Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Carrie Harding

Operating Engineer

Interviewed on February 7, 2005

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 Carrie Harding

MARGARET RAUCHER: We're at the Reuther Library on February 7th, 2005 and we're interviewing Carrie Harding, who is with the Operating Engineers [Local 324] and works in road construction and diversity training.

CARRIE HARDING: Actually, I'm an instructor. I teach MIOSHA classes and hazardous waste removal, mine safety. I'm on numerous committees, MASC, which is the Michigan Apprenticeship Steering Committee, which is GM, Ford, Chrysler and all the building trades and all the community colleges together. And we set the standards for the apprenticeship programs for the state of Michigan.

RAUCHER: Okay. We'll get into all that as the interview progresses. But I wanted to start out asking you some questions about your life before you entered the trades: when you were born, where you were raised, what your childhood was like, your family, that sort of thing.

HARDING: Okay. I was born in Saginaw, Michigan on August 8th, 1962. My dad worked for the C&O Railroad for thirty-four years. I have four brothers and sisters, and my mom stayed home with us. I had a little sister that was very sick. When she was six years old, she was actually the first child in Michigan to have a kidney transplant from an adult. She was in the hospital in Ann Arbor for nine months without coming out and my parents ended up with tons and tons and tons of hospital bills. My mother gave her one of her kidneys. And they told them it was a purely experimental thing, that there

was probably only a thirty percent chance it would work. And my sister is now thirty-nine and on her second kidney, but back on dialysis again.

And then my mom passed away when I was fifteen, so my dad raised the five of us. Like I said, my dad's insurance paid eighty percent of his bills when my little sister was in the hospital. So he had numerous, numerous bills. And we didn't have very much growing up, I mean, very, very, very little. But my dad always gave us a lot of love. I mean, we didn't have clothes or — we always had food and a nice bed to sleep in, but we didn't have any material things growing up. But we didn't care, the five of us. We just babysat and did this and that and made sure everybody had something, you know.

And then at seventeen, I had lost my mom, so I didn't know anything about the birds and bees. I mean, I didn't know. And I met a boy, my ex-husband, and I got pregnant and I got married at eighteen. That only lasted about four years, and I ended up being a divorced single mom. And I did a lot of different jobs, bartended, flagged traffic. Actually, I was working sometimes two and three jobs just to make sure my son could get what he needed. We had no child support. My ex took off out of state, so I never got any child support.

Anyway, from flagging traffic, the opportunity came up to run equipment, through one of the state programs. And of course, I loved being outside and I jumped at the opportunity.

RAUCHER: When was this? What year?

HARDING: 1988 is when I started in the operators. And I actually had to work 800 hours through the state program before I could even join the union. So I worked the

800 hours, and then I joined the union in the fall of that year. I started in May of '88 and I joined the union in October of '88. And it was on I-75 in Flint.

And I don't know if you guys remember that summer, but it was the summer where for almost 100 days straight it was like 104, 108, 112. I mean, the grass was literally burning up. And I was working with asphalt on I-75, and no shade, no umbrellas, no protection from the sun, and asphalt comes out between 270 and 300 degrees underneath you, and I was rolling it. And you would literally be soaking wet with sweat by 10 o'clock in the morning. I mean, when you took a bathroom break, it was like peeling your pants off, like you had been swimming, literally. And that's the way you were all day long.

RAUCHER: How did you get the flagging job? I mean, what prompted you to apply for and get a job like that?

HARDING: They were advertising in the paper, and I heard through a couple other girls that I knew that they hired flaggers. And there was kind of a slight chance that you could maybe move on to something else besides being a flag girl. So I took it, because it was actually pretty good pay, then. I mean, even though it was $4.65 and hour, it was better than the $3.15 an hour or whatever the minimum wage was. Plus you got overtime, so you kind of thought, well . . . That was a nasty job, too. I don't know how they still do it today. That was a nasty job.

RAUCHER: The flagging job?

HARDING: Yes. Girls always get stuck on that.

MICHELLE FECTEAU: What made it nasty?

HARDING: Well, you're out there and most of the time the foreman won't give you a bathroom break, because he's busy or he's here or he's there. You've got people screaming and yelling at you because you're stopping them and they're late and they're this. They throw things at you, swear at you, I mean . . .

PAT NUZNOV: You're talking about the traffic, the drivers.

HARDING: Yeah, the general public, yes.

RAUCHER: So they're worse than the people you're working with, then, in terms of the treatment that you get.

HARDING: Oh, yeah. And then you get on a country road or something, though, and the people that live on the country road, if you were there any amount of time, they get to know you and they'd bring you out soup and pop. But the bigger highways and stuff like that, people were just very rude. They're rude, and you'd talk to them, you'd say, "You know, we hear you guys complain that these roads are so bad, that you're wrecking your cars, your tires, but then when we come to fix them, then we're inconveniencing you, and then you're mad again." So it was always a no-win situation. But that was a really crude, rotten job.

FECTEAU: I just wondered how long you worked as a flagger?

HARDING: Almost two years.

FECTEAU: Was that union?

HARDING: No. No, you had no benefits. It wasn't organized. Some of the flaggers eventually would maybe get in the Laborers' Union, but most of the time when you started out there were no health benefits, you know. You were just happy to make the $1.50 more than minimum wage to stand out there for twelve or fifteen hours a day

and hope that you got over forty hours a week so you'd make overtime for those extra hours.

ELAINE CRAWFORD: Did you work year-round those two years?

HARDING: No. It was always seasonal. Usually you start in May or the middle of April. It could be anywhere from the 1st of April until the 1st of May up until about December, when the ground started to freeze.

CRAWFORD: Sunup to sundown.

HARDING: Yeah, many, many hours.

RAUCHER: Were there many women at that time doing flagging? It seems that women, if they work in road construction, are often flaggers. Were there other women working with you on these jobs?

HARDING: Yes. They had maybe ten regular flaggers that worked for the different crews, and out of the ten flaggers that the company had, probably eight were women.

RAUCHER: And what was the job like, apart from like, the heat and the dust, in terms of the relationship that you had with the other crew members?

HARDING: Oh, the crewmembers treated you pretty good. It was always management, the foreman that was responsible for giving you your bathroom breaks or whatever, that was the problem. Sometimes you'd have to just call and beg, "Listen, I have to go to the bathroom." And most of the time, if one of the crew members heard you, they'd come down, actually, and say, "Here, I'll hold your flag. Go." Because you actually could not leave your post. I mean, if you left your post, then you'd have cars coming at each other head on, and somebody could get hurt. So I mean, if you were sick

or if you had to go to the bathroom, you had to stay there until someone came to give you a break. Otherwise you took the risk of someone hurting themselves or getting into an accident.

RAUCHER: I think maybe I'll have Elaine and Pat ask about the 800 hours of training you went through. You didn't go through an apprenticeship program, or did you?

HARDING: I didn't go through the apprenticeship program.

RAUCHER: You didn't go through it. But you had the 800 hours to train you to do work other than flagging, to do the asphalt work or the construction work.

HARDING: Yes. When I got in in '88, the apprenticeship programs weren't that big for women. But that's when the federal government mandated that you had to hire women and minorities on the highways. And it just happened that since I had been flagging and took an interest, the state gave me the chance to go through this training program. So, of course, that was a bigger pay raise and benefits.

And after you sit and watch them do the job for fifteen hours a day, day after day, you've pretty much got an idea of what you're trying to accomplish. So once I got the chance to get on machinery, I already knew what had to be done, because that's all I had to look at all day.

But you had to go through 800 hours and then at that point, they would decide if they were going to keep you and you could join the union. And once you became a union member, then you had all the benefits of the union and the training center and more training. But you were kind of stuck in that "if they liked you, they kept you," but if you didn't fit in, then after they got done with that project, you're done.

RAUCHER: Were there very many other women in the training program that you went through?

HARDING: No, I was the only one.

RAUCHER: Oh, you were the only woman.

HARDING: The only woman that worked for that company, and I hadn't seen very many women in 1988 at all, not at all. I think it was 1990 or '91 that they hired another woman, but they always kept us separate, because they said we gossiped too much, and we this and we that. And it was funny, because if you watched them in the morning . . . When you're doing asphalt work or road work, everybody gets there early and you have time to get your equipment set up, get the pavers set up, the skis set up, and you have like, a half an hour lead time before the first load would come in. Everybody would be sitting on the road ready to go. And there'd be six or seven, eight guys in the crew and you.

And they thought women gossiped. I mean, they'd be in a circle, and blah, blah, blah, blah, gossip for — it was unreal. When they told me that, I thought, "Oh, right, we gossip too much. I could count hours that I listen to you guys gossip." But you just kind of figured, "Well, it's that stereotype, you know.

CRAWFORD: So you had to get the 800 hours of training from the company that you were working with at that time?

HARDING: Uh-huh.

CRAWFORD: And how hard was it to get that? I mean, what was the first piece of equipment that they let you operate?

HARDING: A power broom.

CRAWFORD: A power broom?

HARDING: Uh-huh.

CRAWFORD: The tractor with the big bristle underneath it?

HARDING: Yeah. The dirtiest, nastiest job there was, because you're sweeping everything that's been on the road for years and years and years — dust, you name it. They gave you a little paper respirator to put on and said, "Go clean it." Because you had to clean it before they could tack it, before they put the asphalt down. But that didn't last very long, and then they put me on a roller.

Rolling asphalt, it takes quite a long time to learn that skill. I mean, I could teach anybody to get up there and run the roller back and forth. But when you talk about the crowns in the road and the different material you'd have to look for — you could actually make it boil if you had too much water on your drums. I mean, the stuff would literally boil right up out of the ground. You had to watch for cracking. You had to know the different material types. When they run that paver machine down the road, when they're matching an existing road that you did the day before to it, if it's too high, you've got to know how to push it, or else it would roll back over. So it did take a long time to learn it to the point where nobody worried about you anymore, you know, where the paver operator would just keep going. If he knew I was behind him, he just knew that I'd take care of it. But it took a long time to learn that.

CRAWFORD: So how did you learn it? Was there someone standing there on the cab with you?

HARDING: Yes. Actually, there was a sixty-one year-old man. I'll never forget him, because he was like my mentor that first year. And he had the patience of a

saint, because I messed up many, many times. And there was situations where you'd have to get in and out of a trench with those smooth-down rollers, and if you weren't just right, you'd risk tipping them over, killing yourself. And he kind of babied me. He'd help me get in and out of the trench until he thought I was ready to do it. And he taught me everything he knew.

He showed me the different situations. At first he would just tell me to do it in a certain way, and I'd say, "Well, tell me why, Oz, why are we doing it this way this time? What's different?" And then he'd explain, "Well, see how that's higher than that?" But it took a whole year and probably part of the next year before I actually could handle it. Well, I mean, a lot of things I could handle by myself, but when it came to a lot of difficult things, he would be there to help me.

RAUCHER: I assume you're the only woman that he ever worked with?

HARDING: Yeah.

FECTEAU: Did he train everyone, or was it that he just . . .?

HARDING: He was a roller operator, and it was his machine. Companies would only run with so many operators per machine. So I was taking his machine. So they were having him teach me because I was on his machine. When you're talking about a paving crew, they usually run with a paver operator, two screen men and two roller operators, and sometimes you'll see up to four roller operators, depending on if they have what they call QAQC work now, where companies have to guarantee the state that the roads will hold up. And they actually take cores and test the material and stuff. So you could see anywhere from two to four, sometimes five rollers on a job. But a normal crew

only had two. And that was just for normal work. So when I came on the job, he was the one that was assigned to me, to show me how to do it.

FECTEAU: What was his name?

HARDING: His name was Warren Ozentoski [phonetic] and the first day I spent with him on that machine was about twelve hours. He was from the Bad Axe area, ugly area. And I would try to have a conversation with him. I'd say, "Do you have any kids?" And he'd say, "Yeeeup." "Do you live around here?" "Nooope." For twelve hours, there was no conversation other than "Yeeeeup, nooope." And I'm like, "Oh, boy, it's going to be a long day."

But he later on told me that he was feeling me out. Women come to the job, and I'm sure there were other jobs where it was a horror story, you know, "Don't talk to her, don't swear around her. You're going to be in the office and fired." And I think he was kind of feeling me out that first week or so. Then after that, him and I became pretty good buddies. I mean, he kind of figured out that because he said "shit" or "damn," I wasn't going to fall over with a heart attack or something. But then after that he took me under his wing. And I'll never forget him.

As a matter of fact, the following year they weren't going to call Ozzie back, and he wanted one more year of work. He wanted to work one more year until he was sixty-two. And they called me in the spring and said, "Well, we're going to put you back on Bob's crew, blah, blah, blah." And I said, "Well, who's not coming back?" Because, like I said, these crews ran with the same people every year. They said, "Well, we're not calling Ozzie back."

And I said, “We’re not calling Ozzie back? Well, then I’m not coming back.” And he said, “Well, you’re going to turn down a job?” I mean, people that went to work with this company stayed with this company for thirty years until they retired, because they knew where they were working, steady employment. And I said, “I think I know enough now that I can go find another job. Ozzie taught me everything he knew. He wants one more year. Sorry. Give him the year.” I said, “As a matter of fact, I’m not coming back. So you better have Oz train yourself another woman so he can get his last year in.”

And the foreman that I worked for, you’d have to understand, he was the rudest, nastiest, vulgar drunk I ever met in my life, my first foreman. I mean bad, to the point where my first day on the job he told me — I mean, can we be real candid with this?

RAUCHER: Yeah, please.

HARDING: Okay. The first day on the job, when I showed up as an operating engineer, he came up to me and said, “The only reason I hired you is because you wear a tampon and I got to have you. I worked twelve years to get in this pickup truck. If I got to get out of my truck to do your job, then I’m not going to need you anymore.” And he walked away from me. And I just went, “Okay, well, you think you’re going to scare me away, you're not. What am I doing?”

One of the crew members come up and said, “Well, you take that broom and start brooming for the tack truck.” And I just hopped on there and started going. And I mean, he treated me — compared to the rest of the crew, because I was a woman — he treated me bad. It was almost like he wanted me to fail, that he didn’t want me there.

But here I am, I get along with the crew. I had Ozzie, and I got along with all the rest of the crew other than just him. I mean, I even got along with the state inspectors. Everybody I got along with, because they knew I was there to do my job. I didn't care. I got up in the morning, I brushed my teeth, put my hair on top of my head. We got full of fuel oil all of the time, so I put my nasty jeans on, and I'm gone.

Great big box lunch, because I learned after the first couple weeks that you might be there fifteen hours. You better put a whole bunch of stuff in that box today because . . . When you first started out, you'd just put a little sandwich in there, a piece of fruit, and after you were there about fourteen hours, you were like, "Wow, I'm hungry." And you'd see these guys pulling this half a barbecued chicken out of their lunch, and you're going [gasps].

So I ended up eventually picking up all those things that nobody is there to tell you about — that you should probably plan on being here so long, and you should probably bring some extra clothes in case you get soaking wet with rain, or you fall in the tack or . . . You just kind of had to figure them out yourself.

FECTEAU: I want to know, did Ozzie get the job back?

HARDING: Yeah, they called Ozzie back.

FECTEAU: Did he ever find out what you did for him?

HARDING: I imagine the guys probably told him. They actually still brought me back, but they put me on what they call the shit crew, which was the prep crew which went in and when the mills got done milling the old asphalt out, they did the joint repair and the sweeping and a lot of shoveling and a lot of labor work. They put me on that crew for one year and put Ozzie back on his crew.

And I just figured that was like paying my dues. I mean, I was not going to put Ozzie out of a job. If I had to do that for one year and Ozzie wanted to retire at sixty-two and then they wanted someone, then I'll take his job.

I went to his retirement party. Didn't see him for about three years, and we were paving a road over that way. And all of a sudden I see this guy on the golf course just come running off the golf course. And Ozzie, who was only probably about five-foot-six and 110 pounds soaking wet, picked me up, you know, and . . . [laughter] He's now since passed away. He passed away about three and a half years ago. And I wrote his daughter a nice letter just to tell her what I thought of her father, and that he was a very admirable man, a very admirable man.

But that's just how I got started. I just got the chance and took it. And so the foreman I worked for, the first foreman I worked for was just terrible. I remember one incident. Our health insurance works that if you don't have enough hours, they bank them. And then once you run out of your bank, then you have to pay self-payments. And my son was nine years old. I sent a self-payment in and the next thing I know I get a letter from the union saying that they didn't receive my self-payment and they're going to cancel my health insurance. Well, with a nine-year-old boy, you cannot be without health insurance.

And at that time, people didn't have cell phones. I remember the first one my foreman had was in a bag about this big, you know, that they carried around, and they were very expensive. So I went to work and I said, "I have to make a call to the union hall to find out why they didn't get my check for my self-pay." He told me, "Do it on your own time." Well, there's nowhere I can even go to call. I don't get off work in time

to call. You can't call the fringe office. That's personal information, so they're not going to give it to your dad or your sister.

So the next day, I didn't go to work. I thought, well, if you want me to do it on my own time, I'll wait until after 8:00 o'clock when the hall opens, I'll make my phone call, and then I'll be to work. He called at 6:30 — I was supposed to be to work at 6:00 — wanting to know where the hell I was and blah, blah. I said, "I got to make a call to the hall. You would not let me do it with your phone. You would not give me the time to go do it. I'm not going to lose my health insurance. I have a nine-year-old boy that could have to have his tonsils out or his appendix out or anything at any time."

But that afternoon when the office called me, they realized that he had done that and it wasn't right. And after that, then it really got worse, because I had kind of stood up to him and said, "Well, you know, you said to do it on my own time, I'll do it on my own time." Well, then when he got reamed out by the office, after that, of course, then it was . . .

FECTEAU: When you say "reamed out by the office," was it the union office or the company's office?

HARDING: No, the company office.

RAUCHER: And he was the only one that treated you this way?

HARDING: Uh-huh.

RAUCHER: Not the guys on the crew.

HARDING: No.

We had a Teamster that hauled equipment, like when we'd pave a mile and a half here and he'd have to move two rollers, a power broom, a paver, everything after we got

done at 8:30, 9:00 o'clock at night, or sometimes at 7:00. He could use the foreman's phone to call home and tell his wife he was going to be late for supper. But I couldn't use it to call the hall because I was going to lose my insurance.

RAUCHER: You were unionized, though, by this time, right?

HARDING: Yes, yes.

RAUCHER: Did you ever think about going to your union to complain about the fact that you were being singled out by this guy?

HARDING: Yes. But the thing of it was that I had to get off at a certain time to even call the hall to even get a hold of anybody to talk about anything, because, like I said, I couldn't afford a cell phone at that point.

FECTEAU: There were no stewards on the job?

HARDING: No. You have to have so many operators to have a steward, and we didn't have enough operators.

FECTEAU: And the BA just couldn't make the rounds more often?

HARDING: Yeah, yeah, he did. But back then, too, you didn't really want to complain a whole lot either, because it just makes it worse maybe down the road.

CRAWFORD: But did you feel like you got support, though, from the other guys? I mean, did you learn not to take Ozzie's job, to say, "I'm not coming back," from being around other operators and the crew, that that was the right thing to do, or was it something from the way you were brought up and your other work experiences?

HARDING: I knew before, because I grew up with union in my life. My uncle was a committeeman for the UAW. My dad was vice president of his union for just a couple years. And whenever we had Christmas or whatever and you sat at the supper

table, you heard, union, union, union, so I knew. And you overheard the stories, you know, growing up.

And besides that, Ozzie was such a good guy. That's the one thing, working where I do now, that you see in a lot of the men. When women come on the jobs, they're afraid that if they teach them too much, bye-bye, because there's no seniority in the operators.

NUZNOV: But don't you think that possibly this could be anybody they train, they're afraid of them getting their jobs, you know, not just the women? I think women are more dependable and easier to get along with, on some levels. I'm sort of generalizing, you know.

HARDING: Yeah. And another thing that I think about women is that they take pride in their work. I know when I built a lot of highways, we'd build a road in the middle of the woods. You know, you could watch the project from the beginning to the end. And when I look behind me, I like to look to see it made nice, you know? The other guys say, "Well, that passes." I think a lot of women get good at the trades because they take a lot of pride in what they do, too. I mean, they're more meticulous about . . . And sometimes you have to be, too, because everybody is always watching your work. I found that a lot. A couple guys tried to sabotage me on a couple different jobs.

FECTEAU: What happened?

HARDING: When you're rolling asphalt, if you stop straight in a road, it will actually leave a bump. I mean, it'll leave a bump to where when you're driving — wham — on a brand new road. You have to put water in your roller all the time. And if you pulled up wrong, you would leave a bump. And I had a guy that did that to me a couple

times, and he'd tell the foreman that I did it. It was like, "Well, if you feel that bad that I'm getting to know this job that well, if that's what you've got to do, then you blame it on me. I'm not going to argue with you. I'm not going to stand here in front of eight guys and argue with you." You learn to adapt. Because I can look at the foreman, and as much as I hated him and I knew he hated me, he knew I didn't do it. He's seen me stop five million times. He knew I didn't do it.

NUZNOV: Well, he knew your work.

HARDING: Uh-huh. And the paver operator — and I'll tell you what, he's still a good buddy of mine today — he stuck up for me many a time. He'd say, "That wasn't her. You know who it was." So, I made a lot of lifetime friends on that crew. I worked for that crew for nine years, mainly because they were close to home, all their work was close to home, and my son was so young, that if you did get a rainy day or you did get a chance to get off early, I could still get home to spend time with my son. So I stayed with them for nine years. I hated that foreman, but I loved my crew.

I mean, I stayed at their homes. We had to work in Ubly, and they were from that area. And I rented a motel room. It was called Last Chance Motel. It was the cheapest one I could afford. It was right at the end of 81 and 25. And you had to pay for it a week in advance. But if you got rained out or if you got done at a certain time, I always raced home to see my son. I wanted to spend time with him, because I never see him in the summer months. So I was actually paying for this room, and a lot of nights I wasn't staying there.

And this Tom that I'm talking about, the paver operator, he said, "Carrie, that's crazy." He says, "I got a travel home. I'm at home. I'm not using it. Why don't I set it

up by my pole barn?" He said, "You can stay in the travel home. Just pay me ten dollars a night. If you don't stay, don't pay. If you stay, pay." And I thought, "Oh, I don't know, Tom, you know, I work with you all day long." And it got to the point where I knew these guys better than I did my own family, because you were spending six, seven days a week, fourteen, fifteen hours a day with them. And that's all we ever had to talk about was our families, our kids, you know, things like that. He says, "Oh, I won't bother you."

So I came out there, and every night his daughter would bring me a fresh pitcher of water, because we had just the hose hooked up to the shower and stuff. I got to know his son. I got to know his wife. After I stayed there about three weeks, his wife said, "Ah, you don't want to stay in that camper. We got an extra bedroom in the basement." And I said, "No, I think I'll stay in the camper." But it was his gesture that he knew I was paying a lot of money for something I wasn't using, and it was his way of saying, you know, "I think you're okay," to bring me home to stay in his yard in his camper.

And to this day, we talk all the time. I haven't worked with him for — I've been at the training center for six years. But I'm a HAZMAT instructor and he has to do an eight-hour re-cert every year, so I see him once a year at least for his eight-hour re-cert. And we catch up on family, and we're still best buddies.

RAUCHER: I have a couple questions related to what you just said. Who took care of your son, then, when you were off working these long hours?

HARDING: My sister, my dad, my aunt. I was pretty fortunate to have quite a few family members real close to home.

RAUCHER: And the other question I had was: You are required to pay for your own housing when you're off on a job where you can't get back to your house? That just comes out of your own pocket?

HARDING: There were some companies that would pay for it, and then some companies that wouldn't. It was just a condition of what they did for everybody else. I worked for a female business after that, Sandy Hughes. I don't know if you guys have heard of her. She was the top female minority contractor in the state for two or three years.

FECTEAU: What was her name?

HARDING: Sandy Hughes, Cheryl Hughes. And she would pay for your motel room. But it was across the board, everybody got paid. It didn't matter if you were male. I was the first female operator she ever hired. So it was offered to me by the foreman the same way it was to all the other guys, "You guys, this is what we're going to do." And they said, "Carrie, we're going to actually put you by yourself, because there's no one else to bunk you with. But you guys are going to have to bunk up together." So it depended on the person, the contractor that you worked for.

RAUCHER: You went to work for her after the nine years with the company?

HARDING: Yes.

RAUCHER: How was that different, or was it, or did you enjoy it more?

HARDING: Yes. I missed the guys that I worked with. But it was different. It was dirt work. It was different than the asphalt world. I was running a scraper. She gave me the opportunity to run an excavator, which most women don't get a chance to do on the job. I ran a dozer for her, which back then was — I mean, the women got stuck on

the rollers or the scrapers. Sometimes you might get a loader, but you didn't get the opportunity much to run an excavator or a dozer.

I remember when I first came to work for her, she even come out on the job and said, "You will treat her just like any other operator. If she can run that machine and she can run that machine, then you let her run them." So her being a female business owner, I think that was part of the reason that she said flat out, "If I'm paying her to be an operator, I'm paying her just as much as I am the guys, and if she can run that excavator and you need someone to run an excavator, then you put her on an excavator." That was pretty much the conversation.

RAUCHER: Where is her business?

HARDING: At that time it was over by Okemos. We were putting in the Vermontville Highway, we were putting a new bridge in through some wetlands. We were building the base up to put a new bridge in.

FECTEAU: When you weren't working on the highway, in the wintertime, did you have another job?

HARDING: Yeah, my brothers have a drywall business, and they do big construction with Meijer's and Chi-Chi's and stuff like that. And they have a subcontractor that would do all their hanging for them, but the subcontractor wouldn't do the cleanup, though, all the scraps and stuff. So I would work for them doing that. And I learned how to tape and mud and sand.

My dad remarried someone that had six kids and we had five, so there was eleven of us. At one time there was eight of us living in a three-bedroom house. So we just got

by. I mean, I think actually it makes you the person that you are, really. You start with nothing, you've got everything to gain.

RAUCHER: You were always the only woman, though, on the jobs that you were working on?

HARDING: Yes.

RAUCHER: Did you work for another company after you worked for her?

HARDING: Yes. I went to work for a company, Valley Asphalt. But then I went back to Saginaw and went to work for Cheryl Hughes, for Sandy Hughes and ended up going back to the asphalt, because her work was more out of town. And finally, when my son was seventeen. I started work for the local, part-time, teaching. And I went to West Virginia to get certified to be a HAZMAT instructor, an OSHA outreach instructor, and I came back and I actually had like, two or three job offers. And now it's to the point where my son was seventeen, so I wasn't afraid to travel.

And Thompson McCulley actually hired me over the phone. They actually had me at their startup meeting the day that I was getting home from West Virginia, traveling home. The letter came, and I told him I wasn't going to make it because I was going to be in West Virginia. I was even going to be driving home that day for a ten-hour drive. And they called and said, "Well, we need your information for the payroll, we want you to start on this crew."

And one of the other guys that I worked with prior to that became a foreman for Levy Company and they own Ace Asphalt in Flint. And he called and said, "Well, I want you to come to work for me." And their work was in Flint, mostly in the Flint area. And I was living in Durand at this time. So I'm thinking, "Well, they're in Flint. Thompson

McCulley is down Ann Arbor way. So I think I'm going to go with the company that has the work in my backyard.

So I ended up working for them for two years until I went to work full-time for the local at the training center. I'd work part-time for them in the winter, in the training center, teaching, and then I'd go back in the field in the summer. And then a couple years later, the opportunity came up to go full-time in the training center.

FECTEAU: Is there something in your childhood, the way you were brought up, that kind of made you gravitate towards doing a skilled trade or non-traditional work?

HARDING: Not really. I watched my mom. She was one of the first city bus drivers in Saginaw, when women weren't bus drivers, either. My mom was a big woman, too. And you know the stories you hear when you're a kid — I remember my grandmother and my aunt just talking about her having a miscarriage in a snow bank on a corner because she couldn't miss work. And she went to work for GM for a while. And I remember her talking to my aunts. You're just kids, and you hear your mom and your aunts talking about how rough it was and hard and stuff. And that's when my little sister got sick and she ended up quitting GM and giving my sister a kidney.

But as a kid, no, I don't know, other than my mom. She loved it, in a snowstorm or a wind storm, she'd go out driving in it. She wasn't afraid to drive buses, she wasn't afraid to do any of that, you know. She was just, "Let's go."

NUZNOV: So you never got the message that there was something you couldn't do.

HARDING: No, no. And my dad was very supportive. My dad, like I said, didn't have a lot of financial things to give us, but he always had a lot of love and

encouragement, and, "Ah, you guys can do whatever you want." I have a sister that's an operator, too.

FECTEAU: Do you have any brothers in the trades?

HARDING: Yeah. I have a younger brother, too. He started out as a laborer and worked his way up to an operator. And my son is an operator.

RAUCHER: Wow.

HARDING: And if you talk to any of the companies that I worked for, or my sister or my brother, we're all good operators. It's a skill, I'm sure you can understand that. Anybody can get up on a dozer or an excavator. We actually have kids that we do tours for at school or at our training center that we can teach to move the dozer around. But actually the engineering part comes in from taking a blueprint and knowing where you're cutting and filling and what you're actually building. And my brothers and sisters, I've heard lots of good stories about them being good operators, and my son, too, so maybe it's just . . .

CRAWFORD: Good hand-eye coordination.

HARDING: Yeah, it takes a lot of good hand-eye coordination to be an operator. Depth perception is very, very important.

NUZNOV: Well, I have a question, and it's about going to work for the local. How did you get that first part-time job in teaching with your local?

HARDING: When I went to union meetings, there wasn't hardly ever a female at the union meeting. And I went to the union meetings. I wanted to know what was going on, where the work was. They send you a lot of mail. They'll send you a lot of things on upgrades on the contracts and stuff. I don't think anybody ever reads them. I

read them. And in the wintertime, if there was a union meeting close to me, I went. I went to a lot of union meetings and I never saw another female in the room. There'd be 300 people at a union meeting and I'd be the only female. And eventually I got to know people.

And being that I went through the state program and not the apprenticeship program, after I became a journeyman, I had the option to go to the training center and upgrade myself. So I spent a lot of time at the training center on my own. Journeymen now get what we call a block week. They actually get a motel and per diem one week out of the year. Back then we didn't. I went down there on my own money, my own time, because I wanted to learn something else besides a roller. At that point, that's all I knew. So I'd spend weeks down there in the winter.

Well, here I am, a female that goes to the union meetings, a female that's down there trying to upgrade my skills. And eventually they just came to me and said, "You know, we're getting a lot more females in the apprenticeship program. We're looking at hiring a female instructor. Would you be interested?" Well, of course, at that point I'm like, "I don't know. I don't know if I can get in front of all these men and teach them something. Because it's not just a female thing. You have to teach men, too and I don't know." "Well, we think that you would be good at it, Carrie, and we'd like to send you down to Beckley, West Virginia to the Mine Academy and get you certified to teach HAZMAT. Let's start there."

So I went down there and I was there for three weeks at the Mine Academy getting HAZMAT and OSHA, federal OSHA, the 500 and 502 classes. And I came back with just a ton of knowledge. But the first re-cert I had to teach, oh, I'll never forget. I

walked out, and it was in our shop. And there was probably a hundred guys sitting out there. And we have three instructors that would teach it, because you can only talk for so long and you have to have a break.

I walked out there and I looked in that room, and I'm sweating. I mean, and this is the shop. Up until this point, I didn't have to go on until the afternoon, and it was cold, you had your coat on. But when it got to be my turn, I mean, the sweat's just rolling down my head. I'm thinking, "Oh, my God, what did I get myself into?" I'm asking the other instructors, "Well, what if they ask me this?" "Well, tell them it's a site-specific thing." I couldn't even say "site-specific." I'm thinking, "I'm going to get up here and talk to these guys?"

But I did it. And each time after that, it just got easier. But oh, that first time, I mean, my knees were knocking, my hands were shaking, the sweat's rolling down and I'm looking at all these guys and thinking, "Oh, my gosh, what did I get myself involved in here?" It was scary. But that's how I got into it, was just being there and being active.

FECTEAU: Was there somebody at the local who was kind of looking out for you or mentoring you?

HARDING: Gary Gattin [phonetic] hired me. And Gary was the coordinator at that time. Well, actually, when I started part-time, Gary was assistant coordinator, and Marv Orling [phonetic] was the coordinator. And Marv retired and Gary took his position. When Gary took his position, that's when Gary hired me full-time.

You had to know Gary. He's retired now. But he's a very fair guy. He didn't care if you were a man or woman, black, white, green, yellow. He was just a very, very good guy — I mean, just was out for the benefit for anybody. He didn't care where you

lived, what you did. He ran the training center to take care of everybody that walked through the door. And he's the one that brought me in and said, "I think you'll be good at it. Let's just give it a try."

NUZNOV: You said that once you got in the local and you were a journeyman, you could go back and train on different equipment. What is that all about? Is it like a big place full of equipment that you can just go and run any time you want? And what's the criteria to be able to do that?

HARDING: Your apprentices are mandated to come out there for five weeks a year. And if they're over sixty miles, they get a motel room and they get $150 per diem to reimburse their expenses. As a journeyman, you're limited to one week, a block week. And we have a 515-acre facility in Howell, with everything from triple cranes to scrapers to excavators to dozers — everything that pertains to an operator. We have every piece of equipment there is. And if we don't have it and there's a special need for it, we rent it.

And we've got different projects set up on the 515 acres, like putting sewer in, digging trenches, pipeline, crane. We have a joint venture with the Iron Workers, where we actually have a three-story structure that the ironworker apprentices and the operator apprentices work together taking the structure up and down.

But as a journeyman, you're limited to one week of upgrade training with a motel and per diem. Back when I got in, we didn't even have that for the journeymen. That was just something that Gary brought along, probably four or five years ago. And then you could take any specialty classes, like HAZMAT training, basic crane, grade stakes, stuff like that. Then you also get a room and per diem for that.

But the apprentices, actually, have to spend 600 hours in their three years of training there that's mandated. They have to do that. Some will spend 200 or 300 hours the first year. Some of them will be working quite a bit, where they don't get their training hours in, and they'll end up being in their third year and still have 300 hours of training. But they have to put in 600 hours of training over the three years. We like to see them do 200 hours a year.

And then they also have to have all the classes that we offer, the grade stakes, the HAZMAT, the basic crane, asbestos. They have to have the CPR first-aid. They have to have everything that we offer as part of their requirement to graduate.

And then they also have to — which just started going on about probably three years ago — they have to pass proficiency levels now. They start out at seventy-percent of journeyman's scale. They're entitled to a five-percent pay increase every 1,000 hours, if they have their classes done at school. There's a minimum number of classes that have to be finished in their first year, a minimum that have to be finished in their second year and third year. Now we also have proficiency tests that they have to do for each level.

The first year is pretty basic, because most of the pre-apprentices, when they come in, they get a two-week orientation and safety evaluation. And then, we instructors evaluate them and decide if we're going to keep them in the program. And then, from that point, they're dispatched right to work. But most of them have jobs, so they're taking their two-weeks of vacation or they're quitting jobs to have the opportunity to come in for that first two weeks.

Well, then they're placed on a job their first year, so when they come back their first year, their first-year proficiency is pretty basic. I mean, they have a project they

have to do. Take the loader, for instance. They have to build a ramp over a pipe from one side without crossing the pipe. Because out on the job, if you're on a pipe job, you'll have to build a ramp to cross over the other side with your loader, but you have to build your ramp all from the side. So it's a practical thing that they're going to have do in the field, and it's a test that they have to take there. And then part of that test is loading an end-dump loader proficiently and cleaning up their area. We watch for all the safety things.

And if they pass the test, then that's one of their three proficiencies for their first level. If they don't pass it, then we tell them what they did wrong, what they need to work on and practice some more. And then they have to wait at least two days of practicing to retest again. And then they have the option on two other pieces of equipment. The first level is a scraper, roller and the end-dump. But the loader is mandatory.

And then the second year is the same thing, they have to, say, take a backhoe and dig a basement. They have to trench and backfill. Trenching is one, backfilling is another one and digging a basement is their second level. Of course, after your second level, you've got a couple thousand hours under your belt and you should be able to do a little bit more with the machine than you did when you first started out.

And actually, isn't that what apprenticeship is about? You're starting out green, so you start at seventy-percent. This is how I explain it to the high school kids and the kids that I talk to — because I go all over the state talking to kids in high schools and stuff like that, too — if you take a brand new operator and he's never operated anything,

he starts with seventy-percent of journeyman's scale, because the contractor is not getting the production out of him like he is his journeyman that's got fifteen years.

But then you're on the job for 1,000 hours, now you've got a little bit more skill, so he's going to give you a little bit more money. Another 1,000 hours, you've learned a little bit more, you're a little bit more productive, so on and so forth, until you get enough time in to be proficient enough to be a journeyman.

And that's how our program works. When we take applications, we open it up to the whole state. We advertise in every county that we're taking applications. It starts out with an application process. Anybody that calls before the time we're taking applications goes on a list. They are sent out a package of information on what the requirements are for the program and they wait on that list until we open up our application process.

I don't know about the other trades, but operators don't take as many apprentices, because our training is so much more expensive. I mean, we have three full-time mechanics. We have equipment that's sitting there that's half a million dollars. In the wintertime when our apprentices are out there, we go through 1,200 gallons of diesel fuel every two or three days. And it's not like taking thirty students, say, as an electrician and teaching them something basic in a classroom. We've got thirty of them all running around on half-million-dollar pieces of equipment over 515 acres.

So we can't have as many apprentices. We have ten full-time instructors now, and you have to have a lot of one-on-one instruction to be an operator. We get up there and we teach them the safety things and we show them how to do a project. And we can show them and show them and show them, but they actually have to sit in the seat. We can't make their hands run the levers. We can show them the basics of what they want to

accomplish a hundred times, but it doesn't do them any good until they get in the seat and actually learn themselves.

RAUCHER: Are you making a special effort to attract women and African Americans to be operating engineers?

HARDING: Actually, we do a lot of the job fairs, like the CAM show we're doing this week. And we do the Just Build It, which . . .

RAUCHER: What is the CAM show?

HARDING: The Construction Association of Michigan has a show every year. All the trades get together and have booths and they talk to people that are interested in becoming operators or electricians or carpenters. And then all the different companies bring out their new equipment for the year. It's like a construction expo, just like you would see the Home Builders Show, but it's all involved in construction.

And we have a booth there. We have our crane simulator there, so the public can actually get into the crane simulator. It's actually like operating a triple crane. You sit in it, the seat moves and bangs and if you run out of fuel, it shuts down. There's different scenarios on actually operating a crane.

Years ago, I know when I was in junior high and high school, I never got introduced to the trades. It was always the girls went over here with the teachers and the travel agents and the nurses and the female-oriented careers. And all the boys went over to engineering and construction. And now — and I'm on the Education Advisory Committee for Livingston County — now you see more women come into these expos. I'll see the girls walk by and they look at me and they come up. We have a crane model that we set on the table and a little bulldozer and roller and stuff. And a lot of them will

come over, curious. "You don't do that, do you?" "Well, yeah, I do that. You can do it, too." "Oh, no." "Why not? Do you drive a car?" "Yeah." I said, "I could teach you how to operate this stuff. It'll take a little while, you can't do it overnight." But they just kind of look at you, like, "I can't do that." But when you really get to talking to them and you tell them, "Well, can you operate a car?" "Yeah." "Well, did you know how to do it when you first got in the seat?" "No." "That's the same thing with equipment. We teach the safety aspects of it, we teach you how to maintain it. We teach you how to check the oils. And then once I put you in the seat, I teach you how to move it, and then we teach you how to operate it. It's the same thing as driving a car. And girls can do it."

I've run into a lot of female electricians, a few carpenters, a few ironworkers, but the Operating Engineers are getting a lot of women, too, because their work is not so physical. I mean, other than maintaining your equipment first thing in the morning, you're sitting, usually sitting and operating, so we retain a lot of women.

But I notice when we do these job fairs, like the Just Build It, which is in Washtenaw County, and they bring all the high school kids — sometimes it's junior high — and introduce them to different careers (and the building trades have been getting more and more involved with these school programs), I notice that you see a lot of young girls. And like I said, most of the time they just walk by the carpenters and the electricians and the operators. But sometimes they see me in the booth and just out of curiosity come over and say, "You do that?" And you tell them, "Yeah." And they're a little skeptical, but then when you get a chance to talk to them, they show a little interest.

But they're not exposed to it. It's just like the trades. We have a lot of applicants that come to our program that have college degrees. We had a gentleman here not too

long ago that was a mortician. We have one going through right now that has an engineering degree, going through the apprenticeship program at thirty-nine years old.

And what I think happens a lot is from the time these kids are eight, nine years old, the parents believe that you cannot make a living unless you go to college. All they say is, "You're going to college, you're going to college." These kids grow up, go to college, get student loans and then figure out, "You know what? That's not what I wanted to do. I want to build something, I want do this."

We've got people in our program that start out at forty years old, forty-five, fifty, because they finally realized that this is what they wanted to do to begin with. And then we have them, like I said, that come in at twenty-two to twenty-five that are still paying off college loans, because it's been pressed in their head since they've been ten years old, "You're going to college."

And if you look at the statistics, there's only two out of a hundred college graduates that make more money than people in the trades do, two out of hundred. What do you hear teachers starting out at? $22,000, $26,000. I mean, we have apprentices that, if the economy is good, can make $45,000, $50,000 a year. And that's an apprentice. I'm talking about someone that's starting out at seventy-percent of a journeymen's scale.

And the parents, sometimes I think they think that construction is for the people that can't make it in college or the fugitives. I've actually had parents tell me, "Well, every time you watch *America's Most Wanted*, what do they say? 'Could be working in the construction industry.' Isn't that what you see?" [laughter] That just makes me mad.

RAUCHER: But do you find there are more women who are interested now

in . . .?

HARDING: Yes, in our apprenticeship. I think we have about seventy-six apprentices right now, and I would say probably thirty, twenty-five maybe, are women and probably another twenty are minorities.

FECTEAU: Why do you think that happened? How did that happen for your trade and not other trades? I mean, I know you said because there's not as much physical labor, but is there something that the Operating Engineers are doing to recruit more women that other trades could be doing?

HARDING: I can't say what the other trades are doing, because I don't know. I know, like I said, we retain more women because the work isn't as physical, say, as being an ironworker or an electrician. And our local, when you get into our trade, they are there for you. I mean, when I did get further on in my career, anytime I ever had a problem, I called the local and they were there right away.

I don't know what the Operators are doing. I know there's a lot of support. I started a mentoring program about three years ago, and what I tried to do was set up our female apprentices with female journeymen, because our local covers the whole state. I tried to set up the female apprentices with women in their area, good journeymen, females. And I'm sure you guys realize there's a lot of females out there that you wouldn't want to be associated with in your trade, because some of the things they do are just ridiculous.

But I tried to set up the good ones with some of the apprentices, because I know when I first started out, when I worked for that foreman that I told you about that was just hard on me, there were days — and I wouldn't cry on the job, because I knew I couldn't

cry, but when I got to my car, I would just ball. That's the kind of day I had. And if I would have had just someone to talk to, because there was many days I would have given up and said, "I'm not coming back here. I'm not putting up with this shit no more! I can't take it! My nerves can't take it. I'm tired."

NUZNOV: What kept you coming back?

HARDING: My son, and the fact that I love the work. I LOVE the work.

And I wasn't going to let him [the foreman] win. I remember one time I almost tipped a roller over and I was so scared. I had the crappiest job in asphalt. Once it gets so deep, if you get that roller over too far, it's going over. And the other two roller operators on the job would not roll it, because they knew it was dangerous. "So Carrie, there you go. That's your job." And I'd be a nervous wreck by the end of the day.

And I knew enough about it, that what I had to do was let it set up so long. It could be done. But then you were the last one done, too. Everybody else was finished up an hour and a half ahead of you, because you still had to wait for that last load to cool off. So, nobody wanted that job.

I got almost the whole job done. I mean, my nerves are shot by now. But I'm almost to the end. It took eighteen inches of shoulder gravel to lift up to the first lift of asphalt. I mean, when you got that roller over there like that and it tipped over, you're going over. There's no ROPS [Rollover Protective Structure] on them, no nothing.

Anyway, I'm almost to the end of the job. I can see the end. And now when we get to the next level, which is leveling and top, now you're talking two inches, and it's a breeze after you've learned how to do this. I'm going along, and one of the screen men, who was a good friend of mine, I'd told him — once you put the second lift of base on

and the asphalt falls off the edge, you can't tell how deep it is anymore, because the stuff that you put on the day before and then the stuff on top, it'll roll over and you can't really see it — so, that morning I said, "Ronnie, when you start getting into some real deep spots, would you put a rock there?" And he'd put a rock there and I'd have to get out and move the rock and I'd know then, because you couldn't tell unless you were walking on the side of the road.

And he didn't put a rock there. On purpose, he didn't do it. Ronnie didn't do it on purpose. And I come rolling back with that roller and that roller starts sliding down and the asphalt was sliding with me, but as it's sliding, the more it's sliding, the roller is going like this and like this and like this. And I'm waiting for it to tip over — I'm just holding on. And when it hit the ground, it came back like that so hard that it shot me out of the seat, almost off the other side of the roller.

And then I quit. I said, "This is enough." After about three weeks of my nerves being like this at the end of the day, I said, "I can't take it, I'm not killing myself. I got a son to take care of. I'm not going to kill myself for money. I'll have to find something else to do." I grabbed my lunchbox and my raingear — you always had a lunchbox, raingear, two coats, because you're out in the weather. I started heading back for the car. I said, "I'm not doing this no more. It's ridiculous!"

My foreman comes, "Where in the hell are you going?" I said, "You stick it in your ass! I'm not doing it no more." He knew that I had the rottenest job out there. And if there's anything I can say about that man, it is probably that that day he saved my career, because he said, "Get back in this truck! You're getting behind!" Oh, and I'm just thinking I could have killed him — that's how bad I hated him. I went back there.

The roller's still sitting there. I said, "I'm not getting it out of there." That thing can sit there and rust before I'll ever get on it."

And one of the guys got it out. He said, "Now, get up there and get back to work." And I did — cussing and swearing the whole time, but I did. And it was one of those nights that I went to my car — by the time I got to my car, I was just balling and wishing that I had someone I could call, you know, like someone else in the trade, and say, "Hey, did you ever go through this?" or "What did you do?" But there was nobody for me to call.

So when I set up that mentoring program, that's what my idea was, to get the women exposed to each other, so, maybe you're not working the same job, because most operators, we don't even see any other females on a lot of our road jobs, but if you know they're out there and you know their phone number, you can still call them.

CRAWFORD: How many journeywomen are in your local?

HARDING: We probably have about 350.

FECTEAU: Out of how many?

HARDING: 14,000.

NUZNOV: Wow.

FECTEAU: That's better than two percent, though.

NUZNOV: And that's a statewide local.

HARDING: Yes.

RAUCHER: But you had other friends, girlfriends or whatever, who were not operating engineers. I'm wondering, although it sounds like you worked a lot of hours,

so you probably didn't have a lot of time to be socializing, but could you talk about any of this to anybody, family, those other friends, or no?

HARDING: Well, they wouldn't understand what you're talking about. They wouldn't really comprehend. I mean, you could tell them that someone did this or that and they'd kind of listen to you, but they'd just tell you to quit.

I talked to my dad a lot. He'd just say, "Well, don't let them get to you. If he knows he's getting to you, Carrie, he's going to get to you twice as bad tomorrow. Just hold your head up. Do you know what you're doing?" "Yep." "Then go do your job. Do you like what you do?" I'd say, "Yeah." "Then don't let him take it away from you."

My dad, I'd have to say, was a big supporter. Of course, you'd work a ton of hours in the summertime, and my son was at my dad's a lot, so I'd be over there and be just bitching, "I never get no time, and I'm tired and I'm sunburned, and I'm na, na, na." Well, then the wintertime would come along and I'd be laid off for three or four months, and I'd be over there in the spring, "Gee, I can't wait to get back to work." And he'd say, "Jesus, you're never happy. In the springtime, you can't wait to get back to work and by August or September, you're over here telling me you can't wait to get laid off." I said, "Yeah, I know, Dad."

NUZNOV: So the situation you described, when you're beginning, getting to 800 hours — I believe that was the figure you used — in the small group, is that typical? Say, if you were an apprentice and you went out on a job, would you be working in a small group of nine to ten people on, I would assume, highway work. But I mean, would any apprentice find themselves in that situation, where they would be in a smaller group that could be supportive of them the way they were with you?

HARDING: They can. An apprentice now gets put on so many different jobs. They might be on one job for a month. But some of them stay with the same company through their whole apprenticeship. And I'm sure the ones that stay with the same company have support. We don't hear any complaints.

CRAWFORD: Do you guys refer the apprentices out for jobs or do they have to find their own jobs?

HARDING: They're dispatched through us.

FECTEAU: Can they also find them on their own?

HARDING: They can find them on their own, but there are certain jurisdictions. I mean, it has to be so many journeymen to an apprentice, because there's some companies out there that if they could hire all the apprentices to run end-dumps at seventy percent and not hire any journeymen, they would. So we have to make sure the ratio is right.

They're allowed to go look for their own jobs. The apprentices have their own business agent, so if they were to find their own job they can call their business agent and say, "So-and-so wants to hire me." He can call the regular agent in the area, find out if the ratio is right. If the ratio is right, then he can take the job. But they cannot just go out and have a company hire them without going through the apprenticeship program at a local.

CRAWFORD: Before your training center was built in Howell — and what year was that?

HARDING: Oh, gosh, I'm not sure on the year. It was in the '80s, early '80s.

CRAWFORD: What kind of formal training was there for apprentice operators?

HARDING: Actually, before the training center in Howell was built, they had three training centers all over the state. They had one in the UP, one, I'm thinking, was in the Williamston area and one in the Detroit area. And what they found was, with the equipment spread out so much, they couldn't offer as much as they could in one spot.

And they bought the property in Howell in 1978, I think. I think it was 315 acres, and they actually paid $265,000 for it back in the early '70s. And at that point, I think it was just a vision from management that we need this for the future. And whoever was looking out for us back then sure did us a favor by buying that property.

NUZNOV: And so now you said it's 515 acres.

HARDING: Yeah, we purchased another 140 acres that adjoined us in the back, and that was just three years ago.

CRAWFORD: It just sounds like since — and maybe that was a misunderstanding on my part — but since that center was set up, that the Operating Engineers have offered a lot more training than they did in the past. Is that a fair statement?

HARDING: Yeah. And I can't say a whole lot about the past, because I've only been involved since the point of the Howell Training Center. I think the first time I visited there was '89 or '90.

And the first time I walked in there, they made me feel more than welcome. "What do you want to learn? What do you know? What can we help you with?" And back then, there weren't very many females there. But I got treated very nicely when I went there. And it was a more relaxed way to learn your trade, because you weren't

being yelled at by a foreman. There was no production. It was a more relaxed atmosphere.

CRAWFORD: When you started in '88, you did or didn't go to a training center?

HARDING: I didn't.

CRAWFORD: Right. That's what I mean. My feeling was that you hadn't had formal apprenticeship training.

HARDING: No, none at all. No, I just had the experience as a flagger. And when the federal dollars mandated that they were going to hire women and minorities, at that point, the apprenticeship program wasn't that huge, either, as far as having women, so they were hiring women off the street. And that's where my opportunity came along.

FECTEAU: What mandate was that? That mandate was in '88, you said?

HARDING: In '88 is when I got started, and the mandate was in process then, that the contractors had to hire so many minorities to keep their federal bidding license, to bid on federal work. And a lot of them weren't meeting that requirement.

FECTEAU: So there was a lawsuit for the mandate?

HARDING: No. The big federal jobs were the big time for the contractors — it would be the I-75 projects — and if you lost your federal bidding license, you couldn't even actually bid on those projects.

CRAWFORD: So Carrie, what do you think is going to happen if Bush succeeds in destroying affirmative action, which is what helped people like yourself and other women get into the program, and removes that requirement on federal bidding processes? What do you see for the future?

HARDING: I see a lot of women not having a lot of opportunity, myself. I really do.

CRAWFORD: That's what I see, too.

HARDING: It's a damn shame. Because I really feel that if a woman can do the job, she should have the opportunity to do it. I worked with women that couldn't do the job, too, and you tend to take a lot of pride that you can. And some of the speech that I give our new apprentices, I tell them, "You've got three years to learn this trade. Don't be spending it going to the doughnut shop. Don't be spending it doing the paperwork. You better have your butt on that piece of equipment learning this trade. Because in three years from now when you graduate to a journeyman and you go to a job, I guarantee you they're not going to put up with the fact that you can't get production."

And like you said, if there's no mandate to even call for women or minorities, they're not going to have the opportunity.

RAUCHER: You said you're on the Livingston County Education — I'm not quite sure of the name of the group — and you have an opportunity, then, to advise on careers for girls.

HARDING: The Education Advisory Committee is actually a committee of the Work Force Development Board for Livingston County. They're doing everything the state mandates them to do. They have to spend so much on career development, the K-12 programs.

And I think by being on that advisory committee, I'm getting to some parents, like I said, to make them understand that the construction industry is good for males and females. And it's not for people that can't go to college, because we test. We've got

people waiting at the gate when we open our application process, and we might have 800 people test. Out of those 800 people, maybe eighty of them will get through the program. We're not taking the ones that aren't making the grade. I mean, they have requirements to meet. They have to have good attitudes. We're not taking the people that they [the parents] assume go into the construction world.

And when you start telling these parents what our benefits are and our pay and our pensions, they're dumbfounded. They had no clue that somebody could make that kind of money. And you ask them, "Well, have you ever called a plumber to your house?" "Yeah." "What do you get charged an hour?" I mean, "You think these people have no skill, but you couldn't fix the sink yourself or plumb your bathtub." Like I said, it's a stereotype.

And what you're talking about, as far as Bush, I think that it's just getting to the point where women are breaking some ground in the construction field, and it's just going to set us back. The apprentices that we have right now — when you talk about the men being scared that women are going to take their job — this new group that we've had for the last six years, we have males, females, black, white, Mexican, you name it, we have everybody out there.

And you see this new generation that we've had for the last six years, actually don't care. They don't care. They look at the girls and see they can operate. It's not a big issue with the younger generation coming up. And I thought it was always a good thing, because you can look at them now and you don't see that hostility — they actually become good friends. Through the apprenticeship programs, they're making lifetime friends, too. And if you take that away, then where do you start again?

NUZNOV: I don't know. That pendulum is out there. It's pretty scary what it might swing back with.

HARDING: I think it'll set women back a long ways.

FECTEAU: Yeah. I don't know if you know much about the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, or what happened in California.

CRAWFORD: The affirmative action or so-called affirmative action . . .

FECTEAU: Yeah, yeah. The anti-discrimination petitions that people were signing. But my understanding is that this proposition is going to be on the ballot. And I don't know if it's next fall or the fall after.

CRAWFORD: I think it's this fall.

FECTEAU: But it's going to eliminate affirmative action in the state of Michigan. And it's similar to what they did in California. And it's going to be by statewide proposal, ballot proposal.

CRAWFORD: I think it will gut the Elliott-Larsen Act, which is basically the Civil Rights Act of the state of Michigan. And with that will go those kinds of protections.

FECTEAU: Because my understanding is that's what happened in California, is that it eliminated affirmative action, and it's the same guy who did it [Ward Connerly].

CRAWFORD: And unfortunately, most people don't understand even the petition that they're signing. And I don't know how hard the building trades will fight for this. I think the building trades will not fight for it, because they see it as a divisive thing among their membership.

FECTEAU: And it might just pass.

CRAWFORD: Well, I think a lot of people will vote for it because they don't understand the wording of it. They'll think it's a positive thing for affirmative action. But I think the building trades will kind of take a neutral position on it. I don't know if the Operators have talked about it at all. But we tend to do the bread and butter stuff and not take on political hot potatoes.

RAUCHER: Well, one of the things that you, Elaine and Pat, have talked about is that there isn't a forum for tradeswomen from all different trades to get together and discuss the common problems they have and solutions for them. Do you, Carrie, have an opportunity very often to meet with women in trades other than operating engineers? I mean, do you go to conferences of women in trades or anything like that?

HARDING: Yeah. I actually belong to the National Association of Women in Construction. Have you guys heard of that? It's an organization that's worldwide, actually, in Australia, Africa.

RAUCHER: Yeah. I have heard of it.

HARDING: And it's tradeswomen, it's business owners, it's construction managers. We all meet and it's all put on the table and the central purpose of the group is to benefit women in the construction industry. And it doesn't matter if you're a project engineer or a tradeswoman or a business owner. It's a networking group that gets together. We meet once a month. And then we also do a lot of female-oriented things, like at Easter time we go to the women's shelter in Lansing and we find out how many women are there with their kids and we make Easter baskets. One meeting we get together and we make all the Easter baskets for the kids in the shelter. Everybody donates candies and baskets.

Then we have guest speakers every meeting, once a month. It could be, for example, taking a tour of the Jackson Prison after it was built. A couple of our members are Kathy Harkness [phonetic], who owns Highball Crane Company. Another one is Mary Ann Federwahl [phonetic], that's involved with Clark Construction. It's her company that built the new Jackson Prison and it was her company that took us through on a tour. But we have a guest speaker every month. And it could be somebody on insurance issues. It could be on tours of different construction projects.

We have a tradeswoman representative, which I am, for our division, and that's five different states. And once a year we have a national convention. Last year it was in New York. And there's about 400 women that get together from all over the country.

RAUCHER: Is it mostly, however, business owners and project engineers rather than tradeswomen?

HARDING: There's not as many tradeswomen as there are business and project managers, yes. There's not as many.

But the mentoring thing that I talked about before that we set up, we actually got involved . . . I don't know if you guys know Sue Jantschak. She's another female you may want to talk to. She's a carpenter that started through the apprenticeship program and now is a business agent for the Carpenters union, the only female business agent.

RAUCHER: Yeah, Michelle mentioned that she might be interested in being interviewed, which would be great.

HARDING: Sue is a wonderful person. She had a hard, hard, hard road. And as far as a business agent, she's had a hard road. I mean, she's been run over in picket lines. She was off work for a long time. She really believes in what she's doing.

Sue had started something years ago, and I think she called it Michigan Tradeswomen Association. I'm not sure on that name. It was when she was a carpenter and these women would actually meet at her house. And it got to be so big that they had to find a meeting place other than her house.

But this mentoring thing that I talked about, that I started, we actually opened it up to the carpenters, the ironworkers, the bricklayers. And I had meetings from November to, usually, the first of April, because after April, we couldn't get a very big crowd because everybody was back to work. We'd have one meeting at the training center, then the next one we'd have at the Carpenters' Hall in Detroit. Then we'd have one back at the training center. And then I was trying to get all the electricians . . .

CRAWFORD: How come you guys never called us?

HARDING: No, I had a couple of electricians at Howell. It's just a matter of getting the word out. I mean, I send the information to the training centers, basically, because that's where my contacts are, is the training centers. And sometimes I'd find out they didn't even pass the information along.

RAUCHER: Are you still doing this?

HARDING: Yeah. I'm having a meeting the 21st of this month. And I try not to make it a bitch session, because if you get a lot of tradeswomen together, too, they just want to complain. And then once they're finished, that's the end of it, they're not interested in anything else.

Last year we structured our meetings to a guest speaker. I did a survey a couple years ago through the Operating Engineers women and asked them what they thought of different issues. One of the biggest things was that when a business agent comes to the

job, they never talk to the girls. They never come up to the girls and ask them for their card. They never ask them about their issues. And they wanted to go one-on-one with a business agent. Then they wanted the business manager and they wanted someone from our health care and someone from our pension fund. Because they said they don't get these questions answered.

So I set up a meeting, and we had George Buholis [phonetic], who's in charge of the pension fund. We had Sam Hart, who at that time was our business manager. And we had Gary Gattin [phonetic]. And there you had a business agent and someone on pension and health care. And they actually stood up and did a Q & A thing with the girls. I said, "Now, this is your opportunity, girls. You're saying that you want this question answered, this one and this one and this one. I got them in the room. There you go." And we had probably about forty-six female engineers that night.

NUZNOV: And this was at your training center.

HARDING: Yes. And then the next meeting I opened up to carpenters, ironworkers, whoever wanted to come. And as a matter of fact, the meeting that I'm having this month is the same thing. Tracy Kurch [phonetic] is her name. Actually, it's not Kurch; she got remarried, and I can't think of her new name now. She's a black belt in karate. This next meeting that I'm having is her and two of her instructors who are going to come over and do some basic self-defense things for women. I've been gathering information for a whole year on women's safety.

So that's why I try to structure the meetings, so there's somebody up there doing something, talking, giving information, instead of all of us sitting around complaining.

There's a lot of good issues that come from those meetings, too, that need to be addressed, but the meetings aren't productive.

CRAWFORD: Just venting.

HARDING: And sometimes that's a good thing, too. Sometimes you need to do that.

RAUCHER: Well, do you folks have any more questions for Carrie?

FECTEAU: Was there anything you didn't say that you wanted said?

HARDING: No, other than I will have to say about my local, they are very supportive of women, and I think that's why we retain so many of them, I really do. We have a new business manager now, John Hamilton, and when issues come across his table, or whatever, they're handled. It's not a brush-it-under-the-rug type program. It's really not. I get a lot of calls from women. And a lot of the agents will tell the women that have problems on the job, "Well, call Carrie." Even though I work for the training center, I'm not an agent, they'll say, "Call Carrie," because they don't feel comfortable in the situation.

And like I said, a lot of times it's because women don't understand, don't understand the structure of how the union works, or what their options are. And a lot of times, eighty percent of the time, once you talk to them, you almost solve their problem for them. The other twenty percent needs further attention, and that's not my job, but I tell them that they need to call this person or that person.

But I would have to say for our local and our management, I'm surprised that there aren't a lot of issues, because I'm the only female that works for the local. There's 14,000 members. Other than secretaries, I'm the only female on the payroll for the local.

And there've been issues that have come up where I've wondered, "Okay, let's see how they're going to handle this one." And surprisingly enough, I've found quite a few times that it was, "Well, what do we got to do to fix it?" or "What do we got to do to correct this problem?" Not a, "Just forget about it."

RAUCHER: There are obviously no women officers of the local and never have been.

HARDING: No.

RAUCHER: Do you think there will be in the near future?

HARDING: No, I don't know. I've had women approach me that were interested in it. And I actually love my job, because I like to see the new groups that come in, that don't know anything, and they come back three years later, and you've helped them in some way with their career. I like that feeling. The women that I've had approach me about being a business agent or something like that, a lot of them don't even realize what that means. They think it's a glamorous job of driving around in a Tahoe.

And when you tell them, "Do you know you have to represent everybody, not just the women in the local? There's no such thing as being business agent for the females and the minorities. That's not happening, because then you're putting yourself in the same stereotype as when you have a male not handling the females' problems."

I tell them, "Do you realize you're going to be out with contractors in your face? Do you realize that everybody is going to hate you?" When the economy is good, everybody loves the business agents, because they're the ones that send them to work. When the economy is bad, they'll say you're only sending your buddies or the people you know. You're going to have members in your face. It's not a glamorous job. I'd like to

see a woman do it someday, but I had a hard enough time breaking ground just being an instructor and doing what I've done so far. I'd like to see another woman try that.

NUZNOV: So, are business agents elected by the membership?

HARDING: They're assigned by the business manager.

NUZNOV: Okay. That's how our local is. But I think sheet metal, they actually elect their business agents.

CRAWFORD: Plumbers elect their business agents.

NUZNOV: And pipefitters.

FECTEAU: In Local 17 of the IBEW, they are elected, I understand.

CRAWFORD: I doubt it.

FECTEAU: Oh, okay.

NUZNOV: Business manager, yes.

FECTEAU: But I thought the business agents were elected as well.

CRAWFORD: I don't think so, under the IBEW constitution.

HARDING: No, same thing with ours. It's the business manager, vice president, treasurer, those are elected.

NUZNOV: Well, thank you for that answer, because I'm always very curious about that agent thing.

HARDING: Same way at the training center, too. The people that work there are appointed by the coordinator.

NUZNOV: And so is the coordinator job a job that they can have all their lives if they're good at it?

HARDING: Uh-huh. Yeah, most of the coordinators that come to the training center, I think they're usually there four or five years, and they retire. Because to be a coordinator, to oversee the training for all the operating engineers in the whole state, you have to know about every part of the industry. And then, of course, you need to know the laws in the county where our building sits. Our last coordinator found out that our land usage permit was up. Our land usage permit had storage for 300 gallons of diesel fuel. Well, we've got more than 300 gallons of diesel fuel just in the equipment that sits back there. I mean, there's certain things that they have to know.

NUZNOV: And experience is a big part of that.

HARDING: Right. Yeah.

RAUCHER: The audio tape has run out, but I think we're about finished.

Carrie, who left her job as an instructor with IUOE Local 324 after this interview was completed, added this afterword:

Over the span of my career, I have observed that many great things have emerged benefiting women in the work place. This revolution was the result of hard work and dedication put forth by employers and labor leaders who believed in the abilities and rights of women within the industry.

There are those within the industry who chose to lead the way, like former IUOE Local 324 Business Manager and General Vice President Sam T. Hart and Cheryl Hughes, President of C&D Hughes Construction Company. Their efforts will impact the

future of women in the industry for decades. Their commitment was beyond mandated laws or contractual obligations.

But the hard work is not yet over. We see leaders retire from their positions of influence being replaced by those who speak of an allegiance to their predecessors' policies, but whose actions prove otherwise. It is of great concern that the new leadership of my revered IUOE Local 324, John Hamilton, Business Manager, has chosen to be among those leaders. The decision to disband the IUOE Local 324 women's mentoring program and an unwillingness to participate in the National Association of Women in Construction demonstrate how rapidly things can regress. Women within the industry cannot be complacent with the status quo. We must continue to push forward with a progressive agenda, pursuing leadership ositions as employers and employees, seeking elected public office and being active participants in our unions.