parochial school, because that was very expensive. It was all about uniforms, very strict. And the teachings there, the education there is, I think, a higher level of education, so that helped us, too.

But never during that time did I ever imagine that I'd be on skilled trades. There was never anything in my thinking that that was the field I was going to go into. I thought about teaching. Actually, I thought about being a mother with children, because that's what Mexican women did — we took care of our men, we had the babies. We sort of evolved into that little mama taking care of our babies and raising them and taking care of our husbands. But that never happened to me. I guess being one of the older siblings meant that I took care of my younger siblings and didn't have time for anything else. As I reached my teenage years and graduated from high school — I was a decent student, I can't say I was a great student, I passed with decent grades — I didn't start attending college, but I hired into General Motors.

At that time, I believe the V-8 engine plant did not have women. It wasn't until 1968 that they opened the doors to women. Before then, women had not entered their doors. And it was only because of the government decree that they had to hire women.

And my father came to me and said, "You know, you should try getting in, try looking into it. Maybe you can get into the shop."

RAUCHER: And this would have been when?

M. G.: September of 1968. But I was way smaller back then. So when I first looked into getting a job, they told me initially I was too small, I couldn't do the job I was required to do, so they wouldn't hire me. Well then, in April of '69 my dad — at that time it wasn't quite the rigmarole that you have to go through now, the testing and such that they do now — he spoke to some of the people that hired the folks, because at that time, jobs were just a dime a dozen. You could get into any GM plant. And women were being hired left and right. He spoke to some of the people up front. They knew him. They brought me in. They hired me and I was able to get in.

But it was such a vastly different world than what I was used to. I had never been on a date at that time. I was very innocent. Being Hispanic, I wasn't privy to the dating routines that people had. So I was very innocent. I didn't know anything about men. So when I walked up the aisles and all these wolf whistles — there were several women that had been hired that same day.

[laughs] I remember they were going to give me the physical and they said, "Well, we're going to give you everything but a pelvic." Well, we were not privy to that kind of information, because our parents were — sex was a big no-no, even though they had twelve children. [laughter] They got there, I don't know how, but it happened. So I remember they said, "Well, we're going to give you everything but a pelvic during the physical." I said, "Okay, but what's a pelvic?" I really had no idea. Here I was, almost

nineteen years old, I didn't know anything. I remember them looking at me like, "Is she kidding us?" I wasn't. I didn't know.

Well, as it turned out, I was hired initially on production, into what they called the head department — we built engines and the cylinder head is part of the engine. And it was a relatively easy job, a no-brainer. You sit there and count these heads. So I stayed at that for a time, I did it for several years. It was boring, boring, boring. It didn't require any kind of brain work. And I thought to myself, "There has to be something more. " So I started taking tests for skilled trades and I started attending college for a little bit here and there, because I wanted to do something more with my life than just sit there and count heads. Well, as it was, I finally got on the list, got called onto an apprenticeship in July of '77. I was the second woman to go on trades and the first to finish, because the first woman did not complete her apprenticeship. She decided this was not something that she wanted to do and she decided to opt out.

But it was horrendous at that time, because I was basically leading the path and opening the doors for other women and not realizing what I was getting into. I had not prepared myself adequately enough, not knowing that I was going to get into this field. I didn't know anything. I didn't know piddly-squat about this kind of thing. So what did I know? I just knew how to change a light! But to really understand the whole spectrum of electrical work, I started at ground zero.

Most of the men that entered into the apprenticeship are men that either have training through the service or had some kind of training, had some kind of mileage. I knew nothing. Nothing. And when they did the apprentice reports and they would state

how well you were doing, I never did very well, because it seemed that I was always further behind than everybody else.

And then, I have to be very honest, when you're young and you're cute, you know, these men are like dogs in heat, they're . . . [laughter] You have to get to know them. And so I think a lot of times men coddled me maybe a little more than they should have, not realizing that that really hurt me more than it helped me. It probably put me behind even more so.

And then management was totally against women on the trade and they were horrendously difficult, always looking for excuses, always looking for this, that and the other. And I was just baffled, trying to learn and trying to do things trying to come up to the level that men would be at.

RAUCHER: Could you give us some specific examples of how management was totally horrendous?

M. G.: I remember that there was always some kind of excuse — they would look for reasons to give me a hard time. I remember coming into work, and you were assigned to different areas with different levels of electrical work during that time — you would work different departments. And as I worked different departments, well, sometimes I didn't know the machinery. I was always taught that if you maybe didn't understand this one, you would go look at another one, maybe if there were problems with it, you would get called, you would take a look at one and you'd try to compare it to the other. And I might ask another journeyman who was maybe more familiar with it than I was, if I was in the area. Well, then they'd use that against me, because I was

asking too many questions. Well, for heaven's sakes, I mean, how do you learn unless you ask questions?

And then it happened one time, I stopped and talked to one of the electricians. He worked in a different area entirely. And they used that against me, too, that I went and got somebody out of the area and asked him for help, to come and look at my machinery, which is totally untrue, because I did not. I was just saying hello to him.

FECTEAU: Were they trying to discipline you because of that?

M. G.: No, I think they were just trying to discourage me enough to say, "I want to get out. I don't want to be part of this anymore."

FECTEAU: So it was more of an emotional, "You can't do this."

M. G.: Yeah. And it got to the point where I was just physically ill. My stomach would just turn in knots and I didn't want to go to work. I didn't know what they were going to do. I didn't know where they were going to — I want to say attack me, but not physically — but where else were they going to challenge me, to the point that I was afraid to ask questions. I was afraid to go to talk to anybody. It was a very difficult to route to take.

RAUCHER: What about the journeymen that you worked with?

M. G.: Oh, the journeymen, they were good. I mean, they were good in the fact that they would explain things and try to give me direction. But for them, it was just whiz-bang, it was very simple. For me it was difficult, because I had to try to understand the mechanics of things that I had no knowledge about. So it was just a long learning process, where I started at ground zero and they were all way up above me. But they

graded me on the same level as a man — I should be at this point. Well, I wasn't at that point, because I didn't know.

RAUCHER: Was the treatment a lot worse than when you were in production, when you were on the line? It sounds like when you were in production you were pretty much, what, left alone?

M. G.: Yeah, right, right. It was simpler, yes.

RAUCHER: It was just catcalls and whistles and stuff like that.

M. G.: It wasn't as bad, right. It was nothing like that. But as far as the journeymen themselves, they were helpful in the fact that they tried to guide me. But I got to the point I was afraid to ask the electricians for help. I was afraid to ask questions. I knew that management would use that against me. Well, that's really kind of silly, because asking is all part of the learning process. You should be able to ask. You should have that vantage point to understand better something that you may not understand. So this went on for a long time.

FECTEAU: Were there other women who were coming up behind you, so you weren't the only one there?

M. G.: Yes, there was another young lady. She went to Delphi. She came on shortly after I did, but she was very mechanical-minded. She was totally different than I was. While I was, I hate to say it, the prissy female kind of person, she was more mechanically-oriented, she was gung ho, and she likes to take charge. So there was two different personalities there. I think we were on separate shifts for a while. But she did very well.

I think it took three or four years to finish my apprenticeship. But I think after they realized they couldn't get rid of me, once I topped out . . . And the big thing back then was we would have got thrown into a big [inaudible] of water. That was our initiation.

FECTEAU: Thrown into water? You got thrown in water?

M. G.: Yeah, everybody did. [laughter]

RAUCHER: Well, what do you mean, like a pool or something?

M. G.: No, it was a [inaudible], a big metal [inaudible] full of cold water, and you got thrown in. That was the initiation. And I got thrown in, too — it didn't matter that I was a woman. So I knew that I'd made it at that point. When I got thrown in with my coveralls and everything else, my shoes, I knew I'd made it, and it was a wonderful — it was a wet experience, but it was a wonderful experience knowing that I had been accepted by the journeymen. And after that, it made a big difference. They knew they weren't going to get rid of me.

But I wanted to go into electronic training and they wouldn't let me do it. That was their excuse: "Well, she's asking too many questions, she needs more help, she needs more work down on the floor. " Well, I wanted to know more about electronics, I wanted to understand that aspect of my electrical training. And so I had to fight for that, and I had to fight for this, I had to fight — I thought, "Oh, my gosh." And it went on and on until finally when I topped out, they realized I wasn't going to leave. But the other young lady did — the first lady did.

RAUCHER: You were working in the plant while you were doing your apprenticeship?

M. G.: Oh, that's all part of the training, yeah, sure. And then you go to school after, as well. And school was very difficult, too, because I had not taken those classes. So I tried to get as much schooling and the lab work and getting tutors and just trying to understand it all, and trying to pass and do well with it. It was really probably one of the most difficult things I've ever done.

FECTEAU: I had a couple questions. One is: So what I hear you saying is that your coworkers were much more supportive of you, if not universally supportive of you, than management?

M. G.: Well, yes. I would say the journeymen electricians as a whole were probably more supportive of me. But I think when you're young and you're cute, I think the men have a tendency to want to help a woman and be right there for her. And that, I think, has hurt me. But I also feel the older generation and some of the other trades, they were absolutely adamantly opposed to a woman. They'd stop and see me and say, "Why don't you go home and take care of your children. You shouldn't be here. You took a job away from my son." They would make comments like that. But that was the older generation, the other trades. It wasn't so much apparent with my trade, as far as electricians. They were a little more lenient towards helping me or insuring that I tried to learn something. But they were pretty good guys overall.

FECTEAU: Do you know why that might have been? Was there a leader among the electricians who was more open minded?

M. G.: You know what? I don't know. There might have been. I think the fact that I was trying and that I wasn't the kind of person that just sat there and tried not to do anything. My forte was not construction. After a while, it became maintenance, because

construction is part of the electrical training as well. I was not comfortable with construction. And even though that was not my forte and we had to learn how to carry ladders and all that, the guys would try to work with me to make sure I didn't get hurt. And a lot of times we had fun. You know, when you're at work, it doesn't mean you can't have fun. The electricians were a different group than some of the others. The tinsmiths, they were horrible. They were horrible!

CATHY DAWSON: Sheet metal — really?

M. G.: They were really — for a woman to go through hell and back, that was the tinsmiths group. Talk about chauvinistic pigs, they were terrible. They drove one woman right out of the apprenticeship. They did horrible things to her. They filled up her tool cart with oil or lube and they did terrible things to her. But I heard, too, that she had a very volatile temper and she would react and it would get worse. So it never stopped and she eventually left. But I heard that she put a lawsuit in. I don't know, but the things that happened should never have happened to her. Her level of harassment, or whatever she went through, was much more horrible than anything I experienced.

FECTEAU: I find it interesting that certain groups are different like that.

M. G.: Yeah, they were different. The tinsmiths were worse.

DAWSON: Wow.

CRAWFORD: Sometimes I feel, though, that it has nothing to do with the craft; it has to do with the particular combination of individuals.

M. G.: Oh, I'm sure that's probably true. I'm sure it is. For some reason, the tinsmiths seemed to be, for whatever reason, chauvinistic. Electricians were a little more understanding. The millwrights, as yet, had not had a woman on the trade, but when it

did have a woman come on the trade, I think they gave her a little difficulty, but it was a few years after, when more women had come on.

And I think that in order to prove yourself you had to show the guys that you were willing to work, you were willing to get dirty. And once at least you were able to do that, you did gain the respect of your peers and they would accept you. But if you weren't willing to work, well, you didn't get respect. They might work with you, but you didn't get a very good name for yourself.

CRAWFORD: Do you remember what your first day was like in the trade, when you walked into that crib area, or whatever it was?

M. G.: I did. I was nervous. I was on first shift.

CRAWFORD: Did you know any of these guys just from being in the plant?

M. G.: I knew some of them, I didn't know all of them. I didn't know them that well. I remember walking into what we called the crib, and then being introduced. And right away I was given coveralls. I was given a job to do. I'm like, "Oh, my God! What have I got myself into?" [laughter] Because I think we had to go take down some piping, some conduit, and I was given the tools. I didn't even know how to hold the doggone channel lock. And after a while it became such that I had to learn all these things. I felt so stupid, but it was all a learning process for me.

And there were things, jokes that were played. I remember we had to go up on a job and I'm tailing behind the guys. We had to go up these stairs into the — I didn't know where we were going, I thought we were going up on the roof of a plant. I ended up traipsing along, following the leader, there's another apprentice behind me. And I was being set up, but it was all a joke. And as I was walking through, all of a sudden I'm

walking into this room, I realize it's a men's restroom. I'm like "Whoa!" So I run out of there. Well, they all started hooting and hollering, because it was a big joke. But things that like happened. You just took it with a grain of salt and you just sort of worked around that.

And I think that also helped, too: the attitude. If you were close-minded and didn't want to work with the guys and didn't go along with the jokes — and especially being an apprentice — if you didn't go along with the ribbing and the kidding that was all part of it, you sort of didn't fit in.

FECTEAU: What do you mean by "ribbing and kidding"?

M. G.: Oh, you know, apprentices are kind of treated like dirt. [laughter]

DAWSON: Right, right. So you were treated the same as everybody else.

M. G.: Like everybody, every other apprentice, yeah. Right, until you're accepted, you were sort of the low man on the totem pole. But you just kind of go along with it and you work with it and they work with you. And once they realize that you weren't going to go away, you were sort of — I ain't saying they embraced you, but I had a big party after I finished and a lot of folks came by and we had a fun time.

RAUCHER: There were other women in the program?

M. G.: There were other women.

RAUCHER: And you became friends with some of these women or worked with these women?

M. G.: Oh yes, we all became very close. We all became like sisters almost. Yes, we all became very close friends. And there were lady toolmakers — we all became like our own little group. And we would have parties, we would have yearly parties

where, oh, my gosh, it was a bit wild. But we had a lot of fun. We had a lot of fun together. And we kind of grew up together and learned together. And we all had our own little talents and idiosyncrasies. Although I think that a lot of us that started out initially as trades, then moved into other levels of expertise. I went into community service back in 1993. I became the community service representative, not full time, but doing the United Way campaigns and different things. But I would still have to work on the floor as an electrician full time, here and there.

But in '99, when our new plant opened, the Flint Engine South facility opened, they were taking applications for capacity assurance coordinators, maintenance planners. And I put my application in because I was so tired doing nothing. I hate to say doing nothing, but with the new machines coming in, as electricians, we weren't geared up to go work because of the high-tech operation. So when they were taking applications for CAC's, as we were called, I put my application in. There was ten or twelve people. I was the only woman. My maintenance manager had told me I probably didn't have a chance in hell to get it because of my seniority. As it turned out, of the five CAC's that were chosen, I was the last one that was chosen. And I became the CAC for what we called the Facilities Group. And they take care of the facilities.

It was a challenge. We learned a maintenance programming system and I loved it. I just thoroughly loved it. But in 2003, I was removed because of a disability issue involving another machine repair person. He had been put on sick leave and he came back and was learning the maintenance planner positions. But because of the fact that they had to give him a job — they said that I was low seniority — I was removed from

my position and he took over my job, which was devastating to me, because I loved my job. It was my everything.

And I was given a different position — I would still do computer work, but I had to work with what they call the quality network process, updating manuals — very tedious, very boring. And I didn't find it as fulfilling as being the maintenance planner, but it was still a good job. And I still did community service. But I miss my job. I think there's a lot to be said about having the satisfaction of doing a good job and taking pride in your work and I really loved that. But being a planner, being an electrician, I have to do that on overtime now, being an electrician.

But the bad thing is, because I never worked on a full-time level with this new equipment, I never learned it as well and I don't know it. And so when I work on the floor I feel really lost, and that's not a very good feeling.

CRAWFORD: So is it a lot with the robotics?

M. G.: Yes, there are some robotics involved in it. But it's what's called "open control." It's all computer-controlled. It's very high-tech. It's a very clean plant. But it's so different, so vastly different. All of the machines I worked with are gone from this facility, because it's all very high-tech.

And now they're adding on a newer portion for the Hypertronics V-6 engine and I think it's going to be even different than what we have now. So there will be more learning involved, but I probably won't be working on it full time either, so I won't get to know that as well.

RAUCHER: So that's what the electricians work on, setting up these machines, these computers, and that sort of stuff?

M. G.: Yeah, that's what we do.

RAUCHER: And maintaining them?

M. G.: Well, we maintain them. But when there's a problem with the equipment, it's down for whatever reason, they have to go out and diagnose it and figure out what's going on. But everything is enclosed so they have to try to figure out where the switch is or what might be broken. It's a very involved process, far more than it seems like it used to be.

FECTEAU: I had a question. So while you were going into the apprentice program and getting involved with that, what was your family life like? Were you supported by your parents and siblings?

M. G.: Oh, yeah. I think my mom and dad were very supportive of the fact that they had a daughter that was involved in the trades. I think that coming from a very humble background, they probably wondered, "What is she thinking?" But they never stopped me. They never said, "No, don't do that. You can't do it." They never said I couldn't do it. I know my daddy one time said, "Well, if I ever hear about the shop blowing up, I'll know what happened." "Oh, thanks Daddy."

But he himself was a mechanic. And many times after I started my apprenticeship, I had so often wished that I had at least been with him there to watch him, to learn a little more about the mechanics. Even when it's a car or whatever, he just had that ability and that knack. And then some of my brothers have been blessed with that.

I have to say that I'm glad that I did it, I'm glad that I never turned back and said that "I can't do this." I'm glad that I took those steps to at least go forward and do it,

even though it was so difficult. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do. And it would have been so easy to say, "I can't do this anymore." But I didn't want to be a quitter.

FECTEAU: So what do you think gave you that stubbornness or perseverance? Where do you think that came from?

M. G.: I don't know. I guess I just didn't want to be a quitter. I didn't want them to say, "Well, she can't do it. We knew she couldn't do it. She's too dumb." That was the last thing I wanted. So that's why. I needed to prove it to myself and to others and my family, too. I didn't want to disappoint them. But in the process of going through all this schooling and just continuing on, you know, being so involved with my family I think is also part of why I never married. Being the third to the oldest as I was, I sort of took care of the family and kind of took on the family responsibilities, helping them out. But I was engaged a couple times. I think the family thing, because I'm very involved with my family, I think that turned off a lot of guys. They don't understand the Hispanic closeness and togetherness. But that's what I'm about, and that's what we're all about.

And I guess, also, getting involved in the skilled trades opened up a lot of doors for me. And I don't know if that would have happened, necessarily, if I had just stayed in production. I think when you go into the trades, you go into another level of learning, you develop more self-confidence, you become another person in the fact that you know that if you can achieve this, then there's nothing that you can't do, there's nothing stopping you. So I went on to another level. I always wanted to get a degree. I felt that getting a bachelor's degree was also very important, so I did that.

DAWSON: What did you get your degree in?

M. G.: Business.

RAUCHER: Where did you go to school?

M. G.: Baker College. I'd like to have gone to get my master's, but it was an accelerated program where, oh my gosh, getting a bachelor's degree was done in fifteen months. It was horrendous. And I remember telling one of the gentlemen I work with — he was quite a go-getter, too, an electrician. I think he had a couple bachelor's degrees, maybe some master's degrees. When I told him I was going to Baker College to get my bachelor's degree, he said, "Oh, you went to an easy school." It wasn't easy when you're trying to do it in an accelerated fashion. But I enjoyed it. And my goal was to maintain a 4.0. I didn't quite get there. I was really close — 3.97 — but when you're working full time — we were working seventy, eighty hours back then. So that was interesting.

And then I went into theatrics, and we did a play about union brothers and sisters. It was called "Rats," written by a union production woman from Buick. It was a lot of fun. It was a musical, a lot of fun. We enjoyed that. It was very well written, very well done. The music was wonderful.

RAUCHER: Where was it performed?

M. G.: It was performed at the Bowery Theater, which is in Flint, and it was very well received. And I believe the [UAW] region supported it. They gave it a lot of support. In fact, they really were out there for us. And then we went to Black Lake. We went to different areas and performed.

RAUCHER: Is it still performed?

M. G.: You know what? They did it last year. They did a smaller version, a similar version — they followed the same music and stuff. But it was done at what we

call a Masonic Temple in Flint. It was done last year. I wasn't in it, but some of our original members were involved in that. And it was well done. But I really liked the more grandiose play. I thought it was much nicer.

So those doors were opened, and without doing what I did, I don't think I would have found those avenues that I found, those pathways that I went on, those journeys that I traveled, as far as learning about life and work and people, and my education process.

FECTEAU: I'm curious about your brothers and sisters. Did any of them go into the trades or do anything similar?

M. G.: No, they didn't. I have a sister who worked at Fisher Body in Flint. She was laid off, and now she's in Indiana. And I have told her, because she seemed to have that mechanical aptitude, that she ought to try to go into a trade. But for whatever reason, she never did. She got married and had a family, and I think that kind of stopped her. My brother worked for General Motors — he worked at my plant for a time. Now he's at Saturn. He's very happy over there. My other brother went to Delphi. He's retired now. But he never went for it.

RAUCHER: But a lot of your siblings work in the auto industry.

M. G.: Well, there's several of them. Then the younger ones didn't get so lucky, so they have jobs, but not the good jobs at General Motors. Once you work for General Motors, you know the benefits are there, the good pay is there, and when you don't have that, then life isn't as good. It's a lot more difficult.

But also I guess I never wanted to forget my roots. And coming from a migrant background, I realized that hard work is something that is not always fun, but if you're going to do something, you should do it well, do it to the best of your ability. And that's

something I learned as well: if you become a slouch and you become lazy, that doesn't say much for your upbringing or for you as a person. And I never want to be known as that, either.

RAUCHER: There's a Latino or Hispanic community in Flint, I assume. Was your family part of that at all?

M. G.: Initially, when we first came into the Flint area in the '50s, there were a lot of Mexican families. We attended the Lady of Guadeloupe Church. In the'60s it might have been still there, but then it seems like towards the later '70s, '80s, as the families grew and people started moving to the outskirts of Flint, then it sort of started — I don't want to say phasing out, but people had moved out into the suburbs and other areas, and the Flint community isn't as large. It's still there, but not like when we first lived there.

RAUCHER: But your family was part of that, at least in the early years.

M. G.: Uh-huh, yeah, the early '50s or the '60s, right. My mom and dad were involved with different groups and they were involved in the church. It was very meaningful. And because of that, I became very involved with different things. We were involved in what we called the G.I. Forum. It's an Hispanic group. I guess back during the war there was discrimination against certain minority groups, among them Mexican soldiers. They weren't even allowed to be put into a funeral home. It was all whites in the home, you couldn't bring the body there, even though this was a soldier that died for our country. And so the G.I. Forum evolved from that. They saw this kind of discrimination going on and they became a group to stop that sort of discrimination, to honor all soldiers. And it's a scholarship program.

There's a whole story behind it, but I'm just sort of giving you this little history behind that. But I'm trying to think of when that began, back in the '40s, '50s? But we got into it through my uncle. He was a veteran from the wars. And he started the group in Flint. And they have a scholarship program, they have a queen, they have a big dance. I think they have different groups throughout the United States.

RAUCHER: What UAW local are you in?

M. G.: 659. We're an amalgamated local.

DAWSON: Have you ever been a steward or an officer or on a women's committee or anything like that in your union?

M. G.: Well, I was a treasurer of the Region 1C Women's Council until just recently. But because I was working the overtime and working Saturdays, I wasn't able to attend the meetings. And then I also am in the Coalition of Labor Union Women — I'm on the Executive Board. But I was a financial secretary until just recently, until just a couple weeks ago. But I've been a chair for so many different organizations, golly. And like I said, I'm the community service rep for United Way. Oh golly, what else? My mind draws a blank.

RAUCHER: How far back were you involved in the Women's Council and stuff like that?

M. G.: Well, the Region 1C Women's Council, probably for the last five, six, seven years I've been on there.

RAUCHER: What does it do, the Women's Council?

M. G.: Well, we not only spread the word about unionism, but we've tried to have fundraisers, because we want to promote not only unionism, but also education.

And so we have a scholarship program. I wanted to develop a program that promoted scholarships and so, working with one of my union sisters, we decided to name it after Ruben Burks, who was our regional director, who retired a couple years ago. We put out scholarships every year to several deserving young ladies. We have special criteria — it's on the Website — and anybody can apply for it.

RAUCHER: Anybody?

M. G.: Well, any young woman that's going to school can apply for it.

RAUCHER: Okay, but if she's a daughter of a union member or somehow related to a union member?

M. G.: Well, we thought we would do it that way, but then we wanted to open the field to deserving young women while promoting unionism as well as education. We didn't want to just restrict it to union members, because we didn't seem to get as much response. But when we opened the field up, we seemed to get a far better response.

And then the Women's Committee — I want to get them involved in another scholarship program that's with our local. And we're thinking about calling it the Rosie the Riveter scholarship. Because it's so expensive now to go to school and get an education and a lot of them don't have the tuition.

FECTEAU: Is there anything that you think that your union, or unions in general, can do to encourage more women to go into the trades and help them to stay there, too?

M. G.: You know, it would be nice to see more women on the Executive Board, to see them get more involved in the union. You don't necessarily see a lot of women officers. You don't see a lot of women committeemen, although we do have one female

who is a committee person. And she's very outspoken. She's very intelligent. She was one of the first women over at Buick. She's been laid off like, fourteen, fifteen times, but she wound up at our plant back in '97, '98. And so she's an alternate committee person.

But from what I understand, they're not always real supportive of — they don't always work with her as closely as she would like. And maybe it's the male thing. I don't know what it is. But it took them a little while to transition to the fact that here's a woman who's a committee person who needs to feel that she's also a part of this. But it would be nice to have that kind of leadership, maybe to promote them, too. And I think because women are more family-oriented, Sundays is a bad day for a union meeting. Because a lot of women aren't going to go to a union meeting on Sunday when it's their day to be with their family and go to church, or whatever. And a lot of them aren't there.

DAWSON: Has it been on Sunday for a long time? Is it just like standard or something?

M. G.: Forever. They're always on Sundays.

DAWSON: Is that right?

RAUCHER: Does that mean you don't go very often?

M. G.: No, I go. I go to my union meetings, being an officer. Because I'm a community service rep., I have to be there. When we're not there, that's something that's frowned upon. If you're a union person and you hold a position, you should be there at your union meetings. But sometimes I feel like unionism almost takes precedence over my faith and I don't want that. I feel like that shouldn't happen.

And sometimes I don't think people act real Christian in the union meeting. Although I know that our UAW president, Ron Gettelfinger, is a very devout Catholic

and he doesn't act like that. That's a wonderful way, I think, to be a leader: leading by example. But I don't see that happening all the time. Politics can be so cutthroat, and I think a lot of women don't like that kind of thing either.

RAUCHER: Well, has anybody suggested holding these meetings on a day other than Sunday?

M. G.: It's always just been that way. It has. It would be wonderful.

RAUCHER: And you say you noticed that there aren't very many women who attend.

M. G.: Well, they do attend, but I think there could be more women attending. But I don't know what other day it could be.

RAUCHER: Is this the case with the IBEW, that you have meetings on Sundays?

CRAWFORD: No. We have them on Tuesday nights.

RAUCHER: In the evening, yeah, I guess I just assumed that that's usually the meeting time.

CRAWFORD: However, I know IBEW locals that have their meetings on Friday nights. So you can imagine it's a boys' night out.

DAWSON: No, they wouldn't do that! [laughter]

PAT NUZNOV: But I was surprised — I was talking to somebody that's a union printer and his union meets on Sundays. And I said, "What?" He goes, "Oh yeah, a lot of the unions that we work with, doing printing for their elections, have Sunday meetings." I was really surprised.

CRAWFORD: And their locals are called "chapels."

RAUCHER: They are, but I never thought of that.

NUZNOV: Yeah, because you can't get to the bar. What time does the bar open on Sundays? I mean, I'm just asking. You know what I mean.

RAUCHER: How often do you hold meetings?

M. G.: It's once a month. And see, I was never one to go drinking or go to the bar. It was not my thing. I'm not a beer drinker, I'm not a beer guzzler. But sometimes I feel like that good old boy network still exists and sometimes I feel like an outsider looking in, because I don't go after hours and go drinking and carousing with the guys. I just don't do that.

RAUCHER: Are there other women officers at all in your local?

M. G.: You know, there is another lady, but she's laid off, apparently, and I guess she's going to retire. And so I don't know what will happen when she retires. Maybe she'll still hold that position or maybe they'll give it to someone else. She's the secretary and she does a good job. She also runs what we call the Old Newsboys up here, but in Detroit it's called Goodfellows. She's on production.

And then we now have a safety person — she was an electrician, but now she's the head of the Safety Department for the union — and she's very intelligent, very capable. She was the third female that went on trades at V-8 Engine. Very outspoken, and she'll tell somebody off in a minute. But she's very capable, very intelligent and she's been on about as long as I have.

And then the other lady, the second lady that started, she went to Delphi, and she has no choice but to opt out for retirement, because she can't go back into the GM sector with all of the people that are going to be looking for jobs once the openings come up.

She feels all those job openings will close up and she'll be left out, so she's going to take the retirement. She regrets moving over to Delphi. She wishes she had stayed at GM. But she was quite the hard worker as well. She was a farm girl and she was very capable and very talented.

There were toolmaker ladies, and they did a good job. I'm just trying to think who else. Oh, I was going to bring my girlfriend. She was the first machine repairwoman to begin over at the plant. She is Hispanic as well. And she was nineteen when she came on board, but she was mechanically oriented, very talented and intelligent, and she was not well accepted or well received initially.

DAWSON: Were there older men she worked with? Because you had mentioned earlier that you thought the older generation didn't accept the women as much.

M. G.: Yes. Well, there were older men that initially, I believe, she did work with. But she was just this young, innocent kid. But even though she was nineteen, she was married by then and her husband wasn't real keen on her coming into the trades. But she did very well. As I said, she was very mechanically gifted. She used to race dragsters. She could tear a car apart and put it back together. She could build a house from the ground up and do all the electrical and all the wiring. She was just very gifted, a very smart woman. And in fact, once the guys realized she could work out there and do anything a man could do, they accepted her. But they gave her a hard time. Machine repair is a little different than the electrical apprenticeship. You have to go into the tool area and learn a little bit about the machining process. And she said a lot of the guys wouldn't teach her.

FECTEAU: You mean the tool and die room? Is that what you're saying?

M. G.: Yeah, they had to learn some of that equipment, some of that machinery. She said the guys would not teacher. They wouldn't have anything to do with her.

FECTEAU: So tool and die was a particularly bad place for a woman?

M. G.: Well, it seemed like it back then, because this is in the early '70s — '73, '74 was when she came in. She was one of the first women to come in. But they were not real keen on having a woman.

FECTEAU: I don't know if this is appropriate, but my father-in-law was a foreman in a tool and die room for General Motors, but at a different plant. And to this day, when I talk to him about his position on having women and minorities come into the tool and die, he won't talk about it. His face just gets real red and he won't talk.

RAUCHER: When you applied for the apprenticeship, you had absolutely no knowledge at all of electrical work, nothing. But this wasn't a problem, right, in applying for the apprenticeship? It didn't matter?

M. G.: No, it didn't matter. You did your testing. But then I took classes so I could go through the testing and I would understand what was going to be asked and what was going to be tested, what area. And I did well. But yeah, when I look back on it, I wish I had gotten more knowledge. I wish I had been more familiar with that electrical work. I didn't know what I was getting into. I talked to some of the electricians before I went on, and they encouraged me to go ahead and sign up, it'd be a new experience.

And one thing I do remember is that they told me — and that's what I really liked — that you would never do the same job two days in a row. It would always be something different. And I liked that because I did the same job day after day after day.

It was very tedious and monotonous. And I thought, “Well, if I could just use my brains.”

But sometimes I would think, "Oh, my gosh!," when I’d get on jobs and just have no idea what’s what. Doing the no-brainers is a whole lot easier than trying to figure things out. But then once you become familiar with it and if you can understand it, then you build up that confidence of knowing and understanding that you can do something, you can fix something, you can understand some of this stuff that people said a woman could never do. Well, yes, you can do it.

FECTEAU: I assume that you probably have lots of nieces and nephews.

M. G.: Uh-huh, I do.

FECTEAU: I’m just wondering if you would encourage your nieces to go into the trades. Do any of them show an interest?

M. G.: I think they would ask questions and I would answer them. And I always encourage them. And this is one of the things I told them, “Know that this is the direction you want to take and know that if you’re going to get into this, you’re not going to just try to slide through and be unprepared for getting into this level of work, because it takes a certain amount of intelligence and talent.

And if you can’t do it, if you think you can’t do it and you’re uncomfortable with it, then maybe there’s another direction. But be prepared. Don’t be like I was, not knowing. I wish I would have been better prepared.

FECTEAU: What could they do to prepare themselves? What are some steps? Like, my daughter wants to become an electrician. What would you advise her to do?

M. G.: Well, there's probably electrical classes teaching basic kinds of things. Just whatever kind of classes that are offered out there, get into them or ask questions of other electricians. And that was one thing I thought would be nice: to develop classes for young ladies that maybe don't know how to fix cars or don't know how to change lights or change a switch, to have just basic little classes where you could learn some kind of basic knowledge or be able to fix things. That would be a good start.

CRAWFORD: Do they still take apprentices? Are there a lot of apprentices started?

M. G.: Oh golly, you know what? In its heyday, our plant had almost 7,000 people and now we're down to 367. Two or three years ago, after nearly twenty years of not having apprentices, they brought apprentices on board. And our concern was that there were so many of us who by this time were into the retirement mode — we were in thirty, forty years — that if they don't bring apprentices on, with all these people that are leaving, they're not going to have people taking their places that know this equipment, know this machinery.

Well, they brought two from the outside and two from in the plant, and one young man that they brought from the outside had been a journeyman electrician, a big guy, a big guy. But they fired him. He wouldn't do the job. He didn't want to work on machinery. And after a couple years, they got rid of him. You know, forget that. He just didn't have a very good attitude. But this was a man.

Now, they brought in a young lady, very smart, very sharp, she worked on production as an electrician. And unfortunately, they laid her off. They laid her off in February. But unfortunately she's going to retire. She's now taking care of her mother

and she feels it best to be there for her mother, so she's going to retire. So she's not going to finish the apprenticeship.

Another young man that started the apprenticeship, he had a bad back and he kept going on sick leave. He opted out. There's only one left of the four electricians that started.

RAUCHER: This tape is going to end in a few seconds. So let me stop it, and then I'll change the tape. Okay, we're back on. And while I was changing the tape, you were talking about your mom, who passed away recently.

M. G.: Yeah, she did pass away. Not being married, not having a husband, just the little things that she would do would just make such a wonderful help to me to take the stress off. And not having her there now, I realize how much I miss her. We all miss her. Because once we lose our mom or we lose our dad, but especially our mom, it's just an emptiness, a void that is never filled, because they're very special.

CRAWFORD: Your father had already been dead for . . .

M. G.: Yeah. He died in a car accident back in '86. So in '86 she came to live with me. I didn't want her to live by herself. And so it was nice for her to come and stay with me. She was my buddy and my companion, my pal. And I envisioned that once I retired we were going to travel here and there. But I guess she'll be with me in spirit.

RAUCHER: Do you think your parents were sort of responsible for your attitude, your perseverance on the job and the way you approached all of that?

M. G.: I guess so. Yeah it must be, because they never gave up, they never said, "No, you can't do it." Anything that I might take on, they never looked at me and said,

"Well, are you crazy?" It was always like, "Okay." They accepted it and never told me, "No, don't do it."

RAUCHER: Well it must have been difficult for your father with a lot of kids and your mom not working, raising a family just on his salary.

M. G.: Oh, it was. It was very difficult. Yes, it was quite difficult, because we struggled. But there were times, you know, we thought of ourselves more as a poor family. And there were times that we would get assistance, like during Christmas, when the community would come and help us. There were Christmases that we didn't have a lot — we didn't have anything, in fact, and if it wasn't for the goodness of the community to come and help us . . . There was one Christmas in particular that we had nothing: there was no food, there was no presents, there was no Christmas, there was nothing in the house. And if it wasn't for Toys for Tots and things like that that showed up at our doorstep giving us presents and giving my mother food and my mother crying and all of us crying, we never would have had a Christmas.

So it's those wonderful memories that we remember always, just the goodness of the community and the people that were there for us. And that's why I do community service, because it's those kinds of things that really bless your heart and you remember forever.

And I like to write, so I wrote little poetry things about that kind of thing. And in fact, I'm working on a children's book right now. I talked to a publisher about that and hopefully maybe one day I'll finish it up. It's a couple hundred pages already.

RAUCHER: A children's book? Wow! You might have to break that up into more than one book.

M. G.: Yeah, I think so, maybe a sequel. [laughter] I get a bit carried away. But I was reading where they're looking for poetry from different people in the UAW, in the union.

RAUCHER: That they would publish?

M. G.: Yeah, that they would publish or you could win $300 or $100 or something.

CRAWFORD: They just had a thing down at Local 22. What did they call it? It was like a worker artists fest. It was people doing poetry or music or readings of stuff that they had written. It was really good. So how did you get involved with becoming a union officer? What was it like when you ran for office? How long had you been there then?

M. G.: I ran for different offices over the various years. There was a position available and we'd sign up for it and we'd just ask people to support us. If they know that you're involved and they know you're out there trying to get things done, you get the support. It's not usually a problem.

But like I said, the one lady, Judy, who's the alternate committee person — the committeeman that's on board now is a little more chauvinistic. She said she was having problems with him accepting her as the alternate. But she does a good job and people seem to come to her. And she tells people the way it is and she tries to give them information honestly. And that's what people are looking for, answers to their questions, honesty, openness. And when you withhold that information, people find out later on and they don't appreciate it.

FECTEAU: Were your parents union supporters or involved with the union?

M. G.: No. They were just involved with the different community and church groups. But I think my daddy was happy that he was part of a union organization. I think he appreciated that. But no, I don't remember his being part of that movement.

FECTEAU: So you didn't have somebody that kind of mentored you or taught you about the union — you just knew it was something you would be interested in?

M. G.: Yeah. I think once I got on board and saw what that group could do, I appreciated the fact that we were part of the union movement. But we also had union history classes. We had classes that taught us about the union and how it all began. And it was then that I realized that if it hadn't been for these folks, we wouldn't have what we had. They fought so hard and they were there for us and it really inspired me to want to go in that direction and support my union.

And that's not to say that it's a hundred percent perfect. There's things that I wish didn't happen. Sometimes I wish they were more supportive of women, doing more to get the women more involved, as we talked about. But I think sometimes people are turned off a lot by the ugliness that politics can become. I don't immerse myself in it, because I don't want to get involved with such an ugly animal — I just sort of skim the surface. I don't want to be enmeshed in it, because I don't like all the political shenanigans that go on.

FECTEAU: When you say "political," do you mean the internal politics of the union or do you mean political action, or both?

M. G.: Sometimes both, because you have to be careful. You don't want to step on toes and you got to be careful what you say and do. But you want to support your leadership as well. Sometimes things don't always turn out as you would want, but you

still support your union, because without them, I certainly wouldn't have — you know, I've been blessed and I've had a wonderful life because of it.

RAUCHER: When you first started out and there weren't very many women in the trades at your plant, did the few who were there get together as a group? I know you said that eventually you became friends and would go out and have fun. But did you use each other as a sort of support during those early years?

M. G.: Well, initially, when I first came on board — I can't say that I was a genius as an electrician — I was learning and it was difficult. Now, other women that came on, it may have been easier for them. But the second woman to go on had a relative who was doing a study on discrimination among women in a working environment. And she saw what I was going through and she gave me the number of her relative and told me to call her.

RAUCHER: She was an academic?

M. G.: Yes, she was an academic.

RAUCHER: In Michigan?

M. G.: Yes, in Michigan. It seemed like it was in the Flint area.

RAUCHER: And it would be in the '70s?

M. G.: This would have been in the '80s by now, probably late '70s, early '80s, somewhere in there. So she asked questions, tried to advise me: maybe I could do this, maybe I could do that. It was nice to have somebody to talk to about the situation, but I can't say that she came in and tried to make changes, because she couldn't.

RAUCHER: But did it help to have these other women in the plant who were going through similar experiences?

M. G.: Yeah, it helped. But some were removed if they weren't doing their work or weren't doing good in school. Another young lady dropped out. She didn't understand that when you're an apprentice, you're maybe not going to be treated as well as you think you should and she didn't like it and she left the apprenticeship. And I didn't really get to talk to her — we were on different shifts and I never really got to know her — but I do remember that she was told to wire a panel or do some kind of job or project and then they went back and they critiqued her and she didn't like it, she didn't appreciate it. And it happened several times, so she said, "No, I'm not going to put up with this" and she left. I do remember that.

But the tinsmith lady, she went through hell and back. She went through a terrible time. But like I said, I think it's the groups of individuals and not necessarily a specific trade.

CRAWFORD: So did the tinsmiths eventually change, or are they still . . .?

M. G.: You know what? Out of all of the tinsmiths that used to be there, there's maybe three left in the plant. And the one female that was there, she did a good job, but she retired early. She left when her husband retired a couple years ago. So there's no women tinsmiths left.

CRAWFORD: So what is the average age of the people in your plant? Are you all getting close to retirement?

M. G.: Well, I would say most of us have over thirty years in. I would say late forties, early fifties is the average age. There's very few younger people under forty. Maybe there are others in the engineers or the salaried ranks and there might be a few from Delphi, because some of the Delphi folks came into our plant.

CRAWFORD: It's kind of the curse and the joy of seniority.

M. G.: Well now, when a lot of these folks leave, a lot of those folks that were in the bottom will climb up, so I'm sure that'll make them happy. But a lot of them are laid off right now, too. I have thirty-seven years in, but not quite thirty years in with the trades. I started in July of '77 and then we were laid off for a time during the apprenticeship, back in 1980, for about eight or nine months.

And it was just a joy to go back to work after that time. When you go on skilled trades and then you learn the ropes and they have their own little way of doing things and you take your own little breaks and you're working in your own little group, and then to go back to production work on the line — wow, what a change that is. You get kind of spoiled. I was so glad to go back on skilled trades once they called me back. It was wonderful. I thought, "I will never complain about my job again," because when you go back on production, it's a totally different world.

RAUCHER: A couple of the women that we interviewed said that it's also a much more volatile and hostile environment — production — from what they were doing, that maybe it's the nature of the work, the environment that just makes people not as easy to work with.

M. G.: Right, right. People get teed off. It is a different world out there. Not to say that there's not a lot of talented people out there — there are, in all levels — but I just couldn't imagine doing that my whole life. But some people take pride in it, they love what they do. And every job is important, everything we do is all part of getting the product out there and taking pride in our work.

CRAWFORD: So did you ever think that being in the skilled trades had any effect on your social life or not getting married or any of that, or do you think that that had no effect on it?

M. G.: Well, I work seven days a week, you know, seventy, eighty hours a week. And that probably did have an effect on my social life. And I think that me not getting married was part of that, but also my involvement with my family. I think it turns some guys off. But it also made me realize that maybe some of these guys that go through — well, there's a lot of divorces in the skilled trades, too, because we work so much.

Now, I never got married, so I didn't go through that, but I endured breakups, which are difficult as well. And I had to go through a breakup of an engagement. He decided he didn't want to get married and I was devastated. But I would have had to leave General Motors, go work in another state. It was a lot to give up and it was a lot that I had to go through emotionally to say, "Am I ready for this?" And finally when I thought, "Okay, I'm going to do it," like six months after I had been engaged and I was already making plans for the wedding, by then he decided he didn't want to get married. And I was like, "Oh!" I was so heartbroken.

But it worked out better for me in the fact that it allowed me to stay in my plant, build up seniority. Even though I didn't look at it that way at the time — I was heartbroken — it was an easier transition, just staying where I was at, than having to move to another area and starting all over again.

But then when you're on the job and these guys that go through a divorce and they lose everything, they have to start over again, that could happen to a woman, too. You build up all that, you work on it, you develop it, you build up your little empire, and then

you lose it all? That'd be devastating. It's like, "This is what I worked for?" That would be a difficult thing to do, so I'm glad I've not had to go through that.

CRAWFORD: Yeah, I think, though, the long hours and being in one place, it really limits the number of people that you're able to meet.

M. G.: It does.

CRAWFORD: And when you're not at work, it's kind of like, "Okay, well, I got to get the laundry done and the brakes on the car fixed." You have this list of errands.

M. G.: You have all these things you have to do, right.

DAWSON: And working, what, sixty, eighty hours a week?

M. G.: Yeah. Back then it was seventy, eighty hours a week.

RAUCHER: And you didn't have a choice. I mean, you had to work those hours.

M. G.: Well, we did. You could turn it down, but then everybody looks at you like you're crazy, "You're going to turn it down?" So you work and you work and you work. And you're right — it limits your social life. You know, you're too pooped to participate in any other events going on. So you're walking around like a zombie.

And I dated here and there. And the last relationship I've had was a long time ago, a real relationship. And you know what? I just decided to give up men, because they're such a pain in the rear end. I thought, "I've got to hit the books, not deal with guys, because guys are such a headache." So that's when I started going to school and getting my degree, because that was just less of a headache than dealing with men sometimes.

RAUCHER: Are you thinking of a career after GM?

M. G.: Actually, yes. I had applied for the ombudsman position over at Flint. But there was like 133 applications, and that's a political thing, too. That's a political hotbed. And the person that was selected, I think it sounds like she's going to do a good job, sounds like she'll do well. She was a policewoman many years ago. But it sounds like she knows the politics, she knows the people. She knows how to deal with it, so it sounds like she'll do a good job.

By a miracle, had I been chosen, I would have retired and gone ahead. But I thought it would be nice at least, maybe with my degree and my background, to do something different than what I've been doing. Even teaching is something else I've thought about.

CRAWFORD: Do you still speak Spanish?

M. G.: You know, I speak it when I have to. I can read it and write it, but you know, when you're not around a lot of Hispanics, you don't get to use it. If you don't use it, you lose it, they say, and that's so true. But I do try to speak it when I have to. But I don't speak it probably as fluently as somebody who has spoken it all their life.

RAUCHER: Did you speak it with your mother, with your parents?

M. G.: Oh, yes. I tried to speak it. I took classes for it. But I took French classes as well, four years of French, and so I was into linguistics. I really enjoyed English and all the languages and such. But I just don't get to speak Spanish as much as I would like to, although I get a lot of e-mails from Mexico, for some reason. There's somebody else who has a name similar to mine and they'll send it in Spanish. And I have to e-mail them back and say, "I'm not the person you think I am." So that was ongoing for a long time, but they finally stopped. But I was writing to them in Spanish.

FECTEAU: You don't go back to Texas anymore, to visit family?

M. G.: I haven't been — when was the last time I went to Texas? '88? Oh yeah, the torch. In 2001 I was in San Antonio. That's right. The girlfriend I was telling you about, the one that was in machine repair, she retired early because of breast cancer. But she's never been a quitter, she's always been such a beacon of light for everybody. She was chosen, because I nominated her, to carry the Olympic Torch, and that was in San Antonio, Texas. So we went down there to see her carry that torch. And it was a wonderful experience. It was so magnificent to the see the train, the Olympic train come through. Then to see her run through the crowd and carry that torch, it was magnificent. But that cost — like, $300 for the torch, and the uniform — they have to pay for all that stuff. She spent $700 buying all this stuff. But it was beautiful.

RAUCHER: Were all your siblings born here in the United States?

M. G.: We were all born here in the United States, yes. But my grandmother was Aztec Indian. My grandfather was Cherokee Indian. So we're somewhere between. We're kind of like a mixture — a Hispanic Heinz — so it's an interesting background. I always wanted to look into my background, and my family tree, my genealogy, to learn a little more about it. But that's something I haven't done, although my nephew was looking into his background. I was kind of interested in finding out what he discovered, because his father is German and the mother is Mexican. And then my other brother married a Hawaiian. So I say they have little "Hawaiicans." [laughter] I never married, but I have fifty-some nieces and nephews. My daddy was prolific and so is my family, a lot of kids.

RAUCHER: We're done, then. We need to say thank you, especially for coming such a long way.

CRAWFORD: And you're our last interviewee.

M. G.: Oh really?

CRAWFORD: Yeah, the money has now run out, so we don't want you to go.

June 15th, 2006

Margaret,

There were some facts I neglected to mention at my interview and I wanted to make sure that you had these before you before any of this information was put into the archives.

First, let me give you all my heartfelt thanks for allowing me this privilege of speaking to a group of women, many who could perhaps relate to what I and others experienced going through the trade, to make it and be accepted within this male-dominated work environment. It is not very often I have had a chance to speak of those times and those years when I truly thought they would get the best of me. It seemed that in taking on this challenge, I became even stronger in my determination to make it no matter the odds or the roadblocks that stood in my way.

Let me take you back over thirty years ago when this all began. Certainly I must absolutely give credit where credit is due and thus I must speak of those that affected my life in such a way as to spur me on to move in a different direction as far as my working

environment. In my conversation with your group in Detroit, I believe I neglected to reflect on the woman who took me to the point of realizing my dream to better my life and position at work.

In the spring of 1974, I was walking to my production department at the Flint V-8 Engine Plant and I spied a young, Mexican girl working in what we called the "tool crib." She had long dark hair woven into a thick braid, as management had decided the women could not wear their hair loose and had to be contained. Of course, this rule did not apply to all the young men who also had long hair. It seemed it was only the women who had been chosen for this new in-plant safety rule. This rule applied to all women and I also had to tie my hair back and resorted to wearing those short synthetic wigs for a time that were so popular back in the 70's and were easy to wear. But S. refused to hide her beautiful long, dark hair under any head covering. I admired her strength and courage.

Where she came from, I had no idea, nor why she was working in this tool crib, so after a short time seeing her work here day after day, I stopped and talked to her. Wondering who she was and how she had come about getting this position, I spoke to her through the grid fencing that made up the area. The young Mexican girl was S. L-M., who was barely twenty years old and had hailed originally from Texas, but was living in the Flint area with her husband, who also worked for GM.

Sylvia came from a migrant family background such as me and it seemed we even looked very much like the other. Once we became friends and I was accepted on the trade, people that knew her and knew me, often mistook us for each other. We took it all in stride and after a while, not wanting to embarrass the person who thought we were the other, we nodded and listened and politely answered questions. We would later laugh

about these incidents as we told each other stories of how we answered questions for each other on our "families." It happened more often than not, believe me, and I could not go anywhere but that I would be called S. and she would be called M. It still happens to this day, amazingly enough, even though she has been gone from our plant for about 15 years.

Back to our initial meeting as friends: Sylvia had just been accepted as an apprentice for the mechanical engineering side and was working as a machine repair apprentice. She told me how she had put an application in and had an opportunity to test for skilled trades and had done well and was hired into our plant as the first machine repair woman to go on this all-male trade.

S. was unlike many women who were raised to be girly girls. There was nothing a man could do that she could not do as well or even better given a chance. She had experience in her trade, in that she worked on and raced cars and was certainly not afraid to get in and tear into machinery and equipment when she was younger. She often worked alongside her father and then once she married, she and her husband would work on labor-intensive projects together. Her husband was not entirely pleased about her signing up, but she was pleased to be working in a union environment. She kept to herself, but took her work seriously, as she was no slouch.

This is where S. and I were very different, as I was raised to be the "normal" Mexican girl, where cooking (my specialty) and keeping house were women's work and working on cars and mechanical stuff was men's work. My dad was a self-taught mechanic and there was not a week that went by, it seemed, where I did not see my father working on someone's car, trying to fix their problem. I never stood by his side to work alongside him when he was doing this sort of mechanical work. I was in the house

working alongside my mother learning to make tortillas or keeping my eleven brothers and sisters in line. My poor mom needed all the help she could get in this area.

Meanwhile, in speaking to S. and seeing that she had "made it" by moving in a different direction than most women who hired into our plant, I realized I wanted something more challenging as well. I began to take classes and network with other women who were also working on trying to get an apprenticeship at one of the GM facilities. It took me over two and a half years to finally make it and although I was initially offered a toolmaker position, I had decided I wanted to be an electrician, as this seemed the more challenging and diverse of the three trades I had designated I would accept.

Once I "made it" in July 1977, my difficult, nearly four-year journey began on this lonely road to success. After a short time, I realized I was ill equipped in my knowledge of the subject matter for the trade I had chosen. I studied constantly and hired tutors and worked in the college labs just trying to get caught up to the level most of the other male apprentices were at, as many of them already had abundant experience in this field. In those years of trying to get through my schooling, my social and family life stood still. The man who I had been dating was not pleased at my being accepted on the trade and shortly after I was accepted on the trade, we broke off our engagement. Believe me, I was better off for it, as he was one of those male chauvinists and I would not have been happy with him, as he would have kept me from following my dreams.

Once he was out of the picture, I could better concentrate on what I had to do to succeed. Something I noted after a time was that I was graded by my peers at work on the same level of the other male apprentices who were already well established, and here

I was starting at ground zero. Insecurity and lack of self-confidence hung like a heavy cloud over me as I was so unsure of myself, not only of my ability, but of my own level of intelligence. I had no idea what I could or could not do on any level. I just knew I did not want to do some tedious and repetitive job on the line for the rest of my life. This difficult challenge that I had undertaken made all those insecurities all the more real and hard to bear.

Never having taken extensive mathematical courses and never knowing I was actually someday going to go on the trades, I had never prepared myself for this field of skilled work. Many of the other folks breezed through these classes but they were a nightmare for me, as I was trying to learn these formulas and do the homework at the same time! It was excruciatingly difficult for me. I hated it!

All in all, taking on this challenge was well worth all the sacrifices I made. But never did I go on this trade for all the money I would or could make. That was not even a consideration in my decision to go on the apprenticeship. Certainly I knew trades made more money, but I had no idea how much more they made. What their work schedule was or how they worked, I had truthfully no idea, especially the overtime involved. I had worked production a number of years and that was my knowledge base and nothing more, so I did not know anything about their routines.

When I would tell others this truth, for the most part they did not believe me. It truly was not the money that motivated me and as I stated before that was NOT even a consideration in going on the trades. Instead, it was the challenge and the opportunity to do something different for myself and for women in general.

Being the second woman to go on this trade and the first female to finish the apprenticeship, I was excited but scared to death on entering my new assignment. The first lady dropped out a couple of years later when she decided this opportunity and challenge was not for her. But by this time several more women had joined the group and I was not alone. The other ladies seemed far more prepared and sure of themselves than I was and I was intimidated by them as well.

Perhaps I should also mention there were other factors that affected me and caused me further anguish in working within this male environment. I was brought up to accept the white man's word and his world, for they were the "top dogs." Coming from a migrant family background, we were *lowly, uneducated Mexicans* who probably could not even compete with their level of talent and intelligence.

Intimidation seems to me what I remember most, as I was truly intimidated by these skilled trades gods, which is how I came to look at them in my youth when I first began this new job assignment. These men I worked with I saw as so talented and intelligent that I truly looked up to my journeymen and all the others and I never imagined that I would ever reach their level of expertise with my own background and lack of talent.

My culture played a large part in how I initially reacted to how I was treated, because I was raised in such a manner that as a young woman, I was taught to be submissive and not outspoken. Since this all took place so many years ago, I did not want to bring any unnecessary attention to myself, but it seemed that not being outspoken and not speaking up for myself did not work in this new work environment. I mention this attitude about our culture, because this is a barrier I had to overcome.

After a time I began to realize that if I wanted equality, I HAD to speak up! And so I did and I thought I did it reasonably well. My brothers and sisters and I arrived from Texas back in the mid-fifties only speaking Spanish, but we were small enough back then to pick up a second language quickly. By September of that same year, we were enrolled in school and speaking English and our Spanish language fell by the wayside.

It seemed I grew to love languages and I leaned towards the linguistic portion of my studies, as I took English, Spanish and French in my school days. Being a woman, I never used off-color language to make my point — this did not seem the most intelligent way in which to communicate. Thus, I never made this crude lingo a part of my vocabulary. EVER! The men I worked with seemed to respect that and when I was present they would tone down their oftentimes colorful language, and I appreciated that for the most part. Of course, there were some men who did not care who was around and let these four letter words spew! This is a habit I never developed.

Being a younger and reasonably attractive woman (I didn't need a paper bag over my head and I was much more slender than I am now), I received a lot of unwanted attention and I tried to take it all in stride. Certainly I was not used to men being that attentive and doting on me, but it seems men can act the fool when there is a young woman around. Perhaps it was because I was younger and somewhat attractive that many of the men coddled me and looking back on this behavior, I realize they did not do me any favors by treating me in this manner. Not knowing any better, I simply tried to get along with the men with whom I worked.

Again, in looking back on those years of my training, I realize that many of the things the tradesmen did to help me was most likely because they saw me as a "poor,

helpless female." Probably, and in truth, I should have not let them do it all. Not knowing any better, I did not know what was best for me, as there was so much to learn and so many adjustments to make. As I think more deeply on their behavior at the time, I believe the guys were just trying to be gentlemen, but in the long run I needed to find my own strength and capabilities and by their helping me, I was not learning this at all.

My turning point in finally realizing I could do whatever was asked of me was not a journeyman, but a fellow apprentice and I remember him vividly. He taught me so much that allowed me to grow and get away from the helpless female behavior that seemed to encompass me. He was a dear, sweet man and we began our apprenticeship within a few short months of each other. He was so talented that he became well respected among his peers. We were both in our late twenties, but he was truly very smart, witty and oh, so funny!! He was one of the more talented and intelligent of our trade and we became close friends. He was also my savior so many times in the field. I truly looked up to him, as I realized how smart and adept he was at his trade. I truly adored him, but only as a friend.

It seemed to me that I was so far behind everyone else and it felt like I was fumbling my way through in doing all the work I had to do and learn all I had to learn. This is where I truly appreciated his friendship for he never made me feel less than what I was. I have never forgotten that and I appreciated it so very much, for he allowed me to build the confidence and self-esteem I did not have. Bless his heart.

It was he who took me aside after a time and taught me how to carry those HUGE and HEAVY wooden ladders and place them on my shoulders correctly. I was scared to death of these things and afraid to get hurt, but I had to learn how to handle them as it

was a required part of my job. Those ladders killed my skinny little shoulders! I was thrilled when the hydraulic lifts finally replaced these wooden dinosaurs. I hated using those things — the age of technology couldn't come soon enough for me when it came to those ladders! Hallelujah!

It took a long, long time before I realized that it did not matter what race or sex we were in doing these specialized jobs. Instead, to the men who worked with the pioneering women like myself, it was our determination and stick-to-itiveness that determined how we were accepted. If they took the time to teach us and we took the time to learn it and keep at it, they respected that. If after a time the apprentice, be it male or female, did not make an effort to learn, the journeyman lost respect for this type of work ethic. After all, who wouldn't? I tried and did my best and although it seemed there were days when my best did not seem like much, there were those who encouraged me to hang in there and I gratefully appreciated their support.

My journey was a long and eventful one and although it was the most difficult and stressful road I ever took, it changed my life completely. Going from the little Mexican girl who could make decent tortillas and rice to being a tradesperson who could work on factory machinery and actually fix it was one of the most gratifying moments of my life. I was accepted into a trade where testosterone-bonding was a plus and females were the weaker sex. I broke that ground in coming into this trade and not letting them break me no matter what they did to me! Yes I was scared, but I hung in there (wherever that strength and determination came from), because I did not want to be a quitter and, as my family tells me, I am so stubborn! No one was going to tell ME I could NOT do something! NO WAY!! The fight was well worth the journey!!

Anyone can succeed in whatever road they take. This is something I have come to realize in my later years. Sometimes that road may be challenging or appear to be more than we can handle but if we take it one step at a time and grow along with the journey, we can do and be anything we want to be! Education and learning truly never stop and my life's journey did not end after I received my journeyman's card. I was always grateful that I worked within a union environment, although the initial first years of my work on the trade was a learning experience for all concerned.

In truth, entering into this level of work within the trades opened a lot of doors for me and changed my life for the better. I have had a good life and have been blessed abundantly because of it all. It also gave me the incentive and drive to keep on going with new challenges and goals I would set for myself. It also taught me never to stop, but to continue to work on making myself a better person and the world a better place. If we can leave this world knowing we have made a difference by touching others and helping others, in leading by example, our lives truly will not have been in vain. I also want to follow in the footsteps of my parents in helping others as they did.