PROFILES OF SWE PIONEERS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Maryly Van Leer Peck Interview

June 13, 2003

Winter Haven, Florida

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Maryly Van Leer Peck

Maryly Van Leer Peck was the first woman to graduate with a degree in chemical engineering from Vanderbilt University in 1951, and the first woman to receive an M.S. and a Ph.D. in chemical engineering from the University of Florida. She began her career in the aerospace industry as a research engineer, working for the Washington, D.C. Naval Research Laboratory and Rocketdyne Corporation in California. Peck lived on the island of Guam for 11 years, where she became the first woman dean of the College of Business and Applied Technology at the University of Guam and founder and dean of what is now the Community College of Guam. In 1982, she became the first female president of Polk Community College, and later became its President Emeritus. Peck was a long-time member and Fellow of the Society of Women Engineers. Peck passed away in 2011.

In her 2003 Profiles of SWE Pioneers Oral History Project interview, Dr. Peck talks about her education at Vanderbilt and the University of Florida; her experiences working at Rocketdyne while in graduate school; her career as an educator and school administrator at the high school and college level; and her involvement in SWE.

- July 2016

INTERVIEW WITH MARYLY VAN LEER PECK, JUNE 13, 2003

LAUREN KATA: It's Friday, June 13th, 2003. This is an interview with Dr. Maryly Van Leer Peck for the Society of Women Engineers Oral History Project. Dr. Peck is SWE's first Life Member, and a Fellow of the Society of Women Engineers. The interviewer is Lauren Kata. We are in Winter Haven, Florida.

And I'd first like to start by thanking you for participating in the project.

MARYLY VAN LEER PECK: Oh, thank you. It's very nice to have you here, Lauren.

LK: Thank you. Can we start by establishing your date of birth?

MVLP: Yes. I was born June 29th, 1930. And my mother always said it was the hottest day that Washington DC had ever had. And I really thought she exaggerated until all the records were broken about five or six years ago, and guess which one was the hottest day? June 29th, 1930.

(Laughter)

LK: Oh, how funny.

MVLP: It is funny.

LK: So you were born in Washington DC.

MVLP: I was born in Washington DC. You're always where your father happens to be working. And he was director of the

predecessor of the National Society of Professional Engineers and was in Washington at that particular time.

LK: Can you describe your family background a little bit?

MVLP: I'd be happy to. I am a Van Leer, which means that my father's name was Van Leer. The Van Leers came to this country in the early 1600s. We have a long history of being very much involved in the history of this country. One of the things that we always tell everybody is that the only sister of General Anthony Wayne married Captain Samuel Van Leer. And the home that is known as General Anthony Wayne's home was actually built by my fifth and sixth great grandfathers.

And on the Van Leer side of the family, they were mostly in what you'd call engineering type backgrounds for those days, you know, surveyors, and they were also in the iron business, meaning that they made things out of iron, like bells and things like that.

LK: Oh, great.

MVLP: From the Pennsylvania area, and then went down through Tennessee to Texas, which was where my father was born.

And my mother was third generation Swedish. She is from a part of San Francisco where there's a very large Swedish background. And when you look at me, you see a blonde version of my father. (Laughs) Does that give you enough of my background?

LK: I guess so. But you had siblings; you weren't an only child?

MVLP: No. I have an older brother and a younger brother. And we all ended up majoring in engineering. My father was in electrical engineering by background. And my mother was actually an architect. And she is really what I call the woman pioneer of the world, because she got her architectural degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1914, and '15 was when she got her two degrees. She got a bachelor's and a masters degree. And my father's story is interesting from another point of view. His father had died when he was three years old. And he was raised in a very small town of Bonham, Texas, which didn't even have a high school. And the town sent him to Big Springs, Texas to go to school. And when he graduated from high school, a very nice lady, a very well-to-do lady asked him what he wanted to be. And he said he wanted to be an engineer but didn't have enough money to go to college. And she said, well, she would send him to Purdue [University] if he wanted to go, and he got on the train and went. And I am very grateful to her, because if my father hadn't gotten his education, I probably wouldn't be sitting here talking to you today. And he went from Purdue to the University of California, to Berkeley, and was one of the early engineering faculty there. At one point he also went to Germany with a

special group of engineers that went between World War I and World War II to study in the late ‘20s, in Munich, and came back. And then that’s when he did the directorship at Washington DC.

I grew up in the South. Actually, Washington DC is south of the Mason-Dixon Line, so I actually was born and raised south of that. But I went from one engineering school in the South to another because my father was dean of engineering at the University of Florida, and then NC [North Carolina] State. And during World War II, was called back into the Army prior to being named president of Georgia Tech [Georgia Institute of Technology].

And one of the things that I always say is the little town of Bonham chose well, because they educated my father, who became president of Georgia Tech. And the other young man that they educated was Mr. Sam Rayburn, who was Speaker of the House longer than any other person in the whole history of the United States, and probably ever will be, since we now have term limits. (Laughs)

But when I was growing up, my father felt very badly that his sister had not had the same opportunity. And he used to tell my brothers that if anything happened to him, that they were to see that their sister got her education, because she was going someplace. And of course, you can imagine what my brothers -- loved that, because they would always ask me, “Where are you

going, Maryly?”

(Laughter)

MVLP: But in truth, we have all chosen our own way. And my parents certainly encouraged me to go into -- to do whatever I wanted to do. They were a little concerned about me going into engineering because my mother had had a real struggle with architecture, which was her major. She couldn’t get a job as an architect, got a teaching certificate, taught art.

She was a very gifted artist, a portrait painter, and worked for many years for Rand McNally doing very interesting maps. And two of her maps are currently in the Smithsonian Institute. They are maps that show the United States and England with authors, you know, women and men. And why they like them is because women were also pictured, although they were from the early, you know, seventeen, eighteen, 1900s, the authors in those periods, and they included women. And so often women were not included among the authors in those days, so they were very thrilled about the fact that Mother’s maps did. She was very, very gifted.

I’m very grateful that although I have three sons who are engineers like their mother -- not exactly the same major in engineering. (Laughs) But I have a daughter who is an artist and also an art therapist, and she takes after her Grandmother Van Leer.

LK: That's fantastic.

MVLP: So there we are.

LK: Well, then, the question, if you knew what an engineer did when you were young or who an engineer was -- obviously engineering was part of your--

MVLP: It was very much part of my growing up. I grew up with being exposed and introduced to a lot of interesting people of the times. For instance, Lillian Gilbreth and her husband both were very close friends of my parents'. There were a lot of people like this. So certainly I knew, one, what engineers did, and they did a lot of different things, and there were a lot of different ways you could go saying you were an engineer, but also that it wasn't confined just to young men.

And in my particular case, I was valedictorian of my high school class in Georgia. And in those days, the state of Georgia gave a scholarship to all the valedictorians of every public school graduating class. And I wanted to be an engineer. Unfortunately the only school that offered engineering was Georgia Tech, and they didn't take women. So my father filed a case in my behalf. They actually admitted women the year after I graduated. And I went first to Duke [University] for one year and then transferred to Vanderbilt [University] my sophomore year so that I could major in chemical engineering.

LK: When you were in high school did you receive much in the way of guidance counseling as far as engineering, or was your family your major influence?

MVLP: I would have to say that probably my family was the major influence. I had a very unique educational experience. First of all, I went to junior high school in Washington DC. It was called Gordon Junior High School. That school does not exist today in its present form. The buildings are there, and certainly there's a school there. But in World War II at that time, when you entered the seventh grade, you were given a placement test. Based on the placement test, you were placed in homeroom. And I was in 7A1, meaning the top class.

There were fifty students in my class. People who are in education today and think that classes have to be twenty-five, that is true if you're going to have a mixed class, meaning mixed abilities, and having to deal with four or five different levels of abilities. But if you are dealing with extremely intelligent highly motivated students whose parents are going to make sure that they do everything -- I had the most challenging educational experience I ever had in the seventh and eight grade, because I had college algebra in the seventh grade. I had Latin in the eighth grade. I was in classes with the daughter of Leon Henderson and James Landis. These were people that were running

wartime Washington, and their children were very well educated, very highly motivated young people. It was a very stimulating experience.

When I went down to Georgia after the eighth grade, they had a very different educational system. At that time, Georgia was on an eleven-grade system. It was seven grades of elementary and four years of high school. And here I was, well they didn't know quite what to do with me. And when I listen to principals today and everything is so rigid, I find that I was very, very fortunate, because the principal of Druid Hills High School who was also the superintendent of DeKalb County Schools, listened to what I said and questioned me on the declension and conjugation in Latin. And he said, "Well, I think we'll put you in Latin II and Algebra II, and we'll try you as a sophomore. And as I say, I ended up being the valedictorian of the class, so obviously I did all right.

That school still exists today, because that particular high school, which was built in 1930 -- and the building is still there still housing the high school -- is out the back door of Emory University. And all the faculty children from Emory University go to that particular school. It is also in one of the well-to-do areas of Atlanta, which meant that the people taxed themselves to make the school better. And it was an extremely challenging

experience.

One of the most rewarding experiences I had was when I went back to my fiftieth high school reunion. And the salutatorian was doing the registration, because she still lives in Atlanta. And she said, "You know, Maryly, you turned out exactly as you should have." And I thought, oh, my.

(Laughter)

MVLP: And what she said was that -- she said, "I remember we had that awful physics teacher." And she said, "We would go from physics to the lunchroom. And there were only three of us girls in the physics class. And you would sit there and teach Catherine Lemker(?) and me what had been taught in the class." And she said, "You should have been a teacher. You ended up a teacher. You ended up exactly as you should have."

And what is truly remarkable about -- and her name is Isabelle Thompson -- and the reason why it's really remarkable is she could have been bitter over my having come there as a sophomore, because when I had gone to my thirty-fifth reunion, they asked all of us to stand up and have a picture. Then they asked all those who started out at Druid Hills in the first grade to stand up. And out of my class of seventy-one, there were still thirty-six that got their pictures taken. I learned two things from that, that most of my class had always been there, and I

understood after all that time why I was an outsider coming in. But they had accepted me and had just, you know, it had been a wonderful high school experience, truly. And I wouldn't give anything for having had the school experience that I did, because I had a wonderful background. I'm not sure that everybody can look back from my vantage point and say, "I had a wonderful junior high school and high school experience." I can truly say that.

And I can also say that wonderful as I think Duke and Vanderbilt both were, I know I learned more in the seventh and eighth grade (Laughs) than I ever learned anywhere else. And the reason was because I learned how to study, and I learned how to give reports and write themes and do all those things. And if you learn that early, it makes the rest of it pretty easy -- a lot easier. Truly it does.

LK: Did you have favorite courses in high school?

MVLP: I was always extremely good in math, and obviously pretty good in science, because I was teaching Isabelle and Catherine. But I liked those better. And I had a wonderful -- my homeroom teacher happened to be the history teacher. And she was a very logical history teacher. And I took, you know, world history and American history and all those things underneath her. And Ms. Forbes was fabulous, very logical. For a long time I could give you every date known -- all that you could think of

about world history and American history.

You know, teachers that truly are good teachers are born. They can learn a few extra skills, but they're born. And I was fortunate that I had a lot of those born teachers. And I was fortunate even after I got into college and went to engineering school that I had some teachers that certainly were not prejudiced against women, even though my bachelor's degree, which was from Vanderbilt, was the first engineering degree ever awarded to a woman.

I didn't find that out until this spring, because they have never made a big deal over it. But I had a wonderful experience this last September. The president of the Society of Women Engineers chapter e-mailed me and asked me if I would be willing to come and talk to the chapter, and I said I'd be delighted, but that I was going to Africa in three weeks and wouldn't be back until the end of the first week of December, and by that time she'd be in exams, so maybe we better make this after the first of the year. And after several e-mails back and forth, we ended up making it during Engineers Week.

LK: That's great.

MVLP: And this young lady is going to go someplace, because it was a wonderful experience. She organized everything. And they even had a special parking place for me with my name on it

when I went back. We had a seminar. People that were in my class came back, and all the faculty were there, and various students and whatnot. It was really a wonderful experience. But it wasn't until the dean told me that at that point that my degree was the first one ever awarded to a woman, and I said, "I never knew that."

LK: Really? Wow.

MVLP: My masters degree at the University of Florida I had known all along, they made a lot more hoopla about it. And perhaps part of that has been that my father was dean of engineering at the University of Florida in the '30s, and also because I came back here and did the last part of my career as president of Polk Community College, and again was the first woman to be a president of a community college in the state of Florida.

So with all of that, they were much more -- they have honored me and all kinds of things that have been very, very nice. It was particularly when they finally had the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the admission of women to the University of Florida, I'm one of the -- because it was in 1947, they chose forty-seven of the women graduates to be honored, and we're on a permanent plaque in the middle of a quadrangle at the University of Florida, so that's very nice.

LK: What does it mean to be the first?

MVLP: Well, they're not very many people that are girls around you in engineering school. I think that's the biggest difference. When I was at Vanderbilt, there were actually three in engineering school at the same time I was. One did not graduate from engineering school. She did graduate from Vanderbilt ultimately. But the other one did graduate from Vanderbilt slightly after I did. She had a very long career in civil engineering. My major was chemical engineering. But in classes, it was all boys. You know, I didn't have any other girls in my class. And the same thing was true with the masters degree, and Ph.D., for that matter.

In fact, my very favorite story about my Ph.D. is that I was pregnant with my fourth child and working on a project with another graduate student. She was born in January 1960. This was in December 1959. And at the University of Florida they had an interview room, and there was a little reception area, and then were little cubicles where you interviewed for jobs. And this graduate student was interviewing, trying to get a job. I was not doing that, because I didn't think that my condition was very impressive.

(Laughter)

MVLP: So I was sitting out. I had come, and he wasn't through with his interview. So I sat down, you know, in the

interview area so we could go where we had to work on our project. And this interviewer came out and he said, "Are you waiting for your husband?" Now, that's very logical. And I said, "No." And he said, "Well, why are you here?" And I said, "Well, I was waiting for another graduate student who was being interviewed and then we were going to work on a project." He said, "You're a graduate student, then?" And I said, "Yes, in chemical engineering." And he said, "Well, do you want a job?" And I said, "Ultimately, but I didn't think interviewing right now that I would impress anybody." And he said, "Well, that is a condition that will pass." And with that he went back in his little cubicle, got out an application and filled it out.

And he was a recruiter for Rocketdyne division of North American Aviation. As a result of that interview, which was two weeks before my daughter was born, (Laughs) I got an offer to come out and be interviewed. I actually got the highest salary offer that was made to a graduate student that year.

LK: Really?

MVLP: And I often tell people that I was convinced after working for two years for Rocketdyne who made all the engines and all the solid fuels that we are currently still using in the Shuttles today -- which I do not find comforting. I find it very disturbing. I think that we should have made some advances, and

obviously we have not spent enough money on the space industry. And we should not be sending people up in unsafe vehicles. And after forty years, there should have been some improvements. And I really feel that they would have hired me if I had been purple or green or had a long tail, as long as you were competent, they needed engineers desperately.

And it was a wonderful opportunity, one that I fondly look back on, because I loved what I did at the time. I had some unique experiences all the way through. But I don't think that -- it certainly wasn't where I wanted to go for the rest of my life. I decided I wanted to go into teaching. And I left there and actually started back into the teaching field. That, by the way, was a whole different time.

My bachelor's degree was in 1951. I also got the highest offer in the class in 1951. You want to know what that salary was? It was $3,410 a year.

(Laughter)

MVLP: And the salary, by the way, that I got for Rocketdyne was more than my father ever earned as president of Georgia Tech. But more importantly, I made more money as a National Science Foundation Fellow at the University of Florida than he ever made as dean of engineering at the University of Florida, which doesn't say much except that times have changed and salaries have gone up,

and they're very, very different than they were.

LK: I want to take a step back for a minute and ask, why chemical engineering?

MVLP: I enjoyed chemistry very much; I was very, very good at math and analyzing things. And that was the reason I got into the chemical engineering field.

LK: So you knew right away, or--

MVLP: No, no. Obviously, I wouldn't have gone to Duke if I had thought I wanted to major in chemical engineering. And actually, I really thought Duke had a chemical engineering major, and it turned out that they didn't. Which sometimes when you're naive -- and I was very young -- I graduated from high school when I was sixteen, from college when I was twenty, so you do make some mistakes along the way.

I think most students when they go to college they change their majors an average of four times. So for me to have said I was going to major in engineering and then my freshmen year decide that it was chemical engineering I wanted rather than -- that's pretty unique. None of the rest of my family has been in chemical engineering.

LK: They were all civil?

MVLP: Well, my father was electrical. I have one son who is mechanical. The three boys now have -- and they're not boys,

they're forty-four to fifty years old, so they're certainly not boys at this stage. But they all have masters degree. And while they went to undergraduate schools at various places, their masters degrees are all from Georgia Tech, and all in construction management. And the McDonald Bolyard Peck -- Peck for obvious reasons, it's actually the number two son who started the firm, and was smart enough to hire his other two brothers. But they are one of the top hundred companies in the United States in only twelve years, so they've done well.

LK: Wow. That's fantastic.

MVLP: Made a lot more money than their mommy made. (Laughs) But I think that all of us have had -- whether you're talking about my sons or my brothers or my father, we all have certain analytical skills and things that are very, very important. And I think that we can solve problems quickly, which makes us very good at like administration, which is what I got into.

And really, it was when I was working on my masters degree that I got involved with working with older students. This was when people were coming back from Korea, older students. And there was a professor who needed someone to substitute for him because he had to present a paper. And he reluctantly asked me finally. (Laughs) I think I may not have been his first choice. But the students really were very responsive. And as a result of

that, it changed my life completely, because I started tutoring a lot of students throughout the whole college of engineering, and in particular, substituted for a lot of the professors. And that's how I really got into teaching.

From that point on, I was teaching dominantly mathematically background courses, I would say, but teaching. It didn't matter where I was working even if I was working as an engineer, I also was teaching on the side, so from that point on. And I think that's the reason I really got into community college work dealing with the older students, because they are very dedicated students and very -- they know what they want to do. Kids like me at sixteen that go to college do not necessarily -- do we need to cut this out?

LK: We can take a break.

(INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING)

MVLP: We're back talking about Rocketdyne. And it was a very unique experience all the way around, for a number -- and by the way, I did teach there, too, in the evening.

LK: So it all stems back from being recruited in that office that one afternoon?

MVLP: Uh-huh. But I really had some unique experiences. In fact, even the first day that I was at Rocketdyne they were -- you know how you go to a new job and they introduce you around. And

one of the most marvelous experiences that I've ever had was being introduced to this very tall black man who looked at me and said, "I've never met a woman engineer." And I looked at him and said, "I've never met a black one." And he threw back his head and roared and said, "I deserved every bit of that."

(Laughter)

MVLP: And we still exchange Christmas cards. And it was just, as I say, they needed engineers so badly, and they had so much work to do that people didn't think about where they came from or where they were going or what they were doing, or what all. And I was working dominantly on solid fuels, doing basic research on that, not on the engines. Although where they were building the engines was right next to where I was doing my research.

LK: Okay. And it was related to your graduate work, or was it--

MVLP: Not really. My graduate work was done under Dr. Aaron Teller. And he was the inventor of the Tellerette, which is the primary absorption tower material, or one of the better ones, we'll put it that way. And my work was in mass transfer. And to that extent, working on solid fuels was on mass transfer also. And with chemical engineering you usually have a chemical reaction involved in whatever you're doing, whether it's trying to clean

something up or trying to make it go somewhere or do whatever it is. And it was a unique experience, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Although when I left Rocketdyne division, one of the unique experiences I had -- my husband at that time was in theology school and he had a few more months to graduate. And I decided I ought to go up there and at least be where he was. He was in the San Francisco area, and I was down in the Los Angeles area, Canoga Park. And so the whole family, all four of my children and I went up there to spend the last few months just before, because we knew we were going to move back to the East Coast.

And so while I did that, I went on a speaking tour. And I got what was in those days big huge sums for going and giving a speech. I mean, $500 to give a speech, in those days -- this was in the ‘60s -- it was a huge sum, and to have your way paid there. So I found that real easy work compared to working as you usually would think of work.

And I was very, very fortunate, also, from another point of view. I had four children; I was able to work having those four children in with graduate school, working jobs, whatever. I never thought when I graduated in 1951 that I would work fifty-some-odd years. It just never occurred to me, because I was of a generation where you got married, you had children. You know, you worked until you had those children, and then you -- and I never

quit. And my mother had worked all during the time that I was growing up, but she worked in the home, like she painted in the home, or she did projects. Except during World War II for two years, she did do plans on the equipment that was used during World War II. But she was always in the home, whereas I was always doing my work outside of the home.

So I had to have competent help. And one of the things I feel very, very lucky about, I had extremely competent help, and extremely fortunate in the facilities that I could take my children to. Not all working mothers today are that fortunate, that they have -- whether it's a caretaker in the home, or depending on the age of the child, or whether they've got them in a nursery or whatever, has the kind of facilities that, you know, to be sure their children were taken care of well.

LK: Right, right. It was such an amazing story that you were in graduate school and working and raising a family that Life Magazine came out to interview you.

MVLP: Yeah.

LK: Could you talk about that a little bit?

MVLP: Well, that was an interesting thing. One of the things about Life Magazine -- and by the way, that was not the first time that I had ever been in Life Magazine. Most people don't know. Life used to do a series called "Life Goes To"

whatever it was they went to. And when I was eleven, almost twelve years old, I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church. And Life went to an Episcopal confirmation in Raleigh, North Carolina. And so while I wasn't the featured young girl because she was related to the photographer and what and all they were doing, I was in quite a number of the pictures.

LK: Oh, how interesting.

MVLP: But the intriguing thing is that when they came to do this one, it was over about a four or five year period that they contacted me and asked me if I'd be willing to be a part of that. And each time they would come back I'd be doing something different. (Laughs) And when they finally called up, I had just started, not maybe a month or two before at Rocketdyne. And they called up, and of course, I told them that I'd have to have permission from my company. Of course, they were thrilled to death. They thought it was marvelous that they would be getting all this wonderful publicity in Life Magazine. And I said, "Well, don't get your hopes up, because they've done this before, and then they've chickened out. So I didn't expect anything.

I called them back -- the number I was supposed to. And they said, "Well, we'll be there at 4:30 in the afternoon at your house." And so I said, "Okay." And so that's how -- they arrived at 4:30, at which point -- and we had hardly sat down when my then

-- now forty-four year-old, but then three year-old, James, who is my third son came in with his bathing suit in one hand and telling me that the neighbor had invited him to go swimming at his swimming pool. (Laughs) And so the big picture that everybody sees in Life Magazine is a picture of me talking to James and pulling up his little britches in the picture.

(Laughter)

MVLP: And it was a wonderful experience. The photographer that took those pictures, and they went all the way back -- they took a lot of pictures. They took 1,800 35MM pictures. And you've seen the article. You see how little is -- you know, they really did a lot of pictures -- even flew back with me to the University of Florida, because I was finishing up my doctorate. I had gone out and taken the job at Rocketdyne before I had actually gotten the degree granted. And they went back with me and followed me along.

And everybody at the University of Florida, the faculty that I had to deal with, thought that was hysterical, because they had known that several times this had come up. At two different -- while I was working on my masters and then subsequently when I was working on my Ph.D., so it was really kind of a funny experience.

LK: Was it exciting working for Rocketdyne during the early stages of the space program?

MVLP: It was, because they were, you know, top in the industry. As I say, the engines that they're still using in the Shuttle were made at that time, forty years ago. And it was very exciting. And there was a huge plant in Canoga Park. And then up on the mountain -- and Canoga is really in the Valley, surrounded by mountains -- they have an area where they would try out the engines and try out the shuttles and do everything. So that was kind of part of what I worked on. We went up there several times to try them out, and work that.

And it was a unique experience. I owned a horse while I was out there. Her name was Babe. (Laughs) And I used to ride around with a two year-old in front and a three-year-old in back. (Laughs) She was a trained horse. She had been in the movies, and did all kinds of tricks and everything. But she had gotten too old, so she was retired. So she was, oh, very tame, very well trained horse, so very good for, you know, carrying children around, and having children get used to riding a horse.

LK: Were your children too young to understand the excitement of the space program, or did they feel that, do you think?

MVLP: Oh, I'm not sure. I mean, they certainly know what their mother did. In fact, one of my family jokes is that one of my sons told me that he used to try not to tell his girlfriends

what his mother did or anything about her until after they had met me, because he found out that if he told them ahead of time they'd get so terrified (Laughs) of his mother being an engineer, his mother being president of a college, whatever it happened to be at the time, you know. So he just always let me get to know the girls before then, then they wouldn't -- you know, they sort of accepted whatever it was I did.

LK: Were you ever in any other situation where your success intimidated other people or other women?

MVLP: You know, I don't think I ever worried about whether it did or didn't, because I think that wasn't part of it. My job here at Polk Community College was to promote Polk County, which is very unique in its own way. A lot of people tease me about being a walking Chamber of Commerce, but we are a very unique county. Most people have not heard of Polk County. Polk County is the fifth largest in geographic size of the counties in the state of Florida, and the seventh in population. And people, you know, "Huh?" (Laughs) They don't know about it, because we have mostly small towns here in Polk County.

But we are the center of the citrus industry. We raise more citrus than the whole state of California, and we have the largest deposit of phosphate in the world in Polk County. And we were, until this year, the only county in the whole wide world that had

three major league teams that spring trained in Polk County. So baseball is very, very important.

(Laughter)

MVLP: But because of the phosphate and everything, engineering is very important in this area, also. And my job was to train people to be able to stay here in Polk County. We're unique in a number of ways here in Polk County, because seventy-some percent of the graduates of Polk Community College stay right here in Polk County.

And a lot of people are shocked and surprised about that, but they like it here. It's a unique place. By the way, we have the best water in the whole state of Florida. And when hurricanes or disasters come to Miami, the evacuation plan is to come to Polk County.

LK: I did not know that.

MVLP: (Laughs) It's because we have the good water. And so when you hear of hurricanes being in south Florida, we have to close our schools and open up our schools to be disaster areas for the people trying to get out of the hurricane area. Not because the hurricane has been here, but because we're safe.

LK: Right. Oh, that's so interesting. It says a lot if people who live here after they graduate want to stay here.

MVLP: Yeah. And they may go away for two years to go

college, or three or four years to go to graduate school, or may even take a job someplace else. But they like to come back if they can get a job here in Polk County.

LK: Right. Can we switch gears for a minute and talk about how you-- actually, I was interested in how you first heard about the Society of Women Engineers.

MVLP: Well, interestingly enough, it was my mother who (Laughs) heard about the Society of Women Engineers, and told me that it was starting up and everything. So that's how I ended up joining, was because Mother had told me about it.

LK: Your mother was Ella--

MVLP: Well, the whole name is Ella Lillian Wall Van Leer, but she always went by Ella Wall Van Leer in later years. And if you look around the room, you can see a couple of portraits, the one over here of me. These are all of me over here. Those are all done by my mother.

LK: I think I'm going to -- do you mind if I (?) a little bit?

MVLP: Huh-uh, go ahead. The one of me in an evening dress is when I made my debut in Atlanta. And the one over here with the Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy, I was in Gainesville, Florida, when that one was painted.

LK: That's beautiful.

MVLP: Which one? Are you taping both of them at the same time?

LK: Right now I'm looking at your portrait of your debut.

MVLP: This one is me when I was about six or seven with Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy. There's another one which is really my favorite one when I was about two years old, which has a big bow on the back of my back, and I look like I'm an angel. And I'm not even sure my mother ever thought that.

LK: Very talented.

MVLP: Yes, she was, very gifted. I used to tell my mother I couldn't even draw a straight line. And she said she used to tell me, "That was not the point, drawing straight lines." (Laughs)

LK: So she was about inspiring creativity?

MVLP: She was very artistic. And as you look around our family you'll find people who are very gifted artists and very creative. But what my mother taught me was an appreciation for the arts, and color and that sort of thing.

And for instance, one of the things that I currently do, I'm president of the board of -- or chairman of the board of Theatre Winter Haven, which is the most honored community theater in the state of Florida. And I'm very involved with a lot of those kinds of things, arts type things.

And right now one of my concerns is that a lot of people are

raising money for a lot of things because there are a lot of needs. And I have not had difficulty nor has anyone else raising money for scholarships or schools or that sort of thing, or even for Girls Incorporated, or for the Boys and Girls Clubs or Girls and Boy Scouts, either one. Those are all youth activities, and they seem to be still very popular even though people are maybe not having as much money to give to charity as they used to.

What seems to be suffering right now is the arts, the music, the dramas. They seem to be having more trouble raising money. I'm very concerned about this because I don't want to raise a whole generation of people that don't appreciate the arts and aren't knowledgeable of the arts, because that's what makes our life more interesting and more worthwhile.

LK: Do you think there's room in our society for a balance between the arts and science and technology?

MVLP: Oh, definitely I do. I think we need all those things in our life. And I definitely want to see that that happens, we'll put it that way. And I've been fortunate that I've been able to do a lot of different things in my life.

And my favorite story from the University of Florida, recently, is the young man who asked me while I was up there, did I ever regret majoring in chemical engineering. And I told him the short answer was no, but why was he asking. And he said,

well, it didn't seem like I had -- at that time I was president of the college -- that I was doing anything that had anything do with chemical engineering. And I told him that what he was learning right now was preparing him for his first job. And the skills that I had learned in college, and particularly the analytical skills, have really stood me in great stead in trying to analyze my problems that I might face as an administrator. So I didn't regret majoring in chemical engineering at all. I think it's a good background for anybody, whether it's chemical engineering or any other--

(Dog barking)

(INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING)

LK: -- introduce this as tape two of our interview with Dr. Peck. And we talked a little bit about how your mother introduced you to the Society of Women Engineers. First of all, why was it important to you to join an organization of women engineers at the time that you did?

MVLP: Well, I've already covered the fact that there were very few women in engineering school with me. And at the time that I joined SWE, we're talking about just having left the University of Florida, where I had been virtually the only one. And I just felt like women needed to be encouraged to go into a field that I thought should be open to women, and there were a lot

of young women besides myself that could do well in this field.

I went back to Atlanta, and therefore it was -- that was an area where I would find more women working in engineering, and that's how I got into working with the Society of Women Engineers. And I felt particularly strongly that where SWE should work is with the students and organize student chapters. And so that was the thing that I got primarily interested in, and really worked most of the time with. Most of the time that I was extremely active with the Society of Women Engineer was working with establishing student chapters.

And even today I would have to say those that thrive have strong sponsors, not necessarily women as sponsors, but have -- either whether it's male or female sponsors. Most of them that seem to be doing well have both, by the way. Almost without exception they have had a man and a woman. Or maybe they had more than one woman faculty member, but they always seem to have a man also.

And I think that's very good, because I remember with a great deal of pleasure, really, the faculty members who were instrumental in encouraging me, particularly in graduate school -- they and their wives. Even though the wives were not necessarily engineers, they went out of their way to encourage me, and basically stayed lifelong friends. Faculty members and their

wives -- I had one faculty member who I worked with in the Operations Lab at the University of Florida, his widow and I communicate quite often. And they have grandchildren that live here in Polk County.

LK: Oh, how nice.

MVLP: So I think that those kind of relationships of having -- I didn't have a female role model. I have been a role model for a number of young females. But they weren't available to you. There wasn't anyone that I could latch onto. I certainly had some outstanding people that were women that had done marvelous things. But there weren't any -- anyone that I could go to. My mentors were all male, and I had some wonderful mentors.

And in fact, even when I decided that I definitely wanted to be a community college president, I was at that time dean of undergraduate studies, which meant I was responsible for all the undergraduate studies at the University of Maryland University College, which is their evening/weekend overseas programs. I used to call myself the quality control person--

(Laughter)

MVLP: -- for undergraduate programs. But I wanted to go back into community college work. I wanted to be a president of a community college again. And I particularly wanted to come to Florida. And one of my mentors said, "Well, you apply for every

job that is reasonable, not necessarily a president." And the intriguing part about that -- and I give this piece of advice to anyone who wants to listen, is that I interviewed for a provost job down at Broward Community College which is in Fort Lauderdale.

And in the final step I was interviewed by the president, and he said, "Well, they're right. You're overqualified for this job. But we need you here in Florida. And he said, "Have you applied for the presidency of Polk Community College?" And I said, "Yes, I have." And he said, "I'm going to call them." And he called them, the interview committee, you know, the committee that was considering the thing. And I think that had a lot to do with me getting an interview. I think I probably handled the interview and was the reason I got selected. But I think if you don't have somebody that really at the right time comes in and says something for you when you need it -- and the state of Florida had never had a woman. And Polk County is considered a rather conservative county. For them to have selected a woman was really -- everyone marveled at it. (Laughs) And it was at a time when -- they think about the economy not being good now; let me tell you, it was not good in 1982, either. So I've had a number of people, like Hugh Adams did for me at that point, who have stepped in and encouraged me and said, you know, this is what you ought to do, and go out there and step for it and go forward...

And I also think that -- I interviewed for a lot of jobs -- you don't necessarily get the first one that you interview for, and you don't necessarily want the first one you interview for. But when I interviewed for the job of president of Polk Community College, I was at the top of my game, it was a perfect interview, so good that -- and here in the state of Florida, all interviews are open. The press is there. Everybody is there.

LK: Oh, I didn't know that.

MVLP: And when I walked out of the room, there was a woman reporter who ran after me and she said, "Wow, you were terrific. If they don't hire you, there's something wrong with this board." Laughs) And of course I did get hired. But I knew I had done a good job when I left that. And sometimes you need to go through a lot of interviews to know -- to have an idea of what they might ask so that you will have your answer prepared and not be unprepared to answer how -- it doesn't come across the wrong way.

But back to the Society of Women Engineers, I feel the young women need that exposure. And one of the reasons I like to talk to SWE student chapters is because I think they need to see some of us who have been through the thing. They need to hear how it was. And no matter what they're going to experience, it certainly isn't going to be what we experienced.

And I think there were a lot of women back in the early days

that really had to struggle. I don't think I struggled. But as I told someone not too long ago, I was very good at my job. And certainly there are people in the world that may not like you because you are a woman, may not like you because you're a blonde, who knows? But I was fortunate that I was able to get jobs that I enjoyed doing and did very well.

LK: Were there any other organizations that you belonged to that helped to reinforce that confidence, or do you think that it was more personal?

MVLP: I think that the Society of Women Engineers does it more than anything as far as women are concerned. Certainly I was very involved in organizations like AICHE [American Institute of Chemical Engineers], and you know, various honorary organizations. One of the reasons I'm so involved now with Girls Incorporated is for the same reason; their philosophy is to teach young women to be the best that they can be, whatever that may be. And I have loved being able to remain here in Polk County and see some things that you -- at the time you're doing them, you don't know whether they're going to really turn out all that great. And one of the things that I have left is a number of scholarships to Polk Community College that I have endowed. One of them is to Girls Incorporated.

And this year I had the most rewarding experience at Girls

Incorporated, because at the Celebration Luncheon, the performance by the young people, that is the girls in the program now, was choreographed by and directed by a young woman who had gotten the first scholarship that I gave to Polk Community College, to a girl that had come out of the Girls Incorporated program. And at the same time there was a solo done by a young girl that I was giving a scholarship to.

And I went to another elementary school and gave out a scholarship. And for the first time in all the scholarships I've ever given, this young girl threw her arms around me, and I didn't realize that she had gone to Girls Incorporated and had known me, because I'd been so involved in their board, and as chairman of the board for Girls Incorporated. But I think those kinds of organizations that try to give confidence to young women, it's very, very important.

And I was fortunate that I had the family that I did, that certainly gave it. You know, all families have jokes that they pass on and like to tease each other about. Both of my brothers were engineers. One was four and a half years older and one was four and a half years younger. And the four and a half years younger one always thought of me as being his second mother because I was always being left, when he was growing up, responsible for him. And he was seriously introducing me (Laughs)

to talk, and he said, "The only thing that I ever beat Maryly at was getting to be president of the Rotary Club before she did. And of course, my response to him was, I said, "Hey, you got in Rotary before I was ever even (Laughs) eligible for it."

And that is a tradition. My father was a Rotarian, and so we've all been Rotarians. And finally I have gotten to be in Rotary also, and have thoroughly enjoyed it, because I think they do the same sort of things. We encourage young people and give scholarships out, and work with young people, and that's the primary focus.

And this last spring I did have the pleasure of leading a group of young professionals to Japan, which was a fabulous trip, as I told you earlier.

LK: Yeah. It seems like it's a different type of activism, or an alternative type of activism, working with young people rather than pursuing some kind of a law or something.

MVLP: Uh-huh. That's interesting. Yeah, I hadn't thought of it quite that... And of course, I was talking to someone; they were asking me what I was doing now. And I had given him some of the organizations I've been in. Almost everything I'm involved with are school boards and children's activities and young people's activities. And this person said, "Do you know that all has to do with young people?" And I said, "So? My whole life has

had to do with young people." (Laughs) You end up doing what you enjoy doing. And in my free time and volunteer time, I can do whatever I choose to do.

LK: That's right.

MVLP: And it's not been just girls that I've encouraged. I feel very strongly sometimes -- in fact, they're coming out now with studies that say that our young men are not doing as well as the young women are because we've spent so much time and effort on encouraging young women.

LK: Really?

MVLP: Yeah. This was in the last couple of months they've come out with a study saying that. I hope that doesn't mean that they'll stop encouraging young women. Because while the University of Florida's graduating class this last May when I spoke at the graduation had twenty-six percent women that still isn't fifty percent. And the population is about fifty percent women, so I hope that we will get up there.

And I do think that most families now are -- both the husband and wife are working. My generation was a different generation; you followed your husband around. And sometimes my choice of where I went was because of what my husband was doing. Until I -- I was president of a community college in Arizona for a while, until that kept -- and then I went on my own from then on.

LK: Can you talk about your experience in Guam, the background leading to how you--

MVLP: Well, my first husband, after we were married, became an Episcopal priest. He was in theology school when we were in California. We went to North Carolina first and started a church there. I was teaching full time. And then he wanted to go in the missionary field. And I said, well, I wasn't sure I really believed in -- you know, there were some foreign religions that were perfectly satisfactory for them, even though they weren't exactly what mine were. But anyway, he decided he wanted to go to Guam, which, by the way, in the Episcopal church, is in the missionary field, but isn't foreign missionary, because Guam is owned by the United States. And if you are born on Guam, you are a U.S. citizen. So that was the reason we went out there.

And on the way out, the bishop in charge of the work on Guam was the Bishop of Hawaii -- yeah, the Bishop of Hawaii at first, and then became the Bishop of Okinawa. The Bishop of Hawaii asked me was I interested in running the school. And I said, "Well, I was going to be a wife. I wasn't going to work anymore." My entire not working lasted about a month and a half from the time the semester ended and we moved to Guam. We arrived in July and it became perfectly obvious there was no one to run the Episcopal school out there, so I took the school over.

And about halfway through the first year, the University of Guam sent a group -- as I said, a mission over to talk to me. There were three -- a dean and two division chairmen who wanted me to come to -- they were desperate because they had had two resignations in the math department and had no one to teach the upper math classes. I said okay, I would do that.

So for that while -- and one of the things that I've had to explain all my life was -- did you really work full time? And I did. I had a full-time teaching job at the University of Guam, and I was running St. John's Episcopal Preparatory School at the same time. I went -- within a month and a half I was a division chairman and within two years I was a dean.

Now, actually, it was running the St. John's School that really helped me know what kind of talents I had for running things, because I took the school over there. They had three teachers hired. School was going to begin the Tuesday after Labor Day. And I hired everyone. And what we did was, we said, "Dr. Peck had come to run the school." And boy, we made all we could of that publicity, and that particular school was the best school on Guam.

When I came there they owed -- they had borrowed $75,000 from the bishop to pay off the teachers to close the thing. The end of the next year, not only had I paid the $75,000 back, I had opened

three new classrooms. And it now runs all the way through high school.

LK: That's impressive.

MVLP: And when I retired from Polk Community College, our Episcopal School here, All Saints Academy, had just lost their headmaster, and so they asked me if I would run the school. We had hired someone to run the upper school and someone to run the lower school. The upper school had just been hired a couple of months before the headmaster left. And I said, okay, I would run this for eighteen months. And the board had to either get comfortable with the man that we had hired to run the upper school or hire somebody else, because this was not what I intended to do with my retirement.

But I had so many people who asked me, you know, this is so different. Well, I had lived so many different lives in my life. As I told them, I had run an Episcopal school on Guam. And they said, well, they didn't know that. And I said, "Well, there was no reason for you to know, because what I was doing now was running the college. But now I'm not doing that, I'm running All Saints." And I loved doing it. It was a wonderful experience. I'm very proud of All Saints, very proud of the headmaster, Mike Wyman, who has taken -- he followed me. He's done a fabulous job. And it's been a wonderful experience to be associated with a

school that had started out as a grade school and gone all the way up through the high school. It has a hundred percent graduation rate, and the students get accepted in all kinds of schools and get all kinds of scholarships. We're very proud of what we've done.

LK: Yeah, that's fantastic.

MVLP: And then when I quit that one, I'm also now on the board of Vanguard School. Now, what is Vanguard School? It's a school for special needs students. So I'm an equal opportunity educator. (Laughs)

LK: That's fantastic.

MVLP: And because I do feel that children that have special needs can be contributing members of our community. In fact, one of the things that I've learned in working with Vanguard School is that some of them can be extraordinarily successful; they just have difficulty with learning to read because they're dyslexic or whatever they are.

And one young man graduated and has been a highly successful businessman. And he now supports about four students every year to go through there. And while All Saints may be somewhat expensive, a Vanguard School is very expensive because most of the children are staying in the dormitory, and it's about a $30,000 a year job. And he is spending that every year because of what he

thinks he got out of it.

LK: That's very inspirational.

MVLP: It is. It's very inspirational. But it's one of the things I enjoy doing.

And one of the young men got some notoriety because he wrote some poems, and they got published. And I clipped out the article and sent it to him and told him how proud I was of him, and he sent me back the most beautiful thank-you note. I would say that I clip a lot of articles and send a lot of things to a lot of students and young people and whatnot. And over the years while some of them may see me and thank me in person, very few write lovely thank-you notes. This young man wrote a beautiful thank-you note. And by the way, his father is an engineer in Europe. (Laughter)

LK: What an interesting connection.

MVLP: It is. It is indeed.

LK: What about this idea that a person will have, you know, so many different careers in their lifetime? Do you have any thoughts about that?

MVLP: Oh, I consider myself very lucky to have been able to do a lot of different things. And I repeatedly tell people that what I learned in undergraduate and graduate school prepared me to be able to do whatever I wanted to do. And I have enjoyed being

able to do many different things, and not be limited, if you will.

LK: Right. Is there anything that you would have done differently?

MVLP: I don't think so. I think that if I -- at this end looked back -- you know -- (Laughs) my children are constantly telling me that I -- you know, because I had four children and I did all this work -- you know, at the time, it didn't seem all that exhausting, but right now (Laughs) I'm not sure I would want to undertake doing that.

And I was fortunate I had four very bright children who were very responsive. Although I've had one of them tell me -- you've heard the dog go in and out as we've been doing this interview. I've always had animals. But about seven or eight years ago when my last poodle died I was still working, and I told my children not to think about -- I guess it had been fifteen years since I had not had a dog, maybe twenty, I don't know. And I told them not to give me a dog, because I didn't have time to train it. And they apparently very seriously discussed this among them. And one of my sons finally said, "Well, Mother wouldn't have an undisciplined child, why would she have an undisciplined dog? I think we better listen to her and not give her an animal."

But of course, when I finally retired, I did get the dog, which is, as I call her, a Humane Society Reclamation project,

since she was very badly mistreated by a man. And she's become more trusting of men, but basically she -- and she loves where she is right now. Fortunately she landed on her feet, I guess is the word.

But I don't think that any of us really start out to do all the things that we say we're going to do. In fact, one of the things that I find very interesting about today's students is that they set goals far more than we did as young people. I wanted to be an engineer; I wanted to graduate in engineering. I met my first husband when I was still in high school, and I married him five days after I graduated from college. And less than two years later I had my first child. So I mean, that was what I thought my role would be. It never really occurred to me that I would work as many years as I did. And it was just the way things worked out. And I was fortunate that they did.

And I think one of the things was that even when I thought, well, I won't work anymore, like when he was in the Marines and I had just had a child, well, they were desperate for somebody to teach math in the evenings.

And my two favorite stories about what girls should wear -- one of them has to do with Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; the other one has to do with the University of Florida. At Camp Lejeune, officers' wives were to wear a skirt and heels at all times--

LK: Really?

MVLP: -- and when you're teaching three hours of math at the board, that is. So I would come in, take off my heels, put my flats on and teach my class and go out every day. Well, it's the same thing at the University of Florida when I was working on a three-story high heat exchanger. And they were requiring all women going to the University of Florida to wear skirts. And the head of the department said, "Change your clothes in the ladies room and don't discuss what you're wearing in the hangar building."

(Laughter)

MVLP: And that's what I did. But they were very -- that was a whole other age and stage. It was just like you also -- Duke had a rule you couldn't speak to boys after 7:00 o'clock during the week if you were a freshman. (Laughs) I mean, those were just rules of the time. And of course, they did change. But I think today's young women can't imagine, you know, like you and I have on long skirts, we may wear that or we might wear slacks, but you know, whether we're going to wear a short skirt or not isn't necessarily the issue anymore.

LK: Right, right. What would you say, Dr. Peck, your greatest contribution to the engineering profession would be? It's kind of a loaded question.

MVLP: Well, actually, I think starting the student -- the number of student chapters of the Society of Women Engineers.

LK: Can you expand on that a little bit?

MVLP: Well, I think that that influenced a lot more young women than anything else I could have done, you know, to stay in engineering. Because I think a lot of -- I would say ninety percent of those who think they want to be engineers -- it doesn't matter which kind of engineer -- they have no idea what they really want, what it is they think they're going to get into, and what they want to do. Now, they may say they want to be an engineer, and they want to work for a large company or a small company, or they want to build buildings, or they may have some vague idea like that, but they really don't know what, and they have no idea.

And the time when I went to engineering school you got through in four years. I took as many as twenty-one and twenty-two hours, some of the quarters, mainly because I was transferring, and your subjects get mixed up.

But today's students don't take anywhere near the number of credit hours that we took. But on the other hand, one of the advantages that I think that we have done for our engineering students is it used to be all lockstep. You could have had college algebra in high school, but you were going to take college

algebra, trig, analytical geometry and then calculus, then differential equations, in that order. You would not skip any one, you would not pass go, (Laughs) you would not collect $200. And literally, you couldn't deviate from that because that's the way it was.

Well, now we have all kinds of opportunities of students to get into honor programs, so many of them have calculus before they ever go to college, and therefore they don't have to do that. So their academic load can be lighter in some ways, but they can also do a lot of other things and not just be snowed under by what engineering is. They can get the whole total experience better, of college. And I think that's very, very good.

But as far as being an engineer and really contributing some engineering concept, or inventing the Tellerette as my thesis advisor had done, I don't think that that was my particular role. And my particular role was being an extraordinarily good math teacher, and that is, teacher of math oriented subjects, because there are a lot in engineering that are math oriented beyond just basic mathematics courses. But today, even though I haven't been in the classroom in a number of years, I could probably walk in and teach almost any of the math courses up through differential equations without looking at the book, because I was very good at doing that level.

LK: Do you think a lot of that is integrated into computers today?

MVLP: Yeah. You know, I think everybody has a computer. You were big stuff if you had a hand calculator (Laughs) when I came along. And when I was in graduate school, we were doing calculations with binary numbers strictly, you know, and using machine language, Fortran.

And now you can -- it's so simple using the computer. And I think that a lot of it has been -- you've become technology literate rather than necessarily learning all of -- some of the math stuff that we had to learn. That's good.

(Laughter)

MVLP: We would hate to think that it stayed the same or didn't improve as time went on. See that's why I'm concerned about the Shuttle still using those engines from forty years ago from Rocketdyne, which by the way is not a part of North American Aviation anymore. It, like a lot of companies, has been absorbed into a larger company.

LK: Isn't that part of Rockwell or--

MVLP: No. Turn this off and I'll tell you what it is.

(INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING)

LK: Okay. So do you have any final thoughts?

MVLP: Well, it's been a real pleasure meeting you and having

this interview. I hope that they'll be young women in the future listening. I usually tell the people at the University of Florida that I'm the original dinosaur, because I'm the first woman that ever got an engineering degree.

The chemical engineering department at the University of Florida has the unique experience of having the first woman and the first black, and I was saying this. And the man who was the first black said, "I wish you wouldn't say that," because he said I -- "can conjure up in my mind this black dinosaur that I am." (Laughter)

MVLP: But I hope in the future that there will be young women listening to us old ladies who are sharing through this project with them.

LK: Well, I want to thank you very much for your time.

MVLP: Well, thank you for coming.

END OF INTERVIEW