

SWE GRASSROOTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Penny Wirsing Interview

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Troy Eller English: Okay. Today is October 26, 2016. This is a Society of Women Engineers Oral History Project Interview with Penny Wirsing. The interviewer is Troy Eller English. We're at the WE16 Annual Conference in Philadelphia. Penny is an environmental manager at the ExxonMobil Torrance refinery in California.

Penny Wirsing: Actually, that has recently changed.

TEE: That has recently changed.

PW: The refinery was sold. Now it's called the Torrance Refining Company.

TEE: Torrance Refining Company in California.

PW: Yes.

TEE: She is a Fellow Senior Life Member of SWE and has been very active in the Society locally and nationally, including serving several years on the board of directors. Thank you for joining me today.

PW: Thank you.

TEE: Can you tell me where and when you were born?

PW: I was born in Mason, Michigan in 1956.

TEE: Okay, and can you tell me a little bit about your family growing up?

PW: Well, it was a small town in rural Michigan. [01:00] My father worked for the county road commission and my mom was a stay-at-home mom. I have, or I had,

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four sisters and a brother. So, I was the next to the youngest and my brother was actually seventeen, eighteen years older than me, so there was quite a range in kids. What more would you like to know?

TEE: I think that covers that. Can you tell me how you became interested in math and science and engineering?

PW: Well, I wasn't—again, it was a small town in rural Michigan, and going to college wasn't a focus of my family at all. And so, I really wasn't that interested in high school. [02:00] I did okay in math and science, but didn't think that it was going to do anything other than, "Oh, this is kind of interesting. This is kind of fun." So, it wasn't until after I was well out of high school that I thought about going into engineering.

TEE: Okay, and what made you start thinking about that?

PW: Well, to back up a little bit, (laughs) so really, everybody in my family just kind of, you know, got married, had babies, stayed home. I was the first person in my family that actually graduated from high school. And so, when I graduated, I—I was married, I had a baby. And then I got divorced and realized that working as a single mom was not very—it didn't pay very well, (laughs) and it wasn't all that fun.

So, I started by getting an associate's degree at the local community college.

[03:00] I was working full time, I was a working mom. Once I got the associate's degree I found that that doesn't really get you very far, either. So, I started

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looking at going for a further degree. At the time, I was working as a secretary in an office. I was working for the Department of Public Health, I think. And I was working in an office full of engineers and I saw how much money they made and what they did, and I thought, "Well, I can do that."

So, I applied to Michigan State University. I actually applied to a couple different places, but it had to be someplace where I could continue working. So, I managed to get enough credits at the community college to transfer in as a junior. And then, I managed to take—I was able to take a full load at Michigan State while working basically thirty hours a week for two years. [04:00] And I got done with my engineering degree in two years. So, that's kind of a long answer to your question. (laughs)

TEE: So, how did you manage to work thirty hours, take full-time courses, and raise a child?

PW: That's a really good question. I think—well, you're a mom. You do what you have to do. At the time it's hard, but you don't even think about it, really. I guess I focused on the end of the next semester. It was always, you know, "Just get through this semester." And I remember thinking at one time that I kind of felt like a flag pole with a bunch of different wires around it. And as long as everything was equally in tension, that things would be okay. But if any one thing started pulling too hard—like my daughter got sick or, you know, I started having trouble with a class or something—then it was really a challenge. [05:00] And I guess, so

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my focus was just keeping all those things in balance to the to the extent that I could.

TEE: Okay. How old was your daughter at this time?

PW: When I finally graduated with my engineering degree, she was nine. So, she was seven when I started at Michigan State. And, you know, it took several years to get my associate's degree and then to get the other classes. So, she was probably three or four when I started working on my associate's degree.

TEE: What do you think she thought about you being in school?

PW: You know, at the time it was just the two of us, and so I think we were really tight-knit. I did try to spend as much time with her as possible. Didn't have a lot of money, so time was about the only thing I could give her. I will tell you that. And then after I graduated and, you know, we started having more money and started moving around for my job and stuff, I was always wondering how it was going to affect her. [06:00] But she has turned out so incredibly successful. She's actually an Assistant U.S. Attorney now and working in Houston. And very, very independent. I don't know where she gets that. (laughs) And so it worked out.

TEE: Great. That's great. So what was your experience at Michigan State, as a woman engineering student?

PW: Yeah, I can hear people talking about being a woman engineering student, and I did realize at the time that I think there were about maybe 25 percent women students [at Michigan State]—which I think is probably pretty good for that time—

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but it didn't really strike me that I was a woman, so much as I was different from everybody else. [07:00] You know, like, nobody else in my family had graduated from high school, much less gone college. None of my peers in college were working full-time with a baby. So I was just totally different from everybody. It wasn't like I was a woman and they were men, because I wasn't any more similar to the women in my class. So to me it was—the male/female thing didn't really strike home.

TEE: Sure, okay. So, did you find any mentors who could help you navigate?

PW: Not as a peer in school so much. But when I was—after I had started classes at Michigan State, one of the engineers at the health department where I worked and I struck up a relationship. [08:00] I was always so amazed that he had any interest in me at all, because here he was—he had a master's degree, and he was this handsome young man, and successful. And I was, you know, a single mom working as a secretary. But anyway, we ended up getting married. And now we've been married for almost thirty-three years. But he really helped me probably as much as anybody. Not just with the moral support and, "Hey you can do it," but, because he was an engineer and hadn't been out of school that long, he helped with some of my classes. I specifically remember a fluid dynamics class that was just over my head, and then he helped me with that a lot.

TEE: Okay. Do you have any positive or negative memories from your time as a student in community college or at Michigan State? [09:00]

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PW: It was all positive. I was just so happy to be there. I don't really remember any negative. No. I joined SWE when I came to Michigan State. And in addition to all the other things I was doing, I was a committee chair, membership committee or something like that, for Michigan State. So, no, I was just so happy to be there.

TEE: Okay. You said that you were pulled in many different directions. Why add SWE to that? What did you feel like you were getting from SWE at that time?

PW: Maybe a little bit of networking, a little bit of camaraderie. Even though, you know, they were women—they weren't working moms, but they were women. Marcia Lampela, although I didn't know her at the time, she must've been in SWE at the same time I was or shortly thereafter. [10:00] So, it was just a way of networking and feeling like I was maybe giving back a little bit instead of just focusing on myself.

TEE: Okay. Did you have any specific career plans or goals at that point?

PW: Graduate. Survive. (laughs) No, I really didn't. I thought about getting an MBA. In fact, when I finished my associate's degree I talked to a few folks about, "Well, should I get a business degree and then go get some other degree?" And fortunately—and I don't even remember who it was at the time—but they said, "You know, if you have the opportunity, get the engineering degree now. You can always get a business degree later." And so I was happy I did that.

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TEE: Okay. You said that you were the only person in your family to graduate from high school, let alone college. [11:00] What was your family's response to your pursuits?

PW: Well—and I should say that everyone in my family eventually went back and got a GED, so that's good. But I think my mom was very supportive to the extent that she could be. I remember when I was invited to join Tau Beta Pi, I think there was a fifty-dollar enrollment fee and I couldn't afford it. And my mom paid it, and I knew she couldn't afford it either. So, I think they were just really happy and really supportive in any way they can. Certainly, it's weird because they can't really identify with a lot of the things. And so, even now when I tell them you know what I'm doing and stuff, I try to keep it just, "Oh, I'm going to Philadelphia for a conference." [12:00] You know. When I travel someplace really cool I'll tell them. But a lot of times I just keep it really low key, because I feel like there's this disconnect and I just don't need to make it any bigger.

TEE: Okay. Can you tell me about having your first professional job?

PW: I ultimately was hired by Rockwell, who came to campus and interviewed and then flew me to Washington state for a second interview. And I was just—again, you know, this is just so foreign to me. I do remember before that—because Rick and I—my husband—were dating at the time and we were thinking, "You know, where would we like to go?" So, one summer, just before I was about to graduate, we went on vacation to Virginia. And we both thought we would do some interviewing in Virginia. [13:00] And so I arranged—and I was a civil

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engineer, so I arranged with this construction company and met the gentleman for an interview. And I remember him saying, "Now why would a nice girl like you want to work in a dirty business like this?" And I just thought, "You're right. I don't want to work for you." (laughs) Fortunately, Rockwell was much more professional. And so yeah, that was my first job.

TEE: Okay. Alright. What was your position?

PW: I was a project engineer. And did a lot of different projects, different-sized projects. Little, small ones. Probably one of the biggest ones was repaving the road that went out—it was at the Hanford nuclear site out in the middle of southeastern Washington. And so, I thought that was one of my bigger projects. But it was just a range [of projects]. [14:00] And then, for a little while I was a process engineer at one of the plants, but not having a chemical background, that was a bit of a stretch.

And then because it is a government program, when the federal government was having a budget cut they had a reduction in force and offered to, you know, to pay people to leave, basically. I had been there four years, and in that time I had earned my MBA at Rockwell's expense. Well, it eventually changed over to Westinghouse, but anyway, at the government contractor's expense. And I had passed the professional engineers exam. So, I figured, "You know, if they want to pay me to leave, I'll take it." And so, I started working with a headhunter and got some different options there.

TEE: Okay. And where did you head then? [15:00]

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PW: I ultimately went to work for Mobil, at the time, which then became ExxonMobil. It's interesting. When I first got the offer for Mobil—and again, you know, they flew me to their headquarters in Fairfax, Virginia and I just felt like they didn't understand who I was. You know, that whole imposter thing, because who am I to be here interviewing with them? But yes, they flew me to Fairfax. They offered me a job initially in Los Angeles, but at the time my daughter was in high school and we were in a small town in Washington state, and I really didn't want to move her to Los Angeles. So, initially I turned down the offer, and they came back with an offer to move to South Florida. So, we ended up living in Fort Lauderdale, which is at least as big a city and, you know, as many drugs available in high schools and everything as Los Angeles. But anyway, that was—.

TEE: Okay. (laughs) What were your job responsibilities at Mobil when you started?
[16:00]

PW: That was also initially as a project manager, specifically for service stations. There was a big program about that time to rebuild service stations, to replace underground storage tanks. When the stations were originally built, they all had single-wall tanks and there was a new regulation to require them all to be changed to double-wall. So, as they were doing that they were rebuilding a lot of the stations. So, I started out doing that as a civil engineer. And then they had the same project manager for everything associated with the rebuild. Well, when you're replacing underground tanks, a lot of times you'll run into contamination. And you need to do something about that. And I think they realized that having the same person responsible for the entire project was a bit of a challenge,

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because when you're focusing on budget and schedule, you know, it's hard to clean it [the contamination] up. So, about that time they broke off and created their first environmental division. [17:00] And so, I moved over into the environmental side and I've been doing that pretty much, almost full-time since then.

TEE: Okay. Can you explain what your role has been in the environmental side now?

PW: Right now? I am an environmental manager at a refinery, so we—I've always said that we're responsible for making sure that the refinery's in compliance, but really, it's the business owners that are responsible for being in compliance. In other words, I don't run the equipment, I don't own the equipment. So, what I do is I work with the business teams to make sure that they're doing things in compliance. So, if everything is running smoothly then it's just a matter of collecting data and submitting reports and—. But of course, in a running, operating facility it's never all that smooth. So, whenever there's an upset, or somebody wants to make a change to a process, we need to look at whether that's in compliance with the regulations, what we can do to make it in compliance. [18:00]

TEE: Okay. Alright. When you first started at Mobil, what was it that made you choose Mobil over other places? You said that you were working with a headhunter. What drew you to Mobil?

PW: Well, I really thought that I was getting a job offer from another company in Georgia, Trane, I think. They manufacturer air conditioning units. And they also

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had me come back for a second interview and I just felt like, you know, that was the one. And so, I figured I had that one in the bag, so when I went for the Mobil interview—I wasn't even going to do it. The headhunter said, "Well, you know, just give it a try." So, I was so relaxed during that interview, because I thought, "There's no way I'm going to go to work here." And then, as it turned out, the Trane offer didn't come through and the Mobil one did. So, that worked out really well. [19:00] Again, it was, you know, a Fortune—I assume they were Fortune 500 company, or probably even bigger at the time. I just felt like I was hot stuff. (laughs) It was cool.

TEE: Okay. What are some of the successes or challenges that you've encountered in your career?

PW: Well, certainly having a daughter—and then later, husband—made mobility a bit of a challenge. I will say that my husband has been incredibly supportive. And when we first met he was an engineer, and so the move from Michigan to Washington state, from there to South Florida, from there to the D.C. area, were all with him as an engineer. And a lot of times, when we'd go house hunting he would go interviewing, and by the time we actually made the move he'd have a job offer. So that worked out great. And he was just super to be supportive and flexible like that. [20:00]

While we were in the Fairfax, Virginia area he went to George Washington University and got his law degree, which is not quite as portable as an engineering degree. He became a licensed attorney in the D.C. area and was

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working at a major law firm there. And then, when I got the opportunity to move to California, we thought it would be great to live in Southern California so he quit his job and went to California and studied for the bar and passed it. But at the time we thought we were only going to be there for a couple of years, so he was trying to find something that wasn't, you know, going to put him on the partner path or something, and then a couple years later he'd have to move again. And that's just a lot more of a challenge. He ended up taking a job back on the east coast after a couple of years because we thought I'd eventually get transferred back there. And so, we were living on both coasts for a while, and after a year and a half or so that really wasn't fun. [21:00] So he left that job, came back to Southern California, and that's where we are now. We love it.

TEE: Okay. I know there can be a tension with deciding who, you know, will be the trailing spouse. It sounds like many, many times where you lived was dependent on your job first.

PW: Absolutely. Every single place. Yes. Yeah, it's very unusual and, like I said, he's super. I mean, it's not like he's doing it "for" me. He's ready for a change and he enjoys new adventures. And I think up until becoming an attorney, it didn't hurt his career. He was a licensed professional engineer in a number of states, and it was not hard for him at all to come on with a new company. [22:00] Certainly, it would have prevented him becoming a partner or something like that. But yeah, it's difficult. There's no doubt about it.

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And until my daughter graduated from high school—so she was in middle school in Michigan, high school through tenth grade in Washington. She graduated from high school in Florida, ended up going to the University of Maryland for her undergrad degree, and then her law degree in Pennsylvania. So, by that time she was just kind of used to being moved around. But it is a challenge. I mean it's—. I think initially it brought us closer together, because none of us had ever lived anywhere else. So when we moved from Michigan and it's the three of us, and Rick and I had just got married at that point, and we moved to Washington state and we don't know anybody there—that brought, I think that brought the three of us together very closely. And it's lasted forever, so that's good. [23:00]

TEE: That's great. Can you tell me about some of the successes that you've had in your job, or some of the key contributions that you've made in your career?

PW: You know, when I think about my career, it's not what I did so much as what the people with me did. I guess there were—when I left Florida it was because I had worked myself out of a job. There was a program that I was in charge of, and I was trying to get it in control, you know, so that when I left it was going to be a non-issue. So that was a success. But most of the other positions I was—when I think back, I think about what did we manage to do as a group. You know, when the ExxonMobil merger occurred, I was planning and budget manager. And so, there was the Exxon group of people that were doing budgeting and things. There was the Mobil group of people. Very different backgrounds, and even all over the country. [24:00] I had folks in Houston and Fairfax and New Jersey. And so, to bring them all together and have them work under a brand new system for

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everybody was—I felt like that was a real accomplishment. So, I really—when I think about what I'm doing now, it's working with the folks in my group. Yes, they work for me, but more than that we work together.

And it's just—you know, we we've had some real challenges in my group. A couple of years ago the refinery where I work had a major explosion, and it was closed down for about a year and a half. Well, not completely closed, but majorly disrupted for about a year and a half. And there was just a real sense of, like, "Why are we even doing this?" You know, "Are we ever going to be able to get back to normal?" And it was just a boatload of work. And so, keeping everybody motivated and feeling like they're actually doing something that's worthwhile is what I like to focus on. [25:00]

TEE: Okay. As an employee, what has been your experience at Mobil as a woman engineer, but just as an engineer. What kind of environment is it for you?

PW: Again, even though by the time I came to work for Mobil I had been an engineer for about four years, I still felt like, you know, I was different from everybody else. Or everybody else was different from me. So I didn't focus on that so much.

I probably noticed it most when the ExxonMobil merger occurred, because at least from my perspective, the Exxon were good old boys from Texas and they were very, very opinionated. [26:00] And I did, I saw how they treated the women that worked for them already and I was not impressed. And so, I really struggled with that a lot. There were some people—there were some people that I really did not like and did not respect, and fortunately I didn't have to work for them

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long. But it gave me a real appreciation for, you know, if somebody [an employee] is in that position and doesn't see a way out, I don't know what you'd do. You'd have to find a way out, because otherwise it just it starts affecting your own self-perception, your own self-worth. Very dangerous place to go.

TEE: Okay. So, you found another position within the company to get out of that environment.

PW: Yeah, I mean this was right after the merger so there were a lot of changes going on anyway. So, some of it was just, you know, sticking it out and waiting for other things to change. Yeah. [27:00]

TEE: Okay. When you were—have been moving up through management, did you have any mentors to help you along the way?

PW: Not what I think mentors are supposed to be. I mean, there were people that helped at certain times. For example, when I was in Fairfax, in headquarters there was a gentleman that I worked with that suggested that I might take another job. It was totally out of the engineering arena. It was as an area manager for the marketing service stations. But at the time, you know, service stations were huge in the area that I was working. So, I actually took a couple of years and went through the marketing training and managed an area of service stations. [28:00] And you know, that was—if it had stayed Mobil, that probably would have helped my career more. But with the ExxonMobil merger, having a background in service stations meant absolutely nothing. And then he ended up

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retiring, and so that that didn't work so well. Well, it wasn't bad. It just didn't have that huge boost like some people get.

And then there was a woman in California, when I moved there. She was in a totally different division, but she was the most senior woman that I had worked with closely, and I really respected her and saw how she dealt with people.

Although I don't think she would ever acknowledge being my mentor, I certainly respected her and looked up to her and learned a lot from her. Is that a mentor?

TEE: Sure? (laughs)

PW: Okay. (laughs)

TEE: So, I'm wondering how SWE played a role in your life during this time, as you're moving around, you know, from coast to coast. [29:00] You were active in all the SWE sections.

PW: I was. I was. (laughs)

TEE: Can you tell me how you got involved with SWE after college, and why?

PW: Yes. So, I absolutely believe that I would not be where I am now if it weren't for my time with SWE. I learned so much and just—you know, when things aren't going well at work and you feel you're working for one of those people that makes you feel like you're an idiot, it is so important to have that external source of validation. And SWE has been that, very consistently.

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So when I first graduated, I went to eastern Washington and there was a very small section there. A woman by the name of Wanda Munn was a member.

[30:00] In fact, I remember she had just received the Distinguished New Engineer Award. And she was just such a cool woman, and she was so supportive and so encouraging. And I was in the Washington, Eastern Washington Section for four years, I think. And by that time, I was hooked. (laughs)

And then I went to South Florida. And they had a very small section, but was a close-knit group of women and we did some really good things there. And then from there I went to Baltimore/Washington Section in D.C., which is one of the biggest sections in the country—in the world, I guess. And what I got there was not just a huge section, but there were some very senior women—specifically, Suzanne Jenniches, Naomi McAfee—that really kind of took me under their wing.

[31:00] I don't know what they saw in me when I got there, but after I'd been there just a very short time the section decided to bid for the 2000 conference. And I specifically remember Suzanne Jenniches asking if I would co-chair with Michelle Tortolani. And you know, the fact that she thought that I had it in me was pretty incredible. But it wasn't just me [she supported]. I mean it was the whole group. She was very supportive, making sure all the volunteers felt like they were part of the group, and really team-building and things. So, it just it just kept getting better and better every time I went somewhere. It was great.

TEE: And you are in the Los Angeles Section now?

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PW: I am in the Los Angeles Section. I've been there since late 2002. The first couple of years I was there I was not all that active. I just gotten over the 2000 conference and I was still recovering a little bit from that. [32:00] Plus, when I first went there the group [at work] that I had taken over was in a bit of a churn. So, I wasn't very active for the first couple of years. Then I started going to some meetings.

It's an interesting thing in the Los Angeles area. There's a lot of aerospace industry. And there are a lot of industries, but technically there are a lot of aerospace industries. And when I went to my first couple SWE meetings, SWE-LA meetings, it seemed like everybody was from aerospace. They even held it at one of the local aerospace companies. And so, I kind of saw it as, "You know, we've got a lot of really diverse people here. We need to expand this a little bit." So, it ended up being one of my goals to get more people involved in the LA Section. And at one time the president of the LA Section was a young woman that I had interviewed at a SWE conference that had come to work for ExxonMobil and had eventually transferred to California, Irene Hodor. [33:00] And she was the president, and there were several other people in in my company that were committee chairs or officers. And we really tried to expand it to, you know, get some different industries represented.

So, the challenge in the Los Angeles section, and I'm sure it's true in other sections, is that we have a huge section. Even when I first got there, I think it was over 300. But you get the same 30 people at every meeting, and it's just the same 30 people trying to do everything. And it's such a challenge to spread that

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workload around. You know, I recognize different people join SWE for different reasons, but that's always been our challenge.

TEE: Can you talk about some of the leadership positions that you've had in SWE?

PW: In SWE? Yeah. [24:00] When I was in Washington state I was the section president. I don't remember all of the positions. I know I was newsletter editor back when we used to print and mail a newsletter. I think when I went to South Florida, I believe I was a newsletter editor there, held a couple of different section positions. By the time I got to Baltimore/Washington, I didn't hold the section positions so much. I became the co-chair of the conference, so that involved a lot of work. Through my exposure there, I was asked to serve as the chair of a couple of different [Society-level] committees. After the conference, I became the chair of the conference program board. And again, I just kept getting more and more exposure to different things. Eventually I was a section rep. I was a senator. [35:00]

And that's when things started getting fun for me in SWE, because that's when I felt like I could really start making a big difference. So, as the senator, I led up a couple of task forces. One was to look at the contingency reserve, and the other was to actually change the reserve document. Well, I guess the first one was to educate people on what the reserve was supposed to be for. And then from that, it was like, "Okay, well, should we be doing something different with the money." And so, I was able to pull on people like Suzanne Jenniches and like Carolyn Phillips, that I had met over the years, who had a lot of experience and a lot of

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understanding and carried a lot of weight within the Society, and managed to put forth a recommendation to change how the reserves were being handled. There were a lot of people, more senior members, who just thought, you know, "That SWE's money. You need to leave it alone." [36:00] But we managed to do it—enough socializing and answering questions and explaining why we were doing things, that by the time that got in front of the senate to be voted on it was really not very controversial at all and it passed. That was fabulous.

And then from there I became finance committee chair and then treasurer. And as treasurer, that's when there was a loan from the reserves that was coming due to be repaid. And in my first—I can't remember, it was my first or second year as treasurer, we managed to lay out the first three-year budget, long-term strategic plan—which we had had for a while, but then with a three-year budget to go with it—showing how the reserves could be repaid, and actually moving the conference overage [transfer] that had always been the year after the conference, because a long time ago the conference used to be in November [June]. [37:00] So we managed to get the conference overage into the same [fiscal] year as the conference. And—I'm sorry the conference used to be in June—and repay the loan and take care of all of those outstanding arms and legs that had been just the source of a lot of churn for a long time. So that was that was a lot of fun.

And now I'm chairing the governance task force, another one with a lot of arms and legs. And you know, this is an interesting one because there are people who are very senior, or have been through—not even necessarily senior, because

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some of them are you know just a couple of years out of college, but they've been through a lot of SWE structure and organization and they have a certain way of looking at things. But then, you think about the others [members], you know, what do we have? Thirty-five thousand members probably. Thirty-three thousand five hundred don't even know what our structure is, or not that well. You know, they know what their local section is. [38:00] So trying to really look at what is best for the Society. And yes, we need to get it approved so we need to listen to what they're saying, and if they have real concerns we should be addressing them. We should be taking those into account. But the naysayers that just say, you know, "I like the way it is—." Yeah, that's probably not going to fly. I mean SWE's been around for 65 years, more than 65 years now. And what got us here will not get us there. We need to change.

TEE: Okay. So, you were on the board and you were in the senate in the late 2000s and 2010s. Obviously, there was the recession, that was affecting SWE quite a bit. Can you talk about why the contingency reserve needed to be looked at?

PW: Yeah, well, the money that is set aside each year had started building up. And at the time—I can't remember exactly how much we had, but it was well over a one year budget gap. And it was just kind of sitting there. I mean, yes, it was it was being invested, and I'm sure the board of trustees would correct me on that. It was being invested, it was earning interest. But I am familiar—I'm on other nonprofit boards and, you know, I can tell you that the local nonprofit that I'm on in Southern California would give their right arm to have a year's worth of budget set aside. You know, you just don't. And you shouldn't have to. You know, there

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are certain fixed costs that you need to cover, but if there was really a huge recession, then we'd start pulling back on some of the programs and some of our expenses.

So ultimately, it was decided that we needed to cover nine months of budget, assuming in that time we'd have to make some other changes that would not be pleasant, but would bring us back into line. [40:00] And then the rest of the money can be used for things that will benefit SWE's mission. I mean, the new association management system that we just did was paid for out of that extra money. That's something that we never would have been able to pay for if we'd had to put it in the budget, but it was money that was just sitting there. Come on, let's use it for something that can help us.

But you're right. There were a lot of people that thought, "No, this is important, we need to hang on to it." And we are hanging on to some of it. But we're freeing up the rest of it to do good things with.

TEE: Okay. What are some of the other big issues that SWE faced during your time in leadership?

PW: Well, there's the ongoing issue that the board somehow, or the executive director somehow, has some hidden agenda that is trying to benefit themselves at the expense of SWE. [41:00] That's just not true. You know, when Betty Shanahan became the executive director, I think it was the best thing that ever happened to us. Karen [Horting] is doing a fantastic job. They live and breathe SWE every day, and why on earth [people think] they would want to do anything that would

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not benefit SWE's mission is just beyond me. The board—now, I know when I was—several years ago, probably fifteen, twenty years ago, my perception of the board was that they were pretty catty. They were not inclusive. A little cliquish. And, you know, I never wanted to be on the board. [42:00] I remember after the 2000 conference and Michelle Tortolani ran for the board, I just thought, "Why on earth?" In fact, we had that conversation. "Why on earth would you do that? Why would you subject yourself to that?"

But I think over the last ten, twelve years, I don't know—the board has changed. We really are working together and with the best interest of the mission at heart. I mean, I can understand why people are concerned that, you know, you don't want to give too much power in one place. But to say that—I think the term that they use is that it's a conflict of interest—that's like you're doing something to benefit yourself at the expense of something else. You know, why would they think that? That's—maybe we're not making decisions consistent with what they would decide, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we're doing it to harm SWE. We were doing it because we think it's in the best interest of SWE. [43:00] We just disagree on what's in the best interest.

TEE: Okay. Can you explain what some of those disagreements are?

PW: Well, certainly the funding. I think we've talked a lot about nominations and whether the executive director should be involved in those discussions. I mean, who better knows what the direction of SWE is and where, or what may be some of the gaps on the current board are that might be beneficial to fill with an

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incoming board member. And again, I mean this discussion is always, "Well no, because she would just put people in there that would think like her." Her job is to advance the mission of SWE. Why—? But anyway. (laughs) You can tell I don't agree with them on that one. Let's see, what are some of the others? [44:00]
Those are the big ones that come to mind.

TEE: Okay. So, certainly, joining the higher responsibility of SWE, being on the board, being a senator—it's a large time commitment. Why was it important to you to do that, to make that commitment?

PW: I think I said earlier it's an opportunity to give back, to make a difference. Also, throughout my career there have been positions I've been in where I felt like I was doing great work and really appreciated, and there have been positions when I felt like there was just a total lack of respect and I didn't feel that—. If all I had to go by was what was happening during my time at work, I would have been very disappointed. [45:00] So, SWE was an opportunity to validate myself in other ways. And I feel like I have a lot to give back and I I'm happy to do it. Fortunately, by the time I got to those higher levels I had established myself so much within my company and within SWE that it wasn't like I had to ask for permission to do it. I just said, "This is what I'm doing," (laughs) which is kind of nice. Unfortunately, my company changed hands just recently, so now I kind of feel like I have to ask for permission again. But you know what, if they didn't pay for it, I'd pay for it myself because it's that worthwhile.

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TEE: Okay. What do you think are some of your personal contributions to the Society. You said you wanted to give back to SWE. [46:00] So what do you think you've given back?

PW: Well, hopefully the new reserve structure is one. I really hope that the governance changes that are being proposed are adopted. I'm sure they'll be tweaked a little bit before they get finalized, but I feel strongly that we need to make some changes to be viable in the future. So, that's a pretty big one.

More than that, I think just being recognized as woman engineer and active in my community. There are so many times when it just kind of comes up in conversation about women engineers and how to how to encourage young women to go into engineering. I'm a member of Soroptimist International, which is a business women's organization. And they were talking about doing a program for young girls about engineering. [47:00] And one of the women was saying, "Well, you know, I was asking if they were good at math and science." And I just said, "How about if you ask them if they would like to solve problems that would change the world." You know, so those [discussions] are much less tangible, but those are things that I can do to help SWE, help women engineers, help lots of people. And it's just because it's so part of who I am now, part of how I think, that it just comes out in normal conversation.

TEE: Okay. How has SWE impacted your career? You touched a little bit on that before.

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PW: Yeah, I don't know that you could say, "This, then that." But I definitely know that I developed self-confidence. I learned how to lead groups. [48:00] I mean, that 2000 conference in D.C., where it was a huge volunteer organization, definitely learned a few things about how to lead people, speaking skills, just all kinds of things. I would not have learned that if it hadn't been for SWE. Would I have learned it in other ways? Possibly. Probably. But it wouldn't—I think one of SWE's unique aspects is that it really does give you an opportunity to learn skills, practice them around people that are very, very supportive, and then recognize them [the improved skills]. You know, when I became Fellow it was a recognition of some of the things that I had done. So, would I have learned them otherwise? Possibly, but I think it would have been slower. It would have been more disjointed, and I just don't think I would be where I am.

TEE: Okay. I have a question about the 2000 conference. At that time, sections were still largely responsible for the conference.

PW: Yes. Yes.

TEE: Can you talk about that experience? [49:00]

PW: It was interesting. It was. Especially because at the time they were considering making that change [to headquarters]. So we did have Show Management [conference management company] to help with some of the work, but we still—I mean we were picking a lot of the meals. I remember we were proofing the program book. We're all full time working engineers, some of us working mothers, and who has time for that? Who has expertise for that? But we brought

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it together. It was—we had a couple of volunteers that were not happy with how certain things went and decided to leave before the conference happened. We certainly had some volunteers that were just so burned out afterwards. Several of them, I don't know if they're in SWE now. The thing that I learned from that is that it's so important to have somebody who's a professional, (laughs) who knows what they're doing, and can do it so much more efficiently. Have them do that.

And that's part of what this whole governance change is about. [50:00] You know, if it's important to be done, but it can be done by someone who does it for a living, for crying out loud, let them do it. And then let our volunteers do things that really help them build the skills and the leadership that they come to SWE for. You know there are a lot of discussions now about the WE Locals [SWE regional conferences managed by headquarters]. And you know, there are still people hanging on to it, "No, I really want to do it." It's like, do you realize how much better it's going to be when once we let the professionals do what they do, and then we can focus on the things that we want to do. And we won't have to be proofing program books at 3 o'clock in the morning. You know, this is crazy.

TEE: Betty Shanahan had a very similar experience.

PW: Yes, because she had Boston [1995 SWE National Conference in Boston].

TEE: She had Boston, yes.

PW: Yes, yes. Yeah. (laughs)

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TEE: So, SWE has changed quite a bit since you first joined. [51:00] Can you talk about some of the changes that you've seen in the Society, and what you think about them?

PW: Yes. Yeah, well, it started out as a grassroots organization, and when I joined it was very much still that. You know, there were regions. I think I went to my very first conference in New York City in probably, I don't know, the mid-eighties, late-eighties. Late-eighties, I guess [likely 1990]. And it was just, it was kind of cute. Now, looking back on it, it was probably a little hokey. A lot of home-grown kinds of things. We're certainly much more professional now. But there was a process that we had to go through to get there. I mean, we—there's still a lot to be said for the grassroots. There's still a lot to be said for that connecting, that personal interaction, and we don't want to lose that. [52:00] But we would certainly not have 12,000 people at this conference if it was still a local, you know, a section doing the work. It's just, we don't do that for a living. We don't have the bandwidth for doing it. And it's very exciting.

The other thing I think—well, a couple of other things. Advocacy, you know. We are now asked to speak in front of Congress. How cool is that? You know, that was—and I remember Peggy Layne many years ago being involved in that. But it was it was not like we were recognized [as we are today], and we were being asked to come answer questions for them. And then the global aspect. You know, the conferences that we're having around the world, and the ability to reach women engineers who don't have anything else to turn to, and being able to impact their lives is just so incredible. [53:00] And again, we would never do

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that if we had stayed the local, separated sections and regions that we were. So, lots of progress, and I'm I can't even imagine what we are going to be in another twenty years.

TEE: What would you like SWE to be in another twenty years, or what do you think it should be?

PW: Definitely global. Definitely more global than we are now. And I know we say we're global, but boy, there are an awful lot of people who think of us in terms of a U.S. organization. And most of it is, but I think there's a huge opportunity globally. And then on the advocacy side, you know, really being able to make a difference. And not just in Washington, D.C., but one of the focuses of the advocacy effort is to help us understand how we can impact locally as well, and feeling comfortable that, you know, knowing what to say. I know the first time I went to Washington, D.C., I thought, "I don't know anything about any of the bills. What am I going to say?" [54:00] But they [the organizers] did a lot to help us very feel very comfortable and feel like we were making a difference there. So being able to advocate at the local level on all types of issues. I think we have a big opportunity there.

TEE: Okay. Is there anything that has changed in SWE that you regret, or somewhere that SWE has gone that you think it shouldn't have?

PW: No, I can't think of any.

TEE: Okay. Alright. Do you have any advice for future engineers?

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PW: Well, hang in there. You will have good days and bad. My father-in-law said make the good days long and the short days bad, or the bad days short. But I would also say, have some external ways to validate yourself. [55:00] You know, don't just focus on work. I know a lot of people, they graduate from school. They want to get into that job. They want to work, you know, sixty hours a week and really impress their boss. And that's fabulous, and I did that myself. But I have to tell you, after a couple of years of that I look back at the end of the year and I think, "Well, you know, I worked sixty hours a week. Yay." At one point, I decided that I was going to leave work early one day a week and go volunteer that night. And at the end of that year, I looked back and said, "Okay, I worked fifty-five hours a week—and I did all these [other] wonderful things." And so, it's not just about impressing your boss and working a hundred hours a week. There's more to life than that. And there are people—I mean you're a woman engineer. You've got a lot to offer, so you can make a difference in other people's lives, as well. So, don't keep it all to yourself. [56:00]

TEE: Okay. You said that you volunteered some of your time to other organizations. What other organizations or causes are important to you, and to give your time to?

PW: Right now, as I mentioned, I'm involved with a local nonprofit. I'm the chair of the board of directors for Pediatric Therapy Network, which is an organization that provides services to kids with special needs and their families and the community. And that's it that's a great organization. I got involved in that because my company actually encourages our managers to get involved in the

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community. So, I was kind of paired up with them close to ten years ago, and it's just been a really great match and I really feel like I've helped them through some rough times. I'm also a member of the Soroptimist International, which is a business women's organization that focuses on issues surrounding girls and women around the world. [57:00] When I first started volunteering those many years ago, I actually went to volunteer at Planned Parenthood because I felt very strongly about what they do. So, I've been involved in a lot. Oh, and I volunteered, or I was on the board of directors at a women's shelter. Started out as a volunteer on the hotline, and then they had an opening on the board of directors so I applied for that and got it. And so it's a variety of things.

TEE: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

PW: Thank you so much.

TEE: Well, thank you very much. This is the end of the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW