

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Women's History Project

Personal Experience

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HELENE W. SCHWAB

Interviewed

by

Jean Engle

on

November 30, 1987

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: HELENE W. SCHWAB
INTERVIEWER: Jean Engle
SUBJECT: housekeeping, childcare, marriage, lesbianism
DATE: November 30, 1987

E: This is an interview with Helene Schwab for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Women's History, by Jean Engle, at 1330 Wick Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, on November 30, 1987.

Could you please just sort of start talking about your work life, not necessarily your formal work life. Talk about how you started out, perhaps, your first job. Did you work at home with the family? You grew up on a farm, so that's. . .

S: I grew up partly on the farm, yes. Do you mean when I graduated from high school?

E: Even earlier. Did you work before you graduated from high school?

S: No.

E: What was your first paying job?

S: My first paying job was a housekeeper-babysitter combination, live-in. It was right after I graduated from high school, in the fall after I graduated. I can't even remember how long I was there. Do you want a description of the job, or what I did?

E: Yes.

S: I took care of the children, and the house. I took care

of everything. They went out and worked, and I was there at home base. I was a chauffeur for the children. I just did normal, everyday things that you do to take care of a home, and taking care of children, getting them to school, from school and anything that they did after. Entertaining them.

E: Was that a particularly well-off family, and that they hired you to do all this?

S: No, the wife was a teacher and the husband was a carpenter. Between the two of them--they lived in Howland--they had a very nice home, for that time, back in 1962. They had three children, three or four, I can't remember now. For the type of work that I did, I was paid well. I had no expenses at the time. Everything was taken care of for me. My expenses were my clothes and what I did.

E: How long did you have that job?

S: I'd say about a couple of years. I went from there to another home. That was a strange household. They had two children, two girls, and Ralph was the husband. He worked also in construction work, I believe. He had a business on the side too--countertops and stuff like that with another guy--and Ann was a teacher. But it was not your typical household in that day, in the respect that the husband wore the pants, Ann wore the pants. It was my first encounter, I'd never come into anything like that. I always remember when they had an argument one time--which they didn't normally have--and I was upstairs, and they were downstairs. There was something wrong with the washing machine. Ralph was arguing with Ann, I was in the kitchen, and I heard her say, "Ralph, how dare you argue with me? You know better than that. You never argue with me." And he shut up, just like that. He was a very meek man, and she was a very strong woman. This was also my first encounter with a woman that--at that time I did not realize, and I don't even know that she realized--there was some lesbian tendency in her. And I wasn't smart enough at the time, to know about it.

E: You were how old? About twenty?

S: Yes, because I had a curfew there, believe it or not. She said, "I am responsible for you. You are not twenty-one years old, and you will follow a curfew." I followed the curfew. I wasn't like the twenty year-olds

today that would say, "Forget you." I did it. She said I had to be home at 10:00 or 11:00, and I was home. It was almost like another set of parents to a certain degree.

E: A substitute mom.

S: Yes, it was really strange. I would go and lie down during the day, and she would come in and lie down with me, and wrap herself right around me. At the same time I realized that there was something different about me, I never realized it with her, that that was maybe a possibility until one day toward the end of my working career. She was lying down next to me and had cupped her body around me, had her arm wrapped around me, and somebody came in, and she was out of that room like a bullet. I've seen her since then, a few times, on the street or gas station, or the store--not to really get into talking with her--but she's divorced now. She had had another child after I left, and last time I heard, was going with a guy younger than I am who was very very rigid. She was no longer a teacher.

E: How old are you?

S: I'm forty-three, soon to be forty-four. After that job, I went to another family and worked there. This family only needed someone temporarily. At that time, I didn't know it. She was going to have a baby, and they wanted someone there for awhile afterward, for just a little while. Well, it turned out that it was a little bit longer because she had postpartum blues. She came home from the hospital--she already had a two year old--handed me the baby, and that was the extent of what she had to do with the baby until a few months later.

E: You were totally responsible?

S: Totally. Everything was moved into my room. It wasn't there before she went to the hospital, but when she came home, the crib, the clothes, everything, was moved into my room. I was totally responsible.

E: Were you experienced in child care?

S: Yes, because I'd watched kids off and on in high school. That was no problem. It was like Sunday she was still in this depression, and Monday morning she woke up and she was fine. It was that queer. And as soon as she was out of it, she wanted her baby back. Then I left

there, and I think at that time I went to work as a receptionist for awhile. I went to work for Bell Tone Hearing Aid Service. No, I take that back. From there I went to my cousins', lived with them, and I worked as a switchboard operator. I loved that. I liked doing that. But I got into a little. . . I'd worked there for months and had no problem, I liked my job, and was well thought of because I could handle the switchboard--we had 400 phones that we were responsible for. We'd usually have people calling in for messages, and calling themselves. It was really good, then the manager asked me, one day, when she found out that I used to do housework, babysitting, and caretaking. She had a father who had cancer of the prostate, and had a lot of other problems. I have a thing about older men.

E: About older men?

S: About older men, yes. I don't like to be with older men. And she watched me to kind of take care of her father. I couldn't do it. I knew I could not do that, and somehow or another, I got out of it by saying I couldn't do it. Well, within a month, I was without a job. Eased right out. And it wasn't anything to do with my work. It was like, the first two weeks the schedule was put up, and I wasn't on it too much. The second two weeks the schedule was put up and I was barely on it then. The third time the schedule came out, I wasn't on it at all. It was just like that, you know. I didn't even have enough sense to do anything about it. I didn't know if I could. And I don't know if back at that time I could have done anything about it. They had a lot of power at that time. Then from there, I went to working as a receptionist at an office for Bell Tone Hearing Aid Service. I worked there for awhile and for some reason or other, my rut in life must be housework and taking care of other people. You know, because I'm there, and the next thing I know, I'm in my boss's home taking care of their kids and the house.

E: Did the same thing happen at both jobs? Bell Tone?

S: Yes. The guy's name was Floyd. They weren't married, they were in the process of going together and all this good stuff. They were both reborn Christians, and a little bit flakey. She asked me if I would come and take care of Marilyn's kids. Good pay, better than what I was getting in the office, or at least equal to what I was getting in the office. So, I ended up there. I worked with Marilyn. I can't remember how long I was

there. I know that while I was there, one time I went out to babysit for my cousin, broke my leg, my ankle, and Marilyn had me come back and stay there. I stayed in the house. The kids were old enough so that we were able to do things without Marilyn being there all the time. And then, where did I go?

E: Do you really enjoy working with children? I love kids.

S: I love kids. I want to do something else besides this. There's got to be something else out here. I should be doing something else, I'm sure. Teenagers babysit, right? Not as you grow older. But I did. And then I came to the conclusion that--I watched people out, customers, consumers, and employees--and I watched the interaction between them, and I thought, "If I was on the other side, and I was a clerk, waitress, whoever, giving the service to the public, I wouldn't have anything to do with the public." The public, in general, is not very nice, myself included. When I had a bad day, God help. . . Now the waitresses, I never pick on the waitresses. My mother was a waitress for twenty years, and took a lot of crap; I saw this, and I won't do that to them. But my mother was never a clerk, so I don't feel bad about giving a clerk a bad time, which I probably should, but I do at times. I'm too cynical--is that the word?--to work with the public. I can't be nice to them.

E: You wouldn't put up with it?

S: No, if you give me a bad time, I'm going to give it right back to you, and I'm going to be fired because you're not allowed to do that. I understand that, so it's not a good thing for me to get into. Finally, I came to the conclusion, after Marilyn and the boys, that this is what it's supposed to be. Then I went to Cortland. All these jobs came from people knowing me or knowing the people I worked for, or out of the newspaper, or out of the employment companies. Then I went to work for Wanda--I can't think of her husband's name--I think it was John, in Cortland.

E: In most cases, when you left one family, was it because you were pretty much done there, or they were. . .

S: Every place that I was at, except Ann's house, was basically it's time to change. No bad feelings left in any other except at Ann's. There was a bad feeling between Ann and I the day I left. I can remember the

day I left. I had my car parked when she came home from working there, which I today realized that's not a good thing to do, leaving somebody without a notice. I said I was leaving, and the kids cried and cried. Ann was hollering at me, and she was mad. The only reason I was leaving was because of the way she wanted to run my whole life.

E: This was in the personal department?

S: Right, she just wanted to take total complete charge. I was getting to where I wanted to be independent. It was almost too much like being at home with Mother type of deal. Almost like leaving home so you can go out and do whatever you're going to do. But that was the only place there were any bad feelings. Any of the other places, it was either time for me to leave, for myself, or the kids had gotten to the point that they didn't need a babysitter and a housekeeper because the kids were getting old enough to do things themselves. From Cortland, I went to work for Lucia and her husband, who was the doctor here in town. I was there for five years. The only reason I left there was because I went to business college. I had decided, "Okay, I'm getting out of here."

E: You did decide this.

S: I did decide. I worked there for awhile--I tried working in a nursing home, also. I worked there for two weeks. I think I made my first paycheck and then I quit.

E: As a maid?

S: Yes, I couldn't handle the way they treated the patients. Like, if I die, or if I become senile, please let me die before I go to a rest home. Because I don't want to be in there. If you know, and you've got all your faculties, fine, they're going to treat you alright. If you don't have all your faculties, they don't treat you too kindly. They were never to the point that I thought them cruel. They took an old lady one time, who messed her bed, and put her in this wheelchair, like an animal, and wheeled it down the hall, with no clothes on. She's eighty-seven years old; wheeled her down the hall, no clothes, no nothing, all because she didn't know what was going on. She'd messed her bed and fell out on the floor. They put her in this stall and stood back with a hose, and hosed her.

E: And that was it?

S: I couldn't go back. This is one of our reputable places in Warren, too. I couldn't do it. You know, "That's it, I'm out of here." I couldn't handle it at all. But I stayed at Lucia's until I decided, "I've got to do something." When I left Lucia's, I went to work at Servamation. I worked there for a year. I first started in the cafeteria, and then went to work with the vending machines. I had my own little area in Packard, and I became a shop steward. Worst thing I could have ever done. Yes, it was then. I don't know about now, but it certainly was then.

E: What do you mean?

S: I know I had to go to a union, because it was time to redo the contracts. I had to go face these big guys at the meetings. I'd never dealt with anything like this, and I went in there with this chip on my shoulder, it was like, "Knock it off." They took one look at me and I thought, "Okay, it's off." But then, after awhile I'd get angry, and then I'd become belligerent. But only because of the way they acted you know.

E: It was the whole tone of whole thing?

S: Yes, and that whole manner. "We're gong to show you" type of deal.

E: How many other people were on the negotiating committee?

S: On my side?

E: Yes.

S: There was myself, and one other one. This was it, and I was the spokesman. And I'd never done this.

E: And neither of you were trained to do this?

S: No, we were like, "Let's cut these up here, and feed them to the animals." I let them get away with that for awhile, because I was unsure. Then, after awhile, I got mad. In any situation in my life, you can do whatever you want to me, and I'll let you get away with it until you put me in that corner, and then I lose all sense. Then I come out fighting, I make no sense, and it really gets bad. I've tried to learn not to let myself get to that point anymore. We finally got that contract done,

and everything. I found that I lived through it even though I had butterflies in my stomach; I could look them in the eye and holler back at them. And when it was all over and done with, we went to lunch. Then it was okay, after all these meetings going on for days. But then, I remember one time, when one of my women that worked in one of the areas that serviced the vending machines got caught in the storage room with one of the big bosses of the Packard union--and I don't mean that they were just sitting there holding hands, they were actually doing it. I sent down word via all the other women, "You tell her, I will not represent her in front of the union. If she gets fired, I could care less." Because I wasn't going to go in there and say that she had the right to do that. I just couldn't believe that she would do it, not like that, there. Oh, it was terrible.

E: In the cooler? (Laughter)

S: A storage room, it wasn't a cooler, it was a storage room, where they kept all the food. Right here in Packard! She is married to that man today. They've been married for years. I liked working there, but then I quit because I was going to school. I had decided on a school. I went to Youngstown Business College. That was in 1975. I went for Court Reporting originally. I was in the program for like three months. I could not break the 80 words per minute. I could get 79 words a minute on the court reporting machine, couldn't get over that hump, so they suggested that I switch over to medical legal secretary. So I did. At the same time, while I was doing that, nothing. I didn't work while I was going to school. I was going in the daytime. I graduated from there; it was in September, somewhere at the end of September. In November 1976 I was in an automobile accident. I spent the first year, six months of it, in the hospital, at one long stretch, and then I came out, in and out, I was in and out so much the rest of that year, that there was nothing. . . . It took another three years to get to the point where I had any stamina to do anything. So, I was at home during that time.

E: With your parents?

S: No, at that time I had my own apartment. Oh, I forgot. I got married. Yes, I got married clear back at Lucia's. I forgot, see, that time of my life there. We were talking work history. Do you want this in there?

E: Yes, when it's relevant. I think that up to this point, you've been living with people in their homes, pretty much taking care of their children.

S: Right. Everywhere, I lived with people. That's right. Until I went to work for Lucia. Prior to working for her, I was involved with a man, we were living together, and I went to work for Lucia. That was my first live-out job. I went there on a daily basis. At first, I was hired strictly as a nanny. I went to an unemployment service, a private unemployment service, and hired as a nanny. I took care of the children--she had two of them at that time--and strictly took care of the kids. It got to the point that her house was so bad--It wasn't so much that she was a dirty person, as she was just so disorganized. I don't know how to explain. But I ended up taking care of kids and doing the housework eventually.

H: Right back into it?

S: Oh no, no. They were not. . .

E: They paid well?

S: Yes, they were very good about being paid there. In fact, at that time I was being paid top dollar for doing that kind of work in this area. I was living with my--who is now my husband--then we got married. We were married a year, then I became pregnant. But the day that I did get married, though, I said to my husband-to-be, "I want you to understand that this is not going to work. I know it, and you know it. But I'll stick it out." And I said, "But when I say it's over, it's over." I said, "It's not going to be swinging doors in and out, in and out. It doesn't work that way." Being the typical male man, you know, as far as he was concerned it was going to work, you know. It was going to work. At this time, also, I must say--because this is part of me at that time--I was a very obese woman, very extremely large at that time. I think that, to some degree, I put up with a lot of stuff, him included. So we were married for a year, then I got pregnant, I had my son. A month after we were married, a month to the day, I found out my husband was running around on me. A month, to the day. He'd been running on me during this month. But, like everybody else, you know, I was stupid enough to think that this time it was going to work. When I found out he was running, it hurt. Even though I knew it wasn't

going to last, it hurt. But that was the first and only time it hurt. It never hurt after that. Because I looked in the mirror, and I was mean, "You knew this was going to happen. Face reality! If he ran on his first wife, he's going to run on you and anyone else that comes in his life." So I stuck it out, got pregnant, had my son and my son was a year old--a week short of being a year old--and I said, "No more." We went to an attorney, got the papers--and he stayed at the home we had bought until he got the papers--and the night before he was to leave he lay in bed, and he said, "I don't want to do this." I just rolled over and went to sleep. Because, basically, I am that type that when I am done, I am done. If I'm not done, I'm not done.

E: Had you been working that whole time, too?

S: Yes, I worked the whole time that I was pregnant, up until the week of delivery.

E: At Lucia's?

S: At Lucia's, right. John was a ten-month baby. I carried him for ten months, and the doctor knew I carried him for ten months, was because I thought I was pregnant previously, and they gave me a shot. If I was pregnant, I wouldn't have a period. If I was, I'd have a period. I had a period, and I must have gotten pregnant, boom, you know. He was due October 31st, and he didn't come until November 21st. So it was like almost a month later. He weighed ten pounds, four ounces. Then I did not work for that first year. I refused to work for that first year of his life.

E: Your husband supported you then?

S: As much as he possibly could. But we got by because I refused to work. It was, "You pay the bills because I'm not going out until he's a year old at least." Well, then when he was in his twelfth month somewhere, I noticed some strange things with John, my son, at that time. Fluttering of the eyes and that, and I knew right away what it was. I called the doctor, told him what he was doing, and I said, "He's having seizures. I can tell by the way he's doing things." I've always been fascinated, to some degree, with the medical field. I read a lot of things at home.

E: Had you had experience with this personally?

S: No, my husband had it too, at that time. But he wasn't born with it. This is the strangest thing. My husband was an epileptic, but he was an epileptic from an automobile accident. When he was twelve years old, he was on a bicycle and hit. When he was hit, he was thrown in the air, and landed on the side of his head on the cement curb. Back at that time--his mother even told me about it--he walked around with a knot on his head as big as a grapefruit. And at that time they didn't take anybody to the hospital. It caused pressure, and seven months after that auto accident, he started having seizures. So, when I told this to the doctor, he said, "We'll make an appointment." I had already made an appointment with John to go to Dr. Timons and Children's Akron Hospital. Before we could get there, my mother was over one night. This was during the week that my husband--I had told him that we were separated, and I wasn't going to go on with the marriage. My mother was just telling John not to touch the television, and you know how you pop them on the hand and say, "No, no." That's all she did to him, and he went into a seizure, just like that, came out of it, and he stood up. My mother was all hysterical. I don't know why, but I wasn't hysterical because I knew that this was what it was, you know. When she was leaving, she was crying, emotional, and on and on. She patted him on the bottom of his rubber pants. Bam! He laid right out on the kitchen floor. So I called the doctor that night and told him. They got him into the children's hospital the next morning. And they never ever saw my son have seizures, never. I don't know what happened, but at that time, me and my son changed. He, for some reason, decided to cut his eyeteeth and his stomach teeth all in the same night. That was a rip-roaring night.

E: Eyeteeth and his what?

S: Stomach teeth. Those are your upper, like fang teeth, and down here. And all in the same night they broke the skin. It was like, "Whoa mom, what's happening to me here?" I even stood in the middle of the bedroom that night, and I said, "What do you want me to do?" Here's this poor eight-month old baby in pain, and I didn't know what to do for him, the crying. That was the only time I ever got up at 2:00 in the morning to bring him his bottle. Never at any other time. In fact, when I was in the hospital, before I brought him home, he was sleeping all night. They didn't bring him to me one morning, because I was breast feeding, I didn't get him

at 5:00 when all the other breast-feeding mothers got their babies. I waited an hour. I thought there was something wrong and they wouldn't tell me. I laid their crying, I thought they couldn't tell me there was something wrong with him. I rang for the nurse, she came in, and I'm crying, "Why didn't you bring my baby? What's wrong with my baby? Why don't you tell me what's wrong with him?" I don't know why they didn't bring him. And she left. Well, she must have finally decided or thought, "Maybe I'd better go check." She came back and told me that the reason that they didn't bring him was because he was still asleep, and they didn't want to wake him up. Anyway, after my husband left, my son had changed from being a storybook baby to hell on wheels. He became, and was diagnosed, as a hyperactive, destructive child. There is hyperactivity in these children, and there is constructive, and destructive.

E: This started just after his first birthday?

S: Yes, right within that month there. I got up one morning, and there was all this red stuff all over my bed. I went into his room and he was all covered, and I thought he was bleeding, I thought, "God, what happened?" I went downstairs because I found that he was okay. He had gotten into the refrigerator, and he broke all the eggs, spilled the catchup, and had come upstairs, got my slip, went back downstairs and covered it with catchup. He tried to clean up the catchup. I asked him, "What did you do? What happened here?" In his baby-talk he told me that he was trying to clean up the mess he made. I thought, "Okay." By the time John was two, our divorce agreement was that I could stay in the house for a year, and my husband had to pay all the bills. So before the year was out, I found a nice apartment, and we moved. We lived there for nine years.

But when John was two years old, John was an extremely strong baby. I had a French Provincial couch, and my son could pick that couch up from the back, and flip it over. I had to watch him like a hawk with other kids. He would come in the house--I'd pick him up from nursery school, from work--and go through my kitchen. I have a line of drawers going this way. He would pull them out as he was walking through the kitchen and dump them.

E: And dump them?

S: And dump them.

E: How did you stand it?

S: I almost killed him. This went on for two years; for two years, I listened to my family tell me, "You don't know how to take care of him. Give him to me for a week, I'll straighten him out. You don't discipline him." I wasn't beating him enough, anything. Unfortunately, I didn't want to do this. This was not me to do, until one day, John was four, and John went out within a week's time broke, playing baseball with another little boy, the windshield of this real nice car. At that time I was on welfare; I didn't have any money to pay for that. Luckily this guy had insurance. A few days later, this guy came to my home, knocked on my door, I opened it up, he had John with him. He said, "Is this your son?" And I said, "Yes." Well, this guy had a Monte Carlo, a brand new whatever year that was, Monte Carlo. John had gotten into this truck that was next to it, that had all these little cans of spray paint. He got out of there with those cans of spray paint, and spray-painted the back end of this man's Monte Carlo, just made a mess.

E: How old was he at this time?

S: Four years old. He made a mess of it. My girlfriend and her husband were there, and this man looked like he was nine feet tall. I said, "I have to tell you I don't have any money." He said, "I have insurance, and I'll turn it in. This man was so gentle. He bent down and looked John straight in the face and asked John, "Why did you do that?" He gave a typical four-year-old answer, "I don't know." And he didn't know. What kind of an answer is a four year old going to give? "Well, you know, I saw this car and thought I could do some damage to it. . ." He didn't. He saw the paint and wanted to paint, and that guy's car happened to be there. The guy left, and I snapped. I took him in his room, and I paddled that boy so bad, I mean severely. When I came out I sat down and I cried, and I cried in front of my girlfriend and her husband, because I beat him.

E: That was the first time?

S: That was the first time. He'd gotten his normal little pats on the bottom, stuff like that, but never anything like that. And they offered to take him home with them that night. All my friends didn't want my kid around. They said, "Helene, come and see us, but leave

John at home." Because he was so destructive. I couldn't seem to do anything. Finally, I got on the telephone--you know on television they advertise about a number to call about battered children--and I called that number that night. I said that if somebody doesn't help me with him soon, I'm going to kill him, and I said, "I know that." At 8:00 the next morning there was somebody at my door. This woman's name was Mrs. Zack; she was from Family Services. This woman was like an angel that came into my life. She was the nicest, sweetest woman. Never at any time was there any implication that I was a monster of a parent because I couldn't take care of my kid. She made an appointment that day for me to take John to the Akron Children's Hospital again, to see Dr. Timmons, and I took him. I went into the office and sat down. I just barely got started and I sobbed, I just totally fell apart. He said, "You're not going to take John home. You leave John here." When I realized that I wasn't going to have to take him home, to deal with him for awhile, I started to calm down. I told him what had been going on, how John had been acting, and what people had been saying to me. When I left that hospital--I still get emotional talking about it--John was in a room with four other children. John was there for two weeks, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't want anything to do with him. I needed this time to heal, to, "Do I love you? Do I want you back?" That's what I was beginning to wonder, if I really care for this kid. I was wondering if this was some kind of punishment that I was having to handle the rest of my life. I went back to pick him up two weeks later, and--mind you, in the hospital you get three shifts of fresh nurses--John was in the room by himself. He was so bad that they couldn't handle him. He would run twenty-two out of the twenty-four hours. He only needed a couple hours sleep, and he would be going full tilt the rest of the time. He just never ever stopped. We did not know at that time about hyperactive children. I didn't know anything about it. And Dr. Timmons took me aside, and he said, "I'm going to tell you the next time somebody tells you that they can straighten this boy out, you pack his clothes and you give him to them. And you leave and say, 'You've got him'." Even Dr. Timmons was just floored. All of them were floored with the way he was just running.

E: How did you deal with that when you went back to work?

S: Yes, I went back to work. I went back to work when he was a year old. I went back to work when I was

separated from my husband. I went back to Lucia's. We muddled through there, and things got better. They tried all these medicines and that, until finally, when I realized that I wasn't at fault--there wasn't anything that I personally was doing or not doing--and they put him on these medicines that made him a little zombie. I took him off of everything and said, "That's it." Then he had seizures. He had eight of them in an hour's time. The last one was a half hour long, and he had brain damage. Up until then John didn't have brain damage. He was a normal four-year-old except for the epilepsy deal. Then I had to deal with that. Also at this time I had gone in for surgery and lost all my weight. So, how I was dealing with John and his problem, my problem with him, and also the fact that I lost all my weight. I lost 200 pounds. Underneath this 200 pounds was this woman. Also, at the same time, I didn't want to deal, or didn't want to deal with the fact of being a lesbian because of family pressure. I have a cousin who is a lesbian, and hearing the family talk about her for years and years and the things they would say about her. I'd only had sexual relationships with other girls my age at that time. I had been in boarding school, met, and got sexually involved with the girls there. I knew I liked women. Even when I was married, I liked women, but I was not sexually active with any woman, other than when I was in the boarding school. Until I lost all this weight, it was like playing musical beds, but it was musical beds with men. I thought, "This time will be different. This time will be different. This time will . . ." It was never different at that time.

E: How old were you?

S: At that time I was twenty-seven, somewhere in that area. I just dated all these guys. It wasn't the type that I dated them for long periods of time, because I was the type that I would run the streets, and do whatever during the night, hit the bars and that. Then I did the picking, I did the choosing, and I did the asking. It was like, "I'm in charge, not you." You know, that type of deal. And the craziest thing was that it was a guy that I was never sexually involved with that kind of helped me get to the point that, "If this is it Helene, if this is what you want, then go for it. Why are you doing what you're doing?" He really was a good friend. Talking with him over a period of time I said, "That's it. No more." It was another time of year when

I said, "That's it." And then for about six months to eight months, I was not sexually active, period, with anybody. I didn't go out. I didn't do anything. It was kind of like I was getting my head straight.

E: You weren't working at this time?

S: At that time? Yes, I was still at Lucia's.

E: Still at Lucia's?

E: I'm still at Lucia's at that time. After I knew I'd come to this conclusion, I started going back out, but I would have to get drunk to go to any bars. I just didn't have the nerve. I would drive around the block, or walk around the block--which makes it kind of neat when I'm talking to people on the hot-line today. I know exactly what you mean when you're doing this. But I finally got to the point where I could go in. Then I went one-night stands with the women there, and then I went with a woman for a year. At the same time I was going with this one woman, I had also known about Jerry. I could never get this woman to go out with me until, finally, I chased her to a bar. I didn't chase her, she was working there, and I went in at about 2:00 in the morning, drunk. I said, "You'll go with everybody else, but you won't go with me," in a straight bar, in that bar. So she said, "Okay." That's it. This time, I'm still at Lucia's. Lucia was a very neat woman in the respect that I would talk to her about it. The only thing she ever said was, "Helene, don't let Donnie know." That was her husband. "Don't let him know; don't ever say anything in front of him." And I got with Jerry, I was still at Lucia's and I quit. Then I was working at Servabase. Then I went to school. Then I had my automobile accident. My first job, after my automobile accident, which was really a bad job for me to take, was working for a medical testing company out of Cleveland. I had a 350 mile route, per day, six days a week.

E: Driving?

S: Driving. I remember the first time I got in a car after my accident. In my car, I took Jerry to work, and I came home. I actually had to stop in Howland, and I cried. I was so scared. I worked for them I think for about two weeks and I just could not get behind that car and drive anymore. The speed limit was 55 miles an hour. The people in Cleveland do not go 55 miles an

hour. If you do, you get killed! I just couldn't handle it. I liked it, because I just went in and worked everywhere, picked up these specimens, went and took them to the lab, they did stuff with them at the lab, and then went around in Cleveland, picked up stuff. I went back and picked up my morning stuff, took it back, dropped it off, and went home to my house. I had to leave, be on the road about 7:00--because I hit the hospitals, too, around here--and I wouldn't get home until 7:00 or 8:00 at night. So I was working long hours, and that made it hard on Jerry and I.

E: And was Jerry helping with childcare with John, or what was going on with John?

S: No, John was still going to nursery school during the day, and then somebody watched him afterwards. Not in any relationship I've ever been in with any woman, I've never had any help in raising John. Not financially, because I never asked this of anybody; financially he was mine. But I'm talking in support, in taking an interest. It just never happened. They just never took the interest in him. So, I couldn't go into that, so I left there. I didn't go back to Lucia's. I answered an ad I can't remember where I went after that. Oh, yes. Then I went to work for a cab company, and drove a cab for awhile. Then I went from driving a cab to working in the office, doing the bookkeeping and the dispatching, and filling in when the drivers didn't come, out on the road. Then it got so bad, I couldn't work with this guy anymore. Even though he was a friend of mine, I just couldn't work with him. He had a very explosive personality.

By this time, I had moved from my apartment that I had been in for nine years, into a house. I went back into baby-sitting. Well, for a year I did housework, strictly housework. I cleaned five houses a week, one a day. I did it for a year, and then I quit because it was physically too hard to do. At that time, in comparison to today, your job was entirely different. I mean, you went in and washed walls, and you did everything. They weren't bashful about asking you to do this all in one day. It was just too hard for me to do. I did that for a year, and then I quit, because it was too hard. Then I think that's when I went into the cab work, and the bookkeeping and working in the office. I worked for that company for a couple years, a few years all in all. I just couldn't handle working with him; he was too explosive personality-wise.

I answered an ad in the paper, again for a babysitter. I went to work for this family and I was there for five years. I started when the oldest one was two, and the youngest one was like eight months, something like that. I was there until they both went to school all day, and they no longer needed me. They'd just ask me to babysit. And then, I answered another ad in the paper when I left that job, and then found a job I have today, taking care of the two children. I'm also their housekeeper, but on a separate day totally. I'm not involved with the children. I am not allowed but cleaning. This is the first time I've ever worked with, I could clean and take care of the children at the same time. This family wants you to spend your time with the children, give attention to the kids. While you're with them--not constantly, because, of course, they play by themselves too, together--I started when one was two and the other one was--I forget how old the other one was--I think about a year old, thirteen months old, something like that. My job there is coming to an end. I've got the rest of this year and this summer, because the oldest boy will be in school all day in the first grade, and Elliot will be in kindergarten all day. So I'll quit watching these children, and I'll be cleaning one, two, three houses a week. I am again going to try to deal with my housekeeping and babysitting. I don't know why, but I'm going to give it a shot, maybe, hopefully if I come up with the money. There is a paralegal program offered, and I'm going to try for it and see if I can do it. I don't know. My ultimate dream really is, and my wish to do, is to work out of my home in some kind of business where I can work in home. Not making a \$1,000,000, but enough that I can live, have my own hours, be my own boss, and do it in my own time. I haven't come up with a magic dream. I've looked at books and I've thought, "Well, that sounds pretty good, and that sounds pretty good." But it's putting it together that. . .

E: How did things go as those jobs grew older? You were doing the housekeeping and child care, and then you were having to pay child care for him too?

S: Right. He went to nursery school. I had to pay child care for him to go to nursery school, which was really strange. Here I am out babysitting other people's children, and sending my child to nursery school.

E: Did he have to have special schooling?

S: Yes, John went to a children's rehabilitation center. He learned at the special nursery school. When he went to school, he went to a public school. Finally he went from children's rehabilitation into a local school. They first started him in regular class, but they realized that he was going to have to be put in special classes. They didn't discover this, really, until John was in about second grade. All that time nobody ever really told me that John had that much of a problem at school. The main thing they told me was John's hyperactivity. It drove them crazy. It was like I had to deal with it, you're going to have to deal with it. I got called to the school for a parent-teacher conference in John's second grade. I remember this guy who had some big job with the school system. He told me that John was not material for public school, that he was Fairhaven material. I'd seen a lot of Fairhaven children, and he wasn't Fairhaven material. I remember crying when he told me that. I said, "There's absolutely no way. He's not going there." And I left at that time, they had that program called E.R. or M.R. or something like that.

E: E.M.R., for Educating the Mentally Retarded.

S: Right. So, he was put into this program and kept there for a few years. Basically he's done alright, up to what he's capable of doing. Today he is eighteen, but if you're going to talk intelligent life he is probably somewhere--he hasn't been tested lately in the last few years, the last time I tested him he was on second-third grade level. I would assume that now he's on third, fourth, fifth grade level, depending on what he's working on. Yet, if you keep away from books, for example, we can talk music, rock and roll, pinball machines, stuff like that. You don't notice too much difference. Once you listen to John start talking about cars, or something on television--you can sit with my son and watch programs, then listen to him tell someone else about it, and it's like, "Wait a minute. I sat there and I didn't see that. Did we watch the same show?" We've had our ups and downs and ins and outs. There have been times that I've said, "I wish you'd go." I've threatened to send him to his father sometimes, when things would be so hard. I've reached a point in my life now that I am tired of parenting; not so much parenting as being a care taker. He's needed to have a care taker. You know all my jobs have ever been, when I was taking care of children, there're certain time limits where you can let go. They can start doing this

on their own, and then you go on to something else with them, and you're responsible for that with the same child. With John I'm always responsible, always. It never seems to cease. I would like for somebody else to take that responsibility. He has not seen his father since he was a year old.

E: Any child support from John's father?

S: No, I went to the attorney about it, and he said, "We can take him to court. It'll cost you \$200 up front, then John will pay for about two, three, four or five months, then stop." He said, "It's going to cost you another \$200 to go through the same rigamarole." I said, "I don't have \$200."

John did meet his father. John did come to see him one time, the Christmas after we were separated, finally divorced, which was June or July of 1971, with his camera and his two girls from his previous marriage and this little package. I met him at the door. Luckily John was across the hall, at the neighbors. He was about two years old at this time, checking out their "stash." I told him, "No money, no visitation rights." And he said, "Fine. You don't hassle me, I won't hassle you." I said, "Bye."

E: That was it?

S: That was it. But the strangest thing is that in the past few years, I was in a store one day with John--in automotives--and who walks in but his father. His father stood sixty seconds looking at him, I would have gotten up. . . He just stood there and looked at him. I was thinking, "Oh my God." And I'm saying, "John, let's go. Let's go next door." "What for, Mom? I want to see. . ." "Let's go next door." I didn't want any confrontations in that store. But obviously I didn't need to worry, because then he looked over and turned, and that was it. And if he really wanted to see him, he knows that legally I could not stop him. Whether or not he paid support, you cannot stop him from seeing his kid. And for nine years after our divorce, he knew where I lived. He had access to come in to see us at any time. And then for the next two years after moving from the apartment, I found out I lived a mile away from him. And now I live a mile from where he works. He is everywhere. I heard he is into his fourth wife. This one has a son that, when they got married, he adopted. He's close to John's age, if not John's age, and when he

was fourteen or fifteen years old he almost killed him. He beat him so bad they put him in the hospital. He would have killed John, yes, because he has absolutely no patience.

It's been a long, slow process with John and myself, in educating the fact that I don't have to go around feeling guilty--which I did for years and years, with him. My brother and I were talking. . . My whole family has had to go through a lot with me coming out as a lesbian, and saying, "That's it. This is the way it's going to be. If you like it, fine. If you don't, fine. You make your decision, I've made mine." We were talking the other day--in the beginning we had a lot of bad words between us years ago--and I said, "You know, I've gotten him to the age of eighteen. If his life he's lived, with the mothers that lay on the street, for years drank, did all kinds of things, until she came full circle and settled down, and decided who and what she is." He's not such a bad kid. He's not out running the streets. He's not smoking dope. He's not drinking. He's had his fun. He's not smoking cigarettes. He has gone through a period where he stole money. But you stop and think, "Didn't we all steal money when we were kids, at some time, or steal something in our life?" Not all of us, but the majority of us, somewhere along the line, did something that wasn't normal. He doesn't want to do anything, his room is terrible. He's a normal eighteen year old kid. Doesn't want to clean his room. Doesn't want to take out the trash. Only wants to do something if he's going to get paid for it, you know.

E: Where did you earn your work at? You like to work hard.

S: Yes, I work hard, I work fast.

E: You work very fast. You're very efficient. Where did you learn to. . .

S: Basically my family background is farming. My grandfather is a second-generation German. I think that's how it goes. His parents came from Germany. So that would make him second-generation. Then my mother is third generation. There were eight kids in the family. They worked a big farm, and they worked. My mother, when she was eight or nine years old, was responsible for all these other kids--there were seven, not counting herself--while my grandmother and grandfather went away one time. They left her in total

charge of all these kids on this farm. Only one was older than her, and all the rest were younger than her. She was only eight or nine years old. Back at that time, an eight or nine year old was not like an eight or nine year old today. They had a lot more responsibility. In fact, they left her one time, and the house burned down, the whole farmhouse, and she was in charge of it. I really wasn't raised too much at home. When I was a baby, I was put into a foster home because my mother worked and she couldn't take care of me at work.

E: Your father?

S: My father was there, but my father, unfortunately, was one of these kind of guys that only paid the rent, and bring in the rest of the food and put the clothes on our backs. There was my brother, my sister and myself. I was the youngest. We were all raised in foster homes to a degree. My sister and my brother not so much as I was. My mother was a very--I don't know--strange woman. If she will tell you, and laugh about the fact that when I was a young child, three or four years old, to go outside and play, she'd tie me to a tree and she'd leave me out there tied to a tree. She had this thing about potty-training children. When she potty-trained me, she tied me to the potty chair--and she'd tell you--I tied you to the potty chair and let you sit there for a couple hours, and you'll learn one way or another. When she sees me with children today, "Don't do that, do this." All my life, with my son, I've been no, she's been yes. If I say no, she says yes. I had to fight that.

E: The hard work was the common goal through that. . .

S: Right, the whole family was just. . . I should say here, that I came from a family of hard workers, but out of my brother, sister, and myself, I was the only one that graduated. My brother was out working when he was twelve years old, in a bowling alley deal. My sister was out working when she was thirteen, fourteen years old. I never worked until I graduated from high school. I'm the only one that graduated from high school. I never worked until I got out of there, except babysitting on the weekends for my cousins, or something like that. I can't always say that I had this strong sense or, or strong value of working for a long time. It kind of came out of necessity. You had to, you know. There was no mom and dad there. All of a sudden I was

responsible for another human being, and I had to put a roof over our head and food on the table. And however and whatever means was available to me, I did. I lived on a farm in a fosterhome for about two years, something like that. I learned working there, because I had to get up and milk the cows by hand before I went to school, slop the pigs, feed the chickens, do all that stuff. Then come home and do it all over again, and do the canning and all that kind of stuff. I have a history of working in me. Then I left my last foster home and went into boarding school. I was there for a year. My mother kept me there for one school year. That's all she could afford. She wanted to keep me there, and I, to this day, wish I could have stayed because I. . .

E: You had fun?

S: Right. (Laughter) But not only was I having fun, I liked it. The only time I ever got straight A's was at that school there. At that time--my mother and father had divorced when I was six years old--they decided to remarry again when I was twelve, and I got out of sixth grade, and I came home from boarding school. Then I lived at home from then on. After I graduated, my mother and father divorced again. They only stayed until I graduated from high school.

E: In all your situations, working in people's homes, living there, a fairly unusual type of thing, did you encounter any incidents of sexual harrassment that you considered unwelcome or threatening?

S: Not while I was living in, not. Not the job I'm at now, of course, but the one job before that, yes, from the husband. If you were going to line up four, five or six men, and that one would run, and that one would run, that one would run, and this one would shine. It wasn't so much that he made any physical advances as much as he made comments or suggestions that he left so that you could take it one way or the other.

E: That's still seen as sexual harassment.

S: Yes, I could always back out by saying I meant it this way, but if nobody's around, okay, fine, great, let's go for it. But I think at the same time, that they also knew that I was a lesbian because everything was always dealing with women. "What did you do?" "Where did you go?" It was always women, I never talked about men.

E: It had never been an issue?

S: No, but I think it's never been an issue simply because I've never made it an issue by stating to them, "I want you to understand, I am a lesbian." As long as I wasn't out in front of them where they had to look at, and deal with it, they could kind of put it back here and say, "Okay, we won't think about it." The only time that there was any sexual discretion of any kind was one time, on this one job I that I was working at before where I'm at now. I came in that morning, and the oldest boy said, "Helene, look at this." I turned, and he went to his younger brother and pulled his pants down and kissed him on the bottom. Well, up until this time, I had observed other things from the oldest boy that he would do to his youngest brother. So it's like, "How do I say anything to his mother?" Maybe she should watch, or be aware, or whatever, because I don't know if you could stop it. But I finally did say something about that incident to her. I tried to be very diplomatic in the way I said it, but I guess she took offense. She didn't say so then, but later on she came home some days later and said, "By the way, what they did the other day is normal." I just dropped it, "Okay." It's not my place, it's not my child and I'm not being paid to relay that kind of information. I would say that's the only place I've ever been harrassed sexually on the job. It was just in that manner there. In all things that I worked in, that is it though. He would get physical with his wife in front of me. But where I'm at now, I would say absolutely, positively no, because the woman I work for is a feminist, strong feminist woman, and her husband is, I guess he falls under this category of a male feminist.

E: Well, it's theoretically possible.

S: I've never run across a man like this before. I still don't quite know how to deal with him. He's the kind of guy that you could sit down and talk to about anything. He's very soft-spoken. I've never seen a macho thing out of this guy, and I've been there for three years. No macho scenes from him at all, and it's really strange. I keep waiting, "When are you going to slip up here?" But he hasn't. They're really a very nice couple. I like both of them, and usually I just like the one out of the two. This time, I like both of them equally. That is very strange. Basically, that's about where it's all at work-wise.

E: So you're on the verge of a career change now?

S: Maybe. If money comes, I'm going to shoot for it. If it doesn't come, then I'm going to stay where I'm at and face the situation when the job I'm at runs out. I may go back into housework, full time, because it's kind of hard to find babysitting that will need these kind of hours that I need for housekeeping. I can't give up my housekeeping because I don't make that kind of money babysitting. So, I've got to do something here.

E: Can John be left alone?

S: Oh, yes. I go away for weekends.

E: That's no problem. So he's able to take care of himself?

S: Yes. This is what I'm saying. He can be left alone, take care of himself. He goes to the mall, goes shopping, and does all kinds of things. No problem.

E: So you're over the hump now?

E: Well, we're into another hump now. I took him to the Doris Burgman home. I don't know if you've ever heard of that place?

E: Oh yes, sure.

S: On the outside that looks like a very nice place. On the inside that place looks like it's been beat to death. They tell me, "John's got a curfew." Like 8:30 during the week and 10:00 on the weekends. I check his friends out. I know his friends. Up here he goes, and after he's been there three or four weeks, he works up into different levels. His curfews are like midnight during the week, and 2:00 in the morning on the weekends, and he can go with anybody he wants to, anywhere he wants. It's like, how can they expect him to be eighteen years old, be where he's at, and all of a sudden be mature enough to go and do all this stuff? I was talking to him today, and I said, "You know, I couldn't sleep knowing you were out until 2:00 in the morning." It's like legally it is a Catch 22. By the legal laws he is an adult. I didn't know it, but I have to go back to court and get legal guardianship of him. yet, at the same time, he's considered an adult, legally he's also considered not an adult. So, to me, if he went out and did something right now, caused some

problems or an accident or something, I might not be responsible financially, but if I handed him the keys to my car knowing that he's not really capable of being under those kinds of stressful situations in traffic, and caused an accident, I would be just as guilty. It doesn't make sense. But they're telling me that he can go wherever he wants. Don't tell him that. I don't want him to hear that.

E: Okay. Is there anything else about your own career? Your feelings about work?

S: I've said many times in the past three years, "This is probably the first time in my work history that I am content with every place that I work." For years it was always, "I hate going in there to do that work." There has always been something. There is no place that I work today that I dread going to. And I would have to say that that's been in the past few years because other times, there have been times that I dreaded going to work, but there were also many times that I loved going to work just to get away from the stress at home. Because I knew that for so many hours, I wouldn't have to deal with it, because I'm at work and it's there and I got away from it. I'm strange to be thrilled to death to go to work to get away from home and the stress there. I'm content right now. The only reason are some of the reasons why I want to try going to work out in doing something else, doing something that isn't going to be dealing with housework and stuff like that.

END OF INTERVIEW