WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Lovay Wallace-Singleton

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: 14 May 2016

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is May 14, 2016. My name is Therese Strohmer, and I'm here in New Bern, North Carolina with Lovay Wallace-Singleton—Is that right?—to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina of Greensboro. Lovay, how would you like your name to read on your collection?

LS: Lovay Wallace-Singleton.

TS: Okay. Well, Lovay, why don't you start off a little bit about telling me when and where you were born?

LS: Okay. My birthdate is September 28th—

TS: You don't even have to speak into that. You can just speak.

LS: Okay.

TS: It picks up. Let me back it up a little.

LS: September 28th. Sorry. I was trying to send him a text. September 28th, 1959, and I was born in Saginaw, Michigan.

TS: Okay. Do you want to finish that? That's okay. I've got no worries. I'll pause for a sec.

LS: Yeah.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay. So you were born in Saginaw. It's alright. It'll pick up a little.

LS: Alright.

TS: We're outside in a greenhouse. What's this place called; the name of the center that we're at?

LS: Okay. It's Veteran's Employment Base Camp and Organic Garden.

TS: So you were born in Saginaw. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

LS: Yes. I have one older sister and one younger sister. I'm the middle child. My oldest sister is named Melinda and my youngest sister is named Marie.

TS: Okay. What was it like growing up in Saginaw?

LS: It was interesting. I guess it was just a normal childhood.

TS: What did your parents do for a living?

LS: Oh, my mom was a housewife, believe it or not; I guess it was back in the day. After my father passed away she became a beautician for a little while, but my father worked for General Motors [American automotive corporation].

TS: Okay. Yeah, that's a place to get a job there.

LS: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. He was in the army during World War II. He was a tank driver.

TS: Was he really?

LS: Yes. And then when he got out he went to work for General Motors and retired.

TS: Now, in Saginaw, did you live in the city, did you live out in the suburbs?

LS: I think it was more of the suburbs.

TS: Suburbs?

LS: Yeah. It wasn't right in the city.

TS: Did you have neighbors that you played with?

LS: Yes.

TS: What kind of stuff did you do as a kid?

LS: Climbed trees, eat rhubarb [both chuckle], grapes, things like that. Just normal stuff.

TS: When you went to school there—I know you moved—we're going to talk about you moving, I forget how old you said you were but—so you started school in Saginaw.

LS: Right.

TS: What school did you go to?

LS: Oh, gosh. I can't remember.

TS: The school in Saginaw, right? [chuckles]

LS: I cannot remember. Now, that is asking my poor brain to go back way too far.

TS: Well, that's alright. Let me ask it to you this way. How'd you like school?

LS: Oh, I loved school.

TS: Yeah?

LS: Yeah. I loved school.

TS: Did you have a favorite subject or anything that you liked to do?

LS: Not really. I think history was one of my favorites. I think. Yeah, I was more of a history buff.

TS: Did you do any extracurricular activities through school or church or anything like that?

LS: Just the normal stuff. Girl Scouts, gymnastics. Let's see. Oh, I sang in the choir.

TS: Yeah?

LS: The concert choir, yes.

TS: You still got a voice?

LS: No. [laughs] No. I do not sing in the choir, no.

TS: Did you finish school in Saginaw?

LS: No. When I was about fourteen, my parents decided that they wanted to move back down South to where they were raised so, we moved back to Natchez, Mississippi, and I was about fourteen. I finished school in Mississippi. I graduated when I was seventeen.

TS: Okay. Now, moving from the Midwest down to the South, that's all you'd known, was Michigan, right?

LS: Right, right.

TS: Was that a transition for you? What year did you—

LS: That was a very big transition, [chuckles] especially as a teenager.

TS: That would have been '72, '73, something like that?

LS: Yeah, something like that.

TS: Right in the middle of a lot of unrest in our country.

LS: Well, I don't know—But you know what?

TS: Well, there was in Detroit [Michigan] too.

LS: We didn't really have that. I mean, it was something that we saw on TV, but we never really noticed that.

TS: It wasn't happening in your neighborhood or anything?

LS: No. No. It wasn't—I guess we were kind of sheltered from it.

TS: Well, you're a child of the sixties and seventies.

LS: Yes, yes.

TS: Did you have any thoughts as a young girl about what was going on in Vietnam, or anything like that?

LS: We had some relatives that were in the military at that time, and they were coming home, and it was—it wasn't something that was really talked about. I know my father never really talked about his military career at all, other than showing us all how to do hospital corners and things like that; the fun side of it. But if there was any other side of it, he really didn't talk about it to us. And like I said, even when we had relatives that came back from Vietnam and things like that—

TS: Nobody discussed it.

LS: —nobody really discussed it. It was like certain things that weren't talked about in front of kids.

TS: Right. But when you're a teenager, we've got the counterculture movement going on. There's the anti-war movement, counterculture, drugs, rock and roll, all of that stuff happening. Were you interested in any of that or was that something outside your bubble?

LS: That was very much outside my bubble [laughs]. I guess I was sheltered. I don't know. I mean, because we kind of led a life of—we had school, we had church. My parents were really active in church, and we had a lot of family-oriented things, but as far as things like—Most of that stuff we saw on the news.

TS: And it was just something out there.

LS: Yeah. It was something that was happening to someone else. It wasn't happening to us. It's not that we didn't know that there weren't things going on, but I think that we were a lot more insulated to them than other people, I guess.

TS: Okay. What were your interests as a young girl? What kind of things did you like?

LS: I liked to design clothes and—

TS: Oh, yeah?

LS: Yeah. I liked to draw sketches of different clothing I would like. My mom was a seamstress, and so she would do a lot of sewing and she taught us a lot of sewing. She sewed my prom dress. She would make coats. She was really, really good. And that was kind of what we spent a lot of our time doing, was learning things like that.

TS: Tools, and how to create at outfit and stuff like that?

LS: Yes.

TS: Well, you said you liked school—

LS: Yeah.

TS: Oh, one question I didn't let you answer, I'm sorry, was, how was it different for you to move from Michigan to—

LS: It was very traumatic. [chuckles] I'm sorry about the noise. I hope you can understand.

TS: It's alright. That's for the transcriber.

LS: But yeah, I think that was the biggest culture shock for me, because moving from Michigan down to Mississippi, everybody thought we talked funny, and I definitely thought they talked funny, and we just—it was like—it was really weird. Because I liked to do a lot of reading and things of that nature, so I think that's one of the reasons why I

graduated earlier, was because I was ahead of the game when I got down to Mississippi, in some ways.

TS: Okay. Besides the language, was there any cultural differences that you noticed; like in the food you ate or the way that church was?

LS: Yeah, they did a lot more fried foods and things like that. And then that was—I think that was when we really started to notice some of the things around us. Because believe it or not, even during that time, that was when they had the—they still had some of the "whites only," "blacks only" entrances, and things like that, into doctor's offices and stuff.

TS: Oh, they did?

LS: Yeah. And it was weird. I mean, it wasn't like there were signs there, but it was like the people knew.

TS: So they used different entrances?

LS: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

LS: So it was—And for me, coming from Michigan, it was kind of like, "What are you doing?"

And they were like, "Well, no, you can't go through the front door. You have to go through that door over there."

And I was like, "What?" So it was kind of weird. It was kind of strange.

TS: And so, you were academically ahead in your classes?

LS: Yeah.

TS: When did you start thinking about what you were going to do when you were done with high school? That's alright.

LS: Well, I had a cousin who came home from the navy, and he was talking about how much of a great time he was having, and this, that and the other. And I wanted to go to college, but I didn't want to go to college in Mississippi because I just felt frustrated from the school system there. So then my next thought was, "Maybe I could join the navy," or, "Maybe I could join the air force," or maybe I could do something like that.

TS: You must have been thinking about that in your junior year, then?

LS: Yeah. In the junior and senior year.

TS: How did you, then, approach that? I mean, did you go and talk to a recruiter? Did they come to the school and you talked to then?

LS: No, they came to the school and I did an ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test, and once I did my ASVAB it's like—it was almost like then it would be sending out a siren or whatever. And my scores were really good. And so, a lot of people started contacting me saying, "Hey, you can do this. You can be this. You can do the other—"

And quite frankly, my mom was like, "Well, no, I don't think you should go into the military. I think you should stay here." And so, she really didn't want me to go.

TS: Did she say why?

LS: Not really. I think she just didn't want—She just didn't like the idea of a woman being in the military, was the thing. Because like I said, she had been a housewife most of her life so she really hadn't—

TS: Non-traditional, non-conforming, out of the feminine realm of what you should—

LS: Right. Right. And so, that would have been totally anti-feminine. "You're going into the military. You're doing what?"

But I was really persistent about wanting to go somewhere, wanting to—I mean—And I think that came from—like I said, I liked history, and so reading about these different places, reading about what had gone on in the world, it was like, "I want to go see that. I want to go do that." That kind of thing.

TS: Right. You wanted to get away and have an adventure, sort of?

LS: Exactly. Exactly.

TS: Well, what did your dad think?

LS: Well, that was around the time that my dad passed away.

TS: Oh, okay. That had to have been really hard.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

LS: And I was making—Yeah—I was making that big decision and—I don't know. I had been kind of a daddy's girl, so with my father passing away—and then I think in some ways—I had kind of been—There were three girls. Okay? And I had been the tomboy. Being the middle girl, I was the daddy's girl. So I think that led to it too; that I wanted to go into military and be like my dad.

TS: Like your dad?

LS: Yes.

TS: Okay. How did you pick the navy?

LS: Well, technically, I was supposed to go in the air force.

TS: Is that right?

LS: I always say that. I went down to the air force recruiter and they were out to lunch or somewhere, and I was sitting out in the hallway and just waiting for them to come back, and the guy from the navy came out and he says, "So what are you doing?"

And I said, "Well, I'm waiting on the air force recruiter to come back from lunch."

He says, "Well, why don't come in here and we'll talk for a little bit till they come back." And the rest is history.

TS: Did you sign up right then?

LS: No. I could not because I was still seventeen, like I said, so he had to come by and convince my mom.

TS: Did you ever talk to the air force recruiter?

LS: No, after that I don't think I did. I think he might have called or something like that, but by then it was like—the navy guy had came and he pulled up my ASVAB and he was like, "Well, what do you want to do, because you can pretty much be anything you want." And so, he started rattling off some things and when—Believe it or not, I was supposed to be an OS—a oceans systems technician or something like that [correction: OT, Ocean Systems Technician]—and the time link to wait for that school was even longer than for air traffic controller.

TS: Really?

LS: And so, I was like, "I'm not waiting that long, so sign me up for ATC [air traffic controller]."

TS: Did you know you'd still have to wait for that school?

LS: Yes. Yeah, but by the time I got to that point it was like—I was like, "I'm going to have to wait, but I'd rather wait for this or this." So it was just a matter of decisions.

TS: Okay. So you had to have your mom sign off? And she didn't want you to go. How did that go?

LS: It took a lot of convincing. It took—And it was more on the recruiter's part, I think, than mine, because I was already sold. It was that he had to sell her. And I mean, it was to the day we were going down to the office, and she kept saying, "Are you sure? Are you sure?"

And I was like, "Yeah, I'm sure, " and then—until she signed and I'm on the bus ready to go, and then I'm like, "Maybe I'm not so sure." [both chuckle] So it was like that kind of thing.

TS: Right. Well, you're seventeen.

LS: Yeah, yeah. You have no clue, but you think you know the world.

TS: That's right. Did you turn eighteen in basic training, then?

LS: Yeah.

TS: That's a familiar story to me. Well, tell me about that. Did you get on a bus or plane?

LS: Yeah. I had to get on a bus and go to Jackson [Mississippi]; because I had to leave Natchez and go to Jackson. And believe it or not, the year that I left it snowed in Mississippi; had not snowed. My mom said, "This is a bad sign." [laughs] "You should not be going." But I still went on. That was my—I think it was my third plane ride I'd ever been on in my life and—but I was by myself; before I had been with family. So it was interesting. It was scary, but it was interesting.

TS: Tell me more about why it was interesting. [chuckles] That could mean a lot of things.

LS: Well, yeah. I mean, just trying to figure out—It was like that's that moment when you say, "Okay, I'm really an adult." And that's an overwhelming feeling saying, "Okay. I am an adult, and now I'm calling the shots. I can't blame anybody for anything that happens but me." And so, it's that big sigh going, "Oh, okay." And then it's the thought of, "Do I really know enough to navigate this thing they call the world?" But then, saying to myself, "Well, yeah, but I'm going into the military and they're going to protect me. They're going to take care of me." Yeah.

TS: So you had that on the one side?

LS: Yeah.

TS: You want an adventure but want to be safe.

LS: Right. And that was the thing; convincing my mom that even if I went out into the world, I was still going to be okay.

TS: Okay.

LS: Yeah, so.

TS: Well, tell me about basic training, then. You went to Orlando [Florida], you said, right?

LS: Yeah. Basic training was—I don't know. It was a nightmare and a fairy tale all wrapped into one, because you're excited because you're an adult and you get to do all these adults things, but then you're being yelled at and screamed at and told what to do by the most insane people you have ever met in your life. And you don't know whether you want to kill them or listen to them, because you think, "Well, gosh, they got to know what they're talking about."

But it was interesting. I made some really good friends, and that was my first thought—Okay, find someone that I could match up with and we will partner up and protect each other. [both chuckle] And that's what it was.

TS: That's what you did?

LS: Yeah, yeah. So it was—

TS: Was there anything particularly challenging, either emotionally or physically?

LS: No. Physically, I pretty much knew I could handle it, because I was always running, and I was—like I said, I was a daddy's girl, so I was kind of always doing something tomboyish or whatever.

TS: Had you played any sports or anything in high school?

LS: Not really, other than track. I did a little track. But I was a country girl, too, in a way, so being physically fit wasn't a thing for me; I wasn't worried about that aspect of it. But it was just all these orders and things that were being yelled at me and told to me, and do this and do that, and why haven't you done this and why haven't you done that. And half the time you couldn't understand what they were talking about, and why you needed to know that, and why are these people screaming at me, and why can I only take three minutes in the shower? Oh, my goodness. Yeah. And what is this food? And then you get there and—what do they call it?—the crud—you get the crud because all of the—and you don't understand it at first, but you've got all these bodies coming together from all over the world—I mean, all over the United States—and they're bringing all their germs into one spot and your immune system is going, "What the world are you doing to me?" And so, you get sick and then it increases your immunities, but in the meantime you feel like hell. All of this is going on. It's like a beauty pageant and hell week [rough initiation] all wrapped up into one. [both chuckle] I'll tell you, it is a—Yeah.

TS: What was the beauty pageant part?

LS: Well, I mean, because you're all trying to figure out, "Well, okay. What am I going to do with my hair?" If you had fingernails or anything like that. And they're telling you, "Well, you got to do this and you got to do that." And you know that you have your cycle

[menstruation] and you want—And it's like I always had the cramps from hell and I'm thinking, "And you want me to jump and run in this?" And the only thing I want to do is crawl up in a ball. So it was all those things that you're trying to cope with.

TS: You had to push yourself through new challenges in that way?

LS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. [both chuckle] It was not that kind of thing where when you were at home and if you had your cycle and you could go lay in the bed for half the day. That was not happening. So you had to learn to cope. You had to learn to function with all of that going on.

TS: What about the swimming aspect of the navy?

LS: Oh, yeah, because I was not really a swimmer and, I mean, I had—it's not like—I wasn't a strong swimmer, put it like that. So the idea of swimming in a pool from end to end—and then I had had a traumatic experience with swimming when I was younger anyway, out in California when we went on a family trip. And so, the idea of swimming end to end—They finally came to me and they said, "All you got to do is float. Just show us you can float." And you had to take a pair of pants and tie the ends and—

TS: Like making an air—

LS: —and jump down in there, and then put them between your legs, and then lay out and float. I was like, "Oh my God." But yeah, you did it. You did it. You just did it because it had to be done.

TS: Did you ever second guess yourself?

LS: I think at night. [both chuckle] That few minutes between exhaustion and sleep, you're like, "What in the world have I done?" But it was—

TS: It's not like you have a lot of time for reflection.

LS: Right. You don't. You don't. And I always wanted this challenge of something. I always—I mean, you can tell by this.

TS: Yeah.

LS: I always wanted something to push myself to see if I could really do it.

TS: So you're doing it.

LS: Yeah. Exactly.

TS: You were probably the youngest one there, or one of the youngest.

LS: Yeah. I was one of the—And that was the thing. I found another young lady who was pretty much in the same boat as me, and she had graduated at seventeen, and so we were kind of like the younger kids, and so we kind of bonded and we would protect each other.

TS: Okay. That's what you meant; like, find some security.

LS: Yes.

TS: You had told me before we turned the tape on that you had to wait almost a year to go to your air traffic controller training?

LS: Right.

TS: And so, instead of the normal progression you went to Norfolk [Virginia]. Is that right?

LS: Yeah, I went to Norfolk for a year and I did—During that time, I would spend half of the day at the squadron—at the VRF [U.S. Navy Ferry] squadron—and then the other half of the day I would go over to control tower and they would let me just do some little training. It was like, "Go get those strips, go do this, go do that," and that was what they—

TS: The runner kind of work.

LS: Yeah. Exactly. Because they really couldn't let me do anything because I hadn't been through school, but it kind of exposed me to actually what my job was going to be like, so I kind of knew ahead of the game.

TS: So you're getting excited about that, then?

LS: Yes. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. So it was fun.

TS: Then you went to your training, and you said that was in Millington, Tennessee?

LS: Yes.

TS: Millington, Tennessee.

LS: Yes.

TS: What was that experience like? What kind of challenges did you face there?

LS: That was interesting, because instead of it just being sailors, it was marines and sailors both there doing the air traffic controller training, and so that was fun.

TS: Were there a lot of women? This was like '80-ish.

LS: Not really.

TS: No?

LS: I think there were, like, two or three women.

TS: Okay. Was that challenging at all to be—

LS: It was. It was, because I think that was—If you notice, that was when I got pregnant with my oldest son.

TS: Oh, yeah. I didn't actually notice that. I wasn't paying any attention. Oh, yeah. Okay.

LS: Yeah, because it was 1980, so I was going—it was either then or when I'd gone—no, I think I had gone back for—Because with air traffic control, you go to the main school, but then you have to go back for additional training, like if you're going into tower, radar, or something like that.

TS: Okay.

LS: And I think it was during one of those—

TS: Like a specialty training?

LS: Yes—one of those that I went back and I was pregnant then. And boy, I'll tell you, that was interesting because they really didn't—They were in that transitional phase between where at first if you were in the military and got pregnant you were automatically processed out.

TS: Right.

LS: Then they kind of gave you the option; you could stay but it wasn't recommended. So that's where I was. I was pregnant in the phase where they didn't really want you to stay. You could stay but they didn't want you and they let you know that.

TS: In what ways did they let you know that?

LS: Well, one senior chief—and this was a female senior chief—called me in her office and asked me, "Well, wouldn't you like an easier job since you're pregnant? Wouldn't you like to transition to a secretarial job or something like that?"

And I was like, "No, this is what I trained to do. This is what I want to do." And her thing was—[heavy rain sounds] Crazy.

TS: I know. The transcriber might not be too happy.

LS: I know. [laughs]

TS: There's lulls. We apologize. It's rain and thunder.

LS: Yeah.

TS: So you say that she thought maybe you would want to go into something easier?

LS: Yeah. I mean, she even mentioned that. She said, "Well, you know we're not going to make this any easier on you. If you want to stay, you're still going to have to perform in the same manner."

And I was like, "Well, that's a no-brainer." But I didn't say that to her. I was young, I was stressed, and I remember that once we finished that conversation, I promptly went to the bathroom and threw up. But I put on this brave face until we got finished with this conversation, and I just kept saying, "Well, no, this is what I want to do, this is what I've been trained to do, and this is what I'm going to do."

And she was like, "Well, just know that we're not going to make it any easier."

And it kind of hurt because it was a woman that was telling me that, but I was like, "Well, I'm not quitting."

TS: Right. Yeah. Maybe she was pushing you, testing you.

LS: I don't know if she was testing me. She didn't like me.

TS: [chuckles]

LS: I think it would have made her life easier if I had left or whatever. Because the thing about it was, they didn't have maternity clothes there, or they weren't easy to access or whatever. You had to order them or something like that. It was crazy. So she made me keep buying bigger uniforms the whole time I was there. Can you imagine being pregnant and just having to buy bigger and bigger uniforms? But I did it. I said, "I'm not quitting. I'm not quitting. I'm going to do this."

TS: Right. Where did you live while you were pregnant?

LS: Oh, in the same barracks, and stuff like that, as the other women.

TS: The whole time?

LS: Yeah.

TS: And then when you had your son—

LS: I was back at—That was when I had gone and transferred to Beeville [Naval Air Station Chase Fields, Texas]. And so, I was able to get housing and get an apartment and stuff like that.

TS: Okay. So that was your first duty station after Norfolk, right?

LS: Yeah. Well, after Millington, yeah.

TS: Right. Okay. After your training.

LS: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: Was is it a naval air station then?

LS: Yes. It was a naval air station.

TS: I guess to be an air traffic controller you needed that.

LS: Yeah. Beeville, Texas.

TS: How did that go? Then you're, like, the first time you're really working—

LS: That was fun. That was fun. It was—[heavy rain sounds] [chuckles] Oh, my God.

TS: It's pouring. Yeah. Here, I'll pause it for a second. I'll pause it for a second.

[Recording Paused]

LS: Yeah. Make sure that that person [transcriber] has my number if they want me to clarify.

TS: Yeah. We got you back on, and we're terribly sorry to the transcriber but we're going to keep pushing through.

So you loved it. You loved being an air traffic controller and learning about it.

LS: Yes. Yes. Although, it was a male-oriented field and it was kind of like—And those were the days when you could still—when they could still smoke in the tower. So if you can image going up into a smoke filled tower with all these guys, and you're the new kid on the block so you got every crap detail there was.

TS: But you did it.

LS: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

TS: Did you face any really overt sexism, besides just being a new person, but as a young girl, young woman?

LS: Other than them telling me, "We hope that you notice that there are all men in this tower and you might not make it through."

And I was like, "Yeah, whatever." But you just had to put on this persona of, "Okay, guys. Maybe it was the male's club, but we're here, you might as well let us work."

TS: Right. Were you the only woman up there?

LS: What they did was, they would sprinkle us—

[Extraneous conversation about hail redacted] [Recording Paused]

TS: Okay so, we're back after a little hail. You started to talk about what they did with the women.

LS: Oh, yeah. As far as the females, when they came into ATC, it seemed like it was kind of like a new thing—well, not brand new. There were a few women that were already qualified there, but they would spread us out throughout the different sections.

TS: Okay.

LS: So they had a day, evening, and a mid-shift, and so there might be two women on the day shift, two women on the mid-shift, and two women on the evening shift. But as time went along and we began to notice that there were more women that were coming through the ranks, and so those of us that were there and qualified would kind of take these other women under our wing.

TS: Mentor them some.

LS: Right. Right.

TS: Because you didn't really have a mentor like that, that was helping you along.

LS: No, not really. No. Not really.

TS: Were you in the first group of women to become an air traffic controller in the navy?

LS: Not really. No. And like I said, there were maybe two or three that were already there and already qualified, but it wasn't enough—There were enough coming through when I came through that they were able to put two to three women in each section. Before, it was like maybe there was one woman in the whole division or department.

TS: Right. Really isolated.

LS: Right. So you kind of had to look at those that were already there and say, "Wow. I have no idea what you went through."

TS: Right. So you see them as the real pioneers for that field?

LS: Right. Exactly.

TS: Now, you're raising your son. You're at your first official duty station.

LS: Right.

TS: Well, not official, but first working duty station with the air traffic controller. How are you handling that?

LS: That was tricky, too, because you had to figure out child care and things of that nature. And they were always quick to tell you, "Well, your child didn't come in your seabag [tubular canvas bag closed by a drawstring, used by a sailor for gear]." And that was the thing, you had to know that. They weren't really concerned with whether you had a problem or whether your child had a fever or anything like that, or was teething and you were up. That was not an issue. You had to turn it on once your got there, and then function as well you could.

TS: Did you set up some sort of system to have people help you if you needed a relief?

LS: Yeah. And that was the thing. You had a person that—It wasn't like you could just go to a day care or something like that. It was more of you had to have a personal babysitter, because that person had to be able to take that child whether they were sick or well.

TS: Right. Right.

LS: And then, too, one of the things that we women started doing was, as a group, we would try and look out for each other. So if I had the day shift and somebody else had the evening shift and they couldn't get a sitter, then we were each other's back-up. So we formed that kind of bond or whatever.

TS: So you had to network within that group to kind of deal with that?

LS: Yes.

TS: Were you happy where you were? Did you want to move on and do something else? What did you think about that?

LS: I mean, I was happy where I was, but the thing was, I also knew that advancement was important as well. And then, the other thing that was in my mind was, I still wanted to travel and see the world, so those things were important to me.

TS: Was time coming up? Were you going to get an assignment?

LS: Yes.

TS: When you enlisted, how many years did you enlist for to begin with?

LS: I think it was just four years.

TS: Four years?

LS: Yes.

TS: And did you think, "I'm going to just try this out and then get my college"?

LS: Not really. I had plans to stay.

TS: Did you? You went in with—

LS: Yeah. From the beginning, I had plans to stay, because I really wanted to travel and I really wanted to see the world.

TS: Is that maybe what gave you a little more determination when you had those roadblocks thrown at you?

LS: I think so. I think so, because I knew I hadn't travelled as far as I wanted to go, or seen as much as I wanted to see.

TS: Yeah. You're just in Texas. [chuckles]

LS: Yeah. Exactly. But for somebody who had been born in Michigan, and then raised part of the time in Mississippi, Texas was exciting.

TS: Yeah.

LS: Learning how to do the two-step [country music dance], and seeing different things like that. Seeing the tumbleweeds, and things like that that other people took for granted. It was like, "Wow."

TS: Some really good steak.

LS: Exactly. [both chuckle] Exactly.

TS: Were you in one of the counties that was dry? Because they had some dry and wet—

[A dry county is a county in the U.S. whose government forbids the sale of any kind of alcoholic beverages]

LS: No, I don't think so. I don't think we were. I don't think we were. And then, see, I was making a progression as far as age. You really had to know what the age limit was for drinking or whatever, because I was still kind of young.

TS: Sure. It was, like, '83 when you left there, so yeah, you're getting in your twenties now.

LS: Yes. Exactly.

TS: Did you put in to go to a different assignment or did you just get an assignment next?

LS: I think—What they did then was, you put in a request for certain things. I think you had three or four options.

TS: Like a dream sheet [a list of duty assignment preferences]?

LS: Yeah. And then they would come back and say, "Okay, well, we've got X and Y. So what do you want?"

TS: And so, did you get to pick? Was it on your sheet?

LS: Yeah.

TS: Where'd you go next?

LS: From Texas, I went to Spain, and that was great. I wanted to go to California, but it was so weird, California wasn't available. And I tell people I had to go to Spain just to get to California, which is crazy but I did. And I had a blast. I really enjoyed that.

TS: Was the work any different than what it was in Texas?

LS: Yes, it was.

TS: How was it different?

LS: We were working with Spanish controllers, and so when we went in, we had to learn a certain amount of Spanish, because not only were we talking with American controllers at some time, sometimes we had to control the Spanish controllers. And the reason why you had to learn Spanish was when—if there was an emergency, they would revert back to their Spanish. If they got confused, they would start talking in Spanish, so you had to be able to speak a little Spanish just to get them to turn or wave off or whatever.

TS: Was that difficult?

LS: No, not really. It was just part of the job.

TS: Like new terminology?

LS: Exactly. Exactly. Just like when you had to go to another place, you had to learn the different airports, the different fixes, and things like that, you just incorporated that into it.

TS: Cool. So you move over to Spain with your son?

LS: Yes.

TS: Were you on post or on—

LS: No, I lived out in the—

TS: On the economy [living off base]?

LS: Yeah. And that was great. That was really great.

TS: What did you enjoy about it?

LS: Just learning about Spain and really—I mean, because you had a choice. You could try and get housing on the base and do like—But I was like, "Why would you go to Spain and then live on the base? Why not get out there?" As scary as it was to be out there, it was so much more fun being out in the culture and really seeing what was going on and talking to people and things like that. And I think it was better for my son as well.

TS: What were your favorite things to do?

LS: Go to the beach [both chuckle], and go shopping, because the exchange rate was really awesome.

TS: Yeah, it was really great in the eighties, wasn't it?

LS: Yes, yes.

TS: Did you travel around Europe at all?

LS: A little bit. It was kind of hard, but we did go to Portugal, and we went to the tip of Africa, and we did a lot of traveling in Spain itself.

TS: You went to the tip of Africa?

LS: Yeah.

TS: The lower tip or the—

LS: No, at the upper, because—

TS: Northern Africa.

LS: Yeah.

TS: So across the Mediterranean [Sea] and into the north.

LS: Right. Right.

TS: Okay. I was going to say, if you went to—That's a lot of traveling! Not South Africa but North Africa.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

LS: No, no, no. Not the tip in—not the bottom tip end. Just right across.

TS: Well, that's pretty cool.

LS: Yeah, it was. It was.

TS: Did you bring anything back with you from that experience?

LS: Yeah. We did. [chuckles] I guess you could say not only mentally, but also the physical items. But also, for me, it was a thing of understanding just how lucky I was to be an American, and just how protected I was as an American.

TS: What kind of things did you see that made you feel that it was different over there?

LS: Well, like, sanitation, different—the way the military was treated, because we also interact with the Spanish military. Just the things that we—A lot of the stuff that I guess we took for granted. And there was just this feeling as an American that if anything happened, that you wouldn't be left behind, that they would—

TS: You had that sense of security still?

LS: Yeah. Yeah. There was a distinct sense of—

TS: Did that continue to go with you the whole way through?

LS: Yeah, I think so. I think so. I mean, because even now—I still feel that even now as a veteran, believe it or not. That there is that sense of when people find out that I am a veteran, they're like, "Oh, okay." It puts you in a different category. Even as a woman, it puts you in a different category.

I had my t-shirt on yesterday that said "Women are veterans too" and it had a combat boot and a high heel. [both chuckle]

TS: You might have got a few comments on that, huh?

LS: Even this "I am a veteran too," so that people know.

TS: Yeah, because people assume—You really have to say something or be involved in something. Even if you're involved in something, they don't necessarily recognize you as a veteran.

LS: It's getting better, but I remember when I first got out of the military I would go to the VA [Veteran's Administration] and they would ask me for my husband's social security number, and I said, "Well, I could give it to you but it's not going to do any good."

And then they'd look at me like, "Are you the veteran?"

I'm like, "Yeah, I'm the veteran." Okay. There's got to be a better way to ask that question.

TS: Yeah, no kidding.

LS: Right.

TS: Is there anything you want to add about your time in Spain?

LS: No, not really. I had a great time.

TS: And the job was good?

LS: And the job was good.

TS: Were you getting promoted at the rate that you wanted to be?

LS: Yeah, yeah. I was. It wasn't until I got back in the States and got transferred to California that—because we got caught up—the air traffic controllers that were in the military—got caught up in NATCA [National Air Traffic Controllers Association], the air traffic controller's strike, and the one thing that people don't really realize is that when those air traffic controllers had that strike and they went out on strike and then—Who was it?—[President Ronald Wilson] Reagan?

TS: Reagan fired them. Yes.

LS: Did not allow them to go back in—he said, "Okay. See you later. Bye."—well, guess what they did? They went into the military. They went right into the military and they—

TS: The air traffic controllers did? Oh, interesting.

LS: They went right into the military, they saturated the field, and a lot of them, because of their qualifications, they went in at a higher ranking than we did. So before, when—And it was so frustrating for us because it saturated it so much that they were only ranking—they were only advancing, like, maybe two or three people. It was unheard of. It was ridiculous.

TS: So your promotional opportunities really just crashed.

LS: Just went to zero.

TS: Wow, okay. That's interesting.

LS: So it was frustrating for me. I mean, when I tell people they're like, "Well, what did you get out of that?"

"Well, I was an E-6 [Petty Officer First Class]."

But those around me, or those people that were in at that time, know why we didn't advance as much as we could have.

TS: Wow. That's the first time I've ever heard that, so that's great to actually talk about it and make people aware of it. It makes perfect sense, because in the military there's not really a lot of lateral moves like that from the civilian world into the military.

LS: Right. Exactly. But they came in and—gosh, that might be a book that needs to be written. [chuckles]

TS: I know the person to do it.

LS: But they came in and they literally saturated the field, and then when—I think Reagan was out of office, and then they forgave them and said, "You can come back at whatever rank you were at." They flew back into the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration]. They went right back into the FAA, but by then the damage had been done, because this was over a period of years that they did that, and it was crazy.

TS: Wow. That's an interesting story. That's worth a whole conversation.

LS: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

TS: So you finally got to go to California.

LS: Yeah. Yeah.

TS: And you went to [Naval Air Station] Lemoore? Is that what you said?

LS: Yeah.

TS: And that's above, below San Francisco?

LS: Yeah, it's below San Francisco and it's above Santa Barbara.

TS: Okay. So north-central.

LS: Yeah. They have what they call the tooley fog—T-O-O-L-E-Y, tooley fog—and if you look for the area where they have that—It's near Fresno. Put it like that. So that gives you a better idea.

But that was interesting. That was pretty good, actually, because that's when—It's funny, because before then I had kind of been advancing, but I think that in Lemoore was when I really got to hone in on my craft as an air traffic controller and learn more about it. I was a little bit more serious about it and I understood what the process was.

TS: Now, when did you have your second son? Was it in—

LS: It was in '84 and it was right before I was leaving Spain, so he was half-Spaniard, half American.

TS: Your son?

LS: Yeah, the youngest. He's in the air force now.

TS: Is he? Okay.

LS: Yes. Both of them went into the air force. My oldest son, he did two tours in Iraq and said, "Mom, I'm done." And he got out and he's a computer technician, and then the youngest one, he's still in. He's probably going to make it a career.

TS: Yeah. What's he do?

LS: He works—At first he was security forces, and now he works in transportation.

TS: Okay. Why didn't they go in the navy?

LS: Because I told them—I said, "You can't handle it." [both laugh] No, I think that the air force is a lot kinder as far as personnel. They do a lot more for their personnel. I think that's the only thing that if I was going to do it again, I probably would hold out for the air force, but I don't regret being in the navy.

TS: Well, obviously, they took longer breaks, the recruiters.

LS: [both chuckle] Yeah.

TS: Right.

LS: That is funny. They did have perks as far as lunch time.

TS: There you go. Yeah. If they had just been there when you got there.

LS: Yeah, there you go.

TS: So Lemoore, you did a lot of good learning.

LS: Yes.

TS: And now you got two boys.

LS: Yes.

TS: Is it getting any easier for things like child care or you're still having to juggle in the same way that you did initially? And obviously, now you have maternity uniforms. Don't you, by then?

LS: Oh, yeah, definitely. It's a totally different experience when it comes around to my youngest son. I mean, I think by that time—Like I said, they were making that transition from once you get pregnant you're automatically out, to once you get pregnant, they don't really want you, to once you get pregnant, it's like it's optional, and then to you get pregnant and they're like, "What do you mean you're getting out? You can't get out."

TS: Right, okay.

LS: So it had progressed that far to where they were saying, "Come on. You got to stay." Or if you want to get out, it was harder to get out at that point.

TS: So the attitude is changing. Are the resources changing too?

LS: A little bit. They weren't then what they are now. Even when it came to the point of the time off for maternity leave. Then, it was like they weren't really understanding of it. It's like, "What do you mean you want two to three weeks off? Are you kidding?" And now, I think it's—What?—forty-five days or whatever?

And sometimes the men get maternity leave right along with the women. I was like, "Seriously? I think the military owes me something." [chuckles] But it is what it is, and I'm glad that it has progressed to where it is now. I think it should even be a lot better.

TS: I think they, just in the last month, standardized all across all services through DoD [Department of Defense], and it actually lost some, I think, in the navy; they actually lost weeks because they had longer—

LS: Oh, really?

TS: It was one service and I thought it was the navy but I could be wrong. Maybe it was the Marine Corps too. They're probably the same for both of those.

LS: Yeah.

TS: So you're in California, and then you spent about three years, maybe, in Lemoore?

LS: Yeah.

TS: And then you made another California move.

LS: Yes. Down to [Naval Air Station] Point Mugu.

TS: Point Mugu. Now, how was that different than Lemoore?

LS: The traffic was worse.

TS: Okay.

LS: Because Lemoore was more of a smaller town kind of feel. If you can get a small town feel in California, Lemoore was it. But it was definitely a lot nicer for the kids and stuff like that.

TS: At Point Mugu?

LS: Yeah. And by then I had gotten married and I was—My husband was from Los Angeles.

TS: Okay. Was he in the service?

LS: Yes. Well, he had been in the service but he got out of the service. He did five years in the navy.

TS: He was a veteran?

LS: Yeah.

TS: Did that help you out as far as juggling things, or he's got his own job he's doing and you've still got the same—

LS: Yeah, he had his own job that he was working out of LA [Los Angeles], so it was kind of like I was in Point Mugu and he was in LA, and then he'd come home on the weekends, and it was—Needless to say, that marriage was very interesting. I'm no longer married to him. [chuckles]

TS: Okay. Alright.

LS: It led to a lot of confusion.

TS: Well, you spent a lot of time at Point Mugu.

LS: Yes.

TS: Did you not want to leave there? Did you want to raise your kids there? Was there something that made you want to stay?

LS: Well, I think it was mainly the kids, because once kids get settled and they get their own friends and things like that, you really don't want to yank them out. And which, my retirement, I still ended up yanking them out. My oldest son was in his last year of school and we migrated all the way to Florida to where I thought—I was looking at a job and was thinking I'd be happier there, and wasn't, but—

TS: Was that after you got out, you mean?

LS: Yeah, that was after I retired. But the main reason for staying at Mugu was for my kids, to give them consistency.

TS: You spent most time there, and then you went for a short time—Did you retire out of Point Mugu or retire—

LS: Yes.

TS: Okay. Somewhere in there you went to San Nicolas Island [Naval Base Ventura County, California], and so what was that? What was that period?

LS: It was just a detachment. It's an actual island that's adjacent to Point Mugu, and that's where they do a lot of their drone runs and bombing and things like that. But you just—And I think that was more like a eighteen month, if I remember correctly now, that you were stationed out there, and then they just detach you right back to Point Mugu.

TS: Okay. So it's almost like a deployment out of there that's local.

LS: Right. Actually, yeah.

TS: Or temporary duty or something out of there.

LS: Yeah.

TS: Can I ask you a few general questions, then?

LS: Sure.

TS: You went in in '78. You got out in '98. And when you went in, really, the expansion of women had begun in the mid-seventies but was still building up, and what kind of changes—did you personally—would you say characterized your career? What were the biggest challenges that are still there, and maybe improvements that your saw?

LS: Well, I think that one of the challenges that I saw, even going in and looking at my mother's generation, was that women seemed to more so rely on men for their self-worth, for their financial stability, and just for their persona, just for who they were. You weren't—I wouldn't be Lovay, I would be Mrs. So-and-so, and if I wasn't Mrs. So-and-so, then I was someone who was seeking to be Mrs. Somebody. And then, as—I don't know. I always wanted to be Lovay, and I always wanted to be with someone who their glass would be half full, mine would be half full, and to the other we'd make a whole glass.

TS: Like a partnership?

LS: Exactly. And so, watching as the world has slowly evolved to that point, to look at women as—not as someone who accentuates someone else, but someone who is a partner, or who is, as they say, 51% of the United States. So it's like we're here and we are doing something. We are productive.

My mother was one of those women that, for a short period of her life, when they had World War II, she worked in a plant and—

TS: One of the Rosie the Riveters [a cultural icon of World War II, representing the women who worked in factories and shipyards when male workers joined the military]?

LS: Yeah. And that was her exciting claim to fame, but when my father came home, she became Mrs. Wallace and that was it.

TS: So instead of having an identity tied to your man or whatever, you have your own identity.

LS: Right. Exactly.

TS: And then you're not subordinate.

LS: Right, right.

TS: Was that changing, then, in the military?

LS: I think it was. I think it has changed, and I think that, to me, even in my marriage now, I'm living proof of it because, I mean, I do what I do. I'm married to Dwayne Singleton but my—I am Lovay Singleton and people know me for what I do and they talk to him about what I do. Although he makes tons more money than I do. But he's like, "Well, that's Lovay's thing and she does this and she does that." And so, it is a partnership.

And I think that the younger women that are coming up, for them it's a no-brainer; "Why were you guys even thinking that?"

But it's like, "Seriously, you have no idea how hard it was."

TS: Well, so, you came up in your formative years, still a young girl and teenager, when the women's movement was coming through.

LS: Right. Exactly.

TS: Did that empower you at all or was that another thing outside your bubble at that time?

LS: I think—See, I didn't really even notice that, or I didn't even really have thoughts about that until after I got into the military.

TS: Really?

LS: And then it was like, "I want to read Cosmo [Cosmopolitan, international fashion magazine for women]. I want to be part of the National Organization for Women," and all these other things. It was like, "Who are these women burning their bras and why are they burning them?" It was stuff like that that I was like, "Well, what in the world is going on?"

TS: Right.

LS: And then, "Do I want to be a part of it? Sounds kind of exciting but I don't know if I want to go all there," and things like that.

I think that being a woman in the military allowed me to be that part of it without burning my bra. I didn't have to burn my bra but, boy, was I really out there in the game.

TS: So you're pushing the boundaries within a certain parameter of that safety net that you're talking about, right?

LS: Exactly. And saying, "Hey, I'm still doing my part for womanhood or kind or whatever." And there were women that—and men—that came behind me that have told me, "Wow, I wouldn't have made it through this without you there to help me through this."

TS: So you became a mentor?

LS: Yes.

TS: Was that important to you?

LS: I think it is. I think it is. It's to help other women to get their sense of whatever they want to be, because everyone doesn't want to be the same thing.

TS: Right. Kind of help them get their footing and give them some sort of blueprint of what's maybe out there?

LS: Right. And see what the options are. You don't have to be like me but be something.

TS: Yeah. Did you experience any kind of sexual harassment, or we've talked about—

LS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah?

LS: Yeah. I mean, I think you always do. It was kind of part and parcel of being a female in the military, but it's kind of like to what degree. I mean, there were some women that were raped or had other things happen to them. We've all—Well, maybe not we've all, but—to experience someone calling you a name or degrading you in some way just to make you feel smaller than what a man is, and you just have to decide how you're going to take that; how you're going to respond.

And, like I said, after a while, we became—and when I say "we" I mean some of us women that were working together—we kind of formed that little sisterhood because we knew there was strength in numbers. We could protect each other if we stuck together.

TS: So as you're building up the numbers, that helped?

LS: Right.

TS: As they're coming into your field.

LS: Exactly. And believe it or not, I'm out of the military since '98 or whatever, but I have friends that—we're still—We still have a group of us that get together and, I mean, it's probably about six to ten of us that we'll try and get together. We might not do it every year but every once in a while.

TS: And these are women that you knew when you were in.

LS: Yes.

TS: Okay. Because you've almost been out as long as you were in.

LS: Right.

TS: Getting close to it, a couple of years.

LS: Exactly. Exactly. And we're still—I mean, if I go somewhere—I was just out in Sacramento [California] maybe four months ago and I met up with one of my friends from the military. We went out to dinner two nights in a row because I was at a conference. And I was like, "Hey, I'm going to be in such and such." And if we can do it, we get together.

TS: I think that's how we travel sometimes, right?

LS: Yes.

TS: "Who's in Colorado? Who's in—"

LS: Well, this was literally a conference that I had to go to, and believe it or not, we have a Facebook group, and so when we're doing different things it's like, "Hey, I'm going to be in such and such."

And they're like, "Well, when are you going to be there because I'm going to be at such and such." Or, "Guess what? I didn't tell you but I moved to—" XYZ." And this is how I found out that this person was there and we got together and had—and it's just like, we're both—Well, I don't dye my hair, she dyes hers. But, I mean, we're sitting there and we're grey-haired people and we just laugh and joke and talk and have a good time. It's just like nothing's ever happened.

TS: Just moving on.

LS: But that's the way that we learned to protect ourselves, was you had to have someone that you could vent to, you had to have someone that you could call when you needed someone, and that's how you get through these things.

TS: Were issues of race ever an issue during the time you were in the navy, for you personally? Or anything that you might have seen.

LS: A friend of mine experienced something that was really racial and it was hard for her to get through, and I think that had a lot to do with her getting out of the military. But she overheard an officer talking about her as a black woman being pregnant and saying something like, "That's all they do is get in the military and become pregnant," blah, blah, blah.

And I was like, "Who cares what they think?" And that was the one time that I know that I really looked at it and I was like, "Wow. Is that what they really think?" And then you go on.

But other than that, you know that there's always this possibility because we all come from different cultures. But my thing is, and always was in the military, if you don't like me, it's okay. I'm okay with that. I don't need to have a gaggle of friends. Just keep you and your opinions and you stay over there in your nice little group and you guys have fun, but if you make it a point to come in on my world, then we're going to have to deal with it.

TS: So when you're in your work environment, it's about just doing the job?

LS: Right. Right.

TS: And so, keep all that other—

LS: Yeah.

TS: Sometimes they intersect, right? If someone's in a position of power over you and those things are going on—

LS: And sometimes you know that—and sometimes you know that—but that's just something—I mean, these are things that my parent taught me, even coming up. There are going to be people that don't like you, and you will sit there and you will wonder, "Well, what have I done?" And it may be nothing but the color of your skin, but that's not something you can change, so you deal with it and you keep going. And that's all you can do.

TS: If you don't spend all your energy trying to figure out what you did when there's maybe nothing you could have changed—

LS: Exactly. Because it's the same thing as being a woman, in some aspects. They look at you and they say, "Well, I don't think you should have that role." And they are serious about it, because you are a woman.

And it's like, "Well, that's nice. I'm glad you have an opinion, but that's all it is." If they have power over you, then that changes the scenario somewhat, but if they don't, hey—

TS: It doesn't matter.

LS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. As you're going through and you're getting closer to retirement, did you have, like, a "Here's my D-Day" for you getting out?

LS: Yeah.

TS: Was there anything, circumstances, that helped push you out the door, or were you just ready to—

LS: No, no. And I guess that was a good thing for me, was that it was time for me to go. I felt like I had done pretty much everything that I had come into the military and done, and then I was looking on to other adventures outside.

TS: You were ready to move on?

LS: Yeah.

TS: Did you have any kind of difficulty transitioning? Not necessarily difficulty but, again, a challenge.

LS: I think I'm still transitioning. [chuckles] Yeah. There is, because when you leave—Well, see, they didn't have all that TAPs and things like that when I left the military. It was like you went to TAPs for a week and that was it.

TS: You want to describe what TAPs is for someone who—

LS: Transition Assistance Program.

TS: Helping you get into the civilian world.

LS: Helping you transition from the military into the civilian world. And so, you imagine, you've been in the military for twenty years and they say, "Okay, here's a week. We're going to give you this week. We're going to talk to you about six million things while you're doing two million other things, such as—"

TS: [unclear] process.

LS: Yeah. It's like, "Really? Really?"

And there was one gentleman—older gentleman—that came to me, and I still write him letters to this day. But he said, "You know what? It's going to take you a year. It's going to take you a year, and you'll probably go through all kinds of different jobs. You'll move to different places. All that. It's going to take you a year, and don't let it faze you."

And so, I didn't believe him. I was like, "Oh, you're crazy. You're old. What do you know?"

TS: [chuckles]

LS: He was right. It takes about a year for you to figure out who you want to be, what you want to do, things of that nature.

TS: So then why did you say you think you're still transitioning?

LS: I guess, in a way, because there's still some of that military stuff inside and it's harder to try and figure out, "What do I do in the civilian world?" It's getting a little bit easier, and it's funny, the younger generation, to me, they are standing there, and not only are they expecting it, but they are demanding it. It's like, "You're going to listen to me and you're going to help me with this transition and—" blah, blah, blah.

And I was like, "Wow. Why didn't I demand something?" I was just sitting there going, "Okay."

"You're leaving. Here's a week."

"Okay."

TS: Maybe part of it, too, is that there's a lot more fear of the economy being not as receptive. Ninety-eight was a pretty good time as far as economic growth in the country goes.

LS: Right. Exactly.

TS: So maybe that's one reason they might be demanding.

LS: There is that, and then there's also, I think, that some of the parents—because I know I'm real protective when it comes to my children and what they're doing as they transition out. And I talk to them and tell them, "Okay, this is going to happen. This is going to happen. You're not going to know. You need this amount of money. It's okay if you don't like that first job. That doesn't make you a bad person." And a lot of the things that I wish I had been told along the way, on the way out, and now I think they're getting more of that. I'd like to see them start a year before—

TS: A year before they leave?

LS: And I think they're getting to that, but it's like—They're like, "Well, they're getting out. They're not a commodity." And that's what you're looked at. On the way out, you're not a commodity. They're already on to the next person.

TS: Well, what about today, the issues of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] from veterans from all eras. Not necessarily you personally, but is that something that you see in your connection? You should probably talk about what you're doing here, now, in the connection to all the veterans that you have.

LS: And I think that that was part of why I decided to do what I'm doing, is—with the Veterans Employment Base Camp and Organic Garden—was looking at the situation of veterans being homeless, disabled veterans not receiving enough transitional care, and knowing that there had to be a better way.

And just my husband saying to me he was tired of me complaining about it, and I kept saying, "Somebody ought to do something. Somebody ought to do something."

And he finally said, "Well, why don't you?"

And I was like, "Oh, well, what can I do?" And just deciding, "Okay, well, I can do my own little bit and see if it will work." And so far it's doing pretty good. Last year—

TS: Go ahead. I was going to say, what was your vision of what it was that you thought would help?

LS: Well, I knew that veterans, especially homeless veterans, needed at least, at a minimum, six months of transitional employment. Because they come to us with no employment. They may have mental health issues. They may have problems with alcohol. They may have been prior incarcerated, things of that nature. And if you don't have a job history—That was the thing that was getting me. People were not able to find employment because they didn't have a job history. Well, you can't get a job history if you don't get employed somewhere. So it was like they were chasing their tail. So one of the main things I wanted to give them was a job history.

The other thing I wanted to do was kind of give them a breathing space where we could help them with any kind of benefits, any kind of mental health issues, any kind

of—because now they have everything on [unclear] benefits now, and you can do the—I'm also a veteran's service officer, so I can help them with their claims, I can help them apply for healthcare, I can help them—directing them to other agencies, because I've gotten into the loop to other agencies that can assist them, be it legal aid—I mean, it's amazing the different things that they needed assistance with. And so, that six month time period gives me that time frame to really help them, because I guess in a way it goes back to that transitional thing where you only get a week. What is a week?

Or sending someone down to the employment office. The only thing the employment office can do is assist them with employment. If you are sleeping in a car and you don't know where your next meal is coming from, how easy it is going to be for you to find employment? That's not your primary thing.

So that was my goal, was to focus on the immediate needs, get them stabilized, and then let's see about getting them permanent employment. So that's what this does.

TS: And so, then, how do you fit the gardening into the—

LS: The gardening is a way of sustainability. Gardening is something that I know. Agriculture is something I know. So if—And I kind of wanted to do something that I enjoyed, because I am retired! [both chuckle]

And so, the other thing about gardening is it gives them a sense of hope, because when they're watching plants grow, when they're having something that they have to take care of, and when they sell something that they've grown, it makes such a difference. It really does.

TS: You started to say, before I interrupted you earlier, about how last year you could see how it made a difference.

LS: Yeah. Last year we had ten veterans that went through our internship program, and by the end of the program we had seven veterans that were employed, and I think there's another one who's starting his own business, so so far we've had successes with eight. There are two that are disabled and I don't think they're going to ever be able to be employed, so their premise here was mainly for horticulture therapy, and they had a great time. We had an eighty-four year old World War II veteran working in this greenhouse, and this was his greenhouse, and you knew it when you walked in there. It was a lot neater than it is today. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, we had a storm, too, so we can say that.

LS: Yeah. I think that there are things that happened to me in my—Well, not happened to me—but there are things that I was exposed to in my military career that I'm still dealing with, in a way. So that's why I say I'm still transitioning, because I still feel like there's a need to mentor and to assist other veterans. And that's just me. That's my thing.

TS: It's amazing, when I was here last year, and just visited it.

LS: Yeah.

TS: It was just amazing the activity that was going on around us. There were so many bees; little worker bees everywhere. [both chuckle]

LS: Yeah.

TS: I just got a few more questions. One issue right now—the big hot topic—is women in combat, right? They just opened up—technically, opened up—all fields to women. Do you think there's any field in any of the services that women should not really be able to do?

LS: No.

TS: No?

LS: No, not at all. I think they should be able to try all of them. I really do. Because one thing that we have shown is that women will surprise you as to what they're capable of, and there are certain instances where we can do some things better than men. There are some instances where men can do things better than women, but I also feel that there's a role for women within every job that they have.

TS: Like a team of—

LS: Being a team player or being a leader. I mean, there are certain women that are fierce and I would follow them—And Rasheem[?] is probably one of them [chuckles]—through—If she said, "Okay, we're going to take that mountain."

I'd be like, "Okay. I'm just falling in line because I know she's going to do it." And she just has that persona about herself and—

I mean, they always go back to the, "Well, women can't lift this or women can't do this." Well, who says it has to be lifted? [chuckles] What if we can drag it? It's just I think that if they allow women to adapt things to our ways, that that job they say, "Oh, it has to be done this way—"

TS: Well, I think some of it is just the way that they make packs, right? The way that you carry it. The way a man can carry it and the way a woman can carry it, the weight-bearing part is different.

LS: Right. And there are women that, believe it or not—because I belong to a veteran's women entrepreneurship program—and there are women that are looking at things that—the way it's always been done, including combat gear, and they're tweaking it to make it a little bit more accessible for women.

And, I tell you, those are going to be the future millionaires. When I saw it at a conference I was like, "Wow. That is awesome." Even from the bullet proof vests, because before they only made bullet proof vests so that they fit the man or whatever. They've taken them and tapered them and it's just amazing.

TS: They saw a lot of that with police officers who were women, right?

LS: Yeah.

TS: They put the male one on them and it just didn't quite—That's interesting.

LS: Right, right. And once you taper it and tweak it, hey.

TS: Works a lot better. Yeah. So, let's see, you went in '78 and you got out '98. When you were in, the issue of homosexuality. So at first, it was if you were found out, you got kicked out.

LS: Right.

TS: And then, just before you left, it was "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" got implemented and now that's gone and you can be openly gay or lesbian. What do you think about that whole issue?

["Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was the official U.S. policy on military service by gays, bisexuals, and lesbians. The policy prohibited military personnel from discriminating against or harassing closeted homosexual or bisexual service members, while barring openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual person from military service. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed 20 September 2011.]

LS: I think it's great that they've done it. I remember when I first went in, there were some women that were homosexuals that were in our group, back in '78, and it was like this big taboo for them. And that was another thing that was kind of scary because it was like, "Oh, they'll turn you into this and they'll turn you into that."

And I was like, "I don't see how they could turn me into anything."

And then going out into the military and having friends who were like that, and them having to stay, so to speak, in the closet, and some of them having relationships with each other that last longer than other people's marriages. And now, with them just being open with it, I'm like, "Well—"

TS: I think we're going to run out here real quick.

LS: Okay.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you?

LS: Oh, gosh. Being able to serve my country.

TS: Yeah. You don't have to hurry your answer because I got a back-up plan if it runs out.

LS: Okay. That's it. Being able to serve my country and do the best that I can, and making my children proud of what I've done in the military.

TS: Do you think there's anything people who are in the civilian world maybe don't understand or misinterpret about people who are in the military or the military itself, or even, in particular, the navy?

LS: I don't think they understand how deep the conviction goes for a veteran. I like the new navy advertisement where they have the family in the middle and they say, "To get to them, you're going to have to get through us." And they have all these navy people around.

TS: I haven't seen that. I'll have to look at that.

LS: And I—It is just awesome. That's what I—Whoever did that really, to me, understands what patriotism is about; is that we will step up and be there. They will have to get through all of us to get to you, and I think that's what a lot of them don't understand. And it's kind of like for the police officer, for the fireman, and everything else, it runs a lot deeper than just that uniform.

TS: Right. That's a great answer. How do you think your life has been different because you walked into that recruiter's office and signed up?

LS: Oh, it's a world of difference. I mean, I look at my sisters and I know that my life, to me, is better. I've had more challenges—can't stay that I haven't, I have—but I think it's made me so much more stronger, more self-aware, more aware of the world and what is going on an—I don't know. I wouldn't have missed that ride for the world. I wouldn't have missed this journey for the world. It's just been wonderful. Yeah.

TS: Well, I don't have any other formal questions. Is there anything that we didn't touch on that you wanted to mention. Would you recommend the service to anybody?

LS: Yeah, and I do. I do sometimes. [both chuckle]

TS: Some people in particular?

LS: And some of them take me up on it and some don't, and some that don't—I have not met a veteran as of yet that was in and got out before they retired that doesn't say they wish they had stayed in. All of them say they wish they had stayed in. Maybe my husband doesn't because he's done quite well for himself after he's gotten out. But I think even that short time frame for him, it was a positive experience, because it kind of helped to make him make him who he is.

TS: Right, right. I didn't quite let you reflect on that. Anything else you'd like to sum up and say?

LS: No, I just. I think that this is awesome. I think that when the real history is written, say thirty years from now when women veterans are looking at some of the things that even my generation went through, they are going to be like, "Are you kidding me?" [both chuckle]

And we're going to be standing there—or our voices will be there saying, "Well, no, we're not kidding you. Believe it or not."

It's like people say "you're standing on the shoulders of the people that went before you". I used to go to a women's—Well, I'm a member of a women veteran's group in Morehead [City] [North Carolina], and I used to drive this World War II veteran to and from the meetings, and just listening to her talk about her experiences was amazing to me. And it made me understand that I really stood on this woman's shoulders to be who I was. And she was a Navy WAVE [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service], but it's just amazing to be able to talk to someone and understand that—

TS: That connection between generations.

LS: Yeah, exactly.

TS: That's great.

LS: Yeah. So that's the only thing I would add. Okay? [both chuckle]

TS: Well, I'm waiting for another hail storm.

LS: Yeah, I know, right?

TS: Well, thank you.

LS: I'm hoping they haven't locked the gate over there.

TS: I'll go ahead and stop.

[End of Interview]