WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Laverne Carter

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: October 18, 2010

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is October 7th, 2010, I'm at Jackson Library here in Greensboro, North Carolina. This is Therese Strohmer and I am conducting an oral history interview for the Women's Veterans Historical Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I have Laverne Carter here with me. Laverne, could you please state your name the way that you'd like it on the collection?

LC: Laverne Ellison Carter, please.

TS: Okay, excellent, thank you very much. And thank you for being here for today. Laverne, why don't we start out by having you tell me when and where you were born?

LC: I was born in Greensboro, L. Richardson Hospital, here in the city.

TS: And do you have any brothers or sisters?

LC: I have two brothers and a sister, and it's a bit more complicated than that. I am the product of a—child out of wedlock. So there are other siblings, so for my mother's side, I have two brothers and a sister. From my father's side, I have there at least—there's at least one other sister, and perhaps five other brothers.

TS: So did they all grow up in this area?

LC: From my father's side, I know his—I know my sister and a brother.

TS: I see.

LC: But from my mother's side, all of us grew up here in this general area.

TS: So what was it like, growing up here in Greensboro?

LC: I mean, it was—I spent my high school time here, my school time here. But on the weekends, I would go to Burlington, which is where a—an adopted father lived, and so I spent my weekends and summers there, between Burlington and Caswell County, North Carolina.

TS: And where's Caswell at?

LC: Caswell is the northernmost county of North Carolina, it borders the Virginia line. We called it the country, it's rural North Carolina.

TS: So you were—so when you lived in Greensboro, did you consider—did you live in the city?

LC: This was city, yes, I did.

TS: So then you got to, like, on the weekends and the summertime, go out to the country, is that kind of how it was?

LC: That's sort of how it was, yeah, it was just a totally different environment. And yes, certainly as a child, I had no big picture of what was going on, but, yeah.

TS: Right. Well, you're—it's interesting to talk to you because you're like a child of the '60s, you would say, right?

LC: Yes.

TS: And so it would be interesting to get your viewpoint on, like, if it was different being raised—just being a child growing up in Greensboro, and then the things that you did in the city and the things you did, you know, out in these different places. Were they different, like the games you played or?

LC: Certainly. In Caswell County, I lived with a family that owned about a hundred and ten acres of land, the Hightowers, and so we did things like, we had chores, like collecting eggs and feeding hogs, and I saw—I saw things that—that I would bring—that later in my life, I would bring people back to Caswell County so they could see it. I saw things like families coming together to help a family build a barn. You know, we grew our crops. It was a very rich childhood, even though I—generally, I was mostly a very sad child. So that was that environment, that Caswell County environment. How they were different, in the city here, is where I guess I played, I rode the bike, you know, those kinds of things.

TS: Kicked the can? Things like that.

LC: Yeah. [laughs]

TS: That's what we played up in Michigan, so, yeah. So it wasn't all fun and games, in the farm country, because you worked kind of hard?

LC: Yeah, but you didn't—I guess I didn't know that it was hard work. It was being under guardians that said "Do it", and even relative to that environment, I might say that it was hard, but since I was kind of—the family that I was given to, I probably didn't even tell that part, but at the age of one, my mother gave me away and I was given to a family that lived out in Caswell County.

TS: I see.

LC: So the family that I was given to, I was their only child. So as an only child, I probably didn't have it as hard as I might be projecting.

TS: Right.

LC: In other words, they raised tobacco. Well, I really didn't have to work the tobacco fields, and I was young, which would have been one reason, but handling leaves, certainly, would have been something that I could have gotten involved in, but you know, I was the only child. So if I did things, it was voluntary.

TS: I see.

LC: And I did them because—I remember, and I tell this story over and over again, that everybody else's hands were filthy, grimy, dark, and I remember wanting my hands that way, too. So I would work long enough to get my hands dirty, yeah, handling leaves.

TS: That's an interesting story. So did you feel, when you said you felt sad, why did you feel sad growing up? If you want to share that.

LC: I guess because—I was given away at the age of one, so I probably had some detachment issues that—and I was given into a family that, somehow you, I guess maybe intuitively, you kind of know that you're trying to find your place to belong. And family members would say, about me, not necessarily to me, that that's the child that Walter and Helene are raising. So—

TS: So they're talking about you in the room, but, yeah.

LC: Yeah. And so you know, somehow, that something's different.

TS: Something's different.

LC: Yes. But I was very much loved by the people that I was given to. And so that, you know, that gave me a sense of love I could never—I could never replace. I was given to the right place.

TS: Right.

LC: But it took me to be a grown woman to kind of come to realize and accept that.

TS: Like when we were talking about reflection.

LC: Right, yes.

TS: Well, did—so, I'm from a fairly large family, there's six siblings in my family. So did you have a lot of contact with your siblings, growing up?

LC: Had very little contact with my siblings, meaning my mother's children.

TS: Mother's children, okay.

LC: Basically no contact with my father's children.

TS: I see.

LC: But the family that I was given into, again, the Hightowers, the matriarch of that family, who was Lily Bigelow Hightower, had twelve children. So, eleven living. So, many of them were grown and gone.

TS: I see.

LC: But on Sundays, I sat at a table where, you know, many people dropped in. They weren't expected, the way we put it is "Their names were not originally in the pot", but there was always room and food for them.

TS: I see.

LC: And so you learn to share chores, like you learn to get up and wash the plate because somebody else—

TS: Right.

LC: You know, so that the dishes could be ready for somebody else.

TS: I see, yeah.

LC: You know, I learned about—I mean, there were things like fireplaces and cooking your—baking your potato in the fireplace, and having Grandma spit her snuff into the fireplace, and she didn't have to hit your potato, you know, you just thought she did. [laughter]

TS: So that potato always tasted a little different.

LC: Oh, if you ate it, you ate it consciously, you know.

TS: That's funny. I understand. So you're living out there, and so you're coming into the city for school, or how was it—how did it go for school, then?

LC: My school time was spent—I think I spent first year, I attended school in Caswell County. Other than that, I attended Washington Street Elementary School, which is here in Greensboro, Lincoln [Middle School], and then Dudley [High School]. So that was during the weekdays, I was here.

TS: What'd you think of school?

LC: I enjoy school. It was a place, for me, where I could—where I could do some things. You know, I like poetry. I could—but I was still working out some, you know, parents then didn't think about sending you to some kind of psychologist to kind of help you balance life's issues.

TS: Right.

LC: And so you had to kind of, you know, meander, bump into a wall, straighten yourself out, and keep going. So, but school was a place that I could immerse myself. I enjoyed things like math, I enjoyed theatre, I enjoyed—I wasn't the best at athletics. Bowling, bowling, bowling I excelled in.

TS: [chuckles]

LC: Not only in school, but also in the navy, I excelled at it.

TS: Oh, excellent.

LC: And my teachers were teachers who really cared about you. It was a different time. And so I did well. I would have been an honor student, and was classified as an honor student, but I had these conduct issues, that, you know, probably acting out for whatever reasons. Undiagnosed.

TS: Right, for the things you were talking about. Right, yeah. Well, you had mentioned poetry, what was it that drew you to poetry?

LC: I don't know. I don't know whether somebody gave me a book and I wound up—I don't know the first love of poetry, but I know that eventually, somebody gave me a book of Negro poetry, written in Negro dialect, and so Paul Laurence Dunbar [African-American poet of the late 19th and early 20th centuries] became one of my friends, so I thought,

through the poetry, through reading his poetry. Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes. The poems were humorous, and they were short, and you know, I could go—I could be at my mother's house here in the city and go sit out on the back step and be with someone through reading this poetry, and actually I guess, at times even, go somewhere through the reading of the poetry.

TS: Absolutely. That's really interesting. People don't talk about poetry so much, you know, so that's why I asked you about that.

LC: And then, too, I think probably another attraction to poetry was, for some reason, it's almost like I had difficulty retaining—the first book I read was *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* [Maya] Angelou, and many parts of that book, I remember. But I had difficulty retaining memory of what I had read. It was different with poetry.

TS: Spoke to your heart.

LC: Perhaps. And as a result, I read it even the more. Now, probably, had I kept up reading short stories or books, I would have developed or whatever, but I didn't.

TS: Right. That's quite interesting. So did you—would you say that you had, some of the teachers that you said that were so wonderful to you, were they like mentors at all, on any kind of level?

LC: Absolutely. Absolutely. To, I guess, one in particular, was doing her, we called it "practice teaching", she was a student at Bennett College, she was from the D.C. area. And I just liked her, and she became someone—she became a writer, and she became someone who I would write to her and she would write to me, that kind of thing.

TS: Do you remember her name at all?

LC: Jacqueline Venable, and she's now Jacqueline Venable Williams. And also, Devetta Bristoe[?] was someone who—Miss Bristoe was one of my high school teachers who—she was always kind of hip.

TS: Okay.

LC: So, to us, she was like friend as well. But Miss Bristoe—I would tell everybody my story. Miss Bristoe would listen, and she would even come to visit sometimes and meet my parents and so that—those things probably really helped me in high school more than I will ever know, because it probably gave me some sense of importance or somebody sees me, or something, I don't know, I can't put a term or a name to some of this.

TS: But she, in some ways, like showed the value in you, right?

LC: Yeah. Absolutely. And she has remained my friend, over the years, over the years.

TS: Does she still live here?

LC: She does, she does.

TS: Very nice. That's great, to have teachers like that.

LC: Yes. It's almost sad that we don't have them anymore, that life has become so fast and we are so disconnected—but the need is still there, because it's a human need, but life has changed.

TS: Yeah. So when you were—so you're going to school, I'm thinking of the years that you're there. And so you're going to school in the south, is it a segregated school?

LC: Absolutely, good question. And actually, my class from James B. Dudley, the class of 1970, was the last all-black class, and they integrated in 1971.

TS: Okay, so you didn't go through any integration at all?

LC: No.

TS: So you would have been—1970 would have been the last year.

LC: Yes. We went through the riots in 19—of '69.

TS: What was that like?

LC: It was—moments of fear, in that, you know, I didn't know what was going on, I had no real sense of what was happening with the lunch counters, and just didn't know, oblivious. And the other piece about it was that my brother, and sister—now, I have a brother that's older and my sister is older. My brother was involved, he would—you know, we'd find out that hey, my brother Waymon[?] had gone to jail. So—but my mother said, if I went to jail, I'd be down there. And so we say that—the Scriptures say that faith comes by hearing. I heard and I believed, so I wasn't going to jail, that was not going to happen to me.

TS: [chuckles]

LC: But certain things do happen to cause you to remember the moment, even if it's later.

TS: Okay.

LC: And I remember that we were—we were in class and I want to say, in one of the English buildings of James B. Dudley, when a brick—when the teacher had just told the class to move back, slide your chairs back, away from the window, which was towards the front

of the class. And within moments of her doing that, a brick came through the window, was hurled through the window. So things that do happen, even though you're totally unaware, somewhat unaware of what's going on around you, somehow things do happen to cause you to remember that you were in that moment and to help bring back some of what happened during that time.

TS: Do you remember what you were thinking when that brick came through, or what that was all about, or?

LC: No, just glad that we had moved, I guess. You know, nothing—like I said, I was kind of disconnected, and probably kind of self-absorbed. Yeah, quite a bit.

TS: Right. Well, you would have been, what sixteen, seventeen years old when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated?

LC: In '68.

TS: Right. Right around that age. So did you have—did you have any remembrance of that experience?

LC: No, I don't have any moment that's locked in place. Now, the JFK assassination, I remember that I was in the sixth grade at Washington School, because it came across the PA system. It was announced on the PA system, so that, I do remember.

TS: Do you remember what happened in your school at that time, or any of the events surrounding that? Just because you were kind of young, that would have been young, to remember.

LC: Yeah, yeah. I don't have any specific recall.

TS: I was thinking, because those years, '68, '69, were pretty volatile, north and south. So with the assassination, you had Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. both assassinated that year. But so that—like you were saying, you had that—what was the word you used. Self-absorbed, I think is the word that you used.

LC: Yes.

TS: So you just kind of didn't have this world outside what was happening in your own little world, you weren't connected to that. Is that what you mean by that?

LC: Right. I do mean that, in a lot of ways. And the reason I say that is because so many classmates, so many classmates will say "Laverne, you remember when we did—" and I did wonderful things for them, I may have taken them places, had a great time, I don't remember it. So that's what I attribute it to. Maybe it's some deeper malady, but that's

what I attribute it to. It's still undiagnosed, okay. [chuckling] And we don't need any more bills[?].

TS: [laughs] We don't—that's right. So, well, because part of the questions of this period, that I ask women veterans, who—in this time period, has to do with, you know, were you involved in the counter-culture at all, right? So you have the Vietnam War going on, and you have the counter-culture against that. Did you have any feelings about any of those? I mean, I know you said, you know, you weren't really outside of this space, but did you have any thoughts about it at the time?

LC: No, not really. I remember that—I remember a cousin's death, his name was Clarence Holman, H-O-L-man. He had gone to Vietnam, and I remember that his death stood out, I remember where I was when I heard that. I remember that I was, you know, at his mother's house, on the front step, and I don't know if I was there when—I don't remember who came to tell, but I remember that.

TS: That you were there at that time?

LC: Yes.

TS: That would have had to have been difficult, I would think.

LC: That's a part of that Hightower family that I lived in, that death would have been a part of that family. No, not difficult. It was—you know, death is just something that's strange as a child, perhaps, so you know. But there were many of the men who had gone into the military and came back, and so, this is kind of an aside I've gone on with this question—

TS: That's okay.

LC: But I remember, and this may have led to me going, I remember that at my grandmother's house out in Caswell County, there were all these pictures of the military men on her—let's see, the hearth—

TS: Mantle?

LC: Mantle!

TS: Fireplace mantle.

LC: Fireplace mantle, yeah. And so—and you'd hear their stories, this is C.L., the one that died. We called him C.L., Clarence.

TS: I see. So there's a whole string of pictures of the military heritage of the family, sort of.

LC: Yes.

TS: Interesting. Well, let me ask you a question about a different part of the culture, growing up, then. Was there any—did you like movies, or music, or anything like that?

LC: Music.

TS: Tell me about the music, then.

LC: And I probably lost myself in music. I liked music and I liked numbers, I remember riding along, I would ride with my dad quite a bit, and I was either adding up the license number of the car in front of us, or something, but other than that, music is what I liked, and I enjoyed—I knew all the words to every song.

TS: What kind of music did you like to listen to?

LC: Well, my mother enjoyed a variety of music, and so I had a taste of Laurence Welk and the classics, or big band, and—or Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, and I think I might be saying that right, which was country-western. And so, in my own collection now, you'll find Kenny Rogers, and I'm at a place now in my love of music that over the last two years, I've absolutely fallen in love with classical music, and pursuing it to utilize my instrument as best for classical music, so. So I heard all of that—it was in here, but my greatest love as a child was probably the rock 'n roll, I guess would be the genre, Temptations, Supremes, Gladys Knight, those—as an adult, military time, I loved jazz, and you know, I lived in places like Philadelphia, which was, you know, really a little jazz mecca. I mean, you had so many musical greats come out of Philly, and here I was, right there where I could just jump on the trolley and go downtown and catch a show. Same thing would be true relative to plays. Being from here, now, plays, I've participated in plays in high school. But in the military, and I probably had gone to see plays, but Philly was different, where I could go see something live.

TS: Right.

LC: So, you know, I guess maybe perhaps it's a progression or something, but that's how it is.

TS: That's something that you really enjoyed, though. That's interesting, now. Well, so you're in high school, you're growing up here, you're listening to music. What are your expectations about the future?

LC: [chuckles] I can't say that I had any. I can't say that I considered life like that.

TS: Okay.

LC: As I graduated from high school, because the family that I lived in, basically spoiled me, so it was not like anybody had prepared me to go to college, or to consider what job I was going to take after high school. Now my dad, his name was Walter, Walter Ellison, my

dad worked for Burlington Industries in Burlington, and was with them long enough and liked by them well enough, that they just had him to bring his little girl and give her a job. So what I was doing was examining hosiery, and it would have been maybe the single-legged hosiery at that time.

TS: Okay.

LC: And—for defects. And so they had a method, where if it was a slight defect, there was a way to kind of correct that, and it would be top quality. I wasn't good at it, so I think I stayed with that company with their good graces for two weeks.

TS: How old were you when you got this job?

LC: I would have been eighteen.

TS: So it was after high school.

LC: After high school, yeah, I would have been eighteen. And so that didn't work, and my dad kind of decided that work was not going to be it for me. And somehow, maybe somebody suggested, I really don't know how, I came to be interested in military, but going away was a good thought, for me, and maybe the navy slogan at that time was "Join the Navy, See the World", and so that, the two, kind of made me want to do it. So I remember bringing the recruiter to my mother's house, and my mother and I didn't have the best of relationship, so going away from home was another good reason—[laughs] another good reason—was attractive for that reason as well.

TS: Right.

LC: But I remember bringing the recruiter to her house, and you know, we were outside in the car when he told me, you know "Laverne, this thing about joining the navy, and we have a spot," you know, to set me up.

And she said "Well, hey, if that's what she wants to do," and—but my mother was very supportive of me during, certainly my early years in the navy, because she would actually write letters to me, and I would write back. She would write and let me know. I mean, when you really think about, when I reflect on that, it means a lot that somebody took the time to sit down and handwrite me a letter. Yeah, let me know what was going on.

TS: And you had said—I don't know, at that time, did you have to have your parents' or guardian sign for you if you weren't twenty-one, for women?

LC: Perhaps—I think it could have been.

TS: I think it might have been at that time.

LC: But yes, she had to give her permission.

TS: Okay, okay. And so your mother was supportive. And I was going to say, too, you have to mention how you really wanted to go in the air force. [laughs]

LC: I sure did. And I don't know how air force came to be number one.

TS: Oh, I can—no, no, I'm just kidding.

LC: Never mind, never mind. [laughter] We usually say that if you were in the air force, I usually tell people, I won't hold that against you, so.

TS: I have a very good friend who calls it the "chair force", so.

LC: Oh, really, okay. But I don't know how I selected it as my number one choice, but I do remember why I did not go, but I did pass the test for air force, I did qualify.

TS: And you had said off-tape why you weren't able to go in the air force, if you want to repeat that again.

LC: That the recruiter had met his quota.

TS: That's right.

LC: And so I wasn't able to go, but. And like I said, you had asked about school—there was no thought of me going to school.

TS: College?

LC: To college, yeah. In fact, it was eleven years later, that I went.

TS: Yeah. Did you consider any—you say you don't quite remember why, you know, you settled on the air force, and then the navy.

LC: Right.

TS: But did you discount the army or the Marines or anything like that? Or remember that?

LC: Yeah, I really can't tell you why. Maybe I wanted to do something different than what the guys had done.

TS: Oh, okay, yeah.

LC: But I did not want to go into the army. Did not want to go into the Marine Corps.

TS: Well, and that was—at the time, Vietnam was still going on, at that time, too.

LC: Yeah, but here I am, oblivious to that—

TS: Were you?

LC: —for the most part. I mean, still, I joined the military at a time of the war, so.

TS: That's right. And that would have been in '71—

LC: It wasn't because I was so bold.

TS: Right. [laughs] So you saw it as an opportunity, perhaps?

LC: I think, more than anything else. And certainly still see it as one of the best choices that I made at the time. It was a good choice.

TS: Well, tell me what you remember about, maybe, your first day in uniform. Do you remember that?

LC: No.

TS: [laughs] Do you remember anything about basic training?

LC: I remember quite a bit about basic training.

TS: Tell me what you remember.

LC: [chuckles] One of the things that I remember about basic training is that I wore a huge afro, so that puts you back in the '60s. I wore a huge afro, in fact, the picture that I'm looking for will be that one because I was in uniform.

TS: Oh, great, it would be great to get that.

LC: And so I couldn't wear this hat. [laughter] So, I mean—

TS: What'd you do [unclear]?

LC: There were things that we could do with the afro—

TS: Tell me what you had to do, I want to know.

LC: There were things that we could do with an afro, though, that was this—

TS: She's holding her hands out, you can't see this on the tape, she's got her hands out about eight feet past her head. No.

LC: I tell you what, the afro would have been similar to the Angela Davis afro.

TS: Okay, at that time.

LC: At that time, my afro would—because we would have—

TS: Okay, just two feet.

LC: We would have been trying to emulate her.

TS: I see.

LC: You know, we liked Angela, we didn't know what Angela was doing, but we liked Angela. So—

TS: Well, why'd you like her?

LC: We liked—I don't know, sister black woman, doing some things, you know, she was—I guess that's why young people now are so attracted to bad folk.

TS: Right. Or maybe not—

LC: And I say "bad", quote unquote.

TS: Right, right.

LC: Because—

TS: Non-traditional, maybe?

LC: Or maybe somehow—

TS: Anti-authority, or.

LC: No, I think somehow, you want that courage.

TS: I see. Interesting.

LC: You want to—you'd like to be that kind of person, that, you know, just kind of—engineering or, I don't want to say commandeering, but doing things. Leading things. Speaking, she was outspoken, and you know, anyway. So for the navy, in the uniform, I had to get this afro to a place where I could do this hat. I probably hated the

navy hat for most of my time in the navy. It was always an issue. But what we would do is, I could wash my hair, and it would shrink some. So when they would catch me out and about in my civilian clothing, they would say "Yeah, but you going to have to get your hair cut some." But when—and most of these would be white authorities, okay? So, but when it was time to come for haircuts, you know, I had my stuff down and kind of tight, packed down, freshly washed, and tight. So when they would cut it, because they had regulations, and so they would not cut much of my afro. And then I could go home and—[laughs] and tease my hair out again. So that went on, and so we would teach that to other blacks in the military, about how to retain your hair.

TS: That's really interesting.

LC: Men and women.

TS: A little defiance.

LC: Hey. [laughs]

TS: Any way you can do it, right, to have your identity.

LC: That's right, that's right.

TS: That's really great. Okay, so what else happened in basic training beside you figuring out how to put a hat on? [laughter]

LC: Basic training, I learned to eat fast, I have never—I have not yet changed that discipline. My friends—and she's waving her hands—

TS: I am.

LC: —in agreement.

TS: I ate fast before the military, but after the military, even faster.

LC: Yeah, because we had twenty minutes to get in and out. And you had to have a conversation with somebody in twenty minutes, too, so. Because you were then going back to a work detail or something else. But basic training was good, you know, it was the discipline of having to put things in certain places, and—so I think—I don't think I rebelled against that, because I had grown up, really, the time I had spent with my mother was a strict disciplinarian. So I had gotten—and discipline she would do, whether she used the belt, the buckle end, okay, we're talking about a different time frame. Because the—that would have some authority.

TS: Right, corporal punishment.

LC: Yeah, that would have some—punitive, with it today. Punitive.

TS: Right. Consequences as a parent, given that—

LC: Right, punitive consequences with it today, yeah. Or whether she used a telephone cord. So I tried to do what Mother wanted, okay? And—I lost my train of thought.

TS: You were talking about discipline in the military. So you had it at home, from your mother.

LC: Yeah, okay, so during basic training, you know, I was very good about putting my stuff in order and getting up on time, and you know, marching and being where I was supposed to be. Now, a very interesting thing about basic training and me being in the navy is that I did not swim and I do not swim.

TS: I hear that a lot.

LC: [laughter]

TS: I actually do.

LC: So usually when I tell people that, it's like "How did you spend that much time in the navy, you don't swim?" Well, one of the things about the time frame was that women were not required to go on ships at that time. So that was—it wasn't a major issue. Also, to pass the test to actually gain entrance into basic training, I had to jump from a ten foot diving board into ten feet of water. And so—and they would tell you "If you can't swim, you hold out your hand." Remember now, I'm real good at following instructions. So they say "You hold out your hand, and when you come up from the water, we'll help you." And so they helped to flip us over on our backs, and we would—I guess maybe butterfly or something, kick our feet to the other end of the pool and get out, and that was it.

TS: So you only had to dive in, jump in.

LC: Jump in.

TS: And not swim at all?

LC: And come up.

TS: No swimming?

LC: No swimming. And because other than that, when were you going to get to go on a ship? You know, you weren't.

TS: Right. You know, in the air force, you wouldn't have to jump out of—not everybody jumped out of a plane, so I guess that's the same sort of concept. Not everybody's on a plane, not everybody's on a ship.

LC: Right. But I did, after my initial ten weeks of training, I was retained to train others, and they call those "company assistants". And I remember that the women in my company loved the way I called cadence, because, you know, I had this way—especially the black women, okay, you know? I had this way of making it rhythmic and soulful and so, instead of saying "Left, right, left," you know, I would say [sings] "Left foot, come on and give me your left, I want your left foot, ladies, come on—" And the women went. And then I'd say "I say high lee, I say high low," [laughs]

TS: Awesome. Now, that would have been much better in my basic training.

LC: So the sisters would be—[laughter] "Go Carter, go Carter!"

TS: Awesome. Really great.

LC: So it was fun, it was fun.

TS: Yeah, it was fun. Now, why were you chosen to stay back and train others?

LC: I have no idea.

TS: Why do you think?

LC: I don't know. I don't know if I showed it during basic training, or if it had something to do with whatever next assignment not being ready, and so I could have been retained for that reason. But I don't remember the specifics of that.

TS: Well, what was your mix of whites and blacks and any other races?

LC: Maybe twenty-five percent—

TS: African-American?

LC: Black, yeah, African-American, black or African-American, I have no problem with each—with either term. And I don't remember any other—

TS: No Asian or Hispanic?

LC: Could have been, I just—I just would not have known. I probably would have assumed, because of the lighter complexions, that, you know, depending on how light they were, that they were just white.

TS: Right. So there were twenty-five percent, you think, though? Interesting.

LC: Could have been, you know.

TS: Well, I'm just wondering, at that time period, it seems—yeah, that's interesting, that would be interesting if there was that percentage.

LC: And then another thing that I didn't—I can't remember, I served my—the woman who was over the training center, I served as her driver for a while, and those were good assignments.

TS: They liked you, it was your singing, I think. [laughter] No, I'm sure—you know, they say they don't choose you for positions in the military unless they think you're capable of it.

LC: Oh, is that what it was.

TS: So if you're not given any kind of authority unless they think that you're capable, so I'm sure that they felt that you were—

LC: Good thing they didn't tell me that. [laughter]

TS: Just do this, and you're like, okay, right?

LC: I probably would have gone from there to arrogance. [laughs] But, yeah.

TS: So you stayed in that area—and so where was it, where was your basic training at?

LC: In Bainbridge, in Bainbridge, Maryland.

TS: Okay. And how was that, did you enjoy that?

LC: I did. And I can remember that certainly there was a time when I did want to come home.

TS: Was there?

LC: I wanted to leave the training.

TS: There was?

LC: And come home—and the way I remember it, though, is that I told my mother, and my mother wrote me and said "Well, if you want to, come on." And you know—just not even considering what the consequences would be. But see, I had no—I would have had no clue. I remember that there were women who had run away from basic training, and maybe some of them, there were bad consequences, where they may have gotten down to the water, and I think I remember—I *think* I remember that somebody may have drowned

as a result of that. But you know, I wasn't even considering what the consequences would have been for leaving, but at least my mom said I could come.

TS: Yeah.

LC: And to me, that—I might have even taken that as love from her. She said—

TS: You did say how your mom felt about you joining the navy, what did your dad think? And what did your other family think, whose name I didn't write down here.

LC: Well, I was living with my mother at the time that I joined the navy, and so she would have been the only one to give the go ahead on that.

TS: Any feedback on, then. Did you get—

LC: I don't even remember asking the parents that I grew up with, who I was given into. Who I was given to—I don't remember asking them. I don't remember.

TS: Do you remember if they had an opinion about it?

LC: I know that my dad was there when I graduated from boot camp. He had brought my mother and some other relatives and he had brought my younger brother, who was my heart, at that time and probably even now, with his nearly forty year old—all but forty year old self. But he's thirteen years my junior, yeah. And my dad brought them to the basic training graduation. And so, you know, they were there, it was just like—some of the family that I loved was there to see me graduate, in my little sharp uniform and everything. So.

TS: And how'd you feel about wearing that uniform?

LC: Oh, I was good at wearing my uniform. I mean, my stuff was pressed, my shoes were spit-shined such that you could see a reflection in them. I was proud to wear my uniform.

TS: Did everybody come to you and have you shine their shoes?

LC: They may have come and asked. [laughter]

TS: They weren't going to look better than yours, though.

LC: I didn't have the mindset that I was going to polish everybody's shoes. Now, I would show them how to polish their shoes.

TS: That's great. Was there anything that was particularly hard about the military at this point, for you?

LC: Not that I—nothing that stands out as a clear memory as far as "hard" is concerned.

TS: So you're like nineteen years old, something like that?

LC: Yeah, nineteen, twenty.

TS: And so what—do you remember, at that time, okay, you went in the navy, did you have a goal? Was there something that you hoped to achieve?

LC: You know, you keep asking me that. But even then, I was still at that same place of not—I guess I probably enjoyed the moment but not really lived in the moment, you know, I—yeah, that would probably be a good description. I enjoyed the moment. I had a good time. My friends—in fact, I was recently reconnected with a friend that I knew after Bainbridge, I knew her from California times.

Which was my duty station after Bainbridge, Maryland, and she—and she said "Laverne," she said "Girl, you were the one that kept gas in our car."

I said "I don't remember that."

And so I enjoyed the moment, and enjoyed it with others, with many, but as to what was going on, a lot of times I was oblivious to it.

TS: Yeah, I can understand that.

LC: Good! Well, then you can help me. [laughter]

TS: I have to pause for just a second. [recording paused] Well, thank you for letting me have that little break.

LC: Sure.

TS: Now, you're—so how long were you in Bainbridge, in Maryland?

LC: Specifics, I don't remember. Specifically, I don't remember, but it would have been—ten weeks would have been the basic training time. And then perhaps another three to six months as a company commander, or a company assistant, maybe that's what they called us.

TS: Right, for helping with the training and things like that. Now, did you have a particular—like, did they assign—did you know what kind of job you were going to have, going forward in the navy?

LC: How did I pick SK [storekeeper]? I don't know if I was in California when that happened. Yeah, because, I think storekeeper's school—storekeeper would have been the designation, was in California, so that's probably why I went to California.

TS: To San Diego?

LC: Yes, to San Diego, because that's the school that I had chosen.

TS: I see, okay. And it was—what school was this?

LC: Storekeeper.

TS: Storekeeper.

LC: Which is supply clerk.

TS: I see.

LC: So that's probably how I got there.

TS: Well, tell me about California, what was that like?

LC: California was a time of still—I remember more racial incidences between black and white military people in California.

TS: Did you have that in Bainbridge?

LC: Bainbridge was so secluded.

TS: Okay.

LC: In Bainbridge—thank you for bringing me back to Bainbridge. Because the ten weeks of training was—you were so isolated. I remember that when I came home from basic training, and when they told me that Mahalia Jackson had died, I cried as if it had been a close personal family member, because I had loved her. I enjoyed her music so much that, you know, I wanted to be like Mahalia. So from outside of—from somewhere in the turmoil of myself, I would reach out and latch on to certain people.

TS: I see.

LC: So, Ms. Bristoe, Jackie Williams, the teacher who was doing it, and now Mahalia. And so we had no clue, we would have never seen any newspapers or reports or anything. That's what basic training—that's what basic training did for you. And so, but anyway, so now I'm in California. Now, in California, one of the people that I run into was one of the girls that I had trained in Bainbridge. I was a strict trainer. [laughter] So, I was good.

TS: That's why they wanted you, probably.

LC: Yeah. So when I get to California and run into her, it's like—we have friction. She doesn't like me, but I'm different now, you know.

TS: You're in different roles.

LC: Yeah. She sees me now and I'm laughing and everything. And probably didn't remember why she didn't like me, because, you know. But I do remember a specific incident with her is that when I was her—the company assistant, she was—her name was Jill, she was from Oklahoma, Tulsa, Oklahoma. And Jill was older than the rest of us, so any instructions that we thought we were going to give Jill, Jill had something to say about them. And, you know, hey, I'm in a role where I ain't supposed to be able to take no lip if I don't want to take no lip, but that wasn't going to work with Jill.

So I remember when we were back in Bainbridge, I would say to Jill "Jill, you need to shave your legs." And Jill didn't want to shave no legs, and black women kind of pride themselves about hair on the legs, that's—you know.

So Jill didn't want to shave her legs, so Jill said "Well, do I have to shave, you know, the hair on my legs? Can't I just cut, clip it?" She's trying to get around it.

I said "Jill," I said, "You don't even get to clip the hair on your head. You will shave the hair off your legs." And so it was with that kind of start that carries forth when we see one another in San Diego.

TS: Okay.

LC: And somehow along the way, somewhere, we become very good friends.

TS: [chuckles]

LC: We become very good friends, so much so—but there again, so much so that now, in San Diego, I'm following Jill.

TS: I see.

LC: In San Diego, we, we meaning the women who worked at the—I worked at 32nd Street. There was a naval training center there, and then there was 32nd Street and then there was Coronado, as far as navy involvement. There was probably some others, too, that I wasn't aware of. I remember them—them meaning the admirals and such, calling all of us to like a base theatre one day to talk to us about putting women on ships. I didn't want to go on a ship. So if it's voluntary, cool, no thank you for me.

But I'm sitting next to Jill, and so the admiral says to Jill—he may have said to all of us—"How many of you want to go on a ship?" And we fold our arms and shake our heads, no, we didn't want to go. So he said to Jill, particularly, said "Jill, Seaman Jones," that's her name, "Seaman Jones," he said "Don't you want to go on a ship?"

And she said "No, sir."

He said "Why is it, Seaman Jones, you don't want to go on a ship?"

She said "Can't take enough land with me." And I just remember, we just bust out laughing.

TS: She can't take another what?

LC: Cannot take enough land with her.

TS: Oh! [laughs] Okay.

LC: So Jill was my mouthpiece then, because that spoke for me, too. [laughter] Other than that, San Diego became a place where I showed my bowling prowess.

TS: Oh, well, let's hear about that.

LC: Prowess. Just started off as just loving to bowl, and would go—

TS: Now, you'd done it a little bit in high school, right?

LC: Yes.

TS: Okay.

LC: Done a little bit, and excelled in it, a little bit, in high school. And in San Diego, I would just go to the base bowling center, it was something to do and I was good at it. And my dad, he always encouraged bowling. Now remember now, he and his wife had split in Burlington, but I still would go during my summers to spend time with him. Now, so basically he's like a single father. He loved bowling, he loved for me to be bowling. I realized later that it was a good babysitter for him. [laughter] He's a smart man, a smart man. [unclear] And it was cheap, it was affordable, and he could, you know, leave certain money with the guy behind the desk, and I could sit in Burlington Lanes and just bowl, bowl, bowl. Well, when I got to San Diego, I did it for fun and it would always be somebody else that actually picked up on it, that perhaps I was good enough to do something else.

And so someone does, who worked there, said "Well, have you considered joining the navy's bowling team?"

No, I don't even know that there is one. And so I do. And as a result of me doing that, you know, when I come into the bowling alley, they let me bowl for free.

TS: You got—it was like the All-Navy bowling team? Or the base one? Or what level was that at?

LC: Well, it starts out at one level, then it moves toward being All-Navy, or inter-forces.

TS: Okay. Really? You were that good? Wow.

LC: Well—you're making me rush to the end.

TS: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm like excited, I love bowling, so this is exciting.

LC: Because my—

TS: I'll back up the bus.

LC: My claim to fame there is that I was number seven in the navy at one time. Number seven. I've been looking for that record myself. And—

TS: Yeah. Oh, in your paperwork?

LC: Huh?

TS: In your paperwork?

LC: No, no, no. Not in my paperwork necessarily, but—it's 5:15.

TS: Yeah, we've got about fifteen minutes.

LC: But—turn this thing off, me and technology, I tell you. But yeah, I was number seven in the navy, because I did well. You know, they would take the top six, and so I was ranking on a local level, and then you go regional, and I'm ranking. And I kind of enjoyed it, because what you did was bowl six games a day, and that was it. Boy, this is good, I didn't—[laughs]

TS: It's like your job?

LC: That was my job for several months out of the year.

TS: Wow. Terrific.

LC: And then it became so much fun—a reunion, like, because the people that you have bowled, and yes, they would try to get you to drink more—

TS: They want to beat you. [laughter]

LC: Oh, you didn't know, you know. It was just "Chief So-and-So wants to buy you a beer," [laughs] But—and so you see all of these people that you have bowled with in previous years, and you see them again. So that was—that was fun. And like I said, I got to the place where—and it was only a few pins that I missed going to the Inter-Services. Only a few pins.

TS: Excellent. That's really fantastic.

LC: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

TS: So I have to ask you, what kind of average were you carrying?

LC: At that time, I was probably carrying 170, 175 average.

TS: Nice.

LC: Yeah. You know, and like I said, and sometimes not even knowing how good that was. Not even knowing, because it's not like I came home and read any bowling literature.

TS: Right.

LC: When I came back, I'd just, you know, hang out with friends.

TS: Did you have the really cool bowling shirt, though?

LC: Oh, yes, and still have them.

TS: Oh. [laughs] I have to see—

LC: No, no, no, still had then[?], I don't—I'm not a current bowler.

TS: Okay.

LC: But, you know, had my name, Laverne, on the back

TS: Oh, I have to see this, when you get your things.

LC: That was—that—you somebody. In fact, my bowling shirts were actually tailor-made for me. Oh, come on.

TS: Of course they were, you've got the shiny shoes, you know.

LC: [laughs] Yes, they would measure me, you know. And so these weren't necessarily the military people, sometimes this could be somebody that was watching. There was one lady, white lady, I didn't know her, didn't know she was watching. But she would start talking to me. She made me a bowling towel that I have today.

TS: Oh my goodness. How wonderful.

LC: Probably not be a part of the donation, but—because I just love it so. But she hand stitched my name on that bowling towel. So if you don't think that meant something—

TS: That's special.

LC: Yeah! So when I fold it, I fold it so you can see "Laverne", you know.

TS: Right. That's really great. So you don't bowl anymore, today? Not much.

LC: No. You know, it's just costly.

TS: That's true. It is a lot more expensive these days. Well, that's a really neat story. So this was all the time you were in California, for this period of months that you were—did you travel around to different places in California, or around the country or anything? Was it just local?

LC: No, in fact—

TS: They came to you, probably.

LC: Most of the travel that I did there, would have been when I was bowling, because you went from local to one year, we—the regionals would have been held—if I was in San Diego, the regionals were held in Whidbey Island North, and so heck, I went there, won, became part of the top six, and so then the All-Navy Tournament was held in Orlando, so they would fly us all cross-country. So those kinds of travel, you know, I took.

TS: Yeah. That's really nice.

LC: Venturing out—I never went to Tijuana, which was right across—twenty miles from, basically, from where I lived. Never went, you know, I heard people come back and talk about the cardboard houses and those kinds of things. It never interested me enough to want to go. And even at that time, I was not interested in going overseas. Just didn't want it, you know.

TS: Yeah. Were you enjoying the time you had in San Diego, though?

LC: I told you, now, I was good about enjoying the moment.

TS: Okay. [chuckles]

LC: Enjoy the moment, so.

TS: Well, I know you have somewhere to be. So maybe this is a good place to pause the interview for now, and maybe we can pick it up again, we'll figure out when.

LC: I would love to, I would love to. You've been easy to talk to.

TS: Well, it's wonderful to talk to you, I could probably stay here all day and talk to you. Well, I'm going to stop this right now, let's see.

[Recording Ends]

[Next Recording Begins]

TS: This is Therese Strohmer, today is—I was just talking about it, October 18th, 2010, we're at the Jackson Library, I'm here with Laverne Carter, and this is a continuation of her oral history for the Women Veterans Historical Project, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Now, Laverne, you wanted to change how your name is on the collection, right?

LC: Yes, please, I'd like to be listed as Laverne Carter.

TS: Laverne Carter.

LC: Yes.

TS: Okay, very good. We will do that.

LC: Thank you.

TS: Well, Laverne, I think when we last left off, you were in San Diego. And before we started the tape here, you were talking to me about how you feel like you're in a period of transition for women going on ships and things like that.

LC: I think that's where we left off before.

TS: Yeah, well, we can start there.

LC: During the time that I was in—well, during the time of my enlistment, women were not allowed to go on ships, but during—also, the navy was transitioning to make that possible, so during my stay in San Diego, it was on a volunteer basis. And I did not volunteer. And, but—

TS: Right, because you had the commander standing up front and he talked directly to your friend, that's right. Okay.

LC: Yes, yes, yes. But, so that was it, relative to that tour.

TS: What year—about what year were you in San Diego?

LC: I would say '72-'74 would be the time frame. And I remember that there were, you know, a lot of racial things happening on ships, with men. I specifically remember the fire on the U.S.S. Forrestal that—and I could be wrong here, so.

TS: Well, it's just your memory of it, so.

LC: Yeah, so, that I think was racially motivated. So.

TS: And was that a ship out of San Diego?

LC: I think it was.

TS: So it was something that was in the presses at the time—did it say in the news at the time that there was a racial incident, or just the fire aspect of it, do you remember that? I'm not familiar with the fire, actually, on the Forrestal.

LC: Yeah. My memory is so vague of it I probably need to leave it alone.

[In 1967, the Forrestal experienced a catastrophic fire due to a rocket misfire, which is a very well-known disaster. In 1972, another serious fire was caused by arson on the Forrestal, but preliminary research does not necessarily show a racial component to either fire.]

TS: Okay. [laughter] That's something I have to look up, because the name Forrestal rings a bell with me, but I can't actually remember any of the facts surrounding it, so. Did you—so when you were in San Diego, what is your job that you're working?

LC: I attended school in San Diego, I guess it would be trade school, to be a storekeeper, is the navy's term for it, but it's a supply clerk, and that's what I did.

TS: So what's a typical day like for you there?

LC: Gosh. I have no—now, this is 1972, you're really challenging me here. But for me and my time in San Diego, I was not really a beach person, so you know, I'd probably spend my time doing whatever I would do at navy, for the navy, go bowling, hang out with friends. That's it.

TS: That's it? What kind of things did you do in your job?

LC: Like I said, we ordered and received supplies, that's what a supply clerk would do.

TS: Were there a lot of other women in your unit that you were in?

LC: Don't remember.

TS: Hard to get that kind of recall sometimes, I know.

LC: Yeah, don't remember. Because even though we lived at the naval training center, San Diego, there was a women's barracks there. We actually worked at what is termed 32nd Street, which would be naval base. The barracks was located at Naval Training Center San Diego, but we actually worked at Naval Base San Diego, so.

TS: Did you live on the base?

LC: I did.

TS: What were your accommodations like?

LC: [chuckles] It was a cubicle environment, cubicle environment with two twin bunk beds. And a closet that we shared. Oh, it may have been two. Wasn't that much room. But I remember an incident because I had my poster of Angela Davis on my wall simply because I admired Angela Davis. [Angela Davis was a political activist who was associated with the Communist Party USA and the Black Panther Party] And so evidently, while I was away at work, the barracks was inspected. And a young lieutenant was offended by it, and so I was called away from my workstation to come back and to give an explanation of me and this Angela Davis poster. Now, mind you, I was mostly ignorant of what Angela Davis did, I just admired her courage. I admired that she was an African-American woman in the news. So—and so I was made to take it down, and it was confiscated.

TS: Why did they confiscate—did they say why?

LC: Well, later I would learn about how it was perceived, of her Communist ties. And so that would be in direct conflict to U.S. military.

TS: Oh, I see, okay, so it's like a radicalization, or if you had a black power poster, would they make you take that down?

LC: Probably so, probably so. Because, you know, and this was 1972, so the reaction of the status quo at that time was to try to control that movement, that black movement, black awareness or black power movement at that time, so.

TS: What'd you think about having your poster taken off your wall, confiscated?

LC: I loved my poster, it was something that I talked about for a long time, even though I did not fully understand why it was being taken. I lost something very genuine, you know, very dear to me. So. And I probably just summed it up as the lieutenant just being nerdy. [laughs] Yeah.

TS: Well, that's interesting that they confiscated it. I'm going through my head thinking about what I had on my walls, so.

LC: I think it's more of the time, and sometimes once we are past those eras, it's difficult for us to think what life would have been like for us. You know, so many times, I hear young people when we talk about, you know, African-American slavery in the U.S., and I probably have said the same thing myself, that "Oh, I wouldn't have—oh, they wouldn't have done that to me," you know, because I couldn't think about what the constraints were, living within those constraints at that time, trying to think back.

TS: Right, without the context of the times that they lived in, the mentalities, the—everything. Yeah. Where were you going to go, what were you going to do? Interesting. So in San Diego, you weren't a beach person, you're busy bowling, you're doing your job. And you're there for a couple years, you said.

LC: That's right.

TS: Was there anything in particular that you—besides the bowling, which I know you loved, that you enjoyed about this area that you were in? Did you get to travel or anything?

LC: Actually, I wasn't—actually, San Diego bored me, and I think it was later I kind of looked at it that it was the lack of seasons, you know. I was a North Carolina girl, and really, there, I only saw a couple of seasons. Maybe spring and then hot.

TS: Yeah. [laughs]

LC: And so.

TS: Yeah, I can see that. So what was your next assignment, where were you off to after San Diego?

LC: After San Diego I was stationed in Philadelphia. My brother, my older brother Wayman, actually flew out to San Diego to help me drive that cross-country, and that was a fun bonding time with my brother, and we—we had fun. I think it took us about three days, we took our time.

TS: That sounds quick, actually.

LC: We took our time coming back across. I had a lot of latitude as to how much time I had before I was to report in Philadelphia, so that wasn't the problem. We were just having fun.

TS: Do you have a memorable moment from that trip that you want to share?

LC: Yes, number one, I was driving a '72 Camaro.

TS: What color?

LC: It was bronze metallic, I'm glad you asked. It was bronze metallic, it was—it had what they call a slap stick, which was automatic, but just on the console, in between the seats. But it was called a slap stick, it was a pretty sharp car. But I remember doing that ride. My brother, we would kind of take our turns, and I would drive much longer than he, and so his time to drive, we are going through Arizona, and so I'm sleeping, it's, you know, into the night, he's a night owl. And you know, I wake up and there are these sirens [chuckles] around us, and what has happened is, he got lost, bless his heart, being the male that he is, he wasn't going to wake me up to ask me. He got lost, we were in downtown—somewhere in downtown Arizona—

TS: Phoenix or something?

LC: Yeah.

TS: Flagstaff?

LC: Going the wrong way on a one-way street.

TS: Oops.

LC: And so—and now, I've got California tags that have "LVERNE" on them. And so when he stopped, he produces a North Carolina driver's license, a Caucasian cop. North Carolina driver's license, and so when he wakes me up, I think I had a California driver's license, with Laverne on it, and—somehow, it took us a while to explain our way out of that. But I just knew we were going to end up in jail that night. But somehow we made it, somehow we made it, so.

TS: Did you sleep again when he drove?

LC: Yes, one eye open, yeah, one eye open. But you know, I think that was real special for my brother to have done that for me, and—because I had always enjoyed traveling, and so we, you know, we took a lot of pictures along the way, and I still have those pictures of us, and our travels. Yeah. We really had not been that kind of close siblings, but we have that as a bonding memory for us. So yeah, then I was on my way to Philly.

TS: And was it—it was just a new assignment?

LC: Yes. Being transferred, and.

TS: Did you put—did you have, at that time, where you could like say—what did they call it, a dream sheet or something where you can say what assignments you want on it? Or anything like that?

LC: [laughs] Oh, I haven't heard that term in a while.

TS: Did I say it right?

LC: Yes, yes, yes. We all had those. We thought that they put that down there just to aggravate us.

TS: This is where we're not going to send you.

LC: That's right, let us know where you want to go and then we'll know where not to send you, yes. But yes, and I can't remember what I would have put down, but I know that at that time, I did not have an interest in going out of the country. In fact, for most of my stay in the military, I did not have that kind of interest. You know, like I said, Puerto Rico and Bermuda were—that was my extent of foreign travel, you know. And—but I did go to Haiti while I was in Puerto Rico.

TS: We'll have to talk about that, too.

LC: Yes, that was a good one.

TS: So what did you do in Philadelphia, how was that assignment?

LC: Philadelphia was a good naval assignment for me, I lived off campus for at least half of that tour of duty, and that was three years, so it was—somewhat my longest stay anywhere. But I loved Philadelphia. It was—you know, it was, for me—me learning to move around in a big city, in other words—and here I am from little Carolina. But I could jump on a bus or trolley in Philly and go to West Philadelphia if I wanted to, or I wasn't afraid. The other thing about Philly was that it—it greatly added to my cultural awakening, because, you know, I could go see plays and live performances of people, you know, jazz artists. You know, I could go see Grover Washington or, you know, Little Jimmy Scott, so—so Philadelphia did that for me. It made me feel—I don't know if that was a, you know, a confidence in growing up, that I could master this city, but now I—in retrospect, I can see—Philadelphia's a pretty small city. Pretty small city, you know, I guess, landmass-wise, but I just enjoyed it, it was a beautiful place for me.

TS: It's interesting, because I'm thinking to myself, well, San Diego's kind of a big city. [chuckles] But your experience was different there. Is it because of different culture? What was it, you think, that attracted you to Philly more?

LC: San Diego is kind of laid-back. But like I said, with Philly, I was more—with San Diego, I did a lot of navy activities, maybe, even in my off time. Spent a lot of time on campus, aah, on base. Bowling alley, I would stay in there for hours, unless somebody was going to a party. But in Philadelphia, you know, I could just go and hang out with friends or get friends and go to see—go to the theatre.

TS: So a lot less—just more free time as a civilian, right?

LC: Yes.

TS: So civilian life, or world, I guess, and not so connected to the base.

LC: That's right.

TS: In some ways. Were you still bowling, at this time, too, for your—for the navy?

LC: I don't—probably so, but not a lot.

TS: Not the intensity and competition—

LC: Intensity of San Diego, yeah. I have no idea why, and it's probably just because interests change. Yeah.

TS: Yeah, you found this was something you wanted to do in the San Diego area, and then you moved to Philly and you see all these other opportunities that you have, maybe, something like that.

LC: It was like the world, you know, a lot of lights and a lot of excitement. Philadelphia had a lot of excitement. You know, they would have the Mummer's Parade on New Year's Day, they would have a lot of—you know, African-American cultural activities.

TS: What kind of things did they have for that?

LC: The radio station would talk about—"Bring families down to some location, you know, we're gathering down here," you know. It was family kind of environment, but—you know, I really don't know what made it different. My train of thought—

TS: Well, you had—that's okay. So you have—one of the things I was going to ask you about, when we talk about like the culture of the military for you, now. So now you've been in—five, five years or so? And how are you feeling about the time frame in which you are going to stay in the navy?

LC: I re-enlist—I remember re-enlisting in Philadelphia.

TS: In Philadelphia?

LC: And one of the incentives to re-enlist was that they would let me stay there a little longer.

TS: Okay.

LC: And they did, and so—and every now and then I would call home, and I would say to a family member, say, "Hey, it's time for me to re-enlist,"

And they would say "Well, you might as well, there are no jobs out here." So bam, that became it, what I would do.

TS: Did you see yourself as—originally, when you went in, the reasons that you went in, are they staying the same?

LC: Well, I didn't have any focused goal on going in.

TS: Oh, I remember that.

LC: It certainly made me—caused me to kind of meander through life, and so the navy's slogan was "Join the Navy and See the World", so I probably, after a while, just had as much fun as I could, and I wasn't—my goal was not to make it from E-1 to E-9. In San Diego, I had an opportunity, I was being tapped again and encouraged to go to an officer prep school that they had started for minorities, called BOOST [Broadened Opportunity for Officer Selection and Training], and I don't know what all of that stood for, but had I pursued it, I know that they wanted me to make a six year commitment on the other end of it, because they would have college educated me. And at that time, I was like, "Uh-oh, naw, six years," so I just wasn't ready. And so I started that program, but did not—my heart wasn't there, so, that, you know, later regretted it, but when you get older and wiser, you look back on some things—opportunities that you had that you just passed up.

TS: Well, like you said though, perhaps this wasn't the time for you to—

LC: And it wasn't, like I—I wasn't focused. I had not been—I had not been, you know, sometimes we kind of help our children think, you know, what are you going to be when you grow up? How are you going to do that? This, that, and the other. Well, I don't think I had had that kind of encouragement in life as a youth. And so I was just finding my way, and the navy was a good, safe place for me to have been, for one so lost, and one story that I did not tell you, that kind of encouraged me even to be in the navy, during my last year of high school, I would spend my summers and weekends in Burlington with my foster dad, Walter Ellison, that's where I got that—began carrying that name, Ellison. But I got in some trouble one weekend. Myself and friends were in my car and, you know, we had been to a club and got ready to leave the club and tried—just simply trying to pass somebody on a narrow road, narrow graveled road, and some girls who knew I was from Greensboro and did not like me simply for that reason, wouldn't let me pass their car. And so I got angry. So when we get to the first stoplight, we on pavement now, when we get to the first stoplight, I should have been behind them but I pulled beside them. So they were in a go straight or turn right lane, mine would have been left only, but I'm beside them because I need to say a few things.

TS: [chuckles]

LC: So we exchange words and I was even more heated, so when the light turned green, even though I was in the left lane, I followed them. We go down two or three blocks to a local

gathering place in Burlington, they park their car, I pull beside them, I get out of my car, I go over to try to pull the one, the driver, out of her—I don't even know her! [laughs] To pull her out of her car, and the doors were locked. Now, what I remember is that I walked around the car—did some terrible things, walked around the car trying to get in, picked up a rock and kind of threatened knocking on the—

TS: The window?

LC: This is years ago, now, you can't even bring this up. [laughter]

TS: Past the statute of limitations, huh?

LC: Yes! So, I tried to get into that car. And I got back around to the driver's door, and the door was locked, but not completely closed. On the old cars, that meant all you had to do was put your hip to it. And so when I put my hip to it, it came unlocked, and you could hear the other locks of the women trying to get out, you could hear their locks coming up too. So, and I get into a fight, a physical fight with this girl under the—under the—that was driving. And like I said, I don't know. And so during the time I was doing my taunting, tapping on the window, I decided to write on the car with a rock. Wasn't smart. Then I decided it was stupid of me to have written my name on the car [laughs], so I took the same rock and scratched it out. The bottom line is, I end up in court relative to this incident. You know, I'm a student. Now, when I went back to Dudley High School, the next Monday—that was over the weekend—when I went back to the high school the next Monday, I got about—you know, about ten Band-Aids on my legs, because, you know, she done scratched me up and stuff. And I remember, we had a Thanksgiving program and I was in it. So here I come out on stage with all these Band-Aids on my legs. Oh, it must have been a time where girls didn't wear pants to school either, because [unclear] I would have had sense enough to do that.

TS: You had a skirt on or something.

LC: Yes! I remember just being exposed with all those Band-Aids. But being in court, you know, I kind of came with the truth as far as I saw it, and told the judge all I was trying to do was pass and they wouldn't permit, and every time I tried to they would get in my way.

And I said "Judge, it was like pouring salt on an open wound."

And so he said "Well, you know, what are you going to do?" Because I was being charged. Well, my dad had contacted their father to try to work out some things relative to repairing the car. And he said "Well, what are you going to do?"

I said "Well, I'm supposed to be going in the navy."

He said "Well, I think you need to make that appointment—keep that appointment. You need to keep that appointment." So that was one of the things that kind of helped me to go in. [laughs] And like I said, still, it was a good place for me to have been, because I didn't know what I wanted to do. And looking back, what else—I mean, that was—I was kind of trailing off, going into a very bad way. What would I have done

next? So I'm glad that the navy was a choice for me at that time. But anyway, so that—we were in Philadelphia.

TS: Yeah, so now you re-upped there, you liked it in Philly, you wanted to stay a little bit longer.

LC: I worked with the boiler technicians there.

TS: What's that?

LC: I don't know what they did, they were probably some kind of mechanics.

TS: Okay.

LC: I worked with the boiler technicians, and the only thing that I remember about that is because I was one of the lowest ranked people there, lowest enlisted people there, and female. They didn't have—I think I was the only female on their staff there. And so they wanted me to make coffee, even though I didn't drink coffee. And I resented it.

TS: Did you make it?

LC: Oh, yes, I made it. So I started drinking it, and I would put so much cream and sugar in the coffee that they accused me of making milkshakes and then they finally told me I didn't have to make it anymore, because I was using up their supplies. [laughter] I mean, not intentional, but you know—

TS: To make it taste better. Cream and sugar.

LC: Yes, yeah.

TS: I understand!

LC: So, but there, I would order their supplies and actually kept their budget, so that was basically Philadelphia.

TS: Did you have any other treatment like that, where, you know, you were assigned a certain role because you were a woman, like that, making the coffee?

LC: No, I don't—not that I remember any. And I don't know even what thought I would have given to it.

TS: Right, maybe it just was something you did.

LC: Yeah, I don't know.

TS: Yeah. Didn't seem out of the ordinary at the time, something like that?

LC: Yeah.

TS: Well, how did you feel you were treated, then, you know, at this point? In your performance evaluations, things like that?

LC: Oh, I did well. I moved up in rank, and passed the navy's tests, even though I did not necessarily study for them. Because ultimately, I went to—I ended up being an E-6, so had I, you know, buckled down and studied, I could have made chief petty officer. But I enjoyed my assignments. I got to a place where I just enjoyed life, you know. So that was that.

TS: Did you have—was looking at where you were at, here. So in Philadelphia, it was a naval base in Philadelphia.

LC: Yes. Naval Base Philadelphia.

TS: And you're out going to plays, things like that, in Philadelphia. And what—

LC: In my little Camaro.

TS: You still have—bronze metallic.

LC: And I was there—yes, I was there—'72!—I was there during the—Philadelphia's celebration of their bicentennial.

TS: Oh, okay. How was that?

LC: Two hundred years—oh, just, elaborate. Yeah, so.

TS: And I know we've talked before, you know, about what's happening in the outside world, you hadn't been paying much attention to it, right, when we talked about that in the last interview. Is there anything—are you getting any kind of political awareness with what's happening?

LC: Well, Philly is so historical, so I remember going to—I would go to visit the Liberty Bell, and actually at some point flew my younger brother to Philadelphia to take him around to see things like that, and because—and then there was the statue, I think of Ben Franklin, but it's made of copper, into pennies.

TS: Oh, a lot of pennies?

LC: Yeah, the whole statue is kind of made of pennies. So I took my younger brother around to see that kind of thing. And the Mint, is one of the locations of the Mint. So I'm starting

to maybe become aware a little bit of history, some things that I'd heard about in school I'm actually looking at, so maybe that's bringing me into an awareness, certainly not directly, of my—of what life was like, yeah, beyond my little internal world. So.

TS: Well, because in this period of time, you know, we had talked about earlier the counterculture going on with Vietnam, things like that. Vietnam was actually still happening, hasn't completely been—we haven't pulled all the way out of there yet.

LC: Yeah. And I was not really involved in that, directly, and I had nothing to do—no assignments like get some orders and get them over to somebody in Vietnam, I had no—

TS: So you're detached from the war effort part of the military?

LC: Sure. That's right, that's right.

TS: Okay, so you're just doing supplies as part of just a regular routine military, not associated with the war.

LC: And even, there were times when we certainly had—there were ships that we had to send, urgently send supplies out to ships, but so, that was just another customer. I didn't—

TS: Think about it in that sense?

LC: Yes.

TS: Well, I was thinking about the kind of things that are happening, like at Kent State, you know, the Guard shooting in the students having a protest. Things like that, did you have any awareness of those kinds of protests going on?

LC: Not protests. You know, I certainly have another thing to happen while I'm in Puerto Rico.

TS: Oh, something's going to happen in Puerto Rico?

LC: Yeah.

TS: What year were you in Puerto Rico?

LC: Oh, gosh.

TS: Approximately. Was it right after Philly?

LC: After Philadelphia, so I'm going to say—'77-'79.

TS: Okay. Want to jump over to Puerto Rico and tell me what happened there?

LC: Yeah, let's go.

TS: Let's go to Puerto Rico. I've not been to Puerto Rico, tell me about it. What kind of assignment is it, what base are you at here?

LC: Roosevelt Roads [Naval Station], Puerto Rico.

TS: Okay.

LC: Their ships pull in there occasionally, my supervisor is an African-American lieutenant and I get to know he and his wife after a while, and—because I'm probably an E-5 by now, so they have confidence in me that I can babysit their children when they're going out. We did, I did get a little bit more attached to beaches in Puerto Rico, because they would do a—my friends would do a lot of things right at the beach. If the—if they were going to have a cookout picnic, it would be at the beach, so. And by now—photography, I liked photography, too. So I would take nice pictures of sunset and flowers and things, yeah. I was supervising an auto shop store, trying my best to speak Spanish. There was a civilian who had probably been a part of the naval base for twenty, thirty years. He's the real supervisor, to help me to know how to—to reorder things when things were low, and he really wanted me to just stay out of his way. [chuckling] So I would accommodate him as much as I could, and—but we—I hung with a civil service employee by the name of Jim, Jim and his wife are stationed in Puerto Rico, and Jim is a California man, real laid-back, kind of cool, and he loves jazz. And his wife is not a—she doesn't like to go out, she just—homebody, and Jim and I, our relationship was purely platonic, but we would go anywhere and everywhere, so if there were groups coming to Puerto Rico, Jim was up on it. And he would—he said "Come on, let's go." And so we had an opportunity one weekend to go over to Haiti, and it was—I forget who all was with us—Jim must have been there with some others as well. And we were all travelling together over to Haiti.

TS: How'd you get there?

LC: I remember some of it was like a flat boat, it was a rough ride.

TS: It's all on a boat?

LC: Yeah. It was a rough ride, and so we knew that in order to get the boat back, we had to be there Sunday by such and such time. And we had a good time—in Puerto Rico, I did a lot of exploring, not only of the island of Puerto Rico, but other places. But when we went over to Haiti, since we're here, we're going to check out what the Haitians do. And so, you know, we bought some art, some of which I still have in my house. I remember buying just a piece of—a carving, wood carving, that stands about—at least three feet, where it's just an old man with a corn cob pipe. And I was just so fascinated, that, you know, someone had just taken the time to carve this—you know, out of wood, carve it

down to what it was. And their system was one of bartering, and it was just the most difficult thing for me, because we realized that they were poor. And so we perceive others who were bartering with them to be taking advantage of them, and so, you know, we bought some art and other things, and then I remember walking down the sidewalk in a shopping area and certainly would even think now, after of the devastation of Haiti, what that area, you know, would look like. But as I would walk down the sidewalk, if there were people on the sidewalk, they would clear the way. And I thought "God, they doing this for me? Why they clearing the way for me?" Well, it wasn't that, it was—this policeman had just kind of taken a liking to me, so he was taking me from one shop to another.

TS: Being escorted.

LC: Yes, so it was them being afraid of him, had nothing to do with me. [chuckles] And then I remember, later, as we passed their—can't say their White House, but their place where the president was, it was Baby Doc who was in command at the time. And they had—their military was lined up in front of the administration building, for lack of a better term.

TS: Like a presidential palace or something?

LC: Thank you, yeah, yeah. The military was lined up in different ranks, there was at least three ranks of them. And I wanted to get closer, and so all I did, with my brazen self, was just walk past all of these military ranks and I couldn't understand why the people were standing so far back. Now, understand now, I don't know what a terror—I don't know about the terror of—

TS: Baby Doc?

LC: Papa Doc—oh, Papa Doc, yeah.

TS: Papa Doc.

LC: Yeah, and—but they certainly immediately knew I was American, and so I had that liberty to move that kind of close. Gosh. Even in my ignorance, you know, I moved close, got whatever pictures I wanted to get, and then went back, thinking that I had just been bold, but really, it was, you know, the fact that I was an American, and so they perceived any Americans to be rich and certainly comparatively to what life was like in Haiti, even at that time. I remember seeing women who were walking and carrying baskets or even water on their heads, and I remember seeing their feet, their feet had so much callus. I mean, mounds of callus, so much so that it looked—rightly so, like it would have served as a sole of a shoe. And so, how they were able to walk about there. So one evening, Jim and I decided we were going to go see a voodoo show. I mean, hey, we in Haiti.

TS: [chuckles]

LC: So we get a taxi, and we go out—the taxi tells us he has to come back and get us at a certain time. Well, certain time meant night, and he's taking us out—we don't know where we're going, we're just trusting this cabbie to get us there. So he takes us to this place, and you know, we sit there and we order something to drink, some kind of beer, it was probably very nasty. We didn't particularly like the taste, but at this point, I'm scared, because I don't know where I am, I'm following Jim. And so, you know, we're there for a while, and I remember there was another couple at another table near us. But it was no more than a half a dozen people at this show.

So finally, over in the night, the people come out to perform. And performance really—I have never forgotten it, because what they do is, they walked on fire. You know, they dance themselves into a frenzy, and I actually saw them, you know, take a piece of wood, which had been burning for a while, it's got a healthy flame on it, and the man begins to chomp at it, chomp at it, putting the wood—flame—to his mouth and, you know, the flame goes down and it's now red-hot cinder that he is chomping and biting at, and the black soot mixed with his saliva is running down from his face now, and I'm okay to go ahead and drink that beer that I didn't like the taste of, you know. [laughing] That I didn't like the taste of before. But I saw it, and saw how real it was—I mean, saw that it was real, and we—and then they explained to us that a part of what we had paid for, because I think we had paid like five dollars each to get in. A part of what we had paid for, we would have seen them bite the head off of a live chicken, but because there were so few people who had come that night, they could not afford to sacrifice that chicken, for—

TS: They needed ten, not six people in the audience, or some economic—

LC: Probably so. You know, for them, I guess a chicken was a very valuable commodity. But I had seen enough, I had seen—

TS: You didn't necessarily need to see them bite the head off a chicken?

LC: No! And Jim knew that they were going to do some of these things, but he had not told me. So—which is probably why he picked me as his running partner, because I didn't ask a lot of questions. I just went along with him. So that was a memorable event from my being stationed in Haiti, but I remember one other thing. I was working and my lieutenant called me—

TS: You were actually stationed in Puerto Rico, right?

LC: Yes. What did I say?

TS: Haiti, but yeah. But you went to Haiti.

LC: That's right. I'm stationed in Puerto Rico. My lieutenant called me from the job and tells me to get—you know, I probably supervise two or three people at this time. Told me to get them together, round them up and go out to the airport. And so—and help out. So, no problem.

So we're in our little navy vehicle and we're headed out to the airport, and I get so far, and I go "What in the world is going on?" You know, I start asking "What's going on?" Because you know I don't know. [laughter] So—so, you know, we pull over to the side of the road, and we just sit and start watching, and I guess at this point, I'm probably maybe a hundred yards from the activity that's going on at the airport.

So, somebody in the truck said "Well, don't you know?" What was happening was—this was the Jim Jones incident, and you know, somebody's informing me that what had happened was, they brought the people from Guyana into Puerto Rico, so what we were watching them do was just lift up body bags, some of them not fully closed, and move them from one place to another.

So that's what I had been asked to go help do, and so I call my lieutenant, I said "Do you know what's going on down here? Do you really expect me to do this?" And I knew him well enough to say "Man, I can't do this." I said "Can you get anybody else?" And I think he was testing me, too, but he let me go from that assignment pretty easily, without any punitive repercussions. So, but that brought me that kind of close again with something that was going on in the world that I had no clue about, which, later, that incident fit well into my spiritual growth, in that once I became a Christian, accepted Christ into my life, I remembered that incident, you know, quite vividly. It's still there, and you know, I'm like "God, how did this happen?" Because these were not all just stupid people, these were not unlearned persons who got caught up in that incident, you know. People had advanced degrees, and so—and people who were senior citizens, older people. So I believe that I heard, you know, God say to me that what I was to do was to teach scripture in such a way that it would not happen again to those that I interact with, and it has now become—it's one of the driving forces, it still is, for how I teach the scripture and how I make an effort to make sure that people have an understanding of what is being conveyed. You know, it brings me back from some of the silliness that I can still get involved in today, that I have to be serious about those things, because people can be easily, you know, led away. So I get to talk about how—but for me, that incident is just—it's just with me—it's a part—it might as well be on my resume. Because it's something that I generally tell—I'm a speaker now, I'm a minister. I'm a pastor, in fact, and generally when I go someplace new, to speak, and if I'm going to be with those people at length that sometimes the reason that I'm so serious, even though I think I have a pretty good sense of humor, but the reason why I'm so serious is because that incident impacted my life just that much, so.

TS: Do you ever think back on that and think, you know, why did I go to Puerto Rico, why was I there that night? Do you think about that as a connection, or is that—

LC: Well, yes, you know, I certainly believe that God positioned me at that moment so that I could have that kind of sobriety, because that makes me sober about the things of God, particularly as I look at scripture. So—

TS: But this is something that came to you later, not like in that moment, it was a reflection of things.

LC: Right. Because I made people aware that at the time that I saw that, you know, I didn't know Jesus Christ. My interaction with church was Christmas, maybe, and we only went to those services where we knew they didn't hold long, we called ourselves CMEs, you go to Christmas, Mother's Day, and Easter. [chuckles]

TS: CME. [chuckles]

LC: So you know, maybe we went to church that much. But I didn't read scripture and so yes, I believe that I was positioned, you know, at that place at such a time as that, for it to have that kind of impact on me and for it to make a statement to me. Just by being there.

TS: I never asked you why, after you had said, you know, you weren't interested in going anywhere overseas or out of the country or anything like that, why did you decide that you would go to Puerto Rico?

LC: Probably because I heard it was just pretty. And in high school, I was a part of the Spanish National Honor Society. So I thought I knew Spanish.

TS: [laughs]

LC: I thought I knew Spanish, and the Puerto Ricans would tell me "Speak English, speak English!" But they loved me enough that they would at least try to teach me some things. Generally most foreign cultures will, if they see that you are interested in their culture. But Puerto Rico, I did a lot of the island kind of things, I went up in the rainforest, I remember Jim and I went high up into the rainforest, where these people had—it looked like a pool out in the front yard. I think we may have even talked about that a little bit. But it probably was, you know, just a spring that—you know, somebody further down the way was drinking the water, but there, they were swimming in it, so.

TS: Interesting.

LC: Yes.

TS: So what was it like, then? So this is really your first experience out of the country, different cultures, right? Although not different—I mean, you've been in different regions in the United States, when you went to Puerto Rico, it's—and then when you went over to visit Haiti, and you said maybe some other islands and things like that, in that area?

LC: Yeah, I went to St. Thomas.

TS: What was that—what did you think about at the time, do you remember?

LC: Being military, you have a certain security, just being military, just the mere fact that even though you're in your civilian clothing, you probably have on your navy shoes. [chuckles] You know, it's something—

TS: You stick out as military somehow.

LC: Yes, you do.

TS: Okay.

LC: You've probably got on your navy jacket or your navy shoes, somehow you are recognized, and maybe there's a certain false sense of security about that, but I never—and so we kind of brought the culture in, if we stopped into a local bar, it would be "Hey, yes, we want beer," you know, so hey, the set up to sale[?] us. And so I don't know, you know, I didn't get into the—well, I lived off-base in Puerto Rico.

TS: In Puerto Rico?

LC: For a while, and so house parties would be what we would have, and the guys would come from the ships, when the ship pulls in, they're going to find their way to who's having the house party. And so, you know, I didn't have to worry about—they could set you up with money to buy the food and everything, so.

TS: Oh, yeah?

LC: So we had a lot of fun. But we'd also get into a lot of trouble, again, because the community that I lived in, Fajardo, they—they would always accuse us of playing our music loud.

TS: Accuse us. [laughter] You weren't playing your music loud?

LC: Probably so.

TS: So they would call like the local police or something?

LC: Yeah, and I say—that said, we didn't have the best of relationships with our neighbors, so didn't get into their cultures that much, but I do remember that at Christmas time, a group of the neighbors would go from house to house singing, and so they'd come to your house and sing, and then you could join them and go to the next house. So I do remember that.

TS: That's nice.

LC: Picking up that bit of culture.

TS: Did you go with them?

LC: I remember going to a house or two, yeah.

TS: Christmas caroling.

LC: Yeah, caroling, and—drinking and caroling. Or drinking and corralling. [laughs]

TS: Something like that. Well, you have exposure, though, to like—in Haiti, you were talking about understanding that, you know, no matter what level American socio-economic status you're at, you're richer than—you're seen as rich by the Haitians. And did that strike you at all, in any way, about the way they live to the way that Americans lived?

LC: No, I think for me, what I was trying to do was just kind of give to them, not realizing how deep that pot—and empty that pot was, but realizing that there were others who—traveling, that maybe could have paid more for the items that they obtained, and they were bragging about how cheap they got it. Jim and I were like, basically emptying out our pockets, you know, just feeling sorry for people.

TS: Right. So if they asked five dollars, here's your five dollars, don't need to pay four-fifty or four or whatever.

LC: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, interesting. And then the point you made about the Haitian earthquake we had, I don't remember exactly when—that was this year, right, early in the year? [January 12, 2010]

LC: I think it was.

TS: And so now, the devastation is—like you said, you imagined that sidewalk that you walked on and what that would be like. Was it in Port-au-Prince, that you were at?

LC: Yes, it was. Port-au-Prince.

TS: Okay, so that's where the earthquake hit.

LC: Yep, so.

But—it certainly, once the earthquake hit and whatever environment that I was in at the time, I forget whether it was work or some other place, and I could hear people who would say "You know, why don't they just drive out to such and such a place and help those people?"

And I'm like "What you don't understand is that even when it was the best of times, many places they couldn't take a four-wheel vehicle, four-wheel-drive vehicle and get to certain places in Haiti. There's not that kind of roadway system." So certainly after devastation, I really couldn't fathom what it was like trying to move from one place to another.

TS: Hmm. And if you hadn't had that experience in the military, of visiting, when this earthquake happened, you wouldn't have been able to educate the people, you know, that you talked to—or even just had that concept. That's interesting, too. So did you ever get out of Puerto Rico?

LC: Yes, and I forget what the dream sheet was at this time.

TS: [chuckles]

LC: But I had some pretty good options.

TS: Okay.

LC: I was always given some pretty good assignments.

TS: Why do you think that was?

LC: I have no clue.

TS: Oh, come on, you have to have some sort of idea.

LC: They just—they just liked me, I guess.

TS: [laughs]

LC: But I opted to go to Bermuda.

TS: Yeah, I have never seen that on anybody's dream sheet. I was wondering about that. How do you get to go to Bermuda?

LC: I opted to go to Bermuda because I had experienced life on an island, having been in Puerto Rico—

TS: Beaches aren't so bad after all.

LC: This is how the logic fell, okay?

TS: Okay.

LC: I had experienced life on an island, it wasn't that bad, and in Bermuda, they spoke English, so why not?

TS: All right!

LC: And I was in Bermuda from '79 to '81. In Bermuda, I participate even more with the locals. Because things are very expensive in Bermuda, and so I mean, if you want to really have a good dinner at a nice restaurant in Bermuda, you can't do that off of military pay.

TS: Really?

LC: And so you have friends who take care of you, and you just take care of the maître d'. And again, that's thirty years ago, so don't hold this against me.

TS: [laughter] How are you taking care of the maître d'?

LC: Oh, you just tipped the maître d'. That's enough.

TS: And they get to keep the money, and you get a nice meal, sort of thing?

LC: Something like that.

TS: I'm just trying to figure out how that works, I don't know, I've never been to Bermuda. And I might want a nice meal when I go there.

LC: [laughs] I left Bermuda in '81, and I like to tell this to give people an idea of what prices were like. But a watermelon was ten dollars, in '81.

TS: Did they not grow watermelon in Bermuda?

LC: There's not a lot of landmass there, so the few that they would grow, I guess would be very expensive. But I learned to ride bikes, scooters, and mopeds in Bermuda. And knew that island from one end to another, it's twenty miles, twenty, twenty-one miles in length, it's three and a half miles at its widest point, and just sometimes I would, you know, find my way up to the lighthouse, at night. You know, I wasn't afraid, wasn't afraid—I didn't have a thought of snakes and stuff. I don't know why, but—I eat eel in Bermuda.

TS: How was it?

LC: It was very good, very good, they fix it spicy. Like I eat—what is it that they have? It's not fish and chip, it's fish and—codfish and something else, for breakfast. It's a staple, every Sunday morning in Bermuda, it's a staple, with codfish and some kind of pasta thing. Potato, or rice, I forget what it was, but it was good. It was what you do in Bermuda on Sunday mornings, and like I said, I know that now, it's because I'm more

into the Bermuda culture. There, locals took me around and they love showing you their island. And in Bermuda, I had an opportunity to move from being a normal storekeeper—opportunity came open for me to be a permanent officer of the day. What the permanent officer of the day did was worked in the same building as the commanding officer of the base.

TS: What was the base?

LC: Naval Base Bermuda—Naval Air Station Bermuda. NAS, yeah. Naval Air Station Bermuda. And worked in the same building as he, just a couple of doors down, and your responsibilities were to kind of know what was going on on the base. And they had radio communication, which you listened to, you know, you were responsible to assign people that were going to work after you left, during the day, if your shift was normally eight to five, there were persons who had to have the second and third shift, and so your responsibility would have been to actually make that listing up on a monthly basis, and the big thing with that is that somebody—everybody's going to gripe about what assignment you've given them. But I think for me, I realized that normally, an E-7 white male had held this position. And here I was coming in as an E-6 black woman to take it, and I remember that the man that I was replacing almost cried, and I just didn't understand it, but there was something about it that was just so, maybe so belittling or something to him—there was something about it that just didn't make him happy. And so that was good, because people felt very good about the fact that I had gotten that particular assignment, as being the OOD—officer of the day.

TS: Is that one you had to put in for, or where they said "Hey, Laverne, this looks like a good slot for you."

LC: I had come to a realization as a storekeeper that I was now being asked to train young officers who were making much more money than me. And I'm saying, this does not make sense.

TS: So what'd you think about that?

LC: Well, it kind of steered me to think about going to school. So now the opportunity that I'd passed up many years ago is now coming back around, so I'm thinking about going to school, and maybe I'm mad enough now not to re-enlist.

TS: Mad at what?

LC: Mad at—I'm being asked to train someone who just come out of the Naval Academy, who's making a whole lot more money than me, and is supervising me. So some of that attitude caused them to move me from where I was working into this other OOD assignment.

TS: It insulated you a little bit, too, then, I guess, as well as gave you these different responsibilities?

LC: Yeah, I think somebody liked me. I didn't know that definitely, that person who was helping me did not identify themselves, but somebody liked me, because things could have been worse, you know.

TS: Right.

LC: I would—yeah, they could have put me peeling potatoes. You know, with your attitude, yeah.

TS: Yeah. Were you showing your attitude?

LC: Probably.

TS: [laughs] Well, I didn't know—not saying you took a rock to their car or anything, but—

LC: [laughing] Probably, yeah, probably. Yeah, so—you know, that was a good assignment.

TS: What did you find that you enjoyed about that assignment?

LC: I enjoyed the Bermudians. I enjoyed how beautiful the island was. I enjoyed the fact that black women thought so much of themselves. They liked themselves, even though they may have been large women, it was nothing to see them out at the beach in their bathing suits. I enjoyed the fact that I could go downtown Bermuda and see black people in positions of authority, not just police people, but in the governing structure of Bermuda were people of color. You know, I had a friend there who, as far as I know, he owned a boat. Nice boat, we could go out, we could—we could cook on his boat, and so I learned some—I gained some pride about myself as a woman of color.

TS: In Bermuda.

LC: In Bermuda.

TS: Interesting.

LC: I remember seeing the women, and they'd have on their make-up, they were just so well made-up, beautiful. And so that was not the perception that I would have had in the United States, in the quote-unquote U.S., continental U.S. And so, the local people loved me, and you know, so I would get invited to their homes. I lived off-base for a while there in Bermuda, because I was actually working at one end of the island near Hamilton, I think is what it's called, but I actually lived at the other end of the island, which was Somerset. And I remember my housemate was a girl from New York, and she was a terror. New York folk, oh, okay, you a northeasterner, I have to be careful how I say—

TS: Midwest. I'm Midwest. You—go, shoot away at New York.

LC: [laughter] Oh, okay. No, New Yorkers—they come with attitude, okay? And so—but it was just so good for me to have her as a housemate, because she was always confident in herself, right, wrong, or indifferent. She was going to explain it, she was going to say something about it. But we shared a house there in Bermuda, I think three bedrooms. But I remember—oh, and we just enjoyed ourselves. Then I remember that we ran out of water. No problem for us, because we had been out there washing our cars. Now, in Bermuda, the—it's really not a basement, but it's a—the—underneath the house is almost like a brick.

TS: Like a crawlspace, sort of?

LC: Yeah. And it's concrete.

TS: Okay.

LC: And so, when it rains, the gutter system catches the water, and it's down underneath there. So wisdom would have been, use water sparingly. We were Americans. [laughs]

TS: Long showers, wash your car—

LC: Yeah, that's right.

TS: Long, hot showers.

LC: That's right. And I remember, we ran out of water. No problem. Call the water man. He comes. And I remember that our water bill was hundreds of dollars, and so that brought us to an awareness, again, very quickly, of what the culture of Bermuda was. Because the way they would wash a car was, they would take a bucket.

TS: Spongebath for your car.

LC: And they would take the—and they would put soapy water and wash their car, and then take a bucket of water and rinse that car. Not us, until we had to refill our water, and then we learned some things.

[Recording ends, next recording begins]

LC: But for—while I was stationed in Bermuda, I'm thinking of going to school, I'm torn between re-enlisting, going to school, and whatever else I'm going to do.

TS: And you're going on ten years now, right?

LC: Yes. Very close to ten years. And can't really make up my mind. And then the Greensboro incident happened, the Morningside homes, the communist worker shoot-out. And I don't know what that's about, but it happened in my hometown, and in the area—

TS: Was that '79?

LC: If not, it was closer to '80.

TS: Yeah, I'm trying to remember. Okay.

LC: It happened in my neighborhood, and I can say neighborhood because I probably lived three or four blocks, I mean, a mile, okay? From where the shootout took place.

TS: For the people who are listening to this transcript, they may not know what happened. You want to describe it? As best you can.

LC: Not that I can tell it all, but five communist workers were killed that day, when a shootout took place between—I want to say civil rights persons and [Ku Klux] Klan, and so it was—you know, you kind of wonder, where were the police, there was all this question about where were the police at that time, and why were they not there, why was there not any more protection there for those people. And so you start to really question, you know, who was involved? You know, who—who permitted these people to die? This was in my hometown, and here I was, away, trying to be the best military person that I could be, because I took pride in my uniform, I told you.

TS: Right.

LC: I told you about me shining shoes, but I didn't tell you—I didn't like the pin-on ties, I always tied my ties. And they were even. So, but I say that to say, I presented myself well in my military attire, I believed in extending military courtesies. But I didn't feel good about the fact that in my hometown, people who looked like me were being shot down. And while I didn't understand and all, it just did not sit well with me.
[This discussion refers to what is often referred to as the Greensboro Massacre, which took place on November 3rd, 1979. A march protesting the Ku Klux Klan was planned to begin at the Morningside housing project, and Klan members and neo-Nazis shot and killed five protesters.]

TS: Right.

LC: So I didn't want to re-enlist. I did want to go to school. And so I initially tried to go to Bennett College. I came home one spring, I remember it was spring, because the campus was just so beautiful. I remember the azaleas, I remember the lady who walked me

around the campus, and I just wanted to go to Bennett College. But my GI Bill was not enough to attend that—it's a private institution.

TS: To cover the cost of it.

LC: To cover the cost of tuition. And so I wound up being at North Carolina A&T State. And—on GI Bill, and so that's basically the extent of my military involvement, but later, I also decided to do reserve, naval reserve, and so I do that for probably nearly five years.

TS: You had said earlier, I think, before we talked the first time, there was a—you got out of active duty, you went to school for a while, and then you went into reserve after a few years? Or did you go into the reserve right away, do you remember?

LC: Not right away, not right away.

TS: Yeah. Because, well, you had said you were in the reserve when the Gulf War happened, which would have been, you know, '90, '91.

LC: Sure. And I remember—Norfolk was my place where my reserve unit would go. And I understood, then, that we were going to Norfolk to help—because we were relieving—people were going to Gulf War, so we would go and work in their place. And also, one of my assignments was to help calculate where supplies would be, position on the plane, because it was a huge airplane, and we had these various—I forget what they call them now, but stacks of supplies that would be on pallets, and so they would be—the intention was to drop those off at various locations. And so, as a result of that, they had to be positioned in the plane in certain order, but then you also had to be concerned about the weight of the order as well, and how much fuel and—so I thought that was just so interesting, to do that calculation, and to be thinking about all of those things. Because I had always had this love for numbers, I told you.

TS: That's right.

LC: And so I did pretty well at that, and—and so that let me know that I was helping out, helping those people who were fighting in those wars. That's about it.

TS: Well, I have a few more questions.

LC: Sure!

TS: When you say, you felt like you were helping out. If I ask you what patriotism means to you, how would you describe it or define it?

LC: Patriotism, to me, means love and honor for my country. I was a patriot when I didn't know it, and it angered some black people. I remember being at some duty station, somewhere, I can't even tell you—it may have been Bermuda—where we would have

these black history programs every year, and I would be involved in it because I loved poetry and so I would either be reading black history—a black poem by an African-American poet, or singing a song or something. And so I was asked to do the—sing the Star-Spangled Banner. So, you know, no problem for me, [chuckling] I like to sing. So I remember going out to sing the Star-Spangled Banner, and those in attendance didn't want to stand. Well, you know, there again, you have to kind of put yourself in the time frame of what was happening during that time, and what was happening during that time was that, you know, when black people were being empowered, the status quo saw it as something that intimidated them, and so that caused us not to like one another necessarily.

So as far as patriotism, you know—hey, you know, a lot of people would say "Hey, yeah, pay me, it's my paycheck. I don't owe them nothing, I work." But I remember that about patriotism. Even now, if I'm somewhere where the Star-Spangled Banner is being played, you know, I always give thought to putting my hand over my heart, because really what I would like for them to know at that time was that I served the country, you know. Sometimes there's not a lot you can do to distinguish yourself at the football game or whereever when the Star-Spangled Banner is being played. But I'm glad to know that—I believe I know the words, I hate to hear people sing it and just murder the words.

TS: [laughs] They do a good job of murdering it.

LC: But even that is—again, it signifies me as a patriot, the fact that I know the words. [chuckling] So that's what patriotism means to me. When I was on duty, I was on duty, you know. I knew how to handle my responsibilities when I was on duty. We had a fun saying that we might say, well, certain things didn't happen on my watch. Or I might, if something happened, out of line, I would say "Well, that wouldn't have happened on my watch." So—and my mother was born on Flag Day.

TS: Is that right?

LC: Yeah, so, you know, she would—she would fly a flag herself. So you know, I have no problem honoring the country—I have no problem honoring the country. I can distinguish my love for America versus how America has treated my people. You know, I've been outside of America and was willing to kiss the grounds of it when I got here, got back here. So you know, I don't have any problem telling anyone, you know, where I'm from. But at the same time, like I said, because I've lived it, I can distinguish it from how we were treated. And because I know the treatment of people of color in other places now, I know what's happening, or what has happened or what can—yeah, I can even say is happening, to people of color here, it's not necessarily how the world looks at you. And that's helpful to know, because otherwise you can—your whole mentality can be tainted by what you are exposed to in a small area. Yeah.

TS: Well, you talked—so you have expressed a lot of pride in the work that you did while you were in the navy.

LC: Yes.

TS: Was there any experience that you had that you'd like to share that gave you, maybe wasn't your favorite experience?

LC: [chuckles] I am sure there is more than one, I'm sure there is. I don't know that I retained, as a part of my memory, a lot of negative things. Like I said, I really enjoyed my time in the navy. And I'm sure I've had some, but I don't know that I retained that. Probably would just have me think on it long enough that—

TS: Well, that's okay, I'm mostly thinking, too, about your experience as a woman and as a black woman, so you've got a couple different class groups where we pigeonhole you into. Say, how did men treat you? How did, you know, how did the culture of the military treat you in these particular categories during your time? And we've talked a little bit about the culture in the greater United States going on in the '70s and the early '80s.

LC: Seventies, eighties, yeah.

TS: For the time that you were in the service. And of course, we talked a little bit before you even went in the service. Did you feel that—of course, it's what you—it's all you know, right? The experience that you have. But did you ever feel that you were treated unfairly because of these particular groups?

LC: Probably for me, you had asked—well, you were asking me, why do you think—you said something about how people select you for certain things because they see ability in you.

TS: Right.

LC: And somehow, I guess certain qualities stood out to others, even though I may not have been aware of them. In San Diego, I am a E-5—E-4, probably E-4, E-5. But it was my bowling ability that attracted a master chief, female master chief petty officer, and she took good care of me. She would pay for me to be on her bowling team, she would tell me about—I mean [unclear]. And she would tell me about bowling opportunities. And also, I played pool. Most of the white girls played pool, sisters didn't play pool.

TS: [chuckling] Is that right? I never really played pool, so I don't know the pool culture. Sorry.

LC: [chuckling] So I was pretty good at playing pool, so it caused me to interact with my white comrades, probably more so than other people of color. Trying to think what else. And probably because of my lack of awareness of what was going on in the larger culture, again, was attractive to whites. In that you wouldn't have me sitting around complaining about what black people were protesting about, I didn't know. [laughs]

TS: Except for that poster! [laughs]

LC: Hey, hey, I liked the way Angela looked! So it's probably a combination of things that allowed me to work very well. And the things in my work as a supply person, I probably did my work well. And those things probably endeared me to those that I worked with. And folk kind of—in the military culture, folk kind of take good care of you. I mean, if you drink a beer with them, they take good care of you. And so, you know, I don't—negative, I don't have a lot of negative that I remember about my life in the military. And when I was working with—I mean, the boiler technicians in Philadelphia, I mean, these were guys that cussed for a living, almost.

TS: [chuckles]

LC: So—but then there was always somebody that would say, hey man, there's a lady. You know, so somebody took care of me, along the way. That makes me be able to say, even today, that I had a wonderful naval experience. Not because I had such attractive duty stations, but the time that I spent in those places, I enjoyed life in addition to working, doing my work, I enjoyed life. So.

TS: Did you have any kind of—I guess culture shock, from your transition from military back to the civilian world?

LC: Yeah! I—one of the ones that I remember most was the kinds of things that were taking place on TV once I got out of the navy. I was shocked to see if people were scantily clad, because I'd been away for so long, and people were cursing on TV. I remember that, that that stood out for me, and why, I don't know, because now, I'm just coming out of the navy after ten years, so I'm cussing myself, but I remember that that stood out.

TS: Anything else for—so you went right into school, right?

LC: Yes, I was enrolled in school in August of '81. I got discharged in '81, so I just about moved right into school.

TS: Into school. And you used your GI Bill, you said, for that?

LC: Yes, I did. I used all of it.

TS: So you said—[chuckles] used all of it.

LC: I said, no bombs with my money, with my—that was my attitude.

TS: No bombs?

LC: No bombs would be made with my GI Bill money.

TS: Oh, you were going to use it, ah, I gotcha.

LC: As if, had it been left there, it could have been moved to another pot.

TS: I see, okay. I've never heard that expression, that's interesting. So your adjustment to civilian life was fine?

LC: It was—fine. I'm eleven years past high school when I enter college, and I'm probably still wearing—I remember I was still wearing my bell-bottom pants, my bell-bottom denims. Yes, yes, and so I probably stood out. [laughs] With the other school kids, college kids. Adjustment.

TS: How about when you went into a work environment, then, when you—so your first—not entirely your first work experience was the military, so you went from—to a work environment, did you see any difference between the military culture and the civilian culture for work?

LC: Yeah, but I can't remember specifics, but there's something about the way we did things in the military that—I don't know if it's a certain firmness that sometimes I have to be careful and conscious of as I interact with you civilians. And we use that term as if—we military people use that term as if it were dirty.

TS: [chuckles]

LC: You gotta—oh, god, I gotta hang out today with those civilians. Because they don't think the same—I still write the date with day, month, and year.

TS: Military time?

LC: My cell phone is now on military time, right now.

TS: Is that right?

LC: Yeah, that's the way. [laughter]

TS: Well, I've had—some people have said that for them, the military job and your mission is all about completing the mission. Not a nine to five job necessarily, it's a complete the mission type job. And like when you go into a civilian environment and it's five minutes 'til five, you know, just that tempo of work—not that you're constantly at a hundred percent every minute of the day in the military, I don't think that's true, but that maybe—that sense of urgency may not be the same.

LC: And I would certainly agree. Absolutely. It was trouble—it caused trouble, it did cause trouble, but it depends on where I was. And I have had some work assignments where the work ethic of that particular organization was extremely laissez faire. And yes, it

bothered me. And it caused me—and my attitude caused me much trouble, particularly because not only had I been military, but after college, I had a professional assignment, with, you know, one of the top accounting firms in the country.

TS: That's right.

LC: And so it's military mixed with professional ethic, and so you are then still concerned about carrying out the job to the best of your ability in a timely manner, those kinds of things. So if I was assigned—when I was assigned to certain work environments where that was not—where getting something done on time was a remote thought, yes, it caused quite a bit of friction. That's generic enough.

TS: That's—I understand. [laughter] It's just an interesting aspect of that transition for me, the work life.

LC: It's having that ingrained in you, where it does become a part of who you are. That—and I still have problems with my brother, you know, who will not finish something. And I'm trying to tell him, you started, finish the darn thing! And so yeah, that still bothers me, because it is a part of me, but you know, certainly since I've been here, the work environment of this institution, and I tell my supervisor this more than one time—I've told her this more than one time, is such that they are mission oriented, and you can see it, and it makes a tremendous difference. You know, in just how you carry out your work. If you are a step or two behind, because you've been somewhere else where they conduct themselves differently, now you know you've got to step it up a bit.

TS: That's right.

LC: You know, I remember when I was working for Deloitte Haskins & Sells, at the time, one of the Big Eight accounting firms, when we walked around the client's business, I mean, you didn't drag. You had, you know, sprite, energy in your step. So I certainly—that has stayed with me, too. To walk like you know where you're going and going somewhere.

TS: Like don't be lethargic and—yeah, interesting. Have that energy.

LC: Yeah. My posture has carried forward, from military. People talk about me, how I walk. Hey, just because they didn't learn how to walk properly by marching, it's not my fault. [chuckling] So, you know, I like the fact that I still walk with my head up. So even on a bad day, so, yeah.

TS: You're answering kind of one of the other questions I have, which is like, how has your life been different because you were in the military? Little tiny things, but.

LC: I think—I don't know how well I fit into the culture of Greensboro, into the culture of maybe those that I went to high school with, because I have been so many other places.

And I say that—I say that because there is a stark difference in how one thinks if they have not traveled, versus if you've been somewhere. So.

TS: What kind of value do you think you get from that traveling?

LC: What kind of value do I get?

TS: Yes. Or any person.

LC: I don't know that I've thought of what kind of value one gains, but you know, I think I—maybe having a—it's easy for me to interact with other folk that I don't know. And maybe that's a biggie. You know, I still walk up to strangers and talk, I still start a conversation. Even in conversing with people, I can—my conversation can extend to other places because of the life experience that I've had from Bermuda or other places that I've worked. So—and so while I enjoy being back in my home town, it's like you—sometimes you feel like you live on the perimeter, but the big difference is—and I don't mean to put everybody in that category—the big difference is between those who have had a bit of exposure beyond Greensboro, and those who've not. Those are the two different worlds.

TS: Like the fishbowl world.

LC: Yeah, two different worlds. And so—but now, you know, I'm back and trying to give what I can to the community while I'm here, so. And yes, I still don't like it when we just drag certain things out.

TS: [laughs] Yeah, no, I can relate to that.

LC: Git 'er done. [sic] [chuckles]

TS: Git 'er done, absolutely. Well, do you—today's women in the military, has changed since you've got out, as far as some of the roles they're playing. For example, with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, you know, we have women jet fighters. Certainly, women are much—I mean, they're talking about putting women on submarines as like the last barrier, really, in the navy, for that. What are your thoughts on that? Not just the navy part, but just the roles that women are playing today. Is there anything that you think they should not be doing in the military?

LC: No. From what I did not want to do, I don't allow it to hinder what women should do. I think that even though I was, you know, naïve in many ways, there were a lot of things that—barriers that I did break through, and so I would want my nieces to know that it's really up to you, it's really up to you as to what you can do. And I really want them to know that they're bigger than they think they are, they can make bigger contributions than they think they can, it's all about them having the exposure, and them preparing themselves to do so. So, no, I wouldn't, you know—just because I wouldn't want to do it,

you know, I still wouldn't want to be in combat. But I think one of the things that I realized about being in combat, about being in danger areas, again, I can't remember specifically what was happening, but there was something happening in Puerto Rico while I was there, and my family was terrified, because they were hearing it on the news. Meanwhile, I'm sitting there washing laundry, 85 degrees, soaking up the sunrays. So, but I was in the environment, but I didn't have the fear that they did. And so I don't—these young women that are doing things now, they have a different level of—they're not so afraid. There are times when I wish I had been more courageous. Yeah, so.

TS: So if you had a niece come up to you and say, you know "I'd sure love to join the navy," what would you tell her?

LC: If my niece—yeah. Go for it! Now, Aunt Laverne would want her to at least try to be an officer, go in after college, and I think I did—my nephew, I found, was really watching my life. He's probably in his late 30s now, early 40s, but then I realized—he went into the army, and he became an accountant. Then it got really scary, to realize he was watching me just that much. So yeah, I would tell them to do it. But that's what I advised him to do, was to wait until after college, because I wanted him to go in as an officer.

TS: And did he do it that way?

LC: No, he didn't, he went in the enlisted.

TS: Why do—what do you see different about going in as an officer than enlisted?

LC: Management and money and the opportunities that they would have even after military, those kinds of things I saw as different.

TS: Get a jump on it.

LC: Yeah, they'd still have as much fun, but they would have had a wider—sometimes a wider base of managerial experience. Though not necessarily, because I realize that some top level enlisted people have wide responsibilities, wide level of responsibilities. But certainly, I would want them to be an officer.

TS: That's interesting. Now, I do have a controversial question to ask you.

LC: Sure!

TS: The big thing right now in the military, the controversy, has to do with the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," should it be repealed or not. Do you have an opinion on that at all?

LC: What is it?

TS: The "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"?

LC: Yes.

TS: That is the one that says don't ask—it has to do with gay and lesbian soldiers, that they're not supposed to—they're okay to be gay or lesbian, but they can't admit it or come out.

LC: So if you don't ask them, then you don't tell them?

TS: Right. But then the controversy has been, well, they're kicking them out anyhow, they're being investigated and things like that. Should they be allowed to serve openly or not, that's the question.

LC: I guess my thought would be that [pause] I don't see—we don't ask the sexual pervert to, you know—that's where I am on it, because now I view things in terms of sin, I'm a pastor, and I have opted to submit myself to the scripture, so. And so we are all cracked pots, we—all of us have our imperfections, so this has been the one we—the gay and lesbian is one that has been highlighted and it's been the one that we talk about, but there are so many other imperfections that we don't even ask about, we don't—we don't ask the thief, we know they steal. You know, we don't ask them to tell everybody they steal. And so I don't think that—I don't think that sexuality should be—I don't see the need to put sex out front. The person is a soldier or is a sailor. I think that's where the focus should be. Now, you know, I realize that their living quarters, ships or submarines, where things get close, and I don't think—gay and lesbian is nothing new, so folk had to exercise discretion. Then, I think discretion is what it should be about. Bottom line, I think discretion is what it should be about. I don't think it should be about the individual's lifestyle. They're not registered in the military to live an openly—for things to be about their sexuality. It should be—they should have an awareness of what's going on in the world, like I didn't have. [laughter] But—so I don't think that it should be about, I don't think that should be the focus.

TS: Any more than maybe heterosexuals, like, having issues that they have.

LC: Yeah.

TS: Interesting.

LC: You know, let's call the adulterer forth, then it becomes about—it's adultery and not about his abilities, his or her abilities. So—and whatever that equates to, if that equates to don't ask and don't tell—it's almost like one of them trick things, I don't know which way to vote on it.

TS: [laughs] Well, right now, they're saying—the policy is "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." But those that want that lifted are—

LC: So they can live openly.

TS: To say that it's really unfair, because how do you live your life—whatever your sexuality is, without like telling—you know, if you have a girlfriend, and you want to go out, how do you—you have to hide it, basically. So it's not a matter of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," it's a matter of don't—you know, don't ask, don't tell, you know, basically, hide. So that's what they're saying—there are gays and lesbians in the military and should they not, you know, be able to just live their lives.

LC: I gotcha. Well, I think recently there was an incident, I think it's in Raleigh, where something happened in a shopping mall, there was a gay couple who—

TS: Oh, just this weekend.

LC: A public display of affection. I mean, when I was in the military, you couldn't even kiss a guy.

TS: Right. PDA, right, no PDA.

LC: Walking down the street, yeah. But what I have to consider is my young children, now, you know, I have the responsibility to teach them, and—but you really, you know, as a steward over them, you really want to—as much as possible, control their environment until they learn to think on their own. So I don't know that I would want a man and female—yeah, that's true, I would not want a male/female married couple who can have sex to have it openly.

TS: [chuckles]

LC: I mean, come on.

TS: Right.

LC: So, again, I think discretion, and maybe that's from the era, but it fits well into my Christian base.

TS: That's interesting. That's an interesting answer, there. I think we have covered a good deal of these questions. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to add? One thing I actually do want to ask you that's not in my normal questions, but because of, you know, your being a pastor now, is at what point did you become a Christian, during your time in the military or was it after that time? I'm just curious about that, it's not—

LC: It was after that time.

TS: After that time.

LC: Yeah, many years, I had to—I had to drop some ways, I had to drop some—my vocabulary, I had learned to curse in the navy. So and then also, not having any, you know, specific goals in life. You know, the scriptures attracted me, and they were something that I could apply to my life, and I think I liked doing good, and you know, yeah, I have been a trouble person, and troubled. But the scriptures could help me to get myself together, and so it was around '89 that I began to study the scriptures, and so then some time later.

TS: I was just wondering if you'd had a mentor or you know, some influential person in your service experience that might have brought you.

LC: Well, actually, my Bermuda housemate, her mother was a pastor. I liked the fact that, here she was, a woman, that was a pastor. You know, she had her own church in New York. When she came to Bermuda she brought me a Bible and actually signed it to me, so I liked having it, but I wasn't reading it.

TS: [laughs]

LC: So, you know.

TS: Yeah, so, but—so that's somebody that you were aware then, maybe even at that time, that it was a possibility, later, when you looked back and reflected.

LC: And like I said, Mahalia Jackson was somebody that I had admired even as a child, and you know, so much so that I said how her death effected me. So those things that I had heard her singing were somewhere in my—in my heart, somewhere in my memory base, and it just all began to come alive, it just all gelled at some point. My cousin who—Barbara, who recently died, during the time that I described, the painful childhood, but you know, Barbara always encouraged me to do the right things in life. Because at some point, I was doing what I felt big enough to do, and needed to be guided, so. And you know, in the military, like I said, they would put me up out front, so when I started with church, I didn't have any problem doing things up and out front. But now I realize that some ways I opted not to carry forward, and that was my choice, so that's where we are.

TS: Well, do you have anything you'd like to add?

LC: No, I don't think so. I've enjoyed talking—

TS: Had a little piece of paper over there with some things we haven't talked about?

LC: Yeah, I—I wanted—things that I wanted to make sure, in different duty stations, that I talked about, and I did.

TS: Did we cover all of them?

LC: Yes. So, but I've enjoyed reflecting on that time. I even went on the website today, to the national WAVES website. That's another thing, you know, while I was in, the name change.

TS: That's right.

LC: From WAVES to WINs [Women In the Navy], and just—

TS: Did you feel any—was there any, like, change in the way things were done, for you as a woman in the navy at that time when the name change was done?

LC: No. The uniform—changing of the uniform was—things that we would basically take issue with.

TS: [laughs] Did you ever get that hat to fit?

LC: No, and I think I had one of the largest size hats. And I've always struggled with hats—and generally, the hat is what the military person carries forward. You know, how you see the Veterans of Foreign Wars, that still—they can't wear their uniform, but they can wear that hat.

TS: That's true.

LC: Well, that will not be the case for me, I'll have to get the little braid[?], something to throw over my shoulder, that says that I have been a part of the military. So yeah, not the hat. But yeah, that's it. I don't have anything else to add.

TS: Well, it's been a pleasure talking with you.

LC: It's been wonderful talking with you listening, making me smile.

TS: [laughs] Well, it's great to listen to your stories. I'll go ahead and shut this off, then.

[End of Interview]