

Interviewee: Laurel Sanderson  
Interviewers: Kristin Pancotti and Carolyn Kriso  
Date Of Interview: October 23, 2006  
Location: Worcester, MA



**Abstract:** Laurel Sanderson was born in 1930 and spent her early years on a family farm in North Dakota. In this interview she describes the difficulties her parents had during the Great Depression, her working on the farm as a young girl, her two marriages, and going to college to earn her associate, bachelor, and master's degrees. She reflects on moving to Worcester and living on her own after her divorce, the multiple jobs she had at a large Worcester company, and gender and age bias in the workplace.

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**CK:** We would like to ask if it is all right that we record this oral history today.

**LS:** Yes, that's fine.

**CK:** Ok, so today, Kristin and Carolyn- Pancotti and Carolyn Kriso are interviewing Laurel Sanderson. It is October the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006. So we are doing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences, based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester. We are focusing on the areas they looked at then, which were: women's education, health, work, politics, and community involvement. And today we would like to focus on your experiences with work, both paid and unpaid.

**LS:** OK

**CK:** And today this interview will also be used for our Gender Studies term paper at Clark University. And thank you very much for letting us talk to you!

**LS:** I like the idea that you're from Clark, it's a great school.

**CK:** Yeah. So, we'll start out with the basics: What is your full maiden name, and if applicable, your maiden name?

**LS:** The whole thing: Laurel Phillis....Sanderson. One maiden name, two married names.

**CK:** And when and where were you born?

**LS:** I was born November 16, 1930, in New Salem, ND, at home, with a midwife. I was a "Gabie baby"- Dr. Gabie delivered me, brothers and sisters and tons of cousins.

**CK:** Wow. How many were born by that doctor?

**LS:** I have no idea how many, how many babies he delivered. But in my family: myself, and my two younger brothers, my sister was the only one who was born in a hospital. He was the doctor. And the midwife was the one...this was a farm community, so many of the farm wives came in while their time was near, and stayed at the midwife's home, waited for the delivery, and then the midwife could do the delivery, but the doctor was there to make it official. He also did calls out in the country, in the wintertime. With 17 horses and a sleigh through storms and snow.

**CK:** That's so cool

**LS:** It's a different part of the world.

**CK:** So do you have any children? I know you do have grandchildren.

**LS:** Uh, I have one son, Kevin, did you want more information about him?

**CK:** Sure

**LS:** I never realized I was getting old until I realized that he was 55 last year, 56 this year Kevin lives in Otomowa, Iowa. He's a licensed clinical psychologist, married to a lovely woman. They have one child, my grandchild Correen, who is 30, lives in Chicago. And I have one daughter, Karen, and she's married and lives in Norfolk, VA. She was in the navy for 23 years, and now she's in the civil service.

**CK:** And what cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

**LS:** Well if were going by blood lines, on my father's side it's all German, and on my mother's side, it's half German and half Sweden. So I'm three quarters German and one quarter Swedish. But the kids... we have a little Scott and Irish stuff there, with their father.

**CK:** So how long were you married?

**LS:** I was married to my first husband for 12 years, and my second husband for 10 years.

**CK:** So could you tell us a little about your parents, what they did for a living, and how you think this may have had an influence on your life, as an adult?

**LS:** We lived in North Dakota, both my mother's parents and my father's parents, grandparents and so on, were homesteaders in North Dakota. They came in the late 1880s. We were farmers, what farmers, raised some cattle but usually for our own use. We had pigs and chickens and ducks, big garden, stuff like that. And we were on the farm until I was ready to start high school, and unfortunately, we'd gone broke. Because they were married in 1928, 1929 began the crash. And in 1930, through all the 1930s, there wasn't any rain. And in probably 1939, 1940, 1941, we got enough rain, beautiful crops,

and then just as they were ready to be harvested, we'd get a hail storm, and that knocks all of the grain out of the corn, and you'd just sit by and hope that you can get something together for next year. And at that point in time, 1941, my parents sold their machinery, their furniture and the farm, and moved from North Dakota, to the black hills of South Dakota. And there, my father went to work in the sawmill until he hurt his back, and my mother held down various jobs. She worked as a silk finisher in a dry cleaning shop, in other words, pressed dresses. She also did a lot of the repair work on clothes that came in, like sewing pants and stuff like that. She also worked as a waitress, and then my parents bought a small café, and my sister and I worked as waitresses there.

**CK:** Is that your first job?

**LS:** No. We'll get to my first job. Then, I did my 4 years of high school in that small town, and I moved to a larger town in Rapid City, 'cause my boyfriend lived there. (chuckles). And I went to work for the telephone company, as a "number please," "thank-you" operator. I know after I was married and had my first child, I ended up getting my second job. Take care, I'm not going back to work at the telephone company. Back to my first job, that's one of the questions that I ask on my questionnaire, when I'm interviewing people for my book is "Tell me about all the jobs, all the work that you have done in your lifetime beginning with the first thing when you were a child that wasn't helping your mother dust or cutting the yard." So my first job when my hands were strong enough was learning to milk the cows. And hoeing in the garden, and hoeing the rows of potatoes, and then when we moved I became a waitress, then the telephone company, and then I sold insurance for a little while. Then I went to work as a checker in the chain grocery store. Then I went to work in the bank, I was a jack-of-all-trades. I could do anything, except work in the teller's cages. I did accounts, kept track of the bad checks, and everyone else, managerial work. And then I got married and came out here, and here... I was a teacher. So between the spring and the time I got out of school, I went to Kelly Services, and they placed me at State Mutual in the secretarial department because I knew how to type. And then I took the summer off and came back in September after I put my daughter in high school here. This is not here... I was living in Whitinsville at the time.

**CK:** Where is Whitinsville?

**LS:** It's about 17 miles that way, headed towards Uxbridge, down 146. So, but then when I came back I went to work for the company, and I spent the next 32 years doing all kind of jobs there.

**CK:** This is at State Mutual?

**LS:** It was State Mutual Life Insurance Company of America. Then it became Allmerica, now it's the Hanover Group

**CK:** Ok, Hanover Group.

**LS:** Yeah. So part of your question was how did my early life, working on the farm, what I did on the farm, how did that effect my life? I think, really... (pause)...the greatest thing that could have happened. Because in essence what happened was that I have lived several different lives. One of them is my farm life, in North Dakota. And I wouldn't trade that for anything because it gives me an outlook on life that many, many people...and my granddaughter...had the same experience. Her grandparents were living on a ranch in Montana shortly after she was born. And she was there until she was 10, and that's home to her. She can hardly wait to get back to Montana (laughs). Even just growing up there as a child. So being able to grow up in the wide-open space, it does something for you. See that building out back there [points to a new building that was built only 20 feet from her back porch]. That just went up this spring. That has killed me, because that took away the last bit of my prairies that used to be an empty lot back there, and has been for the 30 years that I've lived here. And all of a sudden, I am Laurel Bin Laden living in my cage because I have to keep that shade down. They haven't moved in yet, but when they move in, they get a view of my bedroom windows. The light reflects off that in the morning, shines just like spotlights in here, and I had no idea. Cut out a lot of my sky, all of my ceiling. Being able to see what people were doing on the other side of the street.

**CK:** So how did your parents' jobs affect your life?

**LS:** Well, they were farmers to begin with, and... that, I don't think that my parents' jobs so much affects my life as the fact that we were farmers. I was a farm kid, and... I think it would be different if we had jobs in town, and mom and daddy had office jobs, and she'd done something else, and I was on my own. But we all worked together. And we were together as a family all of the time. And so, it isn't a matter of affecting. You're just born into it, it's in your bones, you just grow with it

**CK:** So farm work wasn't seen as a chore, you say, you say it was work?

**LS:** Oh, it was work. Yeah.

**CK:** Were you given any payment for that?

**LS:** The only time I ever got paid for any work on the farm, besides getting fed, and a bed to sleep in, was during the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, when we were on war bonds and stuff. Now, my parents didn't have much in the way of money. But daddy made an agreement with us, my sister and myself, if we milked 5 cows a piece, we each got a nickel. If we milked one cow beyond that, we'd get another nickel. If we milked 2 cows, we'd get another nickel. If we milked 4 cows, we didn't get any nickels. And with those nickels earned that way, I bought my first war bond. But it's the only time I had ever been paid for that work. None of the other farm kids ever got paid for their work, either. So, everyone was poor but nobody knew it because everybody was the same. 'Cause that just the way it was.

**CK:** How were the rest of the chores divided in your house? Were they traditionally gendered?

**LS:** It depends upon in my family, my sister and I were the oldest two, there were 4 years between the first boy and me, and then 6 years after that to the youngest one who didn't really have much farm experience. So my sister and I ended up doing things on the farm that some of the boys would have done if they were older. A lot of my work was on the pastures bringing the cows in to do milking. And she and I milked and we did the separating. In 1941 I was just 11 years old. And at that point in time we-my sister and I-were getting old enough to get into the fields, and help in the fieldwork, the harvesting, stuff like that. And we were responsible for keeping the pigs and the chickens fed, and my mother always had a humongous garden. She canned and canned and canned and canned. And you were down in that garden pulling like crazy all summer long, picking all the vegetables and everything, and helping her can.

**CK:** So did the males in your family help out equally with the women?

**LS:** No, because in 1941 when I was 11 my younger brother was 7. He wasn't big enough- he was getting to the point where he could start with the field work, because the boys could start out earlier than the boys can. But we moved out of the farm before he really got involved much in that. You'd be out in the fields and one of the things you'd do, was run a binder through the wheat fields. And its cuts it, and shakes it down, and ties all of these what stems into bundles, and then kicked them out the back. And you follow along, and pick them up, and you stand them up, so that the tops of those sheaths and standing up like this. And you shock them into small tepees, and then hen that was laid down, then the crew would come down later and take those to the threshing machines and thresh all of the grain out of it and keep the straw out of it. So I was beginning to shock. So I had to be- I was strong enough- to be able to lift the bundle. Now on other farms where the boys were older, yeah, the boys would do more farm work and the girls would be more in the house. For instance my grandfather had 12 kids. And there the girls were really busy in the house. And besides where there was a hired girl, to help with all the washing. She had to have someone to help her. But they did all the washing and the clothes and all the cooking and cleaning and stuff like that.

**CK:** So after you moved from North Dakota to South Dakota, where did you live subsequently, and then what factors played a role in where you chose to live?

**LS:** Well, moving to South Dakota was not my idea. Your parents move, they take you with 'em. We lived in Speuphers, South Dakota, and the reason we moved there was because my dad's parents had moved there and had a small home there. While there, I waitressed, went to high school, graduated, met the man who would become my husband when I was just 16. I met him on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. And... then my move after high school, after graduation, about a year later, I moved to Athens City, because that's where he had been. I moved there in May, worked for a telephone company, and we were married in September. We established our roots, and started raising kids. We were smart enough to stop at two.

**CK:** Did you continue working once you had children?

**LS:** I did as long as, up to the time that Kevin was born. Then I took some time off, then I went back to work, then I was pregnant with Karen, and left again and came back to work after that. And my mother in law was taking care of the kids and she said “I’m not going to do this,” so I came back to the house. And I was....the marriage was... getting very shaky. He had more girlfriends than you can count, and eventually, we were going broke because he knows how to sign his name and storekeepers don’t know enough to tell him to stop. He was charging everything. And eventually I had to go to work, and then, as I said, I went to work as...I tried selling insurance and I’m not good at that, so I went to work at the grocery store as the checker.

**CK:** This is in South Dakota still?

**LS:** Yeah.

**KP:** What is a checker?

**LS:** That’s the gal who’s standing behind the counter when you’re running the grocery store. She does the cash register, but we didn’t have the scanners back then, everything you did was into the cash register. And you bag. But we were divorced, eventually I went to work for the bank. It was during that time that I met the man that I met from here that I married. He came into town, and then we left. Sounds simple. I came back here to live. And this is a matter of ...when you take a big step, because when I left Rapid City with this man and we were married...I left behind my kids, my home, my mother (because my father was already dead), my siblings, my job, my friends, my church, absolutely everything that meant anything to me I left behind. Came out here, married to a man that I had known for 6 months. I came all of the way out here.

**KP:** What factors made you decide to do that?

**LS:** You know something, I fear I don’t know. I have discovered over time, that when it comes to large decisions like that, that I just kind of put one foot in front of the other, and it isn’t until years later that I realize that that was the best thing I could have done. It’s like I’m inner-directed somehow. It never talked to me, it just sort of moves me. For instance, married to John here. He urged me to go to college because I hadn’t had the chance to because my parents didn’t have the money for it when I got out of high school. So I start over at Quinsig [Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester, MA]. I start out with one course per semester. I thought it was pretty good. He told me that I had too good a mind to waste without getting more of an education. It took a couple of semesters when he began, in his own inevitable fashion, to try to convince me that well, you know, maybe I should take a course this semester because were gonna take a long trip this summer or “you know you don’t wanna tire yourself out by going to school.” And “we’ve just come back from a vacation and you’re tired so why don’t you take the fall semester off and rest”. And I said, “No, no, no I’m fine”. Well, I get down to the place

where I have one course left to take, got graduated. So way back there when I thought that the marriage was on solid ground, where I'm saying, "No, no, I'm fine ... No, no, I'm fine". And it's that type of thing that leads me to believe that there's something that keeps me going in the direction that I'm supposed to go. And coming out here was one of the better things that I could have done. Because I was able to grow tremendously here, not only go to school, but I learned so many other things. My son never came out here and he finished high school and he went in the navy. My daughter came out here and she finished two years and she went to the navy- they both got off to good starts. And I think it was very helpful to them to see their mother be brave. And take big steps. Scary steps. And my granddaughter tells me the same thing. She said "Grandma, if you can live by yourself," she says, "then I can live by myself." And so she does, in Chicago. And those things wouldn't have happened had I stayed there and muddled along. So, it's been good.

**KP:** What helped you grow here in Worcester?

**LS:** What helped me grow? Well I'll tell ya, there are some times when you better grow, or you're dead. The man I was married to could be a really marvelous person, he could be really intellectual, I sharpened my mind on his all of the time. He read a lot, I read a lot. But he's manipulative. And controlling. Only I was so naive when I came. I was a farm girl, truly, who didn't know nothin' about how people operated. But, you either learn or you suffer the consequence. So, with John I learned a new language. Listened to him talk. What words did he use or not use? What tone of voice did he use? What was his expression? What was his body language. I learned all of those things. Stands me in good stead ever since because now I see people in different way. If they are saying something but the body language doesn't fit, or the tone of voice doesn't fit, I've learned to ask questions or back off or whatever. I've learned how to hold down a decent job. I learned how to integrate with people who I always thought were way beyond me socially speaking. I was just a farm girl, and we didn't know about etiquette and newspapers, and all kinds of people like that. I found out they are just as neat as anybody else. I learned how to travel, I learned how to go to school. Because when I went to school here, I earned my Associates Degree from Quinsigamond, and I earned my Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Clark and my Masters in Business Administration from Clark. The Quinsig one is highest honors, and the undergrad from Clark is summa. Then I got into too much math in the Masters Degree to get any honors title, but...so I'll tell you something about Clark. Clark teaches you how to think, how to logic your way through things. And man, I just appreciate that so much.

**KP:** What difficult transitions did you go through in moving from childhood to adulthood, especially pertaining to gender?

**LS:** You know, when you live on a farm, I think you begin to see things in a totally different way. For instance, on the farm, sex is all around you all the time, and it's just natural, and so, the transitions that you make are just part of the overall scheme of life you know. You just don't run into all these problems. I'm not saying that you don't have real sexy feelings and stuff like that physically and other ways, but it's just part of the

overall scheme of things. I don't know that I had any problems going from one stage to another.

**KP:** Whose health are you responsible for? Besides your own?

**LS:** Kids are big enough to take care of themselves, granddaughter is big enough to take care of herself, my parents are both gone. My siblings can take care of themselves, it's just me. What do I do about that? Make sure that I have a physical every year, have a gynecology physical every year, this morning I was out having a serious of screening tests: clotted arteries and aorta. Then I got back from that, got into my exercise clothes, went over to Bally's [a local fitness center/gym], went and walked for an hour, did stretching, take care of my teeth, take care of my eyes.

**KP:** That's wonderful. You take better care of yourself that I do probably.

**LS:** Well, it's because if you get down to this end of the line, you figure if you're going to go another 2 years you better do something about it, so that's what you do

**CK:** Well, you look great!

**LS:** Yeah, It feels good when you say I'm 76 and they say, "Oh no, not really!" and I say, "Hmmm!" (all laugh)

**CK:** So when did you move to Worcester?

**LS:** I've been here for 30 years, and I came up here in 1976, and that was when I got a divorce. November 1 of '76.

**CK:** Did you move here *because* of the divorce?

**LS:** Yeah, yeah the job was about the getting me outta the house. I mean his first wife was pushing to get me outta there because she was scared to death I was gonna get the house. (laughs) I didn't want it anyway. But, came up here. Setting up my apartment was the first time in my life I had the opportunity to setup my own living space. It was really nice. I got to say, "Hey I want a sofa, but it's got to be special". I don't want any French Polynesian stuff, no colonial, none of that. And I shopped for a long time before I found this sofa. And everything else too.

**CK:** You moved directly into this apartment?

**LS:** Yeah. Just signed my lease for the 31<sup>st</sup> year! It needs a little picking up.

**KP:** Do you have any other family members living in the area?



**LS:** No. Not a one. Had a cousin who lived in Boston for quite while, but her mother became very ill and she's been there for probably 10 years and her mother just died. But no, no family members here.

**CK:** So what drove you to come to Worcester?

**LS:** Work was right up the street. The reason I came here to this particular place was because the office where I was the executive secretary at the time, and there were 6 of us who worked in what we called the core area. And I said, "Gee, ya know, I'm going to have to find a place in Worcester." And one of the secretaries said, "We'll have you looked in Letchwood? And I had no idea, except for State Mutual, I didn't know where anything else was. And she said. "Well, it's just down the street". And her husband had lived here. And so that afternoon I came down here and checked it out, and they showed this apartment, the people were just moving out of it. And I said, "Gee, you know, can you hold that for Sunday," because I had a court date that I couldn't leave until I had been to court and got the divorce, otherwise I'd have been stuck with desertion. John was the kind of person who will hit you with anything he could. And yeah they had a number of people move out at one time, and they cleaned it and painted and all the stuff that needed to be done on the others, then by November 1, (our court date was December 3<sup>rd</sup>) they said to sign the lease of whether you'll move in or not. So I did. That's when I got here. This was the only apartment that I ever looked at in this place. Until that place went up [points to new house across the back porch that she doesn't like]. Someone suggested that I move to another apartment and I wanted another that was situated like this. In the back, one bedroom, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, and NOT above the laundry room. And there was one a building over, and I was told that when I moved in here, that this was a large one bedroom apartment. Then I went over there and discovered that a SMALL one bedroom apartment was... it was about 3 feet narrower, not too much shorter, the kitchen was smaller, and I would not have been able to keep my table. I wouldn't have been able to keep my sofa stuff like that. So I said no, I'll live in my cave. I'm territorial. I have roots halfway to China in this place. I'm not going anywhere. Unless of course I take a flying leap into space! (all laugh).

**KP:** What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally, especially in the labor market?

**LS:** That becomes a little bit more difficult for me, because a lot of my experience is based on the farm and things out west. If I look at my experience with State Mutual, because that's the one place that I've worked here, and it's been about 40 years ago since I started working there... Women were not treated all that well. They didn't get paid what men were being paid. I had friends who were top supervisors in departments who had managers who would leave, and you would think that these people would move into that position because they've been there for a long time and they knew all the work down flat, but they always hired someone else in that she'd have to train. At one point in time, when I got my degree from Clark, it didn't do me any good in the office. And I always figured that A) I was female. B) I was old, and C) I wasn't blind. If they had a female, black attorney come in I tell you they treated her like gold, because of diversification.

They were scrounging for those people, but for me? I think that we had the same qualifications. So there was a time essentially when I came, where if you fell in love with a guy from the company, and you got married, one of you had to leave. And guess who that would be? And I had a friend who passed away in August, she had spent 44 years at the company, and she'd been outta there since 1973 - she was 95 when she passed away- but that was her first job after she graduated from Becker. And the woman wore white gloves to work. And they wore dresses and hats. They didn't wear gloves WHILE they were working, going back and forth they wore gloves. And in fact, I was just walking around looking, and she's still got a box of gloves -- about 65 pairs.

**KP:** Would that be an example of discrimination that you experience yourself, or are there other experiences?

**LS:** There probably were, but that is a big company, and the way that things were, you didn't see it. But I'm sure that there were others, and particularly in the "opa" (?) area. But I was fortunate in that I started in secretarial services, which didn't pay a whole lot. But in my next job after that - I was working at that firm for two years- then I worked for one of the high vice presidents. And I worked for him for nine years. He was a guy that, when it was time for your review, he'd call you in his office, and he'd throw the sheet in front of you and say, "Is that ok?" And you'd look at it and he'd have you marked off "excellent, excellent". He'd have you marked off top marks on everything and he always kept my salary up at the top level. The salary range was like this and I was always up there (draws picture of graph in the air). And I did the budget for his department. And I'd say "Look, Mr. P, I can't add anything onto the budget for an increase in salary because I'm already at the top" and he'd say put it in anyway. So I'd put it in, and the salary moved up. And I'd always get my increase. And since he was a rather problematic company (NOT SURE OF THE LAST TWO WORDS), when I went on from there, I think I got treated quite well because of that. They had people in the company who cared. When I took the early retirement and came back on a part time basis, that's when we got (makes popping noise with mouth). Because I was making 32,000 then I went back down to 10 dollars an hour. The gal that I wanted to work for, she wanted to get me a salary increase, and I said I couldn't get any more than that.

**CK:** Is it because you took time off?

**LS:** NO. I was pushed into an early retirement. Then you come back as a retiree, on a part time basis. And as a part timer, and as a female, they weren't going to give me anything more than I had. In fact they're gonna start me for 8 dollars. And the gal that I started to work for said, "No way, it's got to be 10".

**CK:** Why were you pushed into early retirement?

**LS:** The company has gone through a series of reductions in force. And they, at one time to do this in a manner that didn't get people really upset, they would offer you early retirement. You had to have the magic number of 95 on a regular retirement. In other words, you had to be at least 55 years old or 40 years old - 95- to get a full retirement

pay. Here they were saying 85, so it's a combination of your age and years of service adding up to 85. And I just squeaked in and made that, and they had almost 100 people when I went out who took advantage of that. They were a little bit surprised. They didn't expect to lose so many good people. And I had gone around and asked about it, and said should I stay and take the chance? And everyone said I should take the retirement and then come back on a part time basis because you have no guarantee that you have a job if they decide to cut you and you haven't taken the retirement check, you can be out of luck. So, I took the retirement. There was one person who said, "No, I am going to stay." And he got canned, he didn't have any retirement, nothing. So you know, that's the way it works. But I came back on a part time basis. And that wasn't too bad. Because that was at a point where...well you begin to retire, when you retire over a period of 10 or 15 years, it's easy. You just - you're not working full time and then you're home the next day, and you say 'now what do I do?' How many hours can you work to begin with, and then you've go the new president. And you were working just enough hours to be making a 1,009 hours a year, and you had to work 1,000 hrs. in a year to get benefits. And with the 1,009 you'd get benefits. And then the new president came in and he figured "Yeah, you're making too much money, all of you". You know, big pension check and big paychecks. My measly 10 dollars an hour. And he cut it back so we were working 20 hrs. a week. So I came out to be ONE WEEK short. 20 hours short of making 1,000 hours. Then he tried to get rid of all the retirees, because, I was told, well I was out of there by the end of June...because of my age, I didn't know if I'd be able to find a job, didn't know what to do in spite of the fact that I have all kinds of different talents. So, I went to an attorney and he said, "All the companies are doing that, you don't have a case." So I decided to rock the boat to see what happens. So I get back and I took my 25 year list of people who have worked for the company at least 25 years, and I call them and I say "Did you know there's a new policy out there that retirees are going to be shoved out?" Then I got to get the feeling that yeah there were some of them going to be pushed out, but ones they wanted to keep were gonna stay there. And I'm getting down to the end of the month, and I've had a retirement party for me even though I said "No I don't want one" and then I went to the head of personnel. And I said "Bruce"- and I know him - I said, "You know I think that policy is not right". He's got the right to set that policy, but grandfathering - grandfather the people who are already retired to tell everybody else, "I'm sorry, you're retired, you're out". Which would be a fair thing to do. And I said you do it that way, and your problems going to go away, because eventually everybody, all the retirees are going to get old enough so they are not working anymore. Everybody's gone. And I said yeah, but we have all this institutional knowledge, and we're loyal, and we work hard and all that sort of stuff. And no no no, everybody was going.

**KP:** Even male retirees?

**LS:** Everybody. Male and female. And so I said, "Bruce, you know if I call back in 6 months and I find any of those retirees still here, I'm going to be very unhappy". Two days later I have in my hand a copy of the changed company policies that they continued to work on. But it was a squeaker! (laughs) I tell you it's like panic. What am I going to

do? I haven't got much money. I'm not going to be able to live. And then every time I walk up the drive way I went like this to the president's office. Then I did not retire when I was 60. I worked until I was 75. So.

**KP:** For the past three jobs, did you take the jobs first and then look for a place to live or did you take the job after you established a residential location?

**LS:** Well we can't talk about the last 3 jobs because if we just want to talk about here, well, I've been here (State Mutual Company) for 30 years. The only place I've ever worked is State Mutual. And I had a home in Whitinsville when I started there, and then because of the divorce, I found a place to live, one that was close to my work. So, it's a question that really isn't relevant to me personally. But the jobs that I had in Rapid City, there I already had a home established and then I got the job through there when I had to get a job.

**KP:** Where did you attend school?

**LS:** 1-8 in 2 country schools in North Dakota. And I'll tell you something, that's another one of those things that I wouldn't trade for the entire world. Have you ever been to a country school? You know how they operate?

**KP/CK:** No

**LS:** 8 grades, you come in a first grader, but everybody else is sitting the same room, there might be 20 kids all together. And so while you're learning your stuff you're always listening to the other kids learning and reciting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, there might be something you didn't pick up on the first grade. And you hung around them and you're learning from them and listening and learning from all the other people so it takes you 8 years to go through, and you're listening to all those 8 grades. My math isn't good enough to tell me how many years of school you get, but you come out of there and you really have an education. Then my 4 years of high school were at Spear Fish high school in South Dakota. That was weird to go into from a one-room school of 12 kids to go to a high school on 3 floors that's got 6 grades in it and several hundred kids and you don't know where the heck anything is. You'd always find someone in a class and follow them and learn your way (laughs) then no more school until I came here like I said. Quinsig, and two degrees from Clark.

**KP:** What were your challenges in education?

**LS:** Math. I'm not really great at math. However, on the other hand, I have answered a whole rath of statistics for this gal which helped her to get her Masters. And I wrote a transportation paper for the regulation of transportation for another gal. So, statistics were never good. I wasn't stupid, it's just it's not my favorite topic and some of it I don't get.

**KP:** How were girls treated when you were at school?

**LS:** I don't see that I had any problems. I could see problems where my sister was concerned. But that was because she was a very stubborn girl, and education did not come easy to her. She got a real bad teacher the first years she was in and was held back so she took the 1<sup>st</sup> grade twice, which meant that she and I were together. But it was more her own asking than that the teacher was against girls. The only instruction I ran into in school was over at Quinsig, an accounting teacher and he didn't like girls. He didn't like women. And he liked to have us to pick on. He said the that he bought a new car, his wife wanted air conditioning in it and he didn't buy it because he didn't think his wife needed air conditioning, which told you about the kind of person he was. But he was the one that I run into - and he worked on all the students in the class, trying to get them to quit. People would come to the library at night, and before he would get there, I'd say, "Don't ANYBODY drop out because that's what he wants you to do. IF we all stay here, he really has to work." And so the bulk of us stayed. A troublemaker I think you can call me. (all laugh)

**KP:** Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

**LS:** Well. Since I was an adult at that time, it wasn't a matter of was I going to get a better job or something. One of my options after I got my Masters Degree was to stop doing business courses and go back to an undergrad level and audit all the other stuff I thought was interesting. I audited for several years. Doing all kinds of interesting stuff. Um...because I was already was far along my work in State Mutual, there wasn't any way I was going to go somewhere else and look for another job. You've got your pension to think about, your profit sharing and putting money away in you're retirement. In that, you're not going to leave for something like that unless you have to. In fact, there was one guy who was my tutor when I went into systems, and by god he was only supposed to stay for 5 years, he was at the 25 year point and I say "Denis, when are you going to leave? How long have you been there, about 30 years now?" (laughs) So you know, it's...but no, I didn't choose to do any options. For me, education was a gift to myself. You learn so much, company helped paid for a good deal of it.

**KP:** What did your parents' educations consist of?

**LS:** My dad probably got through 6<sup>th</sup> grade but that didn't mean he was dumb either, he had a business so he could figure out the Social Security stuff and the whole nine yards and how to run the business. My mother had one year of high school. She was a very intelligent woman too. Then she got stopped because as I understood from her, because her father wanted her to stay at home. They lived on a farm, and the girls, the older sister already had an education so the younger sister was supposed to stay home and help mom.

**KP:** How did you typically get your jobs? Did you find out about them through social networks, or advertisements, or employment agencies...?

**LS:** First on the farm, daddy said stay at home, and mom always says ok these are the things you're going to do. One job that I worked at a waitress. I'm not sure if they had a

sign up in the window or what. I also worked at Spear Fish Canyon, it was a summer resort kind of thing, where I cleaned cabins and waited tables there and I think I got that one because somebody in the family knew somebody there, or knew someone that knew I needed a job and I think I got it that way. Farmed after that one. Willy nilly! You're gone kid. The insurance work that I did, that was because I was in an extension club, and one of the members, her husband had been in an insurance agency, and when I was divorced, she thought that that would be good for me to do.

**CK:** What is an extension club?

**LS:** Like a homemakers club. It's a group of women, it's part of the state college education program, where the homemakers clubs are almost all women. And there are, sued to be, just tons of those in South Dakota where I was a member. And you get lessons in doing certain kinds of sewing, or health types of things, and in fact I used to come and be a county reading leader for 2 years, and give book reports.

**CK:** So these are part of colleges or schools?

**LS:** Yeah, it was probably with South Dakota State College. But all of the states had this. Because there were so many women who can't go to school. Of course Rapid City is where - my mother was a homemaker in South Dakota - where all the farm women got together. It was lovely for them to learn new things and that sort of thing. So. The job at State Mutual, I got that because I went to Kelly Services, and that's where they placed me. And once I know a place, I'm not likely to go away, 'cause then when I go away and come back I can get back in. I was gone for two months which meant that the contract with Kelly had ended, and I could go back on my own. It used to be called Kelly Girls, but now it's called Kelly Services, because they handle men as well. They have an office in the Winter Building downtown.

**KP:** What factors guided your choice to find employment?

**LS:** You wanna eat? Do you wanna keep your kids fed? And (laughs) I was working all my life when I married John and came up here, and there I am sitting at home - he's a teacher and I'm sitting at home all day by myself - and when that happens, nothing gets done before a half an hour before the husband gets home, and you tear around and you dust mop and you dust and you wash the dishes and you start supper and stuff that like. And he comes in and -we were married Christmas day- I think by the end of January he said "You're not doing anything around here you know. You might just as well go to work." (laughs). So that was a matter of not only helping to bring in some money, because his first wife about bankrupted him, but also meant that I had something to do.

**KP:** Did your family influence your decision to enter the workforce? Beyond the farm.

**LS:** It was just assumed that everybody worked. The only reason you didn't work is if you were too ill to do so, or if you didn't have enough knowledge, and even then, those kids still had their chores to do too. And yeah. all of my life, work was just something

that you did. It's like nowadays you decided whether you're going to have kids or not. In those days, you knew that if you got married part of the bargain was that you had kids. And so you never got all bent outta shape when you got pregnant, because that's the way it is. So, I think probably I have a different take on this than a lot of people do

**CK:** You said your mother-in-law watched your children, is that right?

**LS:** Yeah

**CK:** If she hadn't been there to watch your children, do you think you'd have been employed then?

**LS:** Well, you know, it was only a few months. This was when we had the 2 babies. When Kevin was born I had a babysitter who came to the house. She was a girl, probably 17, 18 something like that and she would come to the house to take care of Kevin. So ok, this is probably in the fall and I walked to work, and I had probably 3 miles to work, then I get off my horse and go steaming off into the office, and I'd gotten to the office but I hadn't gone in yet, and the city bus came down the street and I looked at it, and there's the babysitter on the bus and she's taking the kid over to where she lives! And that was the last job for her. I wasn't paying her to take the kid out of the house. So, then when Karen was born I asked her [the babysitter's] mother to take care of her and she said no. Which is good. I was then doing something that I now preach against. If you have kids, fine, but how are you going to take care of them? Instead of having your mother-in-law and your mother take care of them. Pay a babysitter. Get daycare. Or stay home. Or something. They're your kids. They're your responsibility. Not your parents.

**KP:** Why did you choose to work at a workplace in a particular physical area?

**LS:** Some of it is...every single thing I have done in the line of work is just like you walk along and someone says, "OK, here you go"- you don't pick anything. You don't pick anything. Over at the company I started down at secretarial services. Then the guy comes along and he says can you go upstairs and work on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor because the secretary on the Vice-Chairman of the Board, she ended up in the hospital this morning because of a gall bladder. I said "Whew sure!" And I go up there and she was back in about 4 weeks, she wasn't gonna let me get in there and get her job. But before she came back, this guy came up and he said, "How would you love to work for me as a secretary?" and I said, "That sounds good!" Because his secretary had been asked to become the secretary of the Chairman of the Board. And so now he needed a secretary so I worked for him. He was in the bad graces of the Chairman of the Board, so he encouraged me to take job someplace else in the company before he got canned, which he never did. But he also made sure that when I got the second job, it was a step up from clerical to management. So for the next 2 years I worked as an *individual health finance person* (inaudible) and then they did their Friday night special and every single dept had to get rid of at least 1 person, and that last one in was the first one out, and that was me. The only department in the company that was hiring was systems, so I said, "I'll go". Well, you know if you're gonna run computers you better know something about it.

Anyway, my whole background as far as computers are concerned was one course in basic computer. Not really enough. So when you work in systems what you're doing is you're not working on personal computers, what your doing is you have those terminals but what you're doing is you're coding programs for the mainframe computers, not the little programs in here. Everyone says, "But it's so easy to use a computer!" and I say to myself you've never done this main framing, you haven't done working in individual insurance and there's one section where the program they had to handle individual insurance probably had 10 million lines of code that you have to unplug. So that scared me. I had never been truly comfortable with computer since then. So I was there for 6 or 7 years. And then they had me install a new data entry system and then took me out of systems and put me back in secretarial services because then I was supporting that system. And there I learned how to do data entry and I filled in for the supervisor whenever it was necessary. Did the budgets, did the deposits, I was the consultant for the department. And then [laughs] that's when I took the early retirement. So from there I went over to Hanover in their building, and filled in for 6 weeks for an assistant who was out on maternity leave. Then they needed a guy over at the other place because someone had erased one whole cassette, one year's worth of data, then they had all the papers so .. [they asked me] "Can you put it all back in?" So I spent time putting that back in. And then I'd run out of jobs and I went back to Kelly [employment agency] and worked for 2 weeks for another company. Then they called me and said "Hey, we've got another data entry job that we want you to do". And I must have had that job for three months. I set up the system to enter the data and then I supervised it and put all the data in. And then they had an opening across back at Hanover again, so I went back over and worked in the corporate law department. And they moved that State Mutual, and they didn't take part-timers, and so there was a job opening in actuarial, and who knows anything about actuarial, but I ended good and I got a job in the department. And for the last, probably about the last 9 years that I worked for the company, I was the documentation specialist. And I had one coding manual that must have been this thick [shows a couple of inches with her fingers] and it was my job to keep the codes in there up to date. This was the property of the insurance. Which meant that when I was ready to work on these things, I had 9 years of experience working with manuals.

**KP:** What has work meant to you?

**LS:** Well for one thing, like I said, it's just something you do. There's a real job in bringing home a paycheck, and again having it increase at least once a year. There's much satisfaction for working for one company like that and when you come out of it you've got your profitsharing to fall back on and you have your pension and you've been getting a salary all along and you've been putting away money all along so that when you do retire, you've got enough to pay. And I didn't know what to do when finally I did have to leave, because that's part of my social life. And I thought, "Oh my God what am I gonna do without a job?" Well, I was out the 31<sup>st</sup> of December and it took until almost the end of January to get all of my Christmas cards out. I said, "You know something? I have been here a whole month and I haven't thought of that place once." Obviously, I had made the transition! But no, there's a joy in doing a job and doing it well; and having challenges thrown at you and being able to respond to them - and do a damn good job at



it. And in fact, the coding manual hasn't been touched since I left. And I've been gone for six years.

**CK:** How did work affect your family life?

**LS:** When the kids were small for a good deal of the time I was home. Then when I started working at the grocery store, we realized that it was either that or we didn't eat. Because I was making at that time all together, making probably around *a thousand (inaudible)* dollars a year. And even in that time, that was barely enough. Wasn't paying any rent on the house 'cause I own it. But...ask the question again?

**CK:** How did work affect your family life?

**LS:** So the kids knew that I was going to have to go to work. But that time they were well along in grade school, they were probably 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> grade. And then when I got married and I came here, Karen was finishing her sophomore year and Kevin was finishing his junior year, and they stayed in South Dakota. Karen until the end of her sophomore year and Kevin went into the Navy after they finished high school. They stayed with their father for awhile. And then, of course, all of my experience out here. The two years that Karen was here, she was in high school and she worked in the summer time. So, and then after she left, there was no family to bother expect for the husband. He was a teacher and had the summer off and I wasn't allowed to take the summer off and lose my job.

**KP:** Did you consider your employment liberating or confining, and why?

**LS:** I would say liberating because I had pay. Confining in the sense that sometimes there were things that I wanted to do, but I couldn't because I had to go to work.

**KP:** What sort of things did you want to do?

**LS:** Oh, take vacations in the summer time because we traveled a lot, or maybe there would be something going on, an afternoon thing or something that you would have liked to have gone to, but....

**KP:** Were there periods where you would have preferred not to have a job?

**LS:** Oh no. When you grow up, and you're 10 years old by the time, by the time the depression ends, you will have absorbed through your pores what it means to be poor. And you never take the idea that I just want to lay back and do nothing. When...before the dotcom market fell apart, I had over 300,000 dollars in savings for my retirement. And you don't get that by not working. Now some of that I got at the company. Some was when my mother died, I inherited some. But it's the kind of thing... "Oh, I've got some extra money? I'm going to invest it." You don't go out and buy everything which is what my sister did.

**KP:** Did you invest in dot-coms?

**LS:** No no no. No, the whole market went to hell in a hand basket. The value of everything just went down and I lost about a third of it. I had a decent social security, a decent pension, investments, you know my IRA paying. I kept my nice apartment.

**KP:** How would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path? How about the benefits?

**LS:** The benefits, I think, for myself, was ... were, or are, a great deal of self-confidence. If I can get through Clark for crying out loud, if I can get through an MBA over there I can do goddamned anything! That's my whole attitude. And to me, that's a tremendous benefit.. Just the self-confidence. And the benefits of learning new things, all of those different jobs I had. Every single one that I moved into, it was something totally different than I had done before. So I was constantly learning something new. And there was a time when I thought that I probably knew, or on the level that I was at, that I probably knew more than anyone else because I had gone from job to job to job and every time I moved it was a new job.

**KP:** Were there any costs?

**LS:** I don't really see any costs. When you go up to the head of the company, and you win...![laughs]

**KP:** Have you ever been associated with any unions?

**LS:** No. no. Did you ever think you were gonna get a one word answer outta me!  
[laughs]

**KP:** If you were offered a better paying job that required relocation, would you choose to move?

**LS:** That one probably is not applicable if were talking about somebody my age, but... yeah, it would have taken a good deal to move me. There would have had to been extenuating circumstances, for instance if say John had gotten a job some place else and I might then have done so. But, I would not have taken off because basically I did when I got married to him, and came out here....I would have put a lot more thought into it. I'm not sure how I would have done that.

**KP:** So you would have followed him if he had chosen a job elsewhere?

**LS:** It's possible, but he was 18 years older than I was, so that was something that never came up. He was a teacher, so...I don't think he would move either.

**KP:** How did you commute to work?

**LS:** When I lived in Whitinsville, I either drove or carpoled with another gal. When I moved here, my car when I sold it, my 1982 Mustang which I had for something like 2 years, had about 60,000 miles on it...when it needed new tires, it was because the sidewalls broke down, not because the tread was gone. However, I can't tell ya how many pairs of Nikes I bought walking back and forth! So I walked. And when I moved in to this place, knowing that I had to walk, I sat down to figure out my rent, had to figure out what my groceries would cost, and upkeep on the car and the licensing and stuff, and the stuff that I knew I had to pay. I totaled that up and I figured out how much money I was making, and as long as I didn't have to drive to work, I could manage this place. And the other way I've been able to keep it is because I've got salary increases.

**KP:** So you no longer have a car now?

**LS:** Oh yes, I have a car. Yeah. See, the Mustang, the beauty that it was, was beginning to cost more money that I could afford. It was going to be above a \$1,500 worth of stuff done on it. Even though I'd been keeping really good care of it. And I just figured car, I'm sorry, I can't afford ya.. So, I got that Escort down there. And last spring I had to put new brakes on it, cost me 500 bucks. And I'm not sure that I'm not going to have to put another set on it this fall. And if I do that I think I'm going to have to trade cars.

**KP:** So how long were your commutes usually?

**LS:** From Whitinsville up, that was 12 miles one way. And here, three blocks.

**KP:** When you were married, was your husband's commute longer than yours or shorter?

**LS:** To John, yeah he was teaching in Quincy. He had a long commute. He had the Saab. He didn't mind the driving at all.

**KP:** Why did you together choose to move to Whitinsville when he worked in Quincy?

**LS:** That's where his home was, because he had taught in the Northbridge High School, and then when he moved in the Quincy school system, he owned his house in Whitinsville, and just commuted out to work. And now when I lived in Rapid City and I had my own little house, to get to work at the grocery store or at the bank, I had like a mile, mile and a half to catch the bus, then I had to catch the bus back. Then eventually, eventually, someone sold me their old Ford for 75 dollars. I thought, "Geez, I tell ya, I was about to go broke trying to pay for the car", and had to learn how to drive too. But then I drove back and forth to work after I got that car.

**KP:** How did your monetary contributions compare to your ex-husband's?

**LS:** He was making more than I was. To go back to Richard, he was asking the majority of the money there. Spending the majority of it as well. But I was bringing in some from the telephone company and then after he was gone, I was bringing in my own money,

John and I, he was making more than I was, but then he was a teacher for a good many years, and that never seemed to be problem as far as whose making more and who isn't. He insisted that I establish my own checking account, which I didn't because I had to start making money by check. They used to just give you cash. I'm very old you understand. [all laugh]. But I automatically deposited my account. I had a savings account, then we had a household account that we put money into. And I would pay household bills out of my account as well, but there was never any problems as far as money goes like that.

**CK:** So we're going to try to wrap up soon. I know this has been a little bit long. How are you feeling?

**LS:** I always thought that it's too damn bad that I don't get paid by the word because I'd be a millionaire. I love words.

**CK:** So you are feeling ok still?

**LS:** I think I'll put a sweater on. Excuse me just one second.

**CK:** Sure. [tape recorder stops for this, then starts once Laurel sits back down] So how did you divide housework with your previous husbands?

**LS:** Richard never lifted a finger. Course I was home a good deal of time too. And the house was 30 feet long and 18 feet wide. In Whitinsville it all was essentially my job. Here, nobody tells me what I should or shouldn't do. Again, we came off the farm and did most the work. Old habits die hard.

**KP:** One thing I noticed earlier, it seems like many of your jobs have been more female dominated. Why do you think that is? Waitressing, being an operator, secretarial work...

**LS:** Happenstance I would say. I was never interested in making sure that...see one of the things that getting the Masters Degree and the fact that it didn't do a thing for me at the office is perfectly fine for me in this respect: it meant that I didn't have to be a manager, I didn't have to deal with getting people to do things. Generally speaking some of the jobs, in particular that last one that I had, the documentation specialist, I had my cubicle, I worked on my own, I was perfectly happy doing my thing in the best of my ability, and not being responsible for anything that I didn't want to deal with. You're talking to someone from a different generation again, like I said I'm going on 76, and I was never in a situation where women were fighting for men's jobs. It just...things kinda split up and that's the way we did it.

**KP:** So there was never a time where you wanted a job that was more male dominated or more equally-

**LS:** You know, the only time I'd have taken that kind of job was if it presented itself to me. If a company...at State Mutual things just opened up. Systems was probably the

nearest thing that you come to that could be considered male dominated job, although that's pretty much even-steven now. I just go into the things that make themselves available to me. And never, ever thought about whether this was a male's job or a woman's jobs. And I'd always had fairly reasonable paychecks so I couldn't complain about that. So someone who's making more money, maybe they had to work harder. One woman was supervisor for the secretary of the service department and he bitched and complained and she bitched and complained, and she came to work one day and said her husband said at supper last night that if she didn't stop complaining about the company, he was leaving. And I always thought to myself it's so distressing - why don't you get yourself another job! But she never did. So ok. I've always enjoyed all the things that I've done. The only things that took me over was the systems thing.

**CK:** Have you been involved with any community or volunteer work?

**LS:** Probably more in Rapid City when the kids were young, I was in PTA when they were in grade school for the 9 years that covered their grade school experience. Served as an officer and stuff like that. When Karen started in Brownies, I agreed to be an assistant leader, and we got two meetings into it and the gal that was gonna lead it left, so [laughs] eventually I was the consultant for the area helping other troop leaders. Never got into Boy Scouts. Was active in church, sang in the choir, taught church school. Got involved with Parents Without Partners, helped start the chapter in Grand Rapids. Came out here and I was in National Secretaries, was singing in the choir for a while, but didn't really get involved too much in outside stuff.

**CK:** Do you think that over your lifetime, women have gained equal rights?

**LS:** They will never gain equal rights as long as there's a man around. [laughs] I'm sorry I'll be bitter on this point. They can keep fighting, they can keep fighting. Just as an illustration, my Master's thesis was entitled "The Psychology of the Salary Gap." I wrote that in 1987. Women were making 75 cents for every dollar men made. They are now making about 78 cents to every dollar men make. I mean, that's one hell of a lot of no progress. I don't know what it's going to take to get equality and I just don't know because now I'm beginning to see a backlash. Oh my goodness, boys are having such a bad time of it in school because everyone is deciding they are going to help the girls and now the poor boys. No. I don't know when there will be equality. Wait until Hillary starts running for presidency. You're going to see a little bit of inequality, you're going to see that woman tall (?), drawn and quartered. Mean. It's going to be a blood bath.

**CK:** So this might be a bit of a broad question, but based on your experience throughout your life, what advice would you give to women of future generations?

**LS:** GET YOUR EDUCATION. That, to me, is the most important thing. After that, think about getting married. Because you might still get married for the wrong reason, you're trying to get away from home, you know you have some physiological needs or something, but at least you don't have to marry somebody because you've got to have someone support you. Why do you think I tell you that I got all that education I had? I

was divorced by the time that I started my Masters Degree, but I divorced twice any how. And I finally came to the conclusion that there was nobody out there that was going to take care of me. So by God, you better go get your education so you don't have to worry about it. Get your education. Try to do things that build your self-esteem, and education can do that, so that you have strength as an individual. Human being. So that you don't have to lean on somebody else. Yeah... I got married for the wrong reasons. I needed somebody to tell me that they love me. I didn't have much self-esteem. It kind of runs in my family, comes from my mother. Well, doesn't work. Because they're not interested in your self-esteem, they're interested in their own. Not meanly so, it's just the way it works. So, 30 years ago I decided, "Ya know it isn't working, it didn't work, the marriages didn't work because the guys are who they were and they weren't going to change, and you can't change them, so stop picking. Be your own person". Yep, get your education and do things like this because...and the tougher the things are that you do in school, the more you learn from them. When I was auditing, I think I probably got killed in just about every course I took because I didn't have to take the midterms or the finals. When it comes time to take the finals, they didn't like it! But every class I took I did all the readings, can't shut me up in class, I did every single project that was required, because that's the way you learn. Even if you don't have to those things you can just sit there and listen, you know, read the book or something, but you do the hard work because you want to learn. And the more you learn, the better you are. So I'm glad to see you guys in school. Work hard at it.

**CK:** Kristin, do we have any more questions?

**KP:** I don't think so

**CK:** Is there anything else you'd like to add? You've said a whole lot, it's been great!

**LS:** [laughs] I think that's about all... Just one thing...another thing I would suggest you do is read...I think that's it.

**CK:** Well thanks so much for meeting with us, and telling us about your life! It's been really great

**LS** It's been a blast!