Chapter 7. My Journey: Still Putting Parts on the Floor

Jean Reith Schroedel
Claremont Graduate University

Jean Reith Schroedel exemplifies an unusual and under-appreciated academic career path. Born in a working-class family, from high school, she moved from manual to skilled labor and union activism and leadership. Before gaining an academic scholarship to a flagship state university, she drove a Seattle public bus. With the aid and advice of several professors, her paths extended from the University of Washington to a PhD at MIT in political science. Following a first position at Yale, she spent the majority of her career at the Claremont Graduate University with an endowed chair and deanship. She achieved intellectual distinction across research topics. She is currently a leader in studying the denial of rights to Indigenous Peoples in the United States.

Growing Up in Federal Way

For many years, I claimed that I was from Seattle. That wasn't a complete fabrication; I was born in Virginia Mason Hospital. But I grew up and was shaped by Federal Way, a 20-square-mile tract of land in the southwest corner of King County with Puget Sound to the west, Auburn to the east, and Tacoma immediately to the south. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was an unincorporated area without even a rudimentary downtown, just a few businesses located on opposite sides of Highway 99. The name was given in 1929 to a newly established school district with headquarters adjacent to the federal highway (Highway 99).

As a student in Federal Way schools, I never learned even this basic fact about Federal Way. It was a place without history.[1] I never met an adult who had grown up in Federal Way. The population was transient but rapidly growing due to good paying jobs at Boeing plants in nearby Auburn, Kent, Renton, and Seattle.

When my older brother Richard started school in 1954, there were only 1,860 students in the district. Two years later, when I started, there were 2,286 students, and by 1964, the district's enrollment was more than four times greater,

1. Federal Way did not have permanent Indigenous settlements, although the traditional homelands of the Muckleshoot are only a short distance to the east. Prior to the 1880s, there was a very limited Euro-American presence—just men engaged in trapping and lumber work and a small number of women working brothels. See Cater, D. (2005, January 5). *Native American presence in the Federal Way area*. https://federalwayhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Native_Presence.pdf.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2025.2692.2.07

up to 7,998 students.[2] Because the district was building new schools every year, I attended three different grade schools: Steel Lake, Mirror Lake, and Panther Lake.[3] It also meant that the district was in desperate need of teachers; based on my experiences in those classrooms, the quality varied enormously.

My earliest memory begins with me as a two-year old laughing as my father pushes me higher and higher on a swing in our back yard. But then I remember excruciating pain and screaming, "Stop Daddy. Stop, it hurts." My appendix had burst. This was before 911. I have no memories of the 10-mile car ride to St. Joe's Hospital in Tacoma, but I do have vague memories of being in the hospital, although those might be from a later stretch in St. Joe's. The basic take-away is bad stuff happens, but I had good parents and came out okay.

My parents—Robert and Genevieve—married shortly after V-J Day. My father was working at Todd Shipyards when Pearl Harbor was bombed. He could have spent the war building ships, but he enlisted. He had asked my mother to marry before he shipped out. She refused, saying that she did not want to be a widow. "Come back alive and I will marry you."

They were an odd couple. Genevieve was 5 feet, 11 inches tall, and she never weighed more than 125 pounds. She had thick, straight, chin-length black hair, large dark eyes, and high cheekbones. Robert was at least an inch shorter, had a stocky build, and a square face with brown hair and eyes. His hair was slicked back with Brylcreem—famous for the jingle "Brylcreem, a little dab will do you."

Known as Gen to her friends, my mother was smart and funny. She could knit a sweater in a day and type 80 words a minute. Mom had different clerical jobs, interspersed with time as a stay-at-home parent. Dad was the good guy, always ready to give a hug or go out for an ice cream cone, while Mom did the hard parenting stuff. Although he worked full time, Dad also built houses on the side. Most years, he headed out for a few days of deer hunting, usually returning with venison, as well as hides that were made into jackets and slippers.

The marriage was a partnership with complementary rather than adversarial differences. Mom smoked Kool menthol cigarettes, while Dad got his tobacco fix from Roi Tan cigars or an occasional corn cob pipe, lit in honor of General Douglas MacArthur. GIs with German parents, such as my father, were sent to

2. Caster, D. (2008, May 28). *Federal way school history*. https://federalwayhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Federal-Way-Area-Schools-History-May282008.pdf. **Check link. Does not pull up a PDF

3. School district policy was to name grade schools after nearby lakes. That only lasted until they ran out of lakes. Then they switched to fairy tale characters. Junior high schools—grades seven, eight, and nine—were to be assigned Native American names to honor the original inhabitants of the country. But there was no attempt to name the schools after Indigenous peoples whose ancestral lands were in the Northwest. This meant that I attended Lakota Junior High, named after people indigenous to the Great Plains. I found this amusing after I began working closely with Lakota on voting rights issues in South and North Dakota.

the Pacific. At one point while acting as the general's bodyguard, he burned his hands due to firing the Thompson submachine gun so fast that it overheated.

My mother's family were wheat farmers in Nebraska, who became Dust Bowl refugees. They migrated west and settled near the Canadian border in Mount Vernon, where Grandpa got a laborer's job doing road repair for the county. The job carried them through the Depression, but still they were labeled "Okies."

When my mother was 11 or 12 years old, the school nurse came into the classroom and told the children how it was important that "human stock" be improved by encouraging those with good genes to reproduce and preventing those with bad genes from procreating. She then had my mother and a little blonde girl come to the front of the class. The nurse then explained that the other girl had good genes, but that my mother had bad genes and should be sterilized. This was life in pre-World War II America.

I remember my mother telling me this story and taking some pleasure in recounting that the other girl turned out to be a nymphomaniac. Yet she internalized some of the views. Mom often described my brother as her "beautiful blonde, blue-eyed son." Neither my younger sister nor I were ever described as "beautiful." Sara was blonde like Richard but lacked the blue eyes. I, however, look like my mother.

We lived in an area that was called Poverty Bay but was rebranded as the more upscale Marine View Estates. My folks built a house on a former goat farm. Our street (296th) was just east of a cliff that overlooked Puget Sound. My father cleared the land with a bulldozer, poured the cement foundation, and then framed and built the house, working weekends and nights for a year. The house included two bedrooms, a bathroom, a living/dining room, and a small laundry room that led to a one-car garage. After my sister was born, Dad added an attic bedroom above the garage for my brother, and my parents began saving to build a much larger house.

When we moved in, there was only one other family with children in the neighborhood. That family was scary. Mr. Williams yelled a lot. He had a thick leather belt that he used to whip his son Jimmy in the back yard. In turn, Jimmy terrorized the rest of us—my brother and me—and later the Hume children whose parents bought the house adjacent to the Williams. I remember Jimmy taking a hatchet and chasing my brother, threatening to "chop him into little pieces." Another time, Jimmy smeared dog feces on the Hume's station wagon and then claimed that my brother did it. That was one of the few times that my father took a belt to Richard.

Aside from Jimmy Williams, the neighborhood was great. By today's standards, Richard and I had tremendous freedom. Sara was too young to roam like we could. Our house was only a short walk from a trail and stairs that led down to the beach. Our parents allowed us to go there by ourselves. They warned us not to climb on the cliffs because the sand could collapse and someone could die. They never stopped us from riding our bikes wherever we wanted to go.

In summer, we biked two miles to a tiny grocery store for popsicles and learned to swim at Steel Lake. We played Robin Hood. Richard and Ann Hume took turns playing Robin. The loser was the sheriff. Susan Hume, who was one year older than me, liked to be Maid Marian. I was not the girly sort so was happy to be the stalwart Little John. The little kids were sheriff's men. I loved the three months of summer but hated the rest of the year.

In the neighborhood, I was accepted despite my physical disabilities. I was born with legs that bent inwards. At early ages, I wore braces at night. During the day, I wore high-top shoes that were dark brown and resembled baby shoes. I remember being teased about the shoes when I started school, but that was not the worst issue.

It was difficult for me to hold a pencil to write because I had a nasty fungal infection in my hands. The doctors thought that it might be a type of jungle rot that my father brought back from the war. Imagine peeling back the outer layer of skin on your fingers, leaving raw red flesh covered with white pus. It was both painful and ugly.

When the infection was bad, my fingers were covered with bandages. When it was not too bad, I wore white cotton gloves. During the good times, I could write using a pencil wrapped in foam padding. Removing either the bandages or gloves was excruciatingly painful because it pulled off scabs and skin. I can remember sitting in school and watching red lines going up my arms, signaling that I had blood poisoning and had to get to the hospital.

The doctors tried different treatments, including injecting penicillin directly into my fingers. That ended when I developed a severe penicillin allergy. Nothing helped until hydrocortisone cream became available by prescription in 1965. It transformed my life. None of what I've done over the past fifty years could have happened if the drug had not been invented.

Playing in the neighborhood was alright, whereas going to school was torture. There always were a few students who took pleasure from picking on me while urging others to join. They called me names, such as "Monster Hands." It was cruel.

The teachers were even worse. No teacher ever stepped in to halt the bullying. The first-grade teacher, Mrs. Justus, told my mother that I was "mentally deficient" and belonged in a class for slow learners. Fortunately, my mother refused to allow that. In fifth grade, Mr. Tabor stood in front of the class and poked fun at me for wearing raggedy gloves. "Couldn't your family at least afford to pay for decent gloves." The seventh-grade PE teacher, Miss Curly, gave me an F when I could not do a rope climb. Gosh, I couldn't always hold a pencil, but I was supposed to lift my body weight and climb up 20 feet holding on to a rope.

My time at Lakota Junior High was the worst. My best friend from grade school was not in any of my 7th grade classes; our friendship died. She became a popular cheerleader. I turned into myself, not speaking in class, sitting in the back row, and hiding at lunch time. I never shared this with my parents, not even when in ninth grade Richard told everyone that I was not related to him. He was a jock, lettering in football, basketball, and track.

My folks expected us to be tough and handle our business without them stepping in. In retrospect, I think they would have been appalled and raised bloody hell if I had told them about what was happening. But thanks to hydrocortisone, my life was going to get better.

The three years at Federal Way High School were a good period. For the first time in my life, I was like everyone else. Even better, there were students who had attended a different junior high school and had no prior knowledge of who I was. I was free to create a completely different persona. I made friends with students from Totem Junior High.

In classes, I began to sit near the front and speak up. I joined the swim and debate teams. It was as if all these things were germinating inside me and now finally emerged. While I never managed to bring home a straight-A report card, I always came close. Despite having standardized test scores showing a high IQ, no teacher or counselor suggested that I should go to college. The school had 3,000 students and only two counselors.[4]

I always modeled myself after my parents. While far from perfect human beings, they had great integrity. I see this in these examples. My father lost an early job as the foreman in a chemical plant because he refused to fire a worker, who belonged to the Communist Party. Despite being staunchly anti-Red, my father defended the man, stating that he was a good worker and didn't bring his politics into the plant.

In a similar vein, my mother made enemies when she refused to keep my brother home from the birthday party of the only Black boy in his class. Several mothers organized a boycott, saying it was unsafe to go to the child's home. Richard was the only child to attend. These were not political choices. My parents simply believed in doing the right thing.

Mom was a staunch Republican, as was my father. His political engagement was limited to voting. She was a mainstay of the local Republican Party and dragged us along to doorbell for conservative candidates. In 1964, Mom was a Goldwater delegate to the state Republican convention. Like Hillary Clinton, I was a Goldwater girl at the convention. The only time I ever saw my mother cry was on election night when Johnson was declared the winner.

I am certain that growing up watching my mother shaped my views of appropriate female behavior. But much of my embrace of feminism derived from Pastor Malkow at St. Luke's Lutheran Church. Some Lutheran churches are very liberal while others are extremely conservative. At the far right of the spectrum are Missouri Synod Lutheran churches, such as St. Luke's. The women did the behind-the-scenes labor to keep a church running, while public and leadership positions,

4. I only know of one other academic who graduated from Federal Way High School. I recently contacted Craig Dutton, an engineering professor at the University of Illinois. He could not identify any other Federal Way alumni who became professors. He also never received any guidance at Federal Way High.

such as altar boys, elders, liturgical readers, and pastors, are limited to males. The sexism was normalized, and I did not question it until I was 13 years old.

Along with Sunday school and church, for three years I went to Wednesday night classes that prepared us to be confirmed as 13-year-olds. I had to memorize responses to questions in *Luther's Small Catechism* and recite assigned Bible verses. During the last year, Pastor Malkow taught classes on Lutheran theology. None of this caused me difficulties until the final class.

On that night, Pastor Malkow's theme was how God wanted us to live when we became adults. He began by looking at the girls and telling us, "God placed man above woman because of Eve's sin in the Garden, and the pain of childbirth is punishment for the inherited sin of women." Then Pastor stated that when girls got married, we were to be totally subordinate to our husbands, that we could not even buy a blouse without our husband's permission.

I looked at the boys, preening and looking quite pleased with themselves. I thought, "Maybe that one is better than me, but not the rest of those pimple-faced jerks. No way." I raised my hand and all I got out was, "I don't understand," before Pastor Malkow launched into a tirade about the sin of pride and how I was going to burn in Hell if I took communion without having repented for questioning God's plan for humanity.

I spent four days praying to God for a sign that would allow me to understand why those boys were innately superior to me. No sign. I was confirmed and took communion to my damnation. I stopped attending church as soon as I left home, only returning many years later.

Working Class Life

My parents worked hard and assumed that their children would do so, too. Aside from babysitting, my first job was as a lifeguard and swim instructor for 50 cents an hour. When I was 17, I heard that the local Safeway Store decided to hire girls to work as "box boys," a position that required bagging groceries and carrying bags to customers' cars. I immediately applied and was ecstatic when I was hired, along with another girl, Beverly Smith.

It was a part-time, unionized job (UFCWA), paying $1.82 an hour. I felt great pride dressing in my uniform of black slacks, black shoes, white shirt, red vest, and black bowtie. One of the first things that I discovered is that bosses like to pit workers against workers. The manager called all the male "box boys" into a meeting, where he told them they would all be replaced by girls if they did not work harder. Suffice it to say, Beverly and I were not welcomed by our male peers. But I loved the job. To this day, when I shop, I bag the groceries in the way that I was taught at the Safeway Store. I kept the job until I left for college in fall 1969.

My brother, sister, and I were "first gen" before anyone recognized that was something special. My parents decided that Richard must receive a quality education. That meant attending a private college, the University of Puget Sound. This

was a real stretch for my parents, who were still paying off house-building loans. Private school was never mentioned for me.

I wanted to enroll at the University of Washington, but my parents did not want me in the big city. I ended up at Washington State University. My parents paid for my first semester, but they weren't sure about the second semester. After arriving in Pullman, I applied for a job at the local grocery store. They didn't need box boys but hired me to wait tables in their cafeteria. I left college at the end of my second year. Unsure about almost everything in life, I decided to work for a few years, figure things out, and then perhaps return to school.

It was a tumultuous time in the country, with some youth embracing "sex, drugs, and rock and roll," and others protesting the Vietnam War. This left older people thinking the world had gone mad. My parents were appalled when Richard became a draft resister. My mother's inability to continue working made things even more difficult. Mom had suffered for many years from horrible headaches that doctors attributed to hay fever. By this point, the pain was so debilitating that she spent much of the day lying in bed with a heating pad against her head.

I moved to Tacoma where Richard helped me settle. I applied for work at a garment factory located in an industrial area on the waterfront, famous for the smell from its pulp mill. I had taken sewing in home economics, so I thought I was qualified. The foreman had me sew a straight seam joining together two fabric pieces and then told me to report the following morning at 7:30. I would be trained as a cuffer, the person who sews cuffs onto coat sleeves. Sunset Sportswear produced ski parkas for mid-market stores, such as J.C. Penney and Sears.

My job was not difficult. I did have to stay focused because there was continual pressure to go faster and faster. This could easily result in running a needle into your finger, something that I did once. Every job was assigned a piece rate: the number of pieces that a person needed to sew every week to remain employed. On an average day, I attached roughly 900 cuffs onto sleeves. The base pay was $1.64 an hour and one could earn more by exceeding the piece rate. The problem, however, was that exceeding the rate resulted in management increasing the piece rate. It was ostensibly a union shop, but the United Garment Workers of America (UGWA) was a scab union that did nothing for the workers, aside from taking our dues.

Management assigned jobs based on the worker's race and sex. The small number of men—all white—were cutters, who earned a much higher wage and were not subject to piece rate. The men cut rolls of fabric into the different parts of a coat: back, right, and left fronts; sleeves; and pockets. Japanese women, married to GIs stationed at Fort Lewis and McChord Air Force Base, were given the skilled sewing jobs. It was assumed that Asian women had especially nimble fingers. Hana was the only Japanese woman fluent in English.

The Black women were bundle girls. "Lift that barge and tote that bail," one quipped. They moved the crates full of coat parts across the floor. Ruby was the only Black machine operator. She had learned the trade, working in the South,

and had one of the most skilled jobs, setting pockets. The rest of the machine operators were white women like me.

In the morning, we queued up at the time clock to punch in and make sure that we were at our assigned positions before the 7:30 whistle. Failing that resulted in being docked for a quarter of an hour; three late arrivals led to termination. Aside from a half-hour lunch break, machine operators could not leave their machines at any point during the day. The bundle girls were responsible for keeping us supplied with the pieces to be sewn and thread, if we needed them.

But none of us—machine operators and bundle girls—could go to the bathroom at any time, other than lunch. This made it especially difficult when menstruating. We used to spend part of every lunchtime lined up waiting to use one of the few bathroom stalls. Imagine eating your sandwich while standing in line, waiting to pee. It was the one factor that united all the women, white, Black, and Asian.

We took the bathroom issue to the UGWA business agent, who brushed our complaints aside, saying it wasn't a big deal. But it was a big deal to us. Ruby began telling us about the Blue Ridge strike that she had been part of in Georgia.[5] She suggested that denying us the right to go to the bathroom violated our human rights. It was not hard to gain support for action. Hana talked with the Japanese. We didn't trust the male cutters, but the women were united.

What action could we take without jeopardizing our jobs? I don't remember who came up with the plan. What we did was quite simple: every morning at 11:00—a half hour prior to lunch—everyone would leave their workstations and get in line to go to the bathroom. On the assigned day, every woman stood up as one and went to the bathroom. The foreman began to scream at us, threatening to "fire our asses."

We stood firmly and repeated the action every morning. The company labeled us as "communists" and sent Pinkerton detectives after us. The wildcat action was reported in the local newspaper. After about two weeks, the company capitulated. We were on top of the world. Yeah, good guys win. Within six months, Sunset Sportswear closed the Tacoma plant and moved operations to an Indian reservation.

At this point, I moved to Seattle, where I landed a "respectable" job that made my parents happy. Although I was never a great typist, I managed to do more than 40 words a minute without errors and was hired by Prudential Insurance as

5. On August 10, 1967, more than 450 garment workers, most of whom were Black, staged a walkout of the Levi Strauss plant in Blue Ridge, Georgia, after the company started laying off workers in violation of the seniority clauses in the contract signed with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. The strike lasted nearly a year and triggered a nationwide boycott of Levi Strauss jeans. See Anonymous. (1967). Lonely struggle in Appalachia: Women fight to save union. *The Movement,* 3(5), 9-10. Civil Rights Movement Archive. https://crmvet.org/docs/mvmt/6705mvmt.pdf.

a medical claims processor. I loved being downtown and able to go to the waterfront, Pike Place Market, and the original Starbucks.

The job was boring. Depending upon the policyholder's coverage, we could approve a set amount for doctor visits and hospitalization. We did not punch a time clock, but there was a rate that we had to meet. There were women, ranging in age from early 20s through mid-60s, in the department. Several of the young women had college degrees, but there was no upward mobility. The manager was male. The thought that I might end up working there for the rest of my life was terrifying, even though it paid better than my previous jobs, around $100 per week.

I began checking the help wanted ads in the *Seattle Times.* The good paying jobs were listed under the heading "Help Wanted Male," while those under "Help Wanted Female" paid very little. Among the best paying jobs were machinists. Their pay was two to three times more than my salary. My grandfather had been a machinist for the Great Northern Railroad, so I knew that the trade involved high-speed cutting metal parts, but I did not know much more.

As a female, no employer would consider hiring me if I was untrained, so I enrolled in the machine shop program at Renton Vocational Technical Institute (RVTI). I could afford to quit work because I had married a man with a good paying job. When I met Rick, he was a single parent, raising two young sons. I immediately fell in love with those boys.

RVTI only had programs for traditionally male jobs, which meant there were no women's bathrooms. When I suggested that I post a sign, saying WOMEN on the door when I needed to use the bathroom, the shop teacher said that I could walk the two blocks to a gas station and use their restroom. This was in Washington state where it rains nine months each year.

Once while I was on my bathroom trek, someone damaged a part that I had been working on for several days. Another time, a male student pulled a knife on me. He was carrying boxes, so I opened the door to the classroom for him. He became irate, accused me of being a feminist, and pulled out a knife. What was funny is that I didn't think of myself as a feminist.

It may well have become ugly except that my friend Jerry Sanborn intervened. Jerry grew up in the Oakland housing projects and had been in Hell's Angels. He was 6 feet, 6 inches tall and probably weighed 280 pounds with tattoos on his arms. Jerry had never mastered basic math, so he had needed my help to learn shop math. Jerry physically hauled the man outside and started beating him. "You ever mess with her again, and I will smash your head into the concrete out here." Jerry and I remained friends until his death twenty years ago.

This was in 1974, a significant year for another reason. My mother died. Her headaches were debilitating for years, but the doctors continued to tell her that she exaggerated the pain. Then Mom went blind and doctors discovered she had eight intracranial aneurysms, two of which pressed on her optical nerve causing blindness.

My father tried every possible option to get her medical care, including flying with her to the Mayo Clinic in Minneapolis. Finally, doctors did an experimental surgery, cutting into my mother's neck and closing off the two veins with aneurysms that pressed on the optical nerves. Mom regained her eyesight, but she suffered a series of strokes. She was in St. Joe's Hospital, recovering from one when my father's medical insurance ran out. The hospital discharged my mother, causing another stroke. Another hospital agreed to take her, but we had to sell the house to pay for her care. Mom never regained consciousness.

When I finished the RVTI program, there were a lot of job openings. Guys were snapped up midway through the program. I was by far the best student. More than 70 companies offered apprenticeships, and I contacted every one of them. The only job offer I received was for janitorial work at minimum wage.

I asked the shop teacher for help. He responded, "You ever make any waves and I guarantee you will never get a job. Just shut up and quit complaining." Before leaving RVTI, I stopped by the office to say hello to the secretary, who had been very supportive. "Do you really want a job?" she asked. When I said, "Yes, I do want a job," she told me to wait while she made a phone call. Her husband was the superintendent at the Kenworth Truck factory, and thanks to her personal intervention I interviewed with him the following morning.

When I entered his office, the plant superintendent reached out to shake hands. Three of his fingers were chopped off. I tried not to react visibly, but he just looked me straight in the eye and said, "If you're in this trade, you will not get out with your fingers. That's the way it is." He had worked his way up from the shop floor.

The machine shop foreman, Axel Johnson, did not want me. Before my first shift, he held a meeting where the men discussed how to drive me out. No one was to speak with me, nor show me how to do anything. I was to be ostracized. Axel also started up something like a football pool, where the men put money into a pot and marked the hour when they thought I would walk out. Most picked early times. I did not know any of this until much later.

My first day at Kenworth was like something out of a bad movie. The superintendent escorted me to the machine shop near the back of the factory building. As we moved through the plant, workers put down their tools. The line stopped. Production ceased. I could not have drawn more attention if I had been a purple-headed alien. It was totally disconcerting. I was dressed appropriately: Osh Kosh bib overalls, short-sleeved t-shirt, and Red Wing steel-toed boots, lugging a brown Kennedy toolbox.

Being ostracized is not just unpleasant; in a machine shop, it is dangerous. There are many ways a person can be injured or killed. If parts are not properly clamped down or you try to take too deep a cut, things can jam up with chunks of metal flying. Things can go wrong, even if the worker does everything right. The tool can hit a sand pocket in a casting and boom: collision.

Castings, which appear perfectly normal, might have sand pockets. An experienced machinist knew to lower the speed and depth of a cut to adjust for that

possibility. Machinists must calculate the math and adjust for the quality castings or the type of metal. They also need to know whether the company had purchased cheap tools, the kind that tend to shatter. Machines vary from each other. Not all lathes run the same. Nor do milling machines. Trade school is a good introduction, but it cannot prepare one for the actual dangers of the workplace.

What saved me during those early days was a Black man. He worked a swing shift but began to come in during the day shift to help me. I would not have survived the first month without Leonard Bourgeois. When I asked him why he chose to help me, Leonard said that he remembered how the men had ostracized him when he was hired. A key difference was that he had already been fully trained, having learned the trade in the state penitentiary.

From the beginning, I gained support from Black men, most of whom were janitors. The next group to accept me were the handful of Latino men, followed by older white men. The last group to decide I was acceptable were the young white guys. My ability to do the work—put the parts on the floor—threatened them. It couldn't be a real man's job if a woman could do it.

I spent four years as an apprentice, spending most of that time under Axel Johnson. What made it tolerable was that I spent six months in the tool and die shop and another six months in maintenance with foremen who liked me. Both asked for me to be transferred to their shops when I made journeyman, but Axel refused to let me go. I don't know why. Tool and die men design and make prototypes. It is highly skilled work. Maintenance machinists fix broken equipment and machine new parts if needed. Both jobs are much more interesting than production work. Perhaps Axel recognized that I was very good at putting the parts on the floor.

There were two paths that I could take to survive. One was to kiss up to management, be their girl, and hope to move into management. The alternative path, which I followed, was to embrace the union and try to become one of the guys. Local 79 of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) represented all the machinists in the Seattle area, aside from those employed at Boeing.[6] There were a handful of women members working in less skilled jobs, but they didn't attend union meetings. It was just me and the guys, which meant that I stood out.

Even before I finished my apprenticeship, I was appointed to the union's legislative committee. I learned a huge amount from the legislative committee chair. Mike Rubicz was very adept at framing issues in ways that made sense to the average member. He was in his mid-30s, working in one of the small job shops. The major firms wouldn't hire him because he was reputed to be a Communist. He had this thing about the Soviet Union. Mike also opposed the Equal Rights Amendment because he thought it divided the working class. We became friends but argued.

6. In the very early Boeing years, the workers were part of Local 79, but eventually the aerospace workforce got so large that the IAM established Local 751 for them. It also was a way to address government fears of Communist infiltration into an industry directly tied to defense.

When I made journeyman, the men in the machine shop asked me to represent them on the shop committee. I was shocked that they wanted me. Management was even more shocked, not just to have me in that position, but by my way of carrying out the job. In the past, the shop committee members and chief steward tended to be deferential in meetings with management. The bosses would set the agenda and declare what was possible, and the union men would bargain around the edges. That wasn't my style. I'd walk into the office and say, "Okay, this is what we need to discuss, point two, three … and these are what we are willing to accept." I believed in seizing the upper hand. Management didn't know how to handle it. I was very successful, and that encouraged the men to ask me to run for the chief steward position.

Past practice had been that the chief steward be from the machine shop. To keep me from being elected shop steward, Axel transferred me to the maintenance shop. The men responded by starting a petition demanding that both the company and union leaders accept me as the chief steward. Almost all the men signed the petition, which ironically was started by one of the young guys, who had been quite hostile to me when we both were apprentices. That is how I succeeded in escaping from under Axel's thumb and ended up as the chief union steward.

It turned out that maintenance was an ideal job for the chief steward because you must move around the entire plant to do the work. Much of the job entails preventative maintenance, which requires regularly inspecting equipment and discussing performance with operators. This was a good period for me. I liked the work and had the respect of my co-workers, as well as from the more activist Local 79 members.

One of my priorities was safety. Some safety issues, like ensuring safety bars on punch presses, were easy. But others were more challenging. This was before right-to-know laws, which allowed workers to learn the names of the chemicals used in the workplace. The machines sprayed a green coolant on the parts being cut. It got all over our bodies, and we breathed the spray in throughout the day. We were told to clean our hands with the coolant before eating lunch. I hadn't paid attention to the coolant until there was an article in the national union newspaper's column *Help for the Walking Wounded*, which described health problems caused by exposure to trichlorethylene, a chemical commonly used as a coolant. It caused liver damage, kidney failure, infertility, and nerve problems.

I did some sleuthing and discovered our coolant was trichloroethylene. Neither OHSA nor the EPA had banned it, so I raised it as a contract issue. I also was elected to the King County Labor Council, where I pushed through requirements that the companies building the Kingdome open up opportunities for women and minorities to be employed on the project.

The union's old guard was not happy with the growing activism. It reminded them of the years when Local 79 had been a hotbed of radicalism, even leading the Seattle General Strike of 1919.[7] In the McCarthy period, the leaders of Local

7. Shipyard workers belonging to Local 79 were bargaining for a new contract, when

79 were sent to jail, charged with belonging to the CPUSA. The International put the Local into receivership and appointed new leaders. Rank and file union men, suspected of being CPUSA members, were fired from their jobs and in some cases sent to prison, while the new union leaders did nothing.[8]

The same business agents and officials still controlled the union in the 1970s. I often heard members describe the union leaders as "goons" who worked hand in glove with management to stamp out threats to their joint control of the sector. There had been one attempt to replace the leaders, back in the 1960s, but those men had lost their jobs and had been blacklisted.

A movement for change took off, spreading from factory to factory. Many thought the new International Associaion of Machinists president, William Winpisinger,[9] would support us. He wanted more labor militancy. We put together a slate of candidates to run in the upcoming union election. The slate included active members from a cross section of big plants. For the first time a Black man and woman (i.e., me) were nominated for office. I was chosen to run for sergeant at arms, the person assigned to maintain order in meetings and if necessary, physically restrain people. This was a job usually given to a big guy.

The period leading up to the election was both exhilarating and terrifying. On the one hand, there was tremendous excitement among machinists. It was palpable. We were not allowed access to the plants, even though the old guard held meetings on company time. It didn't matter; we held impromptu meetings outside the plants. We also did things like scaling fences in the night to break in and meet with workers on swing and graveyard shifts.

One night someone shot at me when I was returning home. I think the goal was to scare me, not kill me. Another man had the brake lines on his car cut. He was able to turn into a ditch safely. The FBI began investigating whether we were Communists. The scariest thing was an anonymous complaint, alleging that I abused my stepsons. The Children's Protective Society investigator spoke with neighbors and the boys. She didn't find any evidence of abuse, so the accusation was labeled "unsubstantiated" and placed in a permanent file to be re-examined if there were subsequent complaints. These things put enormous stress on the marriage.

I will never forget the union hall on election night when the ballots were counted, and we learned the entire slate had won. Yeah, the good guys won.

---

management locked them out. Within a day, 65,000 workers from across the city had walked off their jobs and the National Guard was called in to patrol the city with tanks. See https://specialcollections.ds.lib.uw.edu/SeattleGeneralStrike/strike-timeline/.

8. The purges of suspected Communists lasted into the 1960s. In 1963, a machinist at Todd Shipyards named Eugene Robel was fired from his job and charged with the crime of being a member of the CPUSA. Robel argued that he had First Amendment rights to free speech and association, which the McCarren Act violated by criminalizing simply being a Party member. The Supreme Court agreed in *United States v. Robel* 1967.

9. Winpisinger, who was elected President of the IAM in 1977, had a history of militance when organizing automotive and railroad machinists.

Then an amazing thing happened. Three days later, boxes of "lost" absentee ballots turned up. Almost all those votes were for the incumbents, who were then declared the winners.

Things went from bad to worse. Men got fired for bogus reasons, and the business agents refused to contest their firings. I was not fired, but I almost got killed. I got a call to repair the hot rails that power the assembly line. Whenever there is work involving electricity, the power must be shut off and locked so no one can accidentally turn it on. The power box was in the machine shop, and the lock and key were stored in the machine shop foreman's office.

I retrieved the lock and key from the office and then shut the power off and locked it into the off position before returning the key to the office. I went back and started to climb up to begin working on the hot rail. But before I did anything, one of the men from maintenance arrived and told me there was a call for me on the phone in the maintenance office. I assumed it was a call about a union matter so climbed back down.

An apprentice, Dan, working with me, asked if he could go up and see if the problem was something he could fix. I said, "Sure, go ahead," and went to take the call. The power had been turned back on, and Dan got hit with 220 volts. What saved his life was that his elbow, as well as his hand, had touched the rail. The voltage went into his hand and then out his elbow instead of continuing to his heart. The safety man described it as an inadvertent accident.

Shortly after this, the maintenance foreman told me that I needed to leave before something "really bad" happened to me. This was a frightening time. Two labor activists in the city had died in suspicious circumstances. One man was shot, and the second suffered a workplace accident. Things were tense at home, as well. The marriage ended, and I left the job.

We filed unfair labor practices against Local 79 and the IAM. The investigation took two years. In the end, the election was re-run with government oversight. Unfortunately, none of the original slate could run because union bylaws required candidates for office to be working members and none of us were still employed in union shops.

Fortunately, another group of activists ran and won. Yeah, good guys won. Six months later, the International put Local 79 into receivership and then merged it into Local 751, which handled Boeing workers. No one from our group was able to continue working as a machinist in the Seattle area.[10]

After leaving Kenworth, I held down a part-time job as a Metro bus driver, working 3-4 hours a day, and I finally started at the University of Washington. I majored in political science because I wanted to understand power—more specifically, how to get it. I did well in my classes and, for the first time, had teachers who thought I was smart and capable.

10. Mike Rubicz moved to Youngstown, Ohio, where he became the president of Steelworkers Local 1375.

One semester I took two classes from an older professor, who had a reputation for being cranky. I picked the classes not because I particularly wanted those classes but because they fit my work schedule. After midterms, Professor Alex Gottfried asked me to meet with him during office hours. I was terrified, afraid that I had failed both exams. Instead, he said my exams were the best he could remember ever getting and he wanted to know about my background. After sharing stories of life in the factory, Professor Gottfried suggested I put them in a book. I laughed and said, "Nobody gives a damn about people like me."

But a seed was planted. Three days later, midway through my bus route, I decided this was something I could do. It was way too painful to write about my experiences, but I could collect the stories of other women working in traditionally male, blue-collar jobs. I bought a tape recorder and began recording the life stories of tradeswomen in the Seattle area.

It was not easy deciding to go to graduate school. I had fallen in love with research, and MIT gave me an incredible package: full tuition plus a living stipend. But going East would take me completely out of my comfort zone. My father talked with family members about how they could support me after I flunked out—because that was almost certainly going to happen. Metro offered me a full-time driving position. That would have been a safe career path, keeping me in my community. In the end, I thought about what my mother would have advised, and I headed off to MIT in fall 1982.

People rarely think of MIT as a place to study political science, but it has a very highly ranked program. Our incoming class had 32 students, a mix of MA and PhD students. Only four of us were funded: two white men, a Black woman, and me. We were told that all funding decisions would be revisited at the end of our first year, which set up a hyper-competitive environment. There was an immediate assumption that Melanie Hines and I got funded for affirmative action reasons while Bill Stanley and John Coleman deserved their fellowships.[11]

At MIT I learned not to stress about whether I was the best or the smartest person. Everyone was very smart. If you do the very best that you can in the time given, you are good. Writing papers and doing research is just another version of putting the parts on the floor.

My advisor, Professor Walter Dean Burnham, was extraordinarily supportive. Early on, he told me that I was a Gramscian organic intellectual of the working class. Of course, that comment led me to read Gramsci. I also owe a debt to Professors Suzanne Berger and Deborah Stone, who showed me how to navigate being female in a heavily male department.

---

11. Bill Stanley is a comparative politics professor at the University of New Mexico, and John Coleman is the dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Minnesota. Melanie got married in our third year and died along with her husband and baby in suspicious circumstances while writing a dissertation.

At the end of the first year, Professor Deborah Stone invited my class to her home for a waffle breakfast. She had just finished writing a waffle cookbook and wanted to celebrate. After listening to her share publishing stories, I started asking questions. Finally, Stone stopped me and asked what was behind my questions. That provided an opening for me to mention I had a book manuscript. Stone asked me to share it with her. She read the manuscript and then sent it to the editor at Temple University Press. And that is how my first book, *Alone in a Crowd: Women in the Trades Tell Their Stories*, came to be published in 1985.[12]

I wanted to write a dissertation analyzing the role of the state in squelching labor activism, with Local 79 as a case study. My committee said that if I wanted a job, I needed to "write about national institutions and be quantitative." I followed their advice and was hired for a tenure-track job at Yale. The research became my second book: *Congress, the President, and Policymaking: An Historical Analysis*. I think of its publication as getting academic journeyman status.

Being at Yale gave me an opportunity to meet some of the most impressive political scientists in the country. The interesting thing about these men—yes, all men—is that they were very nice. I left Yale and moved to Claremont Graduate University in 1991. Giving up Yale was hard, but my new husband had a position in California.

I am a good teacher, but research is what I love. What I like the most about teaching is the hands-on work that occurs when I collaborate with graduate students on research projects. Over the past three decades, I've co-authored with more than 40 graduate students.

I still think of publishing as putting parts on the floor. As of today, the number of parts on the floor is six books and more than 60 other academic publications. Aside from some early mainstream research needed to get tenure,[13] I've spent most of my career doing research on the ways that traditionally marginalized groups can gain a voice and power. My first post-tenure book, *Is the Fetus a Person? A Comparison of Policies Across the Fifty States*, is an analysis of case and statutory law in the 50 states that could legally define the fetus as a person—abortion, fetal battery, and prenatal drug exposure.[14] I found that hostility to women's rights, not pro-life attitudes, explains opposition to abortion. I've done research on the determinants of support for female candidates, as well as threats against women elected officials. I've worked with a former colleague, Chris Krewson, on a series of projects examining the impact of gender on evaluations of the Supreme Court and how that impact intersects with partisanship and religion.

12. In 2018, the book was reissued in a digitalized format as part of a National Endowment for the Humanities effort to make significant out-of-print books available for free online.

13. Prior to coming up for tenure at CGU, a senior colleague told me that he wasn't going to count "any of that stuff I wrote about women, minorities" in evaluating me for tenure.

14. The book was written up in more than 200 newspapers and in 2001 was awarded the Victoria Schuck Prize by the American Political Science Association.

For more than a decade, the primary focus of my research—indeed my passion—has been voting rights issues affecting Native Americans. To be honest, I had never given the issue a moment's thought before a Native student, Deron Marquez, in 2010 asked why I wasn't helping his people gain access to the ballot box. I discovered this was a complex issue, involving electoral law, treaty rights, historical abuses, and contemporary racism. It took me five years to publish a single article—not very quick for putting that part on the floor. But I've picked up speed, publishing another 15 articles and a book, *Voting in Indian Country: The View from the Trenches*.

This research has figured prominently in voting rights litigation and has led me to become involved in voting rights cases, starting with serving as an expert witness in *Wandering Medicine v. McCulloch* (2014). I also was an expert witness in *Yazzie v. Hobbs* (2020) and did research that was used in three other cases: *Poor Bear v. Jackson County* (2015), *Sanchez v. Cegavske (*2016), and *Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation v. County of Elko* (2022). This work brings together both my old union activist tendencies and academic side. I've just returned from doing survey research on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation and can't imagine quitting.