

SWE GRASSROOTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Alma Martinez Fallon Interview

March 9, 2021

Remote Interview

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TROY ELLER ENGLISH: Okay, today is March 9, 2021. This is an interview with Alma Martinez Fallon. The interviewer is Troy Eller English. This interview is being conducted as part of the Society of Women Engineers Grassroots Oral History Project, and we are conducting it remotely via the Zoom video conferencing platform. Alma recently retired as [correction from original recording] Corporate Director, Strategic Planning at Huntington Ingalls Industries. Before moving to Corporate, Alma spent most of her career at one of HII's Divisions, Newport News Shipbuilding [end correction]. She is a senior life Fellow and past president of the Society of Women Engineers. She is also a Fellow of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, and served on ASME's board of governors. Among other awards, Fallon received the SWE Distinguished New Engineer award in 1997, the ASME Distinguished Service Award in 2002, and the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers Junipero Serra Award in 2004.

Thank you for talking to me today. [00:01:12]

ALMA MARTINEZ FALLON: Nice to be here.

ELLER ENGLISH: So, to begin with, can you tell me where and when you were born?

FALLON: I was born December 1, in 1958, in the Dominican Republic—a town called Constanza, Dominican Republic. And I think most people, when they think of the Caribbean islands, they think everybody lives near the ocean. My family is from the mountains of the Dominican Republic. So Constanza is up in the mountains. So I didn't see the ocean—probably the age of eight years old [laughs] when my family moved to the capital, Santo Domingo, so. [00:01:59]

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay, and can you tell me about your family?

FALLON: I'm the youngest of three. I was an accident. My mom, my mother was forty. My dad was forty-one years old when I was born. My mother was an educator, teacher in the Dominican Republic. At that time her education was post-high school, plus a certification to teach. That was the requirements in the 1940s in the Dominican Republic. My dad—eighth grade education. He was an independent young man and did a lot of things in his teens into his twenties, because he was financially independent from his parents, because they had a large family. They were married late. My mother was in her late twenties—twenty-nine. And then had a family in their thirties, into their early forties with me. [00:03:08] So not a large family, but a large extended family. My father is one of eight. Was—I don't have any aunts and uncles for his generation. They all passed on. And my mother was one of six. She was the second oldest. I only have one aunt, one of her sisters that are still in the Dominican Republic, and she's in her early nineties now.

So, hard-working family, wanted to do the best for their children. So that's one of the reasons why my parents, at the age of fifty, fifty-one immigrated to the US [United States]. [00:04:00] We were legal alien green cards. 1967—Christmas Eve. It was an interesting experience, because we left—as a nine-year-old—it was a really warm climate, to winter in New York City. So that was an interesting experience, for seeing—not snow, but seeing ice that was frozen. So it was kind of neat to see that.

ELLER ENGLISH: Why did your parents move to New York?

FALLON: Just giving a little bit of history to the Dominican Republic—the Dominican Republic had a dictatorship from the 1920s into the early 1960s. [00:05:00] So if you were not in support of, or part of that community or network, things could have been really tough. So my dad worked in the forestry in the Dominican Republic, in the mountains, and moved to different towns. So they moved from—this is in the late-1950s, early-1960s. They moved from a town called Constanza, where I was born. And things were really tough financially, economically because of the regime. And so they moved in with my mother's youngest brother. And then from there—this is a different town called San Juan—and from there they moved to the capital. And in mid-1960s there was a revolution in the Dominican Republic. And I personally experienced that as a seven-, eight-year-old, in terms of war, the revolution itself. [00:06:03] Because it was right—it was there, seeing tanks, seeing airplanes. The first American that I ever saw was the marines. So that, I believe that lasted about six months—'65, '66.

And economically, things were not where my parents desired to be, and they felt that they could have a better life in the US. Plus, my father already had a sister that immigrated in the 1950s, and my mother had a brother that had already immigrated in early 1960s, so there was that communication. So basically, to do better than what we had. [00:06:54] At the time, when my parents immigrated, we

were still sharing a home with my uncle and his family. Which those kids were my age, so those cousins are real close to me. They're still close to me now. We're still very close. So to make a better life. And one of the lessons that my parents—that I got, in addition to working hard, making a difference was—. And I don't know if you're familiar with the immigrants that are especially—they're very mobile now versus in the early twentieth century. Once we moved, we stayed, right? And so there are family members that came in, immigrated, made their little fortune, and moved back, because that's where they feel comfortable. My parents said immediately, "We're not going back." So I think that allowed the family to establish roots and not assume that it was a temporary situation.

[00:08:03]

And I think I benefited the most of my siblings, because my sister was seventeen years old and my brother was eighteen. And, you know, they had to go work to take care of—to get through this change. So they were working full-time. So I kind of really got the benefits of their hardship, and my parents hardship, so.

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay, okay. When you arrived in New York, what was that experience like? Where did you go to school, and—?

FALLON: So I actually was—looking back, it was all happy, because there were new family members that I'd met, that had been living in the US that I had not met before. [00:09:12] So it was a happy, fun environment. Of course, we lived in a two-bedroom apartment. A nine-year-old is not going to recognize that, you

know. I didn't recognize it as anything, just so there was—. I shared—so there was a family of five in a high-rise two-bedroom apartment in [Queens].

I went to the local public school in [Queens], and the experience was really mostly learning a second language. And at that time there wasn't bilingual study or bilingual education. So there wasn't a lot of other students that spoke Spanish.

[00:10:07] So, but again, you've got to do what you've got to do, right? So I excelled in mathematics. Not too good in English and grammar, [laughs] but definitely in mathematics and science. And I was the youngest in the class, because when you think about it I was a year ahead in terms of age. I should have been—because I had just turned nine—I should have been in the fourth grade. But I was in the fifth grade, so I was with older kids—nine, ten years old.

My parents did something that I think was potentially a financial sacrifice. Don't know, but within a year they put me in Catholic school, and that's where I got—.

[00:11:02] The nuns told them, "Hey, she's a bit too young to be in the sixth grade." So I repeated the sixth grade. [laughs] But that was good, because it kind of really gave me the opportunity to be with my peer group, age group, and also decelerated a little bit of the learning, in terms of learning the language, English, so.

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay, okay. What did you want to be when you grew up at that time? What did you think you wanted to do?

FALLON: Well, I didn't start seeing things until high school. [00:11:59] So teaching, since my mother was a teacher. Teaching what? First was, I want to be a gym

teacher, because I was very athletic, so I wanted to teach—at the time it was called phys ed. And then it was, I want to be a math teacher. And then it was, I want to be a special ed teacher. So that was the objective when I left. And again, in high school I accelerated in mathematics and science, but not so well—my English teachers were not very happy, but—. [laughs]

So when I finished high school I was just turned seventeen, and my goal was to—I was accepted at Hunter College in Manhattan, which is known for education and teaching. [00:13:00] And the rest is history—fell in love, got married at eighteen. And I think a lot of that was really because—I think it has to do with our, the Spanish culture. You marry young, so I did. And also I never saw, was not involved with folks that—. My family members—I was the first one to even attempt to go to college in the immediate family. So I didn't have that, what I would say—people ahead of me that I could follow. And I remember when I went to be interviewed at a university in Connecticut, in Fairfield, Connecticut—and that was for a sports scholarship. [00:14:03] And when I returned home my dad said, "You can't leave home. You have to study here." So they were still in a mindset—. When you think about it, I mean they were born 1917, 1918, and they jumped from a culture and environment in the Dominican Republic to New York City, so they didn't know—. That's what they knew.

So anyways, I said, "Okay, fine. I'll just do something else." [laughs] And divorced at twenty-two, went to college. I didn't teach high school. So I left Hunter College, part of the City University of New York, and moved down to Virginia, and worked in a bank. [00:15:08] My sister, her career was banking, so I had that experience.

With her, I was able to enter into banking. So I did banking through the age of twenty-four. And that's when—I was still going to school, college part-time, attempting to get a mathematics degree. So I was twenty-three, twenty-four, single, and I worked in downtown Newport News, Virginia. And that's real close to Newport News Shipbuilding, so we had a lot of customers that were engineers, so a lot of young men. [laughs]

So I got to learn about engineering through the customers, and they were curious about what I was studying. [00:16:03] And that's how I got inspired to go to engineering school. And one of them said—his name was Mark—he said, "Why teach math? You can still apply the same principles in engineering, and you can potentially be financially independent because of the salaries." So I checked into that. I said, "Well, why not?" [laughs] And I was rising in the bank, promoted a few times, and I really surprised my bosses when I said, "I'm quitting banking. I'm quitting work, and I'm going back to school full-time." So the rest is history.

[00:16:58]

When I made that decision I was twenty-four years old, 1986. I'm sorry—1984, '83, '84. And the obvious thing to have done was to move back home to New York, live with my parents, and go to school nearby. So I was accepted at Stony Brook, part of the SUNY universities in New York. And I was there nine months. I couldn't. After being away from home for five, six years—it was a bit much. So then I came back to Virginia, and that's when I transferred to Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia and graduated in 1987.

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay, so what was what was your experience like there?

FALLON: At Old Dominion University? It was fantastic. [00:17:58] At the time, the university in the eighties was—now is—really large in terms of there was a lot of students that were studying engineering that were like me. They were working, and commuting to school. So that was great, so we had similar goals. Re-entry—get your degree, and go to work. [laughs] So that was it. So I did have a lot of friends that kind of, we had similar experiences. And the professors, and the dean, and the School of Engineering was fantastic in supporting—when any of us had any obstacles they were there for us. [00:18:58] Not that they made it easier, but they helped us navigate through anything that we mentally have had, so. And we had access to our professors whenever. It was a very good experience.

Sure, there wasn't as many women in mechanical engineering. Typically we had one or two in a class. But I never saw that as a barrier. It could have been because I was into sports in high school, but I didn't see it as an issue. Again, the language, [laughs] grammar continued to be the obstacle. And Old Dominion University at the time had a requirement—you had to pass an essay before you get your degree. I mean, you could have had a 4.0, but you still have to write an essay, and it had to be okay. [00:20:02] So that was an obstacle. I had to go through that at least twice. [laughs] But other than that, it was a good experience.

And the other thing, too—through Old Dominion I had access to working part-time in the local community. So I learned about the co-op program. And that's when I was introduced to the co-op program, and also to Newport News

Shipbuilding, and working for Newport News Shipbuilding. So '84 fall [semester] was the transfer to Old Dominion, and then '85 spring semester I started the co-op program at Newport News Shipbuilding. And I think that was phenomenal, because not only was I getting experience in engineering, but I also got to see what it is to be an engineer, and see that world. [00:21:12] So it was great.

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay. How did you choose mechanical engineering versus a different branch?

FALLON: Good question. When I went to Stonybrook it was electrical engineering. And then when I transferred to Old Dominion, the advisor said, "Why? You have to consider mechanical, because it's broader than electrical." "And what does that mean, broader?" "Well, what it means is you can have a broader opportunity to get jobs, to work." Again, mid-twenties, getting this degree to get a job, you know, [laughs] better than the bank in terms of income. So I said, "Oh, mechanical engineering. I'll try that." [00:22:06] So again, it's because the advisor at the college of engineering at Old Dominion posed that question and gave me a reason why. So I switched to mechanical.

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay. And you were introduced to SWE while you were a student there?

FALLON: Yes, yes. There was a sign that said, "Pizza party lunch." So, free lunch. [laughs] So my friend Barbara and I—who was also re-entry—we went to the meeting and we stayed loyal to SWE. We joined. [00:22:57] When I think of it, having that level of support, as well, because SWE had engineering students that

were ahead of us, and we also had women professors—professor. There was only I think one, maybe two at the time—that were there supporting the student section. So I wasn't able to be very active because I was commuting, and I was off semesters co-opping. But as soon as I graduated from college, I reached out to SWE and went to my first—supported the local section, the Hampton Roads section. And my first conference—at the time, convention—was in 1991.

[00:23:59]

ELLER ENGLISH: I think I have a photo of you at that convention.

FALLON: No way. You do? [laughs]

ELLER ENGLISH: And it was in, was is it Orlando?

FALLON: Yes.

ELLER ENGLISH: Yeah, I found a photo of you. [laughs]

FALLON: Oh my God. [laughs] Was it with Mabel Estevez [Estevez-Velázquez]?

ELLER ENGLISH: I know I have photos of her at that, but I don't know if you're in the in the photo together.

FALLON: So what was interesting, I got involved with the multicultural committee at the time, but it was only conference calls because I was an entry-level engineer. And there was another woman—Laura, Laura Ortiz, who also was a SWE member. She went to Michigan State, so she had a bigger or broader exposure to SWE, particularly coming from that region at the time. [00:24:58] So we both,

through our lunch hours, we would do our conference calls, multicultural and—. And Mabel had such a distinguished, distinctive voice. I don't know if you ever heard her voice, but—. So when we were approved to go to the conference, paid by Newport News Shipbuilding, I heard this voice. I had never seen her, but I heard this voice and said, "That's Mabel." [laughs] And the Puerto Rican section was extremely active, and I think they had a large number of folks from the section, because it was in Orlando. So it was kind of cool. [laughs]

ELLER ENGLISH: So, you stayed at Newport News Shipbuilding after you graduated.

FALLON: Yes, so I graduated. And yes, I did go interview elsewhere, some others. [00:26:05] And I had about five really good offers from Fortune 500 companies, and higher than the offer provided, you know, offered by Newport News. And a difference, looking back—which I still analyzed it back then. Looking back, you had a different cost of living in this area at the time. You also had—Newport News also offered tremendous benefits in terms of your—there was zero cost for health. Zero. [laughs] And they had a pension built into it, and also—which, you know, pension—you think, Okay. [00:26:58] And then also the matching with the 401(k) [retirement plan] was phenomenal. So when you added all that up it was financially—looking back, it was better than the other companies that had made the other offers.

But at the time the reason why I stayed—. What I just shared is really looking back, but the reason why I selected the Newport News is because the offer was to work at a division that was in the process of designing a brand new submarine,

the Seawolf program. And again, because I was twenty-nine—so that meant my peer group that graduated the same year were twenty-one, twenty-two years old. So I kind of knew I was seven years behind, or five years behind in terms of knowledge and experience. [00:27:58] And I wanted to establish my technical foundation, because I felt at the time it was going to be the key thing that was going to propel my career. So, with being involved in a new submarine design, I felt like that would be better, developing a technical foundation.

And my plan then was, I get a technical foundation, experience for about— technical experience for about five to six years, and I'd just move on. I never did, though. [laughs] Because it's a company that, as you know, is the largest shipbuilding company, or shipyard in the US, designing carriers and subs, and at times some commercial ships as well. So you could easily have a career and not move anywhere. [00:29:02] You could stay and work for Newport News. At the time, when I was hired full-time, it was almost mid-thirty thousand folks, thirty-five thousand folks working in the same location. So I never really had to move anywhere, and I went to many, many multiple divisions throughout my career. So that was really great.

ELLER ENGLISH: Can you talk about some of the projects that you worked on?

FALLON: Sure. So when I started in the Seawolf program in January 19, 1988 [laughs] I was assigned to the piping engineering program, piping engineering department. [00:30:00] And the systems that I originally had was auxiliary systems for the emergency diesel generator for Seawolf. So what that

experience entailed was designing, going through the design and approval process with the US Navy, and then working internally with the appropriate technical folks within the department to approve, to write comments. So I learned a lot with some of the top, seasoned engineers in in that department. They were, I would say, twenty, twenty-five years experience. So through the process of presenting my design, and process of them providing me feedback, red-mark, you learn a lot. [00:31:00]

So I started with small systems and that kind of group, to bigger systems—auxiliary systems, fluid systems within the Seawolf program. And then within four and a half years of working in Seawolf my boss, immediate supervisor was moved to start off a brand new concept design of ships. And these are ships that were ABS—American Bureau of Shipbuilding—specs. And the ships' mission was to transport marine equipment, tanks, et cetera. So they're called Roll-on/Roll-off Sealift ships. [00:31:57] So my boss, he went to that program. And then they needed engineers, and I was one of the lucky folks that was selected to move to that area. So I worked on the commercial programs—which is interesting, going from military specs to commercial specs.

And then from there I moved to engineering supervisor, I want to say probably '90, potentially early nineties. Yes, mid-nineties. And then I—hang on a minute. Let me look at my [resume]—. Hang on one second. I want to be accurate. So after, when I was an engineering supervisor, and the group that I had was—. So I had a group of engineers and designers. [00:33:00] And then the company in the late nineties stood up a special project to—because at the time in the late

nineties the US Navy—. This is post-Cold War, so there wasn't a lot of contracts to build new ships, or to retrofit new ships for the US Navy, because the amount of ships weren't as needed because of the post-Cold War environment. Which is great, right? So there was layoffs in the mid-nineties at Newport News, major layoffs. And then the strategy at the time was to move forward and try to figure out how we can do more with less. [00:33:55] So re-engineering our processes, making it more simple in terms of, how do we design something with less resources? How do we use new tools to manage our design? How do we use new tools to manage our operating systems?

And this is just about two to three years before 2000, so they were so scared that the legacy systems could not cross over the 2000 [Y2K software problem]—. So they stood up a group—Newport News stood up a re-engineering group. And they put together a group of people that had different experiences: engineering, planning, production, IT—at the time I think it was called management systems, not IT, but—human resources, design. [00:35:07] So it was thirty-seven folks that were selected. Supply chain—at the time it was called purchasing. So I was one of those that—I was given that opportunity to go to that special assignment. And I—because I had this idea that I wanted to stay in engineering forever, right? I want to be an engineer forever. It would be nice to be a director. I just want to learn, because I'm always very, very curious in terms of learning. So my boss came to me. My director came, "We have this opportunity. Would you like to go?" And I said, "Well, only if I can come back in nine months," because it was a nine-

month assignment. "Yes, you can come back in nine months." I never went back.
[laughs] [00:35:59]

So that's where I got my first—. I worked very closely with the purchasing buyers when I was an engineer, as well as a supervisor in engineering. So they placed me with the materials team, represent engineering on the materials team to try to do better synchronizing processes, communication, data between engineering and supply chain. So I was in that group. It was a phenomenal experience because it was a "mini shipyard." I say a mini organization, where you saw how the whole, everything came together. I was exposed to production, how the production— I'm not saying I was a production person, but was exposed to the things that are occurring, the processes, the production folks, planning folks.

[00:37:02]

So I had that exposure for about nine months. And I got a call from the vice president at the time. No, it was my director—who's still a dear friend of mine—at the time, because I was reporting to a director. We're still good friends. And he said, "The production head of steel fab wants to meet with you. They have to discuss a position." I said, "What do I know about steel fabrication? I don't know anything about steel fabrication. Why do they want to talk to me?" He said, "You need to go talk to him." So I went to his office. And he said he was interviewing me. [00:37:57] And I said, "But I don't really know a lot about the position that you would like for me, that you're interviewing me for." He goes, "I know, but you can pick it up. You can figure it out." I said, "Okay." [laughs]

So that was the next level. So I was moved to manager in 1997. That was a phenomenal experience. I was there seven years in that division, steel fabrication. And if you know about ships, the first production activity that occurs is the steel fab. Yeah, steel—fabricating steel, assembling steel. That's how you build a ship, with the blocks, right? [00:38:59] So I was being surrounded again with experienced folks. I'm not saying I was a great listener, [laughs] but still I picked up a lot of learning. And so I was there seven years. And I was on SWE's board when I had this very challenging position. This was the first time in in my career—it was in in 2002? I had just finished my SWE presidency—'04, I think. Yeah, '04. But I kind of said, you know, it's time for a move.

And in the production area—I was in production for seven years. [00:40:01] In the production areas, people that saw me—you know, wearing khakis, and top, and hard hat, and my safety glasses. Just, that's all they knew. Everybody had forgotten that I had other experiences, when you think about it. And I remember flying back from Phoenix. There was a SWE regional conference in Phoenix. And I used to love going to that region. They were a lot of fun. So there was a speaker that spoke about career management. And so from the flight from Phoenix to Virginia—which is not direct, I'm sure it was Phoenix to Charlotte—I put together a package to share with HR, human resources, to say, "Newport News Shipbuilding has invested in me. [00:41:11] It's time to leverage that knowledge." [laughs] So it wasn't about me. It was about the company, [laughs] which was successful.

I moved to the next position after that. And again, I still had the support of the company. The company was just phenomenal. And so I moved to a brand new class of ships. I don't know if you've heard of the Ford-class aircraft carrier, Ford-class. And at the time it was CVN-21 [program], so it was the next class of carriers, replacing the Nimitz-class that was designed in the late 1960s.

[00:41:58] And I came in as the superintendent of steel for a few years. And that led to my position in supply chain, as procurement director in supply chain management, supply chain procurement. And I was there twelve years, which was phenomenal. I keep using the word phenomenal, but it was just another learning experience, making a difference, seeing your team growing, and trying to affect the company's bottom line in a positive way, and also trying to affect the future of the company in a positive way, so.

And after that I was given the opportunity to move to corporate. [00:42:57] So I went to corporate, as corporate director of strategic planning. [clarification of original recording] I reported to the Executive Vice President and Chief Transformation Officer. I was responsible to work with company leaders across the businesses to drive improvement and synergies in the supply chain management processes. [end clarification]

ELLER ENGLISH: Were there any particularly memorable successes or challenges that you had in your career?

FALLON: As I mentioned, the positions after engineering that I was assigned to or selected—it would have been much—. How do I say this? If you move up within

the same organization, there's a lot less learning and you know the folks, the people. [00:44:04] And I wouldn't change it in any—. Mine was moving to new organizations, learning about that organization, learning about the mission and what they do, and the process and so on. And also learning, getting to know the people that are in that organization. That was great, but it was—. You know, it's a lot of learning, so. But the benefit was just tremendous, because if I would have gone up the ranks in the same organization I wouldn't have met the phenomenal people, the great people that I met across the company. I don't consider that negative. I just consider that it was interesting. But I loved it, because I kept on learning.

The positive is the many people that taught me a lot along the way. People that I worked with, people that worked for me, and people that I worked for. [00:45:03] It's the relationships that was established in my thirty-plus year career. And the culture of questioning and the culture of learning was very positive. I also reconnected with a friend who became my husband. [laughs] Scratch that. [laughs]

Just getting to say that 30-plus years of service at Newport News and then HII—Huntington Ingalls Industries—and I was able to work in six or seven areas, including one that was a twelve-year position, being there for twelve years—. So that was—yeah, it was good. [00:46:21]

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay. So did the company support your involvement in SWE?

FALLON: Yes, yes. I think I would have been an associate, a level-two engineer, when they started supporting me, and all the way through—an elder. [laughs] My entire career I was supported, yes. No issues at all, no issues at all. [00:46:58] And I worked while I was—. I mean, at the time the ability to work out of office—the technology wasn't there, but you still had calls, you were still engaged with what was happening with your team. So it was more or less an integrated SWE and working. It never really was, "I'm going to go to SWE and forget about work. I'm at work and I forget about SWE." It was blended. So trying to manage the priorities, you know, what was important if I was at a SWE event, working and supporting the office. [00:47:58]

ELLER ENGLISH: How do you think your involvement in SWE impacted your career at Newport News?

FALLON: Positively. The exposure that I received through SWE gave me—. SWE gave me a platform that I would never have had at Newport News. I mean, there was a platform within Newport News that published weekly newsletters for the whole entire company, and things could be highlighted there. So I was highlighted in those venues and communications. When things changed within SWE, I was highlighted through press releases. [00:48:56] Also, my SWE career was ahead of my professional career. So I learned a lot of things within SWE that I would say were lessons learned. I learned how to be stupid in SWE and not get fired, [laughs] and make mistakes, and then apply those lessons learned back to my work environment. And many of those lessons learned within SWE obviously were not technical. They were, How do you work with people? How do you work

in teams? Are you able to negotiate, and not get it all your way, and compromise. Communication, public speaking. Yes, SWE gave me all of that much earlier, way ahead of when I really needed it in my professional career. [00:50:03]

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay. So why don't we step back and talk about your involvement in SWE. So after you graduated, you joined the local section, the Hampton Roads Section. How did you stay involved with the Society in the early part of your career?

FALLON: It was easy to do, because the Hampton Roads Section, I started as the— [technical problem]

ELLER ENGLISH: Oh I can't—.

FALLON: Can you hear me?

ELLER ENGLISH: Oh, now I can.

FALLON: That's what I thought. Hang on a minute. [00:50:57] Let me do something here on my phone, because it's picking up the Bluetooth. How is it now? Can you hear me?

ELLER ENGLISH: Yes.

FALLON: Okay. So in the Hampton Roads Section, I worked in the section. I was committee chair—strategy, and also training. And it more propelled me to—at the time it was called national level—that I was the Hampton Roads Section rep

[representative]. So that was my first conference, in Orlando. And I think I was the first member of Hampton Roads that went to a conference at the time. And then I was also involved with Region E.

Now at the time, when I was volunteering for SWE, I was also volunteering for the ASME local section. [00:52:03] My ASME was a bit more formal. I went up through all of the little steps. You know, member of the executive committee, to vice chair, to chair, and then to the region of ASME, as well. So I was the treasurer, secretary of the region at the time. And those two were running in parallel.

So for SWE, the stepping stone to being involved in national level was becoming a rep, and then from there was my involvement with the multicultural committee. And I had some level of involvement at the region level. I was deputy to the director of regions. [00:52:57] But I never really held what I would say was a formal position in SWE at that time in my career. I held mostly my formal positions at ASME section and region level.

Then within SWE, locally, we hosted several conferences, regional conferences. So I worked in supporting those conferences. The multicultural committee was at its beginnings, and so that's where I met a lot of the folks. And I think that's where leaders—and Rachel McQuillen will say this story—past president. Rachel, she went to the multicultural committee seeking diverse candidates. She was on the nominating committee. And that's where I met Rachel.

And I did run for regional director. I didn't get it, I was not elected. And then I ran for the board, and I was elected. I didn't have any—my goal wasn't, "I'm going to be president." That wasn't—no, that wasn't it. So I just stayed engaged within the board. At the time it was so much—I don't know if you've interviewed other leaders within SWE that were part of this time frame? Where you had—

ELLER ENGLISH: Just before and just after.

FALLON: Okay. Okay. [00:55:00] I was just on the cusp of coming on the board when SWE headquarters was moved from New York to Chicago. And I was entering president-elect when SWE hired its first executive director with an engineering background, a SWE member [Betty Shanahan]. So there was some big changes, even though it was eighteen years ago. It seems like, "Oh, that was a long time ago," but I believe that the leadership of that board, and the leadership during the '01, '05, '06, '07 time frame—that first decade—really positioned the society to kind of propel and do things differently. [00:55:58] Not saying what was done in the past was bad—just do things differently to accommodate the needs of the corporations, the needs of our younger students, collegiates, and the needs of the early career engineers.

And so we established the Corporate Partnership Council with very few members and then it just organically—with the leadership of staff and Betty, it just grew tremendously. And this is not all me. I'm just saying I was part of that team. Moving the timing of the conference to where it really provided a positive impact to corporation recruiting, and at the same time to our members. [00:57:00]

Because if the conference is in June, by then everybody has been hired. So by making it in the fall, that allowed a lot of opportunities for our members, and also for the corporations to recruit the best talent there is.

And so, basic things such as partnering with corporations, providing better opportunities in terms of growing and developing for our younger engineers and our collegiate students, collegiate members, and changing the way we do business. [00:57:47] Creating, modifying the senate, modifying the bylaws to enable a more fluid board of directors, smaller board of directors, ability to appoint directors that are outside, that are special in bringing a need, or skill, or a certain talent. And also modifying the COR, the Council of Representatives, to be smaller, or more agile, and to be more strategic. Those things I really think set up the Society, and I'm so happy to see that the leadership team continues to kind of really excel and just continue to move forward. And it's amazing what I've seen, where the society is almost forty thousand members now, where we were ten to twelve [thousand] and were envisioning that we could be quite a bit bigger. This is great. It's fun. [00:59:00]

The other thing, too, is the public policy. That was instrumental. And again, that was one of those times with our executive director at the time, Betty [Shanahan], and we were flying from an event, and we strategized when I was president elect. I said, "I want to do this, because it's important for us to really make a difference on STEM, for young women K-through-12 on STEM, for also post-college. We have to really impact, affect public policy. We have to educate, provide data, provide experiences, evidence through experiences to our lawmakers,

legislators." [01:00:08] And obviously SWE did not have that background, so that's where I made that connection with ASME, because in ASME I was a member of the public relations, public policy—council on public policy. So I made a connection with a senior-level staff and Betty, and Betty just made it happen. So it's by hiring an ASME staff that can really start putting the infrastructure that would have a SWE member, a leader of SWE sit in front of any kind of [congressional] hearing as it relates to women in engineering and STEM education. [01:01:05] So that's really cool. It really was. Yeah, yeah.

And it took several years, because I believe there might have been a bit of resistance because folks were scared that we're going to be politicians, that it's really going to change SWE's trajectory to be more—I don't want to use that word, but to be more politically involved, which then could deter corporations from supporting us because we're "political." And it didn't happen. Of course it didn't, because we're there to educate as our legislators are going through, assessing or going through new policies in the area of STEM, so. [01:01:57]

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay. Okay. So I'm wondering if we can just quickly circle back to your involvement on the multicultural committee, which spanned much of the 1990s.

FALLON: Yes.

ELLER ENGLISH: SWE was, at that time, not very—. It did not have a diverse membership, you know, for the most part. What did the multicultural committee do? What were you hoping to achieve?

FALLON: So this is going back years. So obviously I think awareness was the biggest thing. [01:03:02] Because you can't change things overnight, right? You can't say, "Tomorrow we're going to have 50% of the yadda yadda yadda. Whatever team is going to be diverse." We recognized that what was important was the pipeline, and creating the pipeline to where you targeted and made it more inclusive to where it gave access. That would enable potentially having future leaders within SWE that are more diverse. So our goal at the time was awareness and education. [01:03:55] And also it was—you know, it was a committee that provided support for the women that were diverse. So you went into that committee and it felt comfortable. So from there, we also supported each other in terms of going to other areas within SWE. But what I remember was more—because we delivered in every conference workshops, and invited members of the board to attend, and committee chairs to attend. But again, it was more awareness, and education, and support for each other. [01:04:59]

Later on there was development of the principles of diversity. And that was led by Vi Brown. She was one of the key persons, key leaders that put that forward. And SWE adopted it. And I think that was a position that kind of propelled it further, because there was consensus, and SWE had an agreement. Leadership had an agreement and adopted the values and the principles of diversity—what is the meaning of inclusiveness? And I don't know where we are with this today, but that's one of the major steps that occurred.

And the multicultural committee was truly, mostly of multicultural experiences across the different cultures, versus really pushing an agenda to drive certain

decisions, if that makes sense. [01:06:09] Okay, yeah. We also created recognitions and developed nominations for folks for certain awards. The collaboration between SWE and SHPE, and SWE and NSBE, the dual membership. That was later on. I was not on the multicultural committee, but that was still part of that, where that could have been an opportunity to kind of increase our members of diverse groups, a stepping function for membership at SWE. [01:07:02]

And the last conference that I went to, the last face-to-face conference at Anaheim [in 2019]—and you see it now. You see a lot more diversity within SWE. And I think SWE is poised to really leverage now, they're poised to really leverage the entry-level engineers and the collegiates—because that's where you see the diversity. They're poised to kind of really start mentoring that group now, to be able to affect and impact the diversity of the board, and diversity of committee chairs. [01:07:57]

So when you look at our history, recent history, it's been a while since we've had a woman of color in the helm. The positive thing is, though—I always like to look at the positive thing. That way of looking at it is that we have our foundation. Our ability to recruit is so much easier. And we have access to the younger population that we didn't before, to start mentoring and pulling them, you know, supporting them so they don't—. I mean, regardless of where your background is, once you finish college and you're an early-career engineer, you have other things to do. And then if you have a family—all those things can really push you

away from involvement. So we do lose a lot of folks. I'm assuming that's still the same. So anyways—. [01:08:55]

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay. I'm going through my questions. You've answered several of them already. Alright, so why have you stayed involved with SWE through all these years? You know, what have you gotten throughout from it, both professionally and personally?

FALLON: The friendships, number one, and the women that I've met that I would have never met, internationally, nationally, domestic. At this time it's really the friendships, as a past president. [01:10:00] And one of the changes on the board was—in terms of the makeup of the board of directors—the immediate past president position was gone. And that was the year after I finished my presidency. And I think that's great, because you do not want to have a—my opinion, you don't want to have a past leader sitting next to you while you're leading. So for me, I feel like when I left, when I finished my presidency, I retired from SWE in terms of formal positions. But I still have informal relationships and informal positions through mentoring, at this time mentoring women that are in mid-career, twenty years behind me, fifteen years behind me. [01:10:58] Currently I'm spending time mentoring those SWE members. If they call and they need support, have a question, or ask—I give them my time, and I give them my advice. And I'm happy if they take it, and I'm happy if they don't, so. [laughs] Yeah, so we'll say mentoring, yeah.

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay. How has the Society changed since you first joined? It's changed a lot. So you've talked about some of the ways that it has changed. Are there any other changes in SWE that you've noticed, or—?

FALLON: Well, I always like to celebrate the past. You always have to change, as well. [01:12:02] I find the conferences, and the venue, and the programs that are delivered, it's just—. I would have never dreamed that we would have that amount of participation, as well as the caliber of the speakers, and the level of support from corporations. And also giving access to the local community, giving access to engineering students that wouldn't have had access. It's just—. And the size of the conference—I mean that's wonderful. [01:13:01] That's a huge change. And there's a negative and a positive, you know. But I think SWE's handling the con, which is not losing SWE's personality with the sections and the regions. And I believe SWE is still capturing that and at the same time still advancing the organization forward to what I would say the stakeholders really need. So that's a big change.

The other, I would say as well, is there's a move to really support the women engineers that are going through late in their careers, making decisions on retiring. [01:13:58] You know, just that lifespan—kind of increasing the lifespan of a SWE member. It used to be entry level, college, and then somehow in your fifties you're just kind of like, "Okay, then what?" You know? Now they're expanding the lifespan of a SWE member into their retirement and forward. That's also a very positive change. I like the demographics of really focusing on collegiates and early career, because that's the future. And the technology that's

available, in terms of learning—I remember how we struggled how to put on a webinar. [laughs] [01:15:01] Now it's there, you can see it. And I'm not as close to what's happening internally within the leadership—don't have to be close, but I can see that the team is really doing some really great things, so.

ELLER ENGLISH: And what would you like to see SWE do or focus on in the future?

FALLON: I'm not sure. I mean, the obvious answer is—. I need to think on that one. I really do, because I'm good where it is now. And the future—I don't know the challenges. [01:16:02] I don't know what the insights are about what COVID did to SWE. I don't know how COVID in the last twelve months affected SWE financially. I'm not in the know, but I would have to assume there's been some impact. And I would have to assume that there's been learning from that impact, positive and negative, and that hopefully that through the COVID experience—where everybody went remote, working from home, doing SWE from home, supporting and moving the mission forward from still remote—that in the future we find a sweet spot, that not everything has to be done face-to-face. [01:17:05] And by doing so, I believe that you would increase more participation for members, or potential members that don't have access or can't get there because of other responsibilities, but they can still participate. And how do you do that? Again, assuming that may be improving, strengthening IT infrastructure, tools that are able to deliver and provide that forum, and you still have that participation. And who knows, you may still increase more members because you're touching a group of folks that couldn't get on that airplane and go

somewhere, but wanted to be participate, or didn't know they could participate, so. [01:18:06]

I want them to continue to be successful. I don't know what 2050 is going to bring, or the latter part of the century. You know, professions—like medical professions, and attorneys, the lawyers—when you're seeing the demographics, it's more than fifty percent of those professions are women. Let's say engineering becomes that, more than fifty percent of engineers are women. Then what? How do you keep SWE relevant, to ensure it still provides some level of services to that group? Does that make sense? [01:19:02] Okay.

ELLER ENGLISH: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

FALLON: Oh gosh, you're almost done. Good. Whew! Let's see. So I wanted to kind of also say that—and I'm not sure how you're going to document this, because it feels like I'm going back and forth, so—

ELLER ENGLISH: It's fine.

FALLON: Don't worry about it, you're going to figure it out, right?

ELLER ENGLISH: Don't worry about it. [laughs]

FALLON: Okay, good. [laughs] So one thing that I wanted to highlight is that my position on the board of governors of ASME—. When I was elected governor of the board of ASME, that was in 2007—'06, '07? No, hang on a minute—'04 time frame. And that wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for my presidency in SWE. I

just wanted to highlight that, because of my experience being a director, and being elected president, president-elect of SWE really positioned me to be able to run for governor of ASME. And I believe at that time there were not too many women on the board of governors of ASME. So that's good. [01:20:59]

Kudos to SWE in terms of—and I've seen where members are able to step to a different platform, from not-for-profit and also from their leadership positions within SWE. Because when you look at SWE leadership, board-level—thirties, early forties, maybe mid-forties—they still have a long way, a lot of years to give if they wish to. So that's one way that SWE can influence other societies and other things, by positioning their leadership to move on to another level of position in another organization.

The other thing is—I wanted to really also highlight mentoring. [01:22:01] I wouldn't be where I am today unless I had the advocacy and the mentors within SWE, within my company, Newport News Shipbuilding, and also within ASME. Like I told you earlier, it all kind of blended, right? And within my company, Huntington Ingalls and Newport News Shipbuilding, my bosses—you know, everybody says "good boss" and "bad boss." But my bosses were supportive, and advocated, and taught me a lot. And I'm not implying everything was rosy-rosy. [01:23:01] When you work in a very stressful environment things can be difficult at times. But overall, without the folks that I met—. And it could be—have you ever heard of a poem that talks about, "friend for a season, friend for a reason—"

ELLER ENGLISH: It sounds familiar.

FALLON: —and friends long term. So you always have somebody walking into your life just for a time, and then they walk away. And they did something for you that changed your direction. You could be walking into somebody else's life, and it made a difference. And then you part ways. You did your thing. And then you have friends that are there, you know, for a long time. So I've experienced that, and it's just been—just so much gratitude. [01:24:01]

And lastly, I can't forget my husband. In my family—I, you know, talked about my parents. But my husband, Bob, we've been married going on twenty-two years. We had dual careers. He's a civil engineer and also at Newport News. And we, for I would say a good ten to twelve years, we had challenging jobs, similar positions, titles, so. We both supported each other. I think he supported me more. [laughs] So anyways, it's been good.

ELLER ENGLISH: Well, thank you very much for sharing your experiences. [01:24:59]

FALLON: You're welcome, Troy. I'm glad we finally did this.

ELLER ENGLISH: Yes.

FALLON: I hope I was a good student. [laughs]

ELLER ENGLISH: Absolutely. [laughs] Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]