Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Sara Willis
Electrician

Interviewed on February 16, 2004

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

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Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Interview with Sara Willis

MARGARET RAUCHER: This is December 12, 2005, and we're here at the Walter Reuther Library interviewing Sara Willis, who is an electrician at the Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly Plant. And I'm starting out the questioning by asking Sara what her life was like before she entered the trades. So go ahead Sara.

SARA WILLIS: Okay. I was raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan, born and raised there. And my dad worked for an insurance company and for the Kent County Community Action Program, which was like a neighborhood services program on that side of the state. My mom was a teacher. I had one sister.

When I was in my twenties, I decided to be grown up and I came to the Detroit area. But prior to that, I tried dabbling in — I went to Western [Michigan University] for a little while and Grand Rapids Community College for a little while. I did a little of this and a little of that before I kind of settled into this side of the state. What else do you need to know?

RAUCHER: Well, when were you born? Can you give me a year?

WILLIS: Oh, yes. Yes, I can.

MICHELLE FECTEAU: Will you? [laughter]

WILLIS: Well, I'm going to be honest. I'm proud of how old I am. I was born May 7th, 1960.

RAUCHER: Oh, a mere child!

WILLIS: Yeah, yeah. I don't feel like a child. I feel like I've lived a life already, but I was born that long ago.

Also, I was sickly growing up, so I didn't do a lot of stuff outside. But I guess that built up kind of like a rebellious spirit in me to do stuff different than what everybody else did. I had no role models because I was so sickly. You know, like when little girls play with dolls or whatever? I didn't have that. I just was always sick. I had asthma really bad growing up, so I was just laying there. So I did a lot of reading and a lot of imagination stuff, which made it easy to work by myself when I got to be an electrician — if that all fits together for you.

RAUCHER: Yeah. But I was going to ask you what your parents were like, in terms of, I mean, how you grew up. Were you a tomboy? Well, you already answered some of this. But the subjects that you liked in school or if you thought that there was anything in those early years that sort of prepared you for being in the trades later on.

WILLIS: Nothing. My parents were older, so they didn't do a lot of playing with us. My father was fifty when he had me. So all of that playing with the kids stuff, that was out for us.

FECTEAU: Did he ever work with you with tools? Were you exposed to that through your father?

WILLIS: No, no, no. I am like an exception to most rules. But then once I got older and went through [IBEW Local] 58 and then when I got to Chrysler, I found out I have a cousin in Atlanta who's an electrician, which is ironic. And I'm like, "I'm an electrician. Where'd you get your training from?" Then he told me he was with 58, and it was, "Oh, it's a small world!" We never talked about work stuff.

RAUCHER: So you went through school and you just did the typical girl school stuff in high school and all that?

WILLIS: I was rebellious and stuff, too, but yeah.

RAUCHER: In what way were you rebellious?

WILLIS: Skipping school and stuff a lot. But when I was in high school, I still got good grades, even when I skipped school. So I didn't appreciate the value of education until later on — if that makes any sense. I appreciate it now.

CATHY DAWSON: Is your sister older or younger?

WILLIS: Younger. She's two years younger, and she's real serious about life.

DAWSON: [laughs] Okay, real serious.

RAUCHER: Meaning, more serious than you?

WILLIS: Yeah. I enjoy life. I've learned to appreciate and enjoy life.

ELAINE CRAWFORD: What part of town did you live in Grand Rapids?

WILLIS: Heritage Hill.

RAUCHER: My cousin lives there. Yeah, that's a nice part of town, a lot of historic homes.

WILLIS: Yeah. That's where we were raised, Heritage Hill.

CRAWFORD: And did you go to public school?

WILLIS: Oh, yeah. I went to public school until second grade, then I went to private school until eighth grade.

RAUCHER: What kind of private school? Catholic school?

WILLIS: Catholic school, St. Stephens.

RAUCHER: Are you Catholic?

WILLIS: No. That was for educational purposes. Oh, that was part of my rebellion. I was lik,e stubborn and rebellious in second grade, if that's possible. So I went all the way to eighth grade in Catholic school. Then my mom felt I needed to be well-rounded, so she sent me back to public school to get balance for high school.

RAUCHER: So your mom, who was a teacher, was sort of an influence in terms of the education that you got.

WILLIS: Yes, yes. They believed in us being well-rounded and kind of balanced.

CRAWFORD: Were you taking college prep stuff in high school?

WILLIS: I was. But like I said, I didn't really appreciate education until now. I'm just now starting to appreciate the value of it. And I feel like I wasted a lot of time [laughs)], if that's possible. I don't mean to laugh about it, but it's ironic.

DAWSON: No, it's never too late.

FECTEAU: Was it because the subjects in high school were not really exciting to you?

WILLIS: The funny thing is, I wanted to take biology and chemistry and stuff like that in high school and my counselor encouraged me not to. And that made me want to do it more. But I still got pretty good grades, even though she discouraged me from doing stuff like that. You know what I'm saying?

FECTEAU: Why do you think that was?

WILLIS: Because in Grand Rapids at that time she told that there would be no jobs for me when I got out of school.

FECTEAU: In science?

WILLIS: In her mind.

RAUCHER: Just in science, or in anything?

WILLIS: I mean, I wasn't interested in much of anything. I liked science. I liked like, cutting stuff open. Maybe it was kind of morbid, but I liked that part. But she didn't see — she couldn't see that for me.

CARRIE WELLS: Was she trying to push you into some other classes?

WILLIS: Yeah, like counseling people, like her, like being a social worker. And I'm friendly, but I don't think I'm like, a people person, like a counselor. I think they need a special skill — that maybe a lot of them don't have, but . . .

RAUCHER: Can I ask you: Did you grow up in an African-American neighborhood? An integrated neighborhood? The same with the school: Was it an integrated school? Or was it mostly white kids or mostly black kids?

WILLIS: That's a good question. When I was in public school, when I was little, that wasn't mostly black kids. The neighborhood I lived in was a mixed neighborhood. When I went to Catholic school that was a mostly white school. It was in what they call East Grand Rapids, and so that was mostly white. And when I first started going there, it was only a few black people. I have a son, and my son ended up going there too, later on. But when I was there, it was only a few blacks.

RAUCHER: And that's where the counselor was?

WILLIS: No. This counselor was at high school and that was a mostly black school. She felt that I needed something safe. And like I said, when I was sick, I started looking at all this stuff. You have time to reflect when you're laying on your back, or whatever, you're sick. I started reflecting that maybe I wanted to do different stuff, like

science and stuff because there was so many things I couldn't do when I was younger. You know what I'm saying?

So then when I got to high school and she was telling me all this stuff that I couldn't do, I couldn't hear it in my ears and I probably became a little rebellious, more rebellious.

CRAWFORD: Did you outgrow your asthma?

WILLIS: A little bit. Mostly, it's not as bad as it was. I used to be down for like, three weeks at a time, when the weather changes — that was me.

CRAWFORD: Are your parents still living?

WILLIS: My mom is still living, my dad is dead. He died from Alzheimer's.

RAUCHER: And your mom still lives in Grand Rapids?

WILLIS: Yes.

RAUCHER: And what about your friends, growing up? You said you spent a lot of time alone when you were ill, but maybe by the time you were in high school. I mean, were they rebellious like you and skipped school and stuff like that?

WILLIS: The few I had were just like me. [laughs] There was a few, and we were the same kind of people — I'm honest — we smoked weed, we skipped school and whatnot, you know, in high school. And I'll always say I regret the time that I wasted in school.

RAUCHER: Did you have any hobbies or interests outside of school? Church, singing, anything like that?

WILLIS: I did a lot of stuff. Believe it or not, I was in Girl Scouts until I was sixteen. Church wasn't really a hobby — that was just something that you had to do if

you lived in our house. [laughter] "Hobby" is not a good word for it. What else? I used to read a lot. I don't know. I like to do a lot of stuff now. I'm trying to learn how to golf, trying to learn how to ballroom dance. And like my mom wanted, I'm still trying to do a balance, a mixture of things, not just one type of thing. I also make belt buckles and I'm trying to start a business. I mean, I'm always doing something, now. I don't believe there's any limitations.

RAUCHER: What does your sister do for a living?

WILLIS: She works for a nonprofit organization in Grand Rapids helping people get their lives together, I guess is the best way to put it. I don't know the name of it.

CRAWFORD: She took the social work advice.

WILLIS: Yeah, maybe, maybe. [laughter] But she's more bossy than me, so she likes that control thing. If you get into those nonprofit groups and you're the person in charge and you can call the shots and all that, she likes that. Yeah.

CRAWFORD: How did your parents feel about you — well first, did you work any jobs in the summer? Did you go to college right out of high school?

WILLIS: Yes. And I was pregnant during the midst of all this. [laughs] I tried to hide my pregnancy in college and it didn't work. My grandmother found out I was pregnant and . . . [laughter)] How do you hide it? You just don't go home. You know, I just wouldn't go home. I was going to Western and I was trying not to go home. And my grandma lived in Inkster and so I went to Inkster for Thanksgiving and she knew just by looking. Grandmas can tell that stuff, you know, no matter what. So she just knew I was pregnant.

RAUCHER: But she didn't say anything.

WILLIS: Not to me.

RAUCHER: Or to your parents.

WILLIS: She told my mom, oh, yes. [laughter]

RAUCHER: And this was somebody you met at Western, the father?

WILLIS: Well, yeah, yeah.

RAUCHER: All right. So you're at Western and then you had the baby.

WILLIS: Yeah. And there was no more schooling after that. My mom would not — my mom was paying for me to go to school while I was doing that. So after that, she was like, "If you want to do whatever from now on, you have to pay for it. If you go to school, you're paying for it." So it took me a long time to start back.

CRAWFORD: Were you a sophomore?

WILLIS: No, I was a freshman. I didn't even know what to do, you know. Oh, my God! So many priorities and so much to do! I can't focus.

RAUCHER: So you're a freshman, what, you're nineteen?

WILLIS: I was eighteen, going on nineteen.

RAUCHER: And you kept your child?

WILLIS: Yes. He's twenty-six now. He has four kids.

RAUCHER: Oh, wow. Wow, you're a grandma! But here you are, you're that age and you didn't have money to raise the child yourself, did you?

WILLIS: No. My parents helped me at first. Then I ended up on welfare. And I could find part-time jobs and stuff like that, but I spent a lot of time first in Grand Rapids. And then I decided to find myself on this side of the state. That's how I ended

up on this side of the state. My grandmother lived in Inkster and she had cancer, so I said, "Oh, helping her, I can find myself." And I brought my son with me.

FECTEAU: How old was your son?

WILLIS: He was like, two or three or something when I first started.

RAUCHER: So this would have been what, about 1980, around there?

WILLIS: Early '80s, yeah. So okay, what else do you want to know? [laughter]

RAUCHER: Well, we've kind of covered the early years, I guess. So I'm going to let Cathy or one of the tradespeople here start asking the questions.

PAT NUZNOV: We should be leading up to how you got into the apprenticeship. I mean, there's some time in here, but . . .

WILLIS: Actually, it did. My son was little. We moved into an apartment, a flat in Detroit. This was after my grandmother died, like, '83, '84, something like that. And I met this cute guy — I thought he was cute, anyway. A cuter guy lived down the street, right, and he was an electrician. His name was Phil Rogers. And he told me that I should go back to school. I started going back to Wayne County Community College, and I was studying computer tech. And then he suggested, "Hey, why don't you put an application in for the apprenticeship." So I did.

RAUCHER: What year do you think this would be?

WILLIS: That was about '83 or '84, because I got accepted in '86. So I put my application in and everything. It was two years after I put my application in and did the testing that I was called, so right up in there.

RAUCHER: And in the meantime, what were you doing?

WILLIS: I was on welfare and going to Wayne County Community College. And what else was I doing? That was about it, at that time. And then I tried at first to go to Wayne County and do my apprenticeship at the same time, but that was hard to do, as far as driving and getting back and forth and balancing . . . I was trying to keep my son with me. I ended up sending my son to live with my mom, which was a big mistake. But that's another whole story. Anyway, that's when I started in the apprenticeship, in '86, on a Thursday. [laughter]

NUZNOV: You remember the day.

WILLIS: Oh yeah, yeah. Every other Thursday was our schooling, so all day we had school.

FECTEAU: What was that like, walking in that first day? What do you remember about it?

WILLIS: Nothing.

DAWSON: Were you the only female?

WILLIS: No, there was another female. I was the only black female. But there was another female and her name was Lynn, or something like that, in my class. And everybody was nice. I thought everybody was pretty nice. When I first got on my job, though, I did coffee runs. My first assignment was coffee runs, remembering what everybody ordered and getting it right. That was your first like, orientation, you know. I learned that you learn everybody's name through that. You learn how to listen, you learn how to follow orders. Even though it seemed stupid and dumb when you think about it, when I'm looking back on it, you learn something through that. And plus you got to keep all the change, so it's cool.

FECTEAU: I like the way that you see that, because I can see some women, maybe me, being insulted being told to get coffee. But I like the way that you see it as an opportunity and didn't it let it get you angry. You know, you learned something from it.

WILLIS: I'm saying that's the first day. I had no clue what to expect. And so everybody was saying, "Well, this is what they do." And so I said, "Okay." And at that time, I didn't know any different. I guess if they had kept doing it like, for months, I probably would have thought something different. But every new person had to learn everything, and then after that it went up to learning parts and stuff and the proper names for material.

RAUCHER: When your friend suggested that you apply for the apprenticeship, you didn't know anything about being an electrician or about the trades or anything.

WILLIS: Not a thing.

RAUCHER: So did you just do it on a lark? I mean, were you really serious about it, or what?

WILLIS: I figured if I tried it and I didn't like it, I could say I tried it and it would be something new that I attempted. And I could say, "No, I don't like this because . . ." And it was an opportunity. Does that make any sense to you?

RAUCHER: Uh-huh. And this was with Local 58?

WILLIS: Yes.

CRAWFORD: Was it still a four-year apprenticeship?

WILLIS: Yeah.

CRAWFORD: How did your parents feel about you doing this nontraditional thing?

WILLIS: "This is one of those larks. Sara is going on one of her whims. Just let her go." That's the way my mom says she looked at it. My dad, he didn't really worry about it one way or the other. But my mom, she thought it was just another whim. She had no clue. To this day, she has no clue. She's like, "Well, I just thought that was something you wanted to do, like a hobby."

DAWSON: Can you talk a little bit about your apprenticeship, I mean, the schooling? And I'm assuming you had some kind of hands-on training.

WILLIS: Yeah.

DAWSON: And how were the instructors? There were only two women in the classes and the rest were male I'm assuming.

WILLIS: Well, the way our classes were set up, if I can remember this correctly, is that there was like an A class and a B class. And so there would be a whole group of us who came in on Thursday. And there may be one teacher teaching us pipe-bending.

But in retrospect, I got excellent training. We learned welding, we learned pipe-bending, we learned how to apply the theory of different things. It was good training. I can't be more specific. The people were good, the instructors were good. The instructors were not — just because I'm a lady, they didn't act any different than they did to the guys. So I can't think of the proper word for that right now, but . . .

DAWSON: But they didn't expect any less of you.

WILLIS: Right.

DAWSON: They didn't treat you any differently.

WILLIS: Right.

CRAWFORD: They disrespected you all equally.

WILLIS: Right, exactly. [laughter] If they didn't like you, it was nothing personal.

FECTEAU: So they looked down on apprentices.

WILLIS: Apprentices are lower than whale scum. So you knew that. [laughs]

DAWSON: Across the board in every trade.

WILLIS: Across the board, it didn't even matter. That was your place. I guess I could say that nobody took advantage of that to a really negative extent. I met a lady named Phyllis Turner and she was one of the first black females to get into Local 58.

CRAWFORD: The first.

WILLIS: Okay, the first. I had the opportunity to talk to her and she told me stories about how people used to go and put — I'm trying to think of the nice word — feces in her lunchbox and all kinds of little tricks, try to lock her in the Port-a-john — all kinds of stuff. I never had that. And I didn't expect it, because I didn't know to expect stuff like that when I first got in the trade. I didn't meet her until after I got in, maybe a couple years. But she did tell me some stories about some of the things that she went through. And I didn't go through that part of discrimination or sexism or whatever you want to call it. Yeah, that's a blessing.

RAUCHER: And this happened to her when she was a journeyman or when she was an apprentice?

WILLIS: I think when she was an apprentice.

DAWSON: So what's the time difference we are talking between her and you, four years?

CRAWFORD: At least ten years.

RAUCHER: Well, she was very early, then.

CRAWFORD: She was already out by the time I came in in ‘78, so she must have come in in ‘74.

WILLIS: Yeah, and I came in in ‘86.

CRAWFORD: She was very — she was alone.

WILLIS: Like I said, I had the opportunity to meet her and it was interesting and enlightening to talk to her and everything. I feel fortunate that by the time I came along I didn’t have to go through some of that. You know what I’m saying? But it’s good to be aware that those things did exist and were around.

CRAWFORD: You said on the first job you got sent out for coffee a lot. What was that first job? Where was it?

WILLIS: It was called the Main Street Store, in Macomb Mall, on the back side. But I can’t remember what it turned into after it was Main Street. But that was my first one, for O’Toole Electric.

Then I went to work for them and we went to Hudson’s. And they played a trick on me and I didn’t get mad. I was just laughing, I don’t know why. We were walking through the back parts of Hudson’s at Northland Mall, all through the back parts. And then they said, “Follow me, follow me.” And I’m following them, I’m following them, and all of a sudden we end up in the men’s bathroom. And I’m like, [scratches forehead]. And everybody is looking. The guys, they’re like, [innocent, surprised look] — and I went, “Oh, my God.” Maybe I should have looked at the sign on the door instead of just following these guys around. I think that was one of the worst thing that happened to me — if you call that bad.

CRAWFORD: Did you just turn around and walk out?

WILLIS: Yeah, I did. I can't even remember the guys' names, but it was a father and son team and they were notorious for thinking of stuff that they could do, like move your car keys. And then when you get ready at the end of the day — that was just them.

FECTEAU: Did they pull pranks on everyone?

WILLIS: Yeah, yeah.

NUZNOV: So how long did you work as a journeyman in Local 58 before you decided — and why did you decide to go into Chrysler?

WILLIS: I went to Chrysler because it was slow in Local 58. And at the time it seemed like they were passing over my name. I don't know if they were doing it on purpose or what, but it seemed like they were passing over my name. There was a couple calls that came in for the Board of Education — there was quite a few calls. And it just seemed like I kept missing it, so . . .

DAWSON: How is it supposed to work?

WILLIS: I can't even remember totally how it works. But it's supposed to be that you go so high on a list and if you're like, in that top percentage or whatever, you're supposed to be eligible for a certain type of job or whatever job comes along. And I just thought that I was missing that job. So I went to Old Country Buffet one day and this lady, someone with a Local 58 T-shirt on, told me her son was working for Chrysler, and I was like, "Hey, let me try this."

NUZNOV: So how long were you a journeyman before you did that?

WILLIS: Eight years.

FECTEAU: How was the money coming in? Were the jobs pretty sporadic or was it a nice bump up for you?

WILLIS: The only positive part of going to the plants was the benefits. My son was a teenager. He was playing football and I was thinking that it would be beneficial to him if I had a steady job with steady benefits. That was the only reason. Now, why I'm still there is beyond me. I'm trying to work my way out of Chrysler.

RAUCHER: So your son had been living in Grand Rapids when he was young, but then he came back to live with you.

WILLIS: Yeah, yeah. And he was playing football and I thought that the medical insurance would be a good benefit.

RAUCHER: So what was the work like while you were with 58, though, while you were a journeyman? I mean, did you like the work?

WILLIS: I did, I did. I loved the work. I loved working for Local 58.

RAUCHER: Well, what was it that you liked about it?

WILLIS: I liked being outside and the fresh air — maybe it's because my asthma had cleared up a little bit. I think today would be like the coldest day I would like, though. When I was an apprentice with 58, I worked on Hart Plaza, I worked Trash Burner, I worked People Mover, all of these in the wintertime — outside, Detroit River waterfront in the winter. Who wants that? Nobody. It's cold. But outside of that, I liked working when it was nice outside, being outside. You know, whatever it was, I liked it. I liked the physical work. Didn't have to worry about dieting, none of that. It was nonexistent. So I think those were the benefits.

Also, the other benefit is personality-wise. When you're in a plant, you can't leave those people if you don't like them, you have to learn to get along with them. And I had issues with learning to get along with people.

When you're in construction, you know the job is coming to an end, you may see these people again, you may not. And so it doesn't do any good to hold grudges, it doesn't do any good to go through any changes, because you'll see them maybe for like a month or two or three months, maybe a year, but then you'll be done with them.

But in the plant, you'll see these people for five years in a row. And I don't know if it's the closeness of being inside in a plant, but people don't let go of their hostilities very much. They hold onto stuff. So that's the other big difference.

RAUCHER: Two questions: Were you surprised at how much you liked doing the work? I mean, having known nothing about it and then going into the apprenticeship, were you kind of surprised at yourself that you liked this kind of work, this nontraditional work?

WILLIS: Yeah, yeah. I didn't know what to expect, so, yeah, I guess I was. And like I said, everybody was really helpful.

RAUCHER: That was my other question: Then, for the most part, on the jobs as well as in school and everything, you thought you were treated well?

WILLIS: I think I was, you know. Considering that I didn't know what I was getting into, I think I was. I mean, I've had my share of people on the job say little comments, but the majority of the people, you know what I mean, they weren't negative. They were helpful.

I mean, that goes for the bricklayers, the pipefitters, everybody. It wasn't just the electricians. Everybody, when you were in construction, everybody who worked together on whatever the project was, they were helpful. They would show me little tricks on how to cut the block out when I had to run the pipe up through the brick or whatever. And that was their secret for making it look good. They didn't have to show me that part. Because the electrician part might just be, "well, just make sure it gets there." So I appreciated that.

CRAWFORD: So a lot of women felt that either older guys or minority guys tended to be the most helpful and the most supportive. Was that your experience, or not?

WILLIS: You know, I wrote that down somewhere — yes, I did. The older guys and some of the minority guys. I've had problems with some of the younger minority guys and some of the younger white guys. But the older guys or the people that had been around the block a couple times, they didn't mind.

FECTEAU: Why do you think that was?

WILLIS: I had one black guy tell me that I was taking his job. "Y'all ain't taking my job!" I mean, he was adamant. And we weren't even on a job. This one electrician, his name was Don West, he would have a party for like, a whole month. He's a big guy. He said his mom was in labor for like, thirty days, so he'd have a thirty-day party. [laughter] So on the weekend you would go over and there would be other electricians there and you'd just say, "Hi, how are you doing?" And this one day I go over there and there's this guy — luckily I can't remember his name — and he's like, "Y'all just comin' in and taking my job!" And I don't know if he had been drinking already, but he just went and got mad about it.

DAWSON: This is a young minority?

WILLIS: Yeah, he was younger. But like I said, on the whole, I see more positive than negative. And that could just be me and my outlook on life.

NUZNOV: I'm sure it has something to do with it. Humor will get you many places safely.

FECTEAU: I'm just wondering about your party friends from high school. What do they think about you now?

WILLIS: I don't even know where those people are now.

DAWSON: That's because they're in Grand Rapids and you're here?

WILLIS: Right, right. And the few people that I do keep in contact with, they're more like family friends — we were like, raised up together. And I mean, we'll just always be friends. But high school friends, I don't really have any.

RAUCHER: So how old was your son when he came back to live with you?

WILLIS: Fifteen.

RAUCHER: Well, what did he think about what you do? Or did he not care?

WILLIS: He didn't care. And I tried to take him on little side jobs to show him and tried to tell him, you know, "This'll be a good thing for you in case you want to go to school and hustle on the side or something. Maybe you can learn how to put lights in for your friends at school or something." My head is always thinking "hustle" for some reason. So I'm thinking he can put lights up or if they want those little fancy lights, neon lights or whatever.

CRAWFORD: Did you think about him getting into the trade, following in your footsteps?

WILLIS: I did. And he was like, "No, Mom, I'm tight." That's all he kept telling me, "I'm tight, Mom. I don't need that." So then after he got in a lot of trouble and everything, he was like, "Mom, can you help me?"

CRAWFORD: "You're tight. I'm sorry." [laughter]

WILLIS: Yeah, that's right. But I did at first. And hindsight is always twenty/twenty, because they always think you're stupid at first when you try to tell them something. So not too long ago he was asking me could he get in, and I was like, "I don't know. It depends on how bad you want it — that will determine if you get in or not."

CRAWFORD: Did he finish high school?

WILLIS: Eventually, yeah. That's a sad story. I think he got his GED and he's starting to see the light. It happens when you have a bunch of kids, you got to start seeing something, hopefully.

CRAWFORD: So you were in the local for twelve years, four as an apprentice and then eight as a journeyperson?

WILLIS: No, I think I was only in it all together about eight.

CRAWFORD: So Chrysler was hiring, it was easy to get in.

WILLIS: Yeah it was. At that time, it was easier for minorities and women to get in, right when I applied. Or I think it might have just been electricians, because Chrysler was getting ready to go through a transition and they needed a lot of extra electricians through all of their plants. They were changing all of their models for all of their cars, and so they needed people to fill in for the people that were already there that were getting ready to go to all the training and everything.

RAUCHER: And that was '94, or around then?

WILLIS: Yeah. I got in in '93, and '94 was when they started their stuff.

DAWSON: And you're still at the same plant today, right?

WILLIS: Yes. I've been fortunate. I haven't been laid off or anything, where some of the guys that I know from 58 that are on the — well, I call it "on the inside," like a prison — have been laid off and gone to different plants.

DAWSON: Did they have less seniority than you? Is that why?

WILLIS: I think all of us went into the plant about the same time, the ones that I know right now. There's a couple that went in a few years before that that are at my plant, and they've never been moved around either. But those people from '95 on up, those are the ones that got laid off and got switched around, like to Jefferson plant, Truck plant. They've just been moved around a lot.

RAUCHER: You left Local 58 when you went in the plant, though, and then joined UAW Local 1700.

WILLIS: Yes. It wasn't so much joined as that you just end up being part of it, because the Big Three are unionized, so you naturally just are a union member.

CRAWFORD: Would you start at the beginning, like your first day.

WILLIS: My first day I got into trouble at Chrysler. [laughs]

DAWSON: How did you get in trouble?

WILLIS: This guy was supposed to be training me on this job and I had put my purse or whatever into the area where I was going to be training. And I went to go to the bathroom and go talk to somebody. When I came back, the entire area was locked up. (Well, maybe this was like maybe three days after I started.)

CRAWFORD: Was it a caged kind of area?

WILLIS: Yeah. But my job was to get the line going by a certain time and I couldn't do that, because this area was closed up and all my tools and everything was in this caged area. So this guy saw himself as being funny and I called him on the radio and said, "I need you to come back and open up the cage." And he said that he didn't understand me. And I said, "But I got to get this line up." And I guess I was too concerned about the job at the time. So I got upset and I got mad and I called my boss, I called everybody I knew. And nobody could get a key to open this up and I only had like, ten minutes or something.

So I walked away. And it just so happened there was this other female at the plant named Gretchen. And Gretchen, she was way across the plant. And I left my work area and went over and said, "Gretchen, this man is pissing me off." And she told me that everything I did was wrong. I'm not supposed to leave my work area without letting people know and I should have just stayed there.

But eventually we got it straightened out, where I told the guy directly, "If you have a problem with me being a female, if you got a problem with me being black, you got a problem with me not knowing how to talk on a radio, say so."

DAWSON: Was Gretchen an electrician, or no?

WILLIS: Actually, yes. And I had met her. We used to have this women's group of skilled tradeswomen and Gretchen was a part of that before I went to the plant. So I kind of knew her before I went to Chrysler and then I just happened to run back into her. So that was kind of good. I was like a colleague or a comrade.

RAUCHER: This was a group of tradeswomen in Detroit?

WILLIS: Yeah.

CRAWFORD: Yeah, it was one Pat and I and a number . . .

RAUCHER: Oh, right.

NUZNOV: We talked about it in our interviews. And Gretchen was in my apprenticeship class.

WILLIS: Oh, okay. And I wish we still had that group, you guys.

NUZNOV: So do we.

WILLIS: So that was a familiar face. And Gretchen is very staunch on legal stuff and women's rights. So whenever I have a problem, I go to Gretchen, because I know she either has a book on it, has information or she knows somebody who knows something about a certain issue. But I don't know what else to say. Yeah, I have little issues like that, but I don't have constant battles.

FECTEAU: Have you ever been involved with your local, your union?

WILLIS: Yes.

FECTEAU: How and when did you first get started?

WILLIS: You know, first of all, when I first started with Local 58, they encouraged people to be active in your local. You have to learn about your reasoning and the purpose of the union, as to why you're here. And when I got to Local 1700, I didn't really get that at first, so it took me a while to get acclimated, but I am active in my union. I'm the chair of my Women's Committee. I am also a member of CBTU, which is Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, I'm a member of CLUW [Coalition of Labor Union Women]. I just recently joined those two. Also, I just recently became the co-chair for our Women's Council for our region, at Region 1. So, yeah, I'm kind of busy.

But I want to be more involved in things like either organizing or things related to HIV/AIDS. I like being involved with women's issue-type things. You know, maybe if they see women in skilled trades participating, maybe that will help encourage more women to come into the skilled trades when the opportunity presents itself.

FECTEAU: Do you think the union is doing anything to encourage women to go into the skilled trades? Are there any programs?

WILLIS: I've been trying to find out if there are through the UAW. They brag about it, but I have yet to see it.

FECTEAU: Who brags about it?

WILLIS: You know, you'll hear things about the skilled trades program, but when you try to find out how to go about getting into the skilled trades program, that's where you get, "Oh, well you should talk to so-and-so." And then you call them and you get an answering machine. "Oh, you should talk to this one." And then you get an answering machine. You never can get a person to answer how a female could get into skilled trades.

The few ladies that have come behind me in my plant came from the outside. They were hired, I don't know, through some company or whatever. But say you work on the line and you have aspirations that you want to do something different, nobody can tell you what to do. Nobody can tell you what's the process. The people see me walking around or riding a bike or riding in a cart and they're, "Well, I want to do that." And I can't tell them how to do that, because I don't know how to do that.

CRAWFORD: Is there an active apprenticeship program?

WILLIS: Supposedly.

CRAWFORD: How many apprentices are in it?

WILLIS: That's a good question. Right now I think there's maybe about ten, because they've frozen all of the hiring and everything. When it was more active, of course, there were quite a few more apprentices. But my committeeman tried to keep all of that information from me, for some reason.

DAWSON: Any women in the apprenticeship?

WILLIS: Yes. There were some women in our apprenticeship. There were two blacks, I think, and maybe about five white women. They may not have all been white-white, — they might have been other nationalities. And I think most of them have turned out, now they've graduated. They were some of the first to get laid off. But some of them have gotten called back, some of them have gone to other plants.

RAUCHER: Were there very many women electricians when you first went into the plant?

WILLIS: There was Gretchen, Sue and a lady named Barb Krych and then there was me, as far as electricians. Then there was a lady named Leslie, who's a toolmaker, and she's still there. Then maybe it was five or six years later — we're not talking immediately, we're talking a substantial amount of time later — a few more ladies came.

RAUCHER: How many workers are there in the plant?

WILLIS: 3,000 approximately.

FECTEAU: How many skilled trades?

WILLIS: It was 300. They're going through a transition right now, so I'm not exactly sure on the number right now. They just laid off people, brought some people back. I'm not sure.

CRAWFORD: Do you know how many electricians?

WILLIS: Uh-uh.

CRAWFORD: It's too transitional?

WILLIS: Right now it is.

RAUCHER: But you only knew a handful of women when you were first there.

WILLIS: Yeah. Maybe that number has gone up to ten.

RAUCHER: But you feel that you were still treated as well in the plant by the guys as you were out on the construction sites?

WILLIS: It was different.

RAUCHER: In what way?

WILLIS: The difference is the way that, like I said, people on the outside didn't mind sharing their information that would help make the job easier, because if they could help make my job easier, that would help make their job easier. If you're laying brick and I know how to run this pipe the right way, both of our jobs are getting easier.

In the plant it seems like people are afraid of sharing information, so you have to show a conscious interest in wanting to learn and wanting to know, and then you have to pursue it constantly. So that part is kind of hard. But I don't think that some of the people do it intentionally — they just don't like to share.

CRAWFORD: IN your plant are there more African Americans than Caucasians, or is it pretty evenly split?

WILLIS: Not in skilled trades.

CRAWFORD: Okay. But plant-wide?

WILLIS: Plant-wide, right now there's more blacks than whites in production. In skilled trades, it's not.

FECTEAU: Would you give a breakdown, your best guess?

WILLIS: I would say if there's 300 skilled trades, maybe fifteen percent are minorities. It may be a little bit more than that. But I think it depends more on the person that you have to deal with than making it a racial thing. You know, some people are just jerks — it doesn't matter, they're just stupid. It wouldn't matter if they were black or white or Mexican, they'd still be dumb. And they just don't want to share stuff. And a lot of people bring a lot of stuff from home to work and that translates into how they deal with people at work, too. I think I'm a little more understanding than a lot of people, though, so I don't know.

CRAWFORD: Do you work afternoons?

WILLIS: Days.

CRAWFORD: Do you find that working in the plant, most of your friends are people from the plant?

WILLIS: Most of my friends are from Local 58. Most of the people that I hang with are people that I know originally from Local 58. And it's ironic that I keep running into people in the plant from Local 58, so then we end up hanging out outside of the plant. But it's people that I met then that I'm still mostly dealing with now. I don't know if it's the mindset or being able to understand your work environment. Even the ones that went into Chrysler from 58 are the ones that I'm hanging out with more. I think it's just having a common interest. You really don't have a common interest with a lot of people in the plant. Not to be snotty.

FECTEAU: I was just wondering about how your son feels about having a mother who's an electrician, if that's affected him.

WILLIS: Hmm. I think he's proud of it, but I think he just has his own way of showing it. And I think eventually it will affect him in a positive way. Like I was saying earlier, he'll have to want more for his own life. And when he decides he wants more, then he'll get more. But I think right now he's proud and he's happy.

FECTEAU: Do you think it affects his relationship with women, having a mother that can do all the things you do?

WILLIS: Yes, because I find that he does pick women that work, which is good. He ended up getting married and his wife is Puerto Rican and she's a nurse. And she's going for being a surgical nurse or something. So yeah, he's leaning towards people that don't do the usual things.

FECTEAU: And I wonder if you have any granddaughters?

WILLIS: Yes.

FECTEAU: And would you encourage them to become electricians, and why or why not?

WILLIS: Yes, I would.

FECTEAU: What advice would you give them?

WILLIS: My first advice would be to stay in school and then to learn all that she can learn about everything, not just one thing, but everything. You never know what's going to end up being your blessing later on in life. And don't be afraid to try something new. Even if it looks like you can't do it right now, don't be afraid to try it. That's what I want to put in her more than anything.

FECTEAU: What's her name?

WILLIS: Daysia Renee Honey Rain Vashon.

CRAWFORD: And those are only her first names.

WILLIS: No. The last one is her last name. And her last name is her father's middle name. He named all of his kids with his middle name for their last name.

FECTEAU: Well, he's somebody who doesn't go the traditional route.

DAWSON: Do you wish you had done something else, as you reflect back? Other than getting a college education?

WILLIS: Right. I'm working on that now. And I'm trying to work my way out of Chrysler by doing that. As soon as I get my degree, I want to be ready to do something else.

RAUCHER: What would you be if you weren't what you are?

CRAWFORD: A butterfly.

WILLIS: A butterfly. How did you know? See, because I have a company called Black Butterfly.

RAUCHER: What does it make?

WILLIS: Nothing right now. I'm just saving the name until I can figure out what to do with it. If I didn't do what I do, what would I do?

CRAWFORD: What do you wish you had done, maybe?

WILLIS: That's a hard question. I think in a perfect world, I'd be a teacher.

DAWSON: Like your mom.

WILLIS: Yeah, but I don't know, I'd have to be more picky than her. I couldn't just teach like, a bunch of random kids. I'd have to be able to kind of pinpoint the type of

people I want to teach. Maybe like special ed kids, because you can kind of figure out what kind of kids are going to be in your group, as opposed to like, regular public school, where you never know what you're going to get. I think I'd probably be a teacher. I know I wouldn't be a social worker or a counselor. No, that's not me.

FECTEAU: Not a doctor, in science?

WILLIS: No. But I could see me doing something like chemistry. I'd have to study a whole lot harder. But I could see learning that and liking that. The thing I like the most about being an electrician is the troubleshooting — when you run into a problem, having to figure out the solution to the problem and then having that solution work. That's the part I like the best about it, troubleshooting different problems that we have.

I work in the conveyor room. Oh, we haven't talked about that part, did we?

CRAWFORD: Do you tend to work alone or do you have a partner?

WILLIS: I have a partner. And we do a lot of stuff with computers and PLCs and control logics. And when I first got to Chrysler, I worked with robots and that was cool. So that aspect — when it comes to having a problem and this part of the line is not running, finding out why it isn't running, troubleshooting it — I like. There's somebody in the control room that's sitting there and is on the computer figuring this part out and then there's somebody out on the floor looking at the visual to make sure that nobody is in the way or maybe it's a mechanical problem — putting those two together to figure out and make stuff go again, I really like that part.

CRAWFORD: What is the conveyor room?

WILLIS: We have the ability in the conveyor room to monitor the whole system in the paint shop. We monitor carriers carrying cars to get painted in the paint shop.

RAUCHER: It's all automated.

WILLIS: Yes. And it's controlled by this system called PLC, which is Programmable Logic Controls. And we have PLC III, which is outdated, and PLC V, which is almost outdated. So we're using those logic programs to help monitor the system. That's what we do. And we field phone calls and we let people know when stuff isn't running properly or if anything is too hot or too cold. We try to help prevent problems. We have an area where we can keep track of the count so we know if a zone has too many carriers in it — we let whoever needs to know that. Just try to keep things flowing.

CRAWFORD: So the conveyor room is the control room.

WILLIS: Right.

CRAWFORD: So you're one of the people that sits behind and looks at the screen.

WILLIS: Sometimes, yes. And then sometimes I go out on the floor.

RAUCHER: Where you use your electrician skills.

WILLIS: Well, they consider us an electrician no matter which part we do. When I go on the floor, I'll be doing more mechanical, hands-on electrical. When I'm in the control room sitting behind a computer, I'm doing electrical, but I'm just doing the logical part, because it's all a circuit. A circuit is a circle with switches and these switches are controlled by ones and zeros.

RAUCHER: What was the transition like from being a construction electrician to coming into the plant and doing this sort of work? I mean, was there any problem at all in adapting to a new kind of work?

WILLIS: One thing was just adapting to everything being on a smaller scale. Everything is big in construction — you got big pipe and wire or you have big panels. Whereas in the plant, everything is on a smaller scale. Basically, it does the same thing, it's just on a smaller scale. They may use a different voltage, smaller voltage, but it's still similar. The way that it works is very similar. So if you can understand what's going on in the big picture, you can understand what's going on in the smaller picture.

CRAWFORD: So you don't deal with like, the switch gear in the plant?

WILLIS: No, not me.

CRAWFORD: But there are other electricians . . .

WILLIS: Right. I would like to deal with the switch gear in the plant.

CRAWFORD: That's big.

WILLIS: Yes. But that's a cool job.

RAUCHER: Well, is there any way you could?

WILLIS: No, they don't want me to.

FECTEAU: Why?

WILLIS: [laughs] My committeeman told me that he doesn't think that I would really like that job, so he took it on himself to just say that I wouldn't like that job. I don't know, I think we've vendored out that job now, but at the time when I wanted the job, we went to training for it and everything and had a special contractor come in and

teach us about high voltage and all of that stuff. And he just felt that I wouldn't like that job.

CRAWFORD: Is it because you're a woman?

WILLIS: Yeah. And I had to kind of like tell him, "In the future, don't decide for me. I appreciate you trying to look out for me, but let me have the chance to say no."

RAUCHER: Do you think he didn't want you to do it because it was too dangerous, or what? I mean, you said, "look out for you."

WILLIS: Yeah. It was more a guy's work and it was also a little bit more isolated work, where I would have had like, tons of freedom. And I just don't think that he felt that that would be good for me, that I probably would just . . . But that's just him. And I kind of, in a nice way, let him know that if an opportunity comes up in the future, I'd still like to be considered — don't not check with me. And he has, since then, made sure that he includes me when things come up, to see if I'm interested at least. Because you never know what might be that little thing that might spark something else that I might want to learn. But I did go to school for it, so . . .

CRAWFORD: But that one never came up again.

WILLIS: No. But they vendor that job out now.

FECTEAU: You said you're going back to school. What are you studying?

WILLIS: I'm going for a bachelor of science in management.

RAUCHER: Where are you going to school?

WILLIS: Cornerstone University, which is a Christian-based college, Bible-based college.

RAUCHER: It's in Grand Rapids?

WILLIS: Originally based out of Grand Rapids. And they've got branches in Troy [a suburb of Detroit] and all around. So I'm going to Cornerstone, just because I want to have an ethical background for business. And I don't know exactly what it's going to lead to, but it's even giving me a bigger perspective on dealing with people at work. And I have an understanding for the other side now that I didn't have before.

FECTEAU: You mean management?

WILLIS: Yeah. It don't mean I like them better, but I think it's better to have both sides of the picture than just look from my perspective on the whole situation. So it's giving me that.

CRAWFORD: So you don't see yourself retiring from Chrysler with twenty-five or thirty years?

WILLIS: No ma'am.

CRAWFORD: Do you think Chrysler will be there or do you just personally don't think you'll be there?

WILLIS: Personally, I'm getting dissatisfied.

RAUCHER: How come?

WILLIS: I'm going through some issues and it's making it hard to come into work. The issues that I'm going through have to do with — I think when you first called me, I told you I was suspended — it all has to do with me being suspended over a safety issue that I didn't realize was a safety issue at the time, because I didn't get any of the paperwork to let me know that if you do this certain thing, then you will be disciplined in this manner as opposed to just being talked to. So I got thirty days off. So I'm getting really discouraged, but I'm trying to hold back my discouragement until I get through

with school and get a plan. Just don't get mad and get discouraged and cuss people out — have a plan. So that's what I'm doing.

DAWSON: Could you fight the suspension?

WILLIS: I'm grieving it. But it seems like everybody doesn't — I'm not going to say they don't have your best interests at heart, but they don't see your perspective on things. And so they may not put as much energy into something as they would if I was your best friend coming with a problem. You know?

DAWSON: So you see a lot of favoritism.

WILLIS: Pretty much.

DAWSON: You said that you didn't know this was a safety issue.

WILLIS: Right.

DAWSON: Since it's happened to you, have they made a point of letting everyone know that it's a safety issue?

WILLIS: No, they haven't let everybody know yet. They were supposed to have like, a town hall meeting to share that information. And they never did. And what happened was, they came out with some information and the week that they came out with the information, I was not in the plant.

RAUCHER: By "they," you mean management.

WILLIS: Management. And I just wasn't in the plant. So I said, "Well, I won't grieve it if you show me where I signed and I said it was okay." Because it's possible that I did. Over the summer I did a lot of things — I was at a CBTU thing in Arizona, I went to the CLUW conference in Detroit, I went to Black Lake. I was gone a lot. And so maybe, you know, when I got back and I was still getting oriented, maybe I signed

something that I wasn't aware of. Or maybe I just said, "Okay." So if I did something wrong, just show me. I don't have a problem with it and I'll leave it alone. I'll say, "Okay, I'm taking my lumps because I messed up." But nobody can do that yet. And so I'm a little discouraged, but it's making me stronger and it's making me wiser and I'm learning more rules.

FECTEAU: Could you be a committeeperson?

WILLIS: You know, I thought about that for the next time. I'm thinking about running.

RAUCHER: Yeah, I was going to ask you to talk a little bit more about your union, about your Women's Committee work and that sort of stuff.

WILLIS: Okay. What do you want to know about that?

RAUCHER: Anything you want to say.

CRAWFORD: It's production and skilled trades?

WILLIS: Yes.

RAUCHER: And it's an elected office?

WILLIS: It's elected to a certain extent, in that the women that are already on the committee pick who they want to be their chair. I wasn't thrown into the position, I was asked to run and I did, because when I first got on the committee, the previous chair retired. Then this other chair retired. So it was like, two years we didn't do anything. I had no clue what a Women's Committee even did. So I'm in the process of kind of learning more of what a Women's Committee's duties are, the power that a Women's Committee has and how to utilize what we have to benefit not only ourselves, but

everybody else in the plant — that's the challenge. And not to seem like we're just a social club.

FECTEAU: I believe Cathy was chair of her Women's Committee.

WILLIS: So you understand.

DAWSON: Oh yeah. Are your women automatically on your Women's Committee? Do you have meetings or are you trying to have meetings?

WILLIS: Yeah, we have meetings.

DAWSON: You got twenty-four hour coverage. You've got shift workers, right?

WILLIS: Uh-huh. We have meetings on union meeting days when we have our general union meetings. Our president has asked us to have them on that day, so that's when we usually have them.

RAUCHER: How many women come out to the meetings?

WILLIS: Usually — well, there's supposed to be like, eighteen women on the committee. I'm doing good if I get ten of them to come out, if I get ten to participate.

FECTEAU: That's good.

WILLIS: Yeah, I'm learning. One of the things is that the other ladies are getting upset because they feel like they're doing most of the work and the other ones on the committee don't even show up. They don't even give the consideration of calling and saying they can't make it. So they're getting a little upset with them.

CRAWFORD: Are all eighteen appointed?

WILLIS: I would say, yes. Our president — I guess it's him and the vice president and the top officers who pick who's going to be on the committee and then the committee, amongst itself, picks the chair, the co-chair and like that.

RAUCHER: Do you have any women officers in the local?

WILLIS: Yeah. Our financial secretary is a female and our recording secretary and our treasurer. We also have two trustees that are women — not skilled trades. But we do have one skilled trades — I believe she's a committeeman in our plant — that's a female. But she's not on our committee or anything like that.

DAWSON: So on your committee, do you have to get women from production, too. Is it a cross section?

WILLIS: Yes. Our skilled trades people doesn't participate very much with our production.

DAWSON: That's what I've always heard about the plant.

WILLIS: Yeah. I think I'm the only one. And like I said, I'm getting a little discouraged. And so I'm kind of pulling back a little bit and I'm picking my fights and picking what I want to be involved in. I've decided that I want to continue to be active in CLUW and I don't know about CBTU yet. But I'm picking my battles. I'm picking what I want to be involved in a little bit closer. I'm pulling away from my immediate local a little bit and trying to do more on the regional level. Not so much for the prestige. Everybody thinks it's whoop-ti-do, but it's harder work I'm learning. And the more people you're involved with, the harder it is. People don't see that. They just think it's . . . You know.

RAUCHER: Are there any specific or particular issues that the Women's Committee has been involved with at the Sterling Heights plant?

WILLIS: I think the biggest issue that we've been involved in is letting people know about breast cancer. The other one was the Equal Pay Day that comes up in April. It comes up every April. And that's to let people know about the inequality in pay between men and women. So we do a little equal pay awareness to let people know about the discrepancies in the wages that a lot of women get paid, even if they do the same amount of work.

RAUCHER: Are there any particular grievances that women at that plant have, as women? I mean, are there specific situations where they feel they're discriminated against or anything like that? Or is it just these general women's issues that you deal with?

WILLIS: I am not privy to that. And a lot of people don't talk a lot about their different problems. You just hear gossip, so I don't want to repeat gossip.

There used to be a time when there were bosses that used their power to do whatever. Say the female wanted a favor, she wanted to get an easier job, so she was sleeping with the boss and you know, maybe it backfired on her. Maybe then he started falling in love with her and so now he was stalking her or whatever. We've had different issues like that, but that's been a while. So I think they've kind of worked on the sexual harassment thing. Now we're going to work on workplace violence, and diversity is a new big one for us.

FECTEAU: Is that from the company or from the union?

WILLIS: That's from the company. Our union doesn't really see that they have a problem with that.

RAUCHER: With diversity.

WILLIS: With diversity or with workplace violence. I think the biggest problem we have is that people are more reactive than proactive. And that's a problem. You know what's going to happen. Why wait until somebody beats somebody up in a parking lot to realize you have workplace violence? Or why wait until somebody gets stabbed or shot?

FECTEAU: I'm kind of plugging this too, but have you ever thought about doing a survey of your members? I mean, if you ever need any help, you can go to our [WSU Labor Studies] Web site and there's some information on how to put together one.

WILLIS: Really? You know, I was thinking about that, only because our plant is getting ready to shut down for six months.

CRAWFORD: What will you do if the plant shuts down?

WILLIS: I'll be going through training. They're getting a new car. Well actually, it's from May until August — then the first shift is supposedly coming back. But the second shift may not come back until next December.

DAWSON: Do they get paid?

WILLIS: They get laid off. They get unemployment, yeah. So what I was thinking was that it would be good to do a survey now and have it kind of ready for when people all come back. By next year we'd do something like a welcoming thing or something, you know. I have lots of ideas in my head and I'm keeping them there, because I think my union is a little bit non-receptive sometimes to things.

DAWSON: Is there at least one forward-thinking person?

WILLIS: I know that they're afraid of change and the loss of power. There's somebody in my union, a leader — I'm not going to say a name — they're afraid of e-mail. I don't get paid for being a Women's Committee chair — it's a volunteer thing. So I'm trying to utilize as much time as I can the best way. E-mail is wonderful. And if a person doesn't know how to open up an e-mail, that makes things hard. Do you see what I'm saying?

DAWSON: They're afraid of it.

WILLIS: Yes.

DAWSON: And you have people who blank out at computers.

WILLIS: Yes. And the union doesn't want to pay. They used to reimburse you, give you paid time off to go handle your union business or something like that. They're not doing that anymore.

CRAWFORD: It's an affordability issue.

WILLIS: Right. But because they're not doing that as much anymore, a lot of people don't want to volunteer or at least they don't want to give up their time. So it would behoove them to move it up into the 21st century, because nobody wants to give up too much more of their time freely to help keep the union moving.

FECTEAU: My theory is that there's a certain amount of paranoia that somebody would hack into those files, somebody they don't want to see certain things. It would be harder to control.

WILLIS: And I can respect that a little bit. But that's the only problem I see with our union right now. And it's been a problem when you have people that want to

work, that want to help, that want to share information and then you have somebody saying, "Well, no, don't do that. Don't do that right now." And that kind of like squashes, squishes [laughs] the enthusiasm a little bit.

I guess my goal right now with the Women's Committee is to try to keep everybody's enthusiasm up, which gets kind of hard sometimes. But that's what I do. We're going to Ohio in January to a women's seminar with another local. Heaven forbid we're doing this outside of our region, outside of our state.

FECTEAU: What's it for?

WILLIS: It's just a women's seminar showing how to have an effective women's committee, trying to get more women involved.

FECTEAU: The UAW's doing this?

WILLIS: Uh-huh. It's a lady that I met at the CLUW conference in September. She invited us and her local is inviting everybody from around there and maybe a couple from the lower part of Michigan, near Ohio, down that way. And she invited us to come over, because she's having one of the reps from UAW International put on a presentation. So we'll see what happens. A lot of people don't want to go, but there are some that want to go. They want to learn, they want know how to do things the right way. And I don't know totally the right way.

DAWSON: Is it during the work week?

WILLIS: It's on a Saturday.

DAWSON: So you're going to take your own time.

WILLIS: Yeah. All I do is I make sure that whenever I find out information about something, I let everybody else know about it. They were mad at me because I

went to the CLUW conference and I didn't tell everybody. So everything I do from now on, I just bring back information to the entire committee, whether they act interested or not. Anything else you want to know about that?

RAUCHER: And you still think that the trades are a viable career for young women?

WILLIS: Yes. You know what I think is viable about that is that I've learned confidence since I've been in the trade, more than anything. I laugh a lot and I'm giggly a lot, but I think I have more self-confidence. And I know that I have an ability to do certain things that previously I had no clue that I could do.

And that spills over into so many areas of your life, you know, not just work, but your one-on-one interactions with so many people. So yeah, I would encourage young people, especially young women, to learn that there are things that they could do, different avenues that you can take, not just one — that you can do this and you can do that.

And in electrical, there's so many different areas you can go into. You can go into the plant. You can go do construction. You can go be a contractor. You can go be a home inspector. You can do all of that different stuff besides just . . . It's not one thing, I guess is what I'm saying.

FECTEAU: I guess this is a question I didn't ask that I usually ask: If you could be in charge of the local and you could do anything to help make the trades more inclusive, particularly to women, do you have any ideas what you might do?

WILLIS: Actually, yes. I think what I would do is first of all, in order to make them feel more included, just talk to them. And I think that I would ask what they want,

what do they feel is missing in our local. I see that we don't have a lot of skilled trades inclusion in the way that our local union is run. And it's almost like you have to just push your way in there, because everybody has their own mindset on how they want things done. I would try to include skilled trades in everything that I do and not just think production or just think skilled trades, but try to include everybody. And I think that would make the union a lot stronger, especially now with so much going on. The way that they do stuff in the past is what's keeping them weak. So I think that we need to include everybody, we need everybody's ideas.

And you never know — a lot of people don't know, at my local, that I came from Local 58. So they don't know all of my different experiences. Like when I was with Local 58, I think I coached a softball team for a couple of years or something goofy, but that's a different aspect that a lot of people don't know about. And there may be other people that have other talents and other skills that you could bring to the table. Somebody may know how to work a computer and do everything and be able to just freely teach them how to read e-mail. But how would you know if you're not willing to try?

RAUCHER: But you're thinking about running for committeeman?

WILLIS: That's only because of the issues I've been going through, but yeah.

FECTEAU: That sometimes brings the best ones forward.

WILLIS: Right.

RAUCHER: And when is the election?

WILLIS: I think it's 2007. And there's a lot of stuff happening in 2007, quite a lot. So yeah, I'm gearing up. I've taken my grievance handling and my parliamentary

procedure. And I'll probably be down here [at Wayne State] next year, when I finish with Cornerstone.

RAUCHER: And you have to run a campaign, right?

FECTEAU: We've got a class for you. [laughter]

WILLIS: But yeah, I'm thinking about it, because I think the whole union needs to be more inclusive.

CRAWFORD: This November there's going to be a ballot issue that would ban affirmative action. And I think that if that were to pass, there would not be much chance of there being any more diversity than we already have. It would really destroy the impetus for companies to change, because you couldn't sue them. It got on the ballot because they gathered enough signatures. They hired African Americans to stand there and get African-American signatures. Two or three of my friends — I mean, they were totally misled.

FECTEAU: Well, if you read the petition — I remember I'm looking at it and it says "We'll have absolutely no preference with regard to race, blah, blah, blah, and education." And I said to the woman, "You see, this means they do not want affirmative action. Do you understand?" This petitioner was telling me, "Oh, no. We're not anti-affirmative action." I said, "No, this is exactly what that means." And she's arguing with me.

CRAWFORD: And it's on the ballot in the November election. So the Metro AFL and probably the State AFL are working to develop a campaign to educate people about what it actually is. Labor did not take a strong position before and that's why they

got the signatures and it got on the ballot in the first place. And again, diversity is a divisive issue in the labor movement.

RAUCHER: You say the skilled trades don't participate much in the union. But is that by choice? Because the skilled traded are sometimes known as sort of prima donnas within the plant.

WILLIS: Yeah, that's partially by choice, but partially that's because people don't go up to them and try to include them. And I've learned that people, no matter who they are, they want to be included, and so if you go up to them and say, "Hey, I'm having such and such. Do you mind coming?," they'll come. But if you just, "Oh, well, they're this way, and they're not going to come," they're not going to come. And that just dawned on me — I don't know why it took so long — maybe like last week or so. So I was going to try to start — because somebody was like, "Well, Sara, you ought to start a skilled trades group at the local." I'm like, "Okay."

Because Mike Parker does something — I'm sure everybody knows Mike Parker. He has a little newsletter that he puts out every so often at the plant. And so I was thinking maybe I could talk to him and maybe we could do something together with the skilled trades, to let them know, for example, about the affirmative action thing. A lot of people don't know about that. And our locals are so busy being petty that they're missing the picture there. We have bigger issues coming up. There's bigger issues with the affirmative action, with the voting, with our healthcare. They're missing those big issues, and worrying about "somebody taking my job." But if we don't have a job, we ain't got to worry about this one no more. So we need to worry about these things so that

we can make sure we have this. But to me, they're not seeing that — "I'm okay now, thank you."

RAUCHER: Well, I guess the last thing is — I know you said you made some notes there. So is there anything we missed that you'd like to talk about?

WILLIS: I just tried to answer all your questions.

RAUCHER: Did we miss any? No, we think we've covered everything. Well, thank you.